

THE “CIVILIZATION OF THE UNIVERSAL”:¹ THE INTERSECTIONAL, DECOLONIAL, AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL REVISION OF PHILOSOPHY

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We emerge to critical thought in interaction with the limitations of the worlds we inhabit, but we can also bear their destructive traces and enact their exclusions in spite of ourselves.² Aiming for generality, we can arrive instead at a disavowed parochialism, a “universality” that is suspiciously intimate with and defensive of the contingent specificities of our ways of life. Thinking can thereby become a tool for concealing parochialism, immunizing destructive social habits from criticism, and preventing perception of and engagement with that which could build our capacity for generality.

It is particularly the decolonial critique of Eurocentrism in philosophy and intersectional analysis and its critique of feminism that have illuminated this critical problem and inspired this paper.³ Decolonial critique targets what Santiago Castro-Gomez calls “zero-point hubris”: “the imaginary according to which an observer of the social world can situate themselves on a neutral observation platform that, in turn, cannot be observed from any point” (2021, 8). Coloniality is thus, as Nelson Maldonado Torres argues, the “systematic negation of sociality and ordinary forms of interhuman contact” (2012, 262) in favour of the imposition from outside of principles construed as universal. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1989) shows how theory and antidiscrimination law are dominated by a “single-axis framework” that, as Elena Ruíz (2018) notes, produces “social, institutional, and

¹ Souleymane Bachir Diagne (2013) attributes this phrase to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Léopold Sédar Senghor following him.

² I am grateful to Jennifer S. Simpson for her generosity in discussing this paper with me, as I am to the Critical Perspectives in Phenomenology Research Group—particularly Susan Bredlau, Kym Maclaren, David Ciavatta, and Laura McMahan.

³ While Crenshaw (1989) coined the specific term, the idea has been developing and circulating in Black feminist thought for a long time: see, for instance, the work of the Combahee River Collective (1982), bell hooks (1984), and Angela Davis (1983). For analysis of this history, see Kathryn Sophia Belle (2011).

juridical systems that are structurally unresponsive to the needs, situations, and concerns of historically oppressed communities, and in fact may be the source of harm" (Ruíz 2018, 341). "Single-axis thinking" has encouraged feminists, for instance, to perpetuate the oppression of certain women in its complicity with anti-Black racism (Davis 1983), transphobic oppression (Bettcher 2021), capitalism (Fraser 2013), ableism (Hirschmann 2012), and "colonial feminism" (Ahmed 1992) or "gendered Orientalism" (Abu-Lughod 2013), as those dominant within the group-formations that stand to benefit from struggle against oppression hoard its successes (Táíwò 2022).⁴

The point of this paper is not to do the situated, practical analysis that Ruíz flags as the focus of intersectional work, but rather to show specifically how philosophy should self-consciously revise its practices and universality be reconceived so as to answer to the risks of zero-point hubris and single-axis thinking. In the first section, I explore phenomenologically the lived experience of being situated within a perspective, rehearsing the argument that situatedness produces in us a partiality and "single-axis thinking" that separates us from others who live in different terms. I distinguish, however, the phenomenologically revealed partiality of perspective associated with our basic existential situation from the historical, practical domination that renders certain forms of partiality general and powerful in defining the terms of social reality. In the second section, I show that we can inhabit the irreducibly partial specificity of our basic existential condition in ways that do not *prevent* but *enable* the effectiveness of struggle against and theoretical descriptions of domination. In other words, partiality is inevitable, and it often admits of political organization that conceals or expands it, but it is possible for us to live our partiality in a way that does not simply operate according to the necessarily one-sided terms by which we are inducted into being human. Through partiality, the meaning of the experience of others can become concrete to us. Here I will show that thinking itself must be reimagined: it is not a matter of a choice between specificity and universality, for it is within and through the crux of the specific that we catch a glimpse of the horizon of universality.

At the heart of human experience, the issue of the simultaneously enabling and inhibiting character of specificity is a richly developed point of study in the tradition, and thus, phenomenological reflection on how experience unfolds can contribute to analysis of this problem. This paper relies in particular on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1964a) "The Philosopher and Sociology" for its insight into, first, how we are initiated into meaningful experience by specific forms of life, and second, how communication and a particular kind of universality remain possibilities for us even in our inhabitation of determinate and mutually unfamiliar forms of experience. The paper's ultimate commitment is captured by Merleau-Ponty's

⁴ These failures have inspired self-conscious use of the term "feminisms," so as to avoid implying that there is a unified feminist movement. Leaving the term singular can imply that women who find aspects of their experience challenging because of their gender but not in significant other ways have the most legitimate proprietary claim to it, that the constitution or nature of this domain is settled, and that it has established criteria for entry. For a perspective on why to use the singular term, see Cheryl Johnson-Odim (1991).

claim that “superficially considered, our inherence destroys all truth; considered radically, it founds a new idea of truth” (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 109).

Because the paper’s theme is specificity and its relation to thinking, it is important to identify where my efforts toward philosophical thinking have found their origin and impetus. I am a white, middle-class settler woman without, as Walter D. Mignolo calls it, “the colonial experience and political interest propelled by the colonial wound” (2009, 170). My efforts themselves are a colonial artifact, a by-product of my implication in the dispossession and subordination of others. In answer to Socrates’ profound question to Cephalus, I have inherited wealth, not made it (Plato 1968, 330a). My aim is to make the inevitably flawed effort, against the grain of my cultivation, to think not from the terrain established by “centrisms” but to think of and with the exteriority projected by them, to attend to the scenes of profound injustice to which all are accountable: entrenched economic exploitation; the organization of the globe according to racist, colonial, and ableist priorities; the ongoing suppression of genders and sexualities that do not reflect the priorities of the generic heterosexual man. We are enveloped in systems that suppress and exploit human power, and our efforts to struggle against them require thinking with others, with the exteriorities these systems constitute. My desire is to investigate the living realities of human experience that make shared effort in this regard both difficult and possible.

SPECIFICITY AND ITS AMBIVALENCE

Who we are as human individuals is profoundly a function of others and the availability of specific worlds to us. This interdependence renders us specific and one-sided, reflecting the priorities of those who induct us into humanity and the characteristics of the specific environments we inhabit, which support and dissuade different activities and attitudes. The worlds to which we adapt do not have the same dimensions as what we might project as the “actual” world beyond any actual experience, or as the worlds of others, yet their specificity tends to be somewhat invisible to us.

Merleau-Ponty captures the sense of this specificity when he observes that the “individual drama takes place among *roles* which are already inscribed in the total institutional structure, so that from the beginning of his life the child proceeds—simply by perceiving the attentions paid to him and the utensils surrounding him—to a deciphering of meanings which . . . generalizes his own drama into a drama of his culture” (1964a, 112; emphasis in original). “Attentions” and “utensils” are the vehicles of specification that circulate around us: forms of human behaviour and material expression of historical priorities that demand we assume them in order to be counted as a piece of the real world.

There are many dimensions to this specificity. It is familial, reflecting our intimate community, its lineage, its style of inhabiting the world. Who we are unfolds as a response to the specificity of our familiar others. Specificity is cultural, stamped by the qualities of its contextualizing environment. We speak a certain language, use a certain generation’s slang, manifest trends in how we dress, make a living in specific ways, and so on. While there are significant differences *within* cultures, we nonetheless have a basic familiarity with

cultural options that qualifies us as "insiders," a status hard won by others. Specificity is also political; societies have made specific decisions about operation and self-organization that render them different from others, though their functioning depends on treating many of these decisions as not contingent but necessary.

Our interpretations of reality settle into the grooves made by these more primordial interpretations, yet it is only by participating in specific worlds with specific others that we develop as participants in "reality." The development of the capacity to *make sense* bears the traces of particular forms of sense-making and how these forms are demonstrated to us, and any perspective we take on this inheritance is mediated by it. We implicitly reflect what has always been demonstrated to us as "normal" even when we explicitly take ourselves to reject it. While this can seem and be oppressive to both insiders and outsiders, it is not simply an oppressive matter: only by being embedded in organized systems of meaning do we develop and become capable of relating to further others. Further, no such context could include everyone; location is necessary, and it depends on exclusion.⁵

Importantly, I am using "we" here in a way I construe to be universal. This is the case for all of us, *and* it renders us irreducibly different from each other. We share the condition of specificity, and so our experience diverges. And this unshareability is only exacerbated by the fact that our specificity is not transparent to us.

Merleau-Ponty gives the term "perceptual faith" to the epistemic orientation to the world that develops in this condition. This is the faith that "we see the things themselves, the world is what we see": it is a trusting "contact" that precedes and "exceeds [reflection's] power of comprehension" (1968, 3; 1964a, 104). Thinking emerges on the basis of this primordial contact, in which the distinction between true and false is already meaningful to us and others, and the world is already real. Thinking cannot disavow the original condition of perceptual faith and can never grasp it in the way it actually happens. It can only point to it in the mode of what Merleau-Ponty calls "hyper-reflection," which would put "to itself the problem of the genesis of its own meaning" (1968, 38, 12). "Objectivism" in thinking, as Merleau-Ponty's critique goes, takes the true to be the objective and takes knowing to be that which exposes its true reality, and in so doing disregards the lived experience of integration between experiencer and object, the original, non-reflective contact out of which objects of reflection and reflective powers emerge and to which they owe an undischageable debt. It disavows the murky ancestry of thinking.

While we can expose phenomenologically the non-perception of the lived present, the decolonial critique of Eurocentrism and the intersectional critique of feminism expose the *politically constituted* non-perception of the lived present.⁶ Alongside the philosophical critique of objectivism extends a political critique of domination: reflection operates on the basis of a disavowed history of domination. The scene behind the scenes that phenomenology illuminates, while a necessary condition of experience as such, is in turn shaped by a specific political history. While the condition of specificity is universal, forms of specificity are

⁵ See Jacques Derrida (2005) for extended discussion of this point.

⁶ Thanks especially to David Ciavatta for help in clarifying this distinction.

organized differently in relation to each other, and the way they are organized differently shapes how we live them.

This organization entails different epistemic capacities and orientations for different kinds of people. While those whose specificity links them with the dominant ways of life can be ignorant of the specificity of others, the converse is typically not the case. Given the power associated with dominant ways of life, familiarity with them can be the price people pay to make their way in the world. One thinks here of W. E. B. Du Bois's (2015) notion of "double-consciousness"⁷ and of James Baldwin: "ask any Negro what he knows about the white people with whom he works. And then ask the white people with whom he works what they know about *him*" (1993, 103; emphasis in original). To use Lewis Gordon's (2006) powerful metaphor, to live on the basis of the dominant code is to have the cat's reach over the mouse: the cat has a sphere of influence that goes well beyond the immediate coordinates of tooth and claw. Its reach "extends to the area over which it can move faster than the mouse; thus, run though the mouse may try with all its might, the cat will seem to pop up everywhere" (2006, 42). The shared familiarity of the dominant code is an effect of dominance. Another's orientation to the world must in some sense become familiar to me—as that by which I orient myself—if the reality it projects is the reality I am forced to reckon with.

The phenomenological story here is complex. Inasmuch as all experience in taking shape becomes specific, it is a felt, familiar interiority that projects a familiar sensible world around itself and to which it feels attached. It is experienced as distinct from what seems to be an unfamiliar exteriority, which is the specificity of others' interiority and their projected, familiar world. In this historical situation, however, some experience has come to mark other forms of experience and the worlds they inhabit as perpetually exterior in relation to the interiority of the dominant, projecting a world for all, having its sense of the strangeness of others count for all, projecting its sense of familiarity upon all, and displacing suppressed experiencers from their own interiority and projected world.⁸ No wonder, then, that Frantz Fanon observes that "the dreams of the colonial subject are muscular dreams, dreams of action, dreams of aggressive vitality . . . During colonization the colonized subject frees himself night after night between nine in the evening and six in the morning" (2004, 15). This would presumably be a felt consequence of experience being projected as exterior and severed from its felt familiarity and uninhibited projection into the world.

⁷ W. E. B. Du Bois writes:

it is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (2015, 5)

⁸ See also Enrique Dussel (2002) for the language of "exteriority" in relation to Eurocentric modernity.

There are two factors here: first, displacement from the interiority of one’s perspective; and second, reduction of one’s world—“the ever-non objective to which we are subject,” to use Martin Heidegger’s words—to a lifeless object, and to, as Fanon calls it, a “phase in the dialectic” (Heidegger 1993, 170; Fanon 2008, 111). Ordinarily, the interiority of my perspective projects its own exterior world, such that that exteriority is lived as mine and thus functions as the other side of my interiority. To live myself, then, is to live my world. But worlds too become projected as exterior, as object, and in the context of racist colonialism, as essentially or intrinsically so, as in principle uninhabitable as they are. There is a difference, then, between (1) that form of dim, inaccessible exteriority we project simply by inhabiting a specific perspective from experience and (2) worlds that have been fashioned as intrinsically exterior, which continue to be projected as such by global institutions and sustained by “centrisms” that link genuine knowledge, action, and world-inhabitation to certain kinds of lives and render others marked.

Reflection on our specificity must be part of our critical orientation to political problems because our critique can produce unjust effects of its own and empower the forces that suspend certain forms of experience in perpetual exteriority. All critique aiming at more just social arrangements inevitably propels us to generalized understandings of human experience: what is needed or wanted and why, what is desirable and undesirable, bad and good. It is inconsistent with critique to refuse to reflect on this inevitable partiality of these generalizations. The world has been built to answer to certain forms of specificity above others. We are inevitably trained in these priorities and they are entrenched further by our failure to perceive them and our actions on their terms.

There have been significant efforts to expose these interpretive dysfunctions, particularly by those cultivated to perceive them because these dysfunctions are felt as constraints in their experience. Domination has been characterized as the power to render specificity invisible. As María Lugones (2003) argues, the dominant social position projects a culture for everyone *else*, whereas it postures itself as postcultural (as one can see, for instance, in popular use of the term “ethnic food” to designate food from Mexico, China, or India but not from England or Canada). The world reflects the interests of the dominant as general, giving them access to mechanisms of publicity and power and disinclining them to acknowledge their favoured status. As Fanon shows, those attached to dominant communities often have the privilege of living far away from the violence that is the condition of their way of life.⁹ Further, the communicative practices that would foster improved interpretive function are impoverished because of entrenched segregation, the habitual alliance of the powerful with their own, the impoverishment of educational contexts that should induct us into the rich experience of imaginative communication, and the unrecognized heritage of racist Eurocentrism operative in these contexts, which, as Anibal Quijano notes, has repressed “colonized forms of knowledge production . . .

⁹ Fanon observes that this violence “governed the ordering of the colonial world . . . tirelessly punctuated the destruction of the indigenous social fabric, and demolished unchecked the systems of reference of the country’s economy, lifestyles, and modes of dress” (2004, 5–6).

modes of producing and giving meaning . . . the imaginary, the universe of intersubjective relations with the world” (Quijano 2000, 541).¹⁰

Let us take feminist interpretive dysfunction as a further example. Crenshaw diagnoses the way that feminism’s strategies often “reinforce the subordination of people of color,” such that feminist policies tend to benefit white women (1991, 1252). Naomi Zack observes that women of color can be oppressed by white women, and their oppression in turn by men of colour can be an “indirect result of white racism” (2007, 196). Haunani Kay Trask (2008) warns against race-based activism in Indigenous contexts, since dividing a people by race can divide them from each other,¹¹ and Aileen Moreton-Robinson argues that “it is an *irrelevant luxury* for Indigenous women to prioritise white feminist issues over Indigenous issues” (2008, 363; emphasis added). These problems result from the pairing of existentially inevitable partiality and politically constituted hierarchies. It should be clearly *contrary* to any feminist project to work against those who suffer from sexist oppression, to contribute to the disempowerment of others, to undermine the resources that empower people in their opposition to oppression, to make universal claims that do not apply universally in ways that undermine struggles against oppression. We transgress the boundaries of another’s specificity theoretically, when we speak in a universal register of things illuminated by our specificity, and politically, when we spend political resources “here” and reduce their availability elsewhere, and when we advance political transformation without perceiving its destructive impact on others.

Entrenched in specificity, however, we may wonder *how* it is possible to oppose our tendencies toward interpretive dysfunction, perceive how we are hierarchically situated, and practice good reflection and communication. Is the specificity of situation an insurmountable obstacle to a broader awareness, to the intelligibility of other forms of life? Intersectional and decolonial forms of criticism identify the specific, violent consequences of false claims to universality, and in doing so seem to imply a hope: that it is possible to perceive beyond the confines of our situations, to grasp truths illuminated by others, to notice “single-axis thinking” and “zero-point hubris,” to see how our situations are structured by hierarchical relations that render certain voices neutral and others accented, and to act on the basis of that improved perception. In other words, one may be able to claim, “since I/we can express this truth to you, its significance extends beyond its meaning for me/us, who are specifically situated, and becomes a matter of general interest, a claim to truth.”

Merleau-Ponty’s (1964a) invocation of a *Weltwissenschaft* in the face of *Weltanschauung* is an insistence on the possibility of this broader awareness. The idea of a *Weltanschauung* or “worldview” captures broadly the existential point thus far: we are situated in specific worlds that shape our perception. But “the *Weltanschauung* philosophers miss everything” because they have “no *Weltwissenschaft*,” no “science of world” or “world-knowledge,”

¹⁰ See Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2014) for a discussion of how educational spaces and practices can be places of critique and movement toward justice.

¹¹ Cited as “H. K. Trask’s presentation on ‘Native Hawaiian Sovereignty Rights’” by Annette M. James (2008, 323).

which would involve working to *comprehend* the immediate sense of lived familiarity, to thematize our specific links to a specific world, to grapple with our "worldedness" (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 103). We are not, he says, "in time, in space, in society, as an object is in a container"; rather, we can "become conscious of" this link to our world and pursue "an understanding of what [we do]" (1964b, 49). Following Merleau-Ponty, I will argue that thinking must steer clear of two false alternatives: the idea that we can access reality as such through rationality exercised individually, and the idea that specificity simply hems us in, stonewalling thought's aspirations to generality. I will argue that the third way demands a "situation of dialogue,"¹² the careful structuring of which is required if it is not to reiterate the problems it is invoked to resolve (Merleau-Ponty 1964b, 51). If principle is always and only expressed in specific, embodied forms, which are thereby meaningful in ways that cannot always be directly perceived, communication is required as its supplement, for the principle's expansiveness can only be grasped through dialogue across these forms. If thinking beyond specificity is guided by others, then, as Souleymane Bachir Diagne notes, "only in a postcolonial world can the question of the universal truly be posed" (2011, 8). Or, to invoke Torres's provocative words: if "the fundamental axes of reflection about human reality are grounded in the human-to-human relation," then decolonization is "first philosophy" (2012, 261).

"RATIONALITY IN CONTINGENCY"¹³

The situation of dialogue is founded on two fundamental characteristics of experience, which I will discuss in turn in this section. First, our experience unfolds for us as an experience of being one among many, of being inside an interpersonal reality in which interaction guides us to sense. Transformative dialogue with others becomes a possibility for us insofar as it is an extension of this aspect of our basic constitution as experiencers. Second, thinking is linked fundamentally with determinacy, insofar as each of us draws on local mechanisms available to us to give expression to meanings we experience as non-local. Given the importance of the local and familiar mechanism for our sense of the principle, the possibility of universality lies in dialogical exposure to other local mechanisms that are different from our own, and to their power to express and reflect meaning.

The Experience of Oneself as "One Among Many"

Recently, I asked approximately thirty-five students in an introductory philosophy class (five of whom were racialized, and most of whom were from Newfoundland and Labrador, a province in Canada) to talk about the experience of being judged critically by others. Some of the students spoke in articulate detail of the anxiety and frustration inspired by the idea of being an object in someone else's view. On the basis of that rich discussion, we turned to consider

¹² Merleau-Ponty attributes the phrase "situation of dialogue" to Eugen Fink.

¹³ This phrase comes from Merleau-Ponty (1964a, 111).

the possibility of being met routinely with that kind of consciousness in others, making a transition to Fanon's (2008) account of being confronted at every turn with the white person's interpretive overreach of him. Made alive to the challenging character of the perspectives of others, those participating found resources from within their own experience with which to register both the significance of Fanon's experience and, where relevant, the difference.

This is an example, I suggest, of what Merleau-Ponty calls "rationality in contingency" (1964a, 111). What is shared, the "rationality," is this: experience is a matter of negotiating one's sense of self in tandem with the views of others upon oneself.¹⁴ We see in Fanon's experience how this intertwining with others can be a significant psychical and physical threat, whereas in other forms of experience it can be less charged. In both, however, experience essentially *comes with the meaning* that it is only a variant of experience: experience unfolds inside an intersubjective reality in which we are learning, through our interaction, how to make living sense of a concrete situation. Inherent in every perspective is the meaning that it is one among many, that it is intertwined with the perspectives of others, and that its character is *to be expanded*; experience originally involves the spontaneous "imaginary variation" of one's own perspective in response to others (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 100). This is a structure of experience as such, even when unacknowledged, even though as a structure *of experience*—as something inevitably determinate—it is always expressed in determinate ways.

The primordially of communicative interaction is the very reason why experience is specific; by virtue of our intertwining with specific others, we become different. We *share* this interpersonal constitution of perspective and thus there is a "rationality" or logic here: we all experience our perspectives as limited and one among many; we are all initiated into the practice of coordinating our perspectives with those of others. Because of this rationality, the ways we are human are specific and contingent. And philosophical investigation of this rationality, if it is to be thorough, must be paired with investigation of its specific and contingent effects.

This very structure of perspective inducts us into the possibility of relating to further, unfamiliar others. Another person is not someone whose situation is laid bare to us through our own absolute and private powers of rationality, *nor* is she absolutely inaccessible in that only the external facts and not the meaning of her situation are available to us. These are the false alternatives spoken of above: that rationality exercised privately could give us reality or that one-sided specificity renders us mutually opaque. The other person is rather someone who, like me, is grappling with her status as *one among many*, learning with others how to discern the sense of her lived situation, oriented from an "inside" toward an "outside," open (whether willingly or unwillingly) to being transformed by new forms of interaction. The determinate condition that made me specific is where my capacity to connect across difference comes from, and the possibility of a shared understanding exists

¹⁴ This is also G. W. F. Hegel's (1977) point: self-consciousness is itself but also an *other being*, and it has its "unity" in this "duplication" (§178). I invoke Hegel here because of my conviction that his philosophy, despite its implication in racist and colonial thought, can also be mobilized for thinking through the themes of this paper, insofar as he is a profound thinker of ethical specificity on the one hand and historical transformation on the other. See also Shannon Hoff (2018).

for us if it makes itself known in the determinate terms of our experience. Determinacy is the very route through which one can become alive to the meanings of another's determinacy. One is neither the "absolute spectator"—the "rationalist philosopher" who sees from a universal point of view—nor the arm's length "sociologist," who assumes that all they can access in a foreign context is the external "fact" of the matter (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 109). Our situation "is what links us to the whole of human experience, no less than what separates us from it" (110); it is our training for insight into the experience of others. We develop the capacity for understanding at the price of misunderstanding; for the "small fee" of partiality, we cultivate the capacity for insight. To put it in the terms of John Russon's (2017) analysis, determinacy is a site of *exposure*.

Uday Singh Mehta (1999) similarly argues that it is parochialism that we share: our lived, non-reflective entanglement with our own situations, the way the world meaningfully "hangs together" for us. Against the abstract universality of liberalism, he defends the possibility of a concrete universality *on the basis of* this parochialism, a universality rooted in what it "feels like" to be inside our own experience. Since everyone is "deeply and hence not provisionally *invested*" in the "conditions through which [they] may understand and experience life" and the "modes of experience by which things hang together," we cultivate the possibility of sharing when we aim to discern, through how things "hang together" for us, the sense of unfamiliar specific attachments as they are lived "from the inside" (26–27; emphasis in original). Mehta proposes a cosmopolitanism appropriate to the universal inhabitation of specificity—a cosmopolitanism not of reason but of sentiment—in which, through "conversation, which has as its purpose the understanding of the sentiments that give meaning to people's lives, wider bonds of sympathy can be forged" (22).

The project of developing a broader understanding is initiated when I pursue the sense of myself as "one among many" that operates inside my experience, when I "awaken within myself," as Merleau-Ponty writes, "the consciousness of this social-which-is-mine." He argues that the "interior" that philosophy brings us back to "is not a 'private life' but an intersubjectivity that gradually connects us ever closer to the whole of history" (1964a, 112). To be me is to have navigated the perspectives of others, expanding and contracting in relation to them; it is that determinate history that sets me on a path toward thinking. In inhabiting this situation, I have reason as "a summons and a task," as merely latent, and requiring the "dimension of coexistence" in order to "be changed into itself and brought to explicit consciousness" (110, 113, 110). It is a summons and ongoing task because meanings always express themselves in determinacy and are therefore fated to an inexhaustible unfolding appropriate to the inexhaustible character of determinacy; this is because my capacity for rationality itself will always be expressed inside the determinacy of my own condition as "one-among-many." Intrinsically linked to contingency, rationality depends (and has always depended) upon my exposure to the many of which I am one. Others too exist in this original answerability to the perspectives of others, and insofar as we share this we are not simply alien. I pursue thought as a living response to the existence and operation of others in me.

Unsurprisingly, Merleau-Ponty adds a bodily dimension to this argument, arguing that

the very externality of bodies provides the possibility of genuine encounter with another perspective. Because I am

invested individually with an exterior through which [I] become visible . . . all the other person sees of me—all my facticity—is reintegrated into subjectivity, or at least posited as an indispensable element of its definition . . . [We] no longer know [our]selves to be subject in relation to [our] individual selves, but in relation to one another as well. (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 106–07)

What the other person sees of me changes me; *how I appear to them* is formative of me; I take shape around their view because it moves me to adjust myself; I am intrinsically, inherently sensitive. My very own experience dispossesses me of myself; it is not my property or under my sway.

To insist that we can arrive at comprehensive knowledge prior to this dispossession is to assert a claim to possession of thought that we have no right to assert. What we do know, however, is that it will continue to take the shape it does in relation to the freedom of others, since it has always taken shape in that way. And to insist on a fundamental separation from others due to our differences is also to maintain a *dishonest possessiveness* in relation to our own experience. In fact, others, and their interaction with and perception of ourselves as bodies, govern our unfolding: “the social is not simply an object but to begin with my situation” (112).

This point has a further significance that is another instance of a *politically illuminated* extension of a phenomenologically illuminated point. If experience essentially comes with the meaning that it is only one variant thereof, and if it unfolds inside an intersubjective reality in which we are learning how to make living sense of a concrete situation, then *those by whom it is not lived as such* are being trained into unreality, and *those by whom it is lived as such*—those in whose experience this point is thematized—are being cultivated to perceive reality (though if the way this point is thematized in experience is significantly oppressive and/or violent, it can have its own destructive effects on the capacity to perceive reality). The reality that is projected by the experience of those who inhabit the sense that their experience is a *variant* is more genuine than the reality projected by the experience of the dominant whose domination depends on not acknowledging variation. Gloria Anzaldúa’s (1987) “mestiza consciousness” and Lugones’s (2003) “world-travelling” resonate here: those who have the sense of their experience as a “variant” find that reality shows more of itself within their experience than it does in the experience of those who live it in such a way that denies the reality of the interiority of others. This is not to defend living in terms of “double consciousness” (Du Bois 2015) or to argue that such a perspective automatically generates greater insight—a problematic argument if oppression is harmful—but to see that the experience of variation is more hospitable to the horizon of universality than the lack thereof. As Anzaldúa (1987) observes, universality comes closer as a possibility when we “link people with each other—the Blacks with Jews with Indians with Asians with whites with extraterrestrials . . . transfer[ring] ideas and information from one culture

to another” (Anzaldúa 1987, 107). Specificity and universality are inevitably paired; my situation opens the world for me, and the situations of others have the capacity to expand my sense of what it is that I see dimly through my own. Thus, any universal will be, as Aimé Césaire claims, “enriched by all that is particular” (2010, 152). We can contribute to each other’s power to grasp generality, and doing so is a possibility because the sense that circulates in our situation does so as a function of the existence of our “first” others, their views on us, our receptivity to them.¹⁵ Merleau-Ponty writes that “the philosopher may no longer speak of mind in general, deal with each and every mind under a single name, or flatter himself that he constitutes them,” but must maintain consciousness “of the open and successive community of *alter egos* living, speaking, and thinking in one another’s presence” (1964a, 106, 110; emphasis in original). Thinking is supported by relations, by the “community of *alter egos*”; it requires “other minds.” This is especially important when we inhabit a history that has violently suppressed what is unfamiliar to the dominant perspective.

We are always negotiating our sense of self in relation to the perspectives that others have on us. These perspectives do not end where anyone would arbitrarily say they do, and their existence on the horizon calls for a certain kind of orientation to reality: it is always bigger than can be grasped, and we are always situated at the experiential centre of perspectives that exceed us. What is outside—the perspectives of others upon us, the reality projected by their interiority—shapes our interiority, our sense of our own selves, and calls for an ongoing reckoning. We should cultivate occasions for communication that would propel this practice of reckoning, taking shape around the views of others, expanding the social that is our situation, the dimensions of human reality in its complexity, our educational and communicative contexts.¹⁶

Because the social is “my situation,” the outcome of improved communication is as much *finding out* who we are as it is of revising our sense of ourselves. I think of a discussion session at Memorial University focused on Indigenous relations and research. After the participants introduced themselves, Max Liboiron, co-host of the session, highlighted the rich significance of introductions, observing that we are accustomed to introducing ourselves in terms of our sense of what is salient for us, whereby we can actively conceal

¹⁵ This is not to say that we should all become something like “cosmopolitan tourists,” using the goal of knowledge to justify a kind of incessant engagement. If, to put it in Torres’s words, “the fundamental axes of reflection about human reality are grounded in the human-to-human relation,” this does not simply justify ongoing pursuit of opportunities for human-to-human interaction (Torres 2012, 261). Doing so would undermine human-to-human interaction by challenging the conditions of existence of specific communities.

¹⁶ As Simpson describes it, “engagement with the theories and practices of co-resistors is powerful because it often illuminates colonial thinking in myself, and it demonstrates different possibilities in analysis and action in response to similar systems of oppression and dispossession” (2017, 66).

important dimensions of who we are that do not typically show up for us.¹⁷ Who I am is not simply my vision and priorities, but also how I have been cultivated in and projected by specific historical patterns and structures and who I am in relation to the others situated there, which I may not perceive. I had not introduced myself as “settler,” but doing so may have reflected an attempt to wrestle with the “zero-point hubris” that disavows the significance to our own experience of others’ experience of us; an attempt to avow the role that relations play in our formation; recognition of the fact that the dynamic between communities may have more to do with the constitution of our situations than our own actions do. But this dynamic has historically offered little cause, as Chelsea Vowel observes, for the majority to refer to itself as such. Using the relational term “settler,” however, could aid in opening the possibility of discerning this relational history (2016, 16). Here again it is evident that interaction with others can give us a more accurate sense of ourselves, since our situation is constructed by what is outside of it. The *intimacy* of the question “who am I?” is *belied* by the fact that it is answered from the outside, by the unfamiliar.¹⁸

More broadly, then, the theoretical work of philosophical reflection relies on the practical work of cultivating contexts of communication. Since praxis, however, will always be the occasion for setting prejudices in motion, care must clearly be taken here. One must avoid requiring extraordinary labor from already exploited people, and cultivating communicative contexts in such a way that the terms and desires of the dominant are once more at centre stage. *How* we develop such contexts will also bear the marks of our specificity.

We have discussed the interpersonal constitution of the inward domain and have found in experience, where the tyranny of the familiar has taken root, the capacity for connection with unfamiliar others. Let us now turn, however, to the idea of universality as such, with the healthy suspicion of a rationality that would masquerade as universal while suppressing certain forms of experience, yet with openness to the possibility that the idea of universality could still be meaningful.

Principles in and of Situations

Jehangir Saleh, once a Master’s student in philosophy working on Merleau-Ponty, had cystic fibrosis and died in 2013. Saleh (2011) wrote a blogpost in which he tried to speak to the frustration doctors had expressed to him because they did not but wanted to understand what his experience was like. On the surface, he says, these doctors are right: they don’t

¹⁷ The session was co-hosted by Liboiron, who at the time was Associate Vice-President of Indigenous Research, and Catharyn Anderson, then Special Advisor to the President on Indigenous affairs and now Vice-President (Indigenous) at Memorial University. See Liboiron for a related discussion of the complexities of citation: “it is common to introduce Indigenous authors with their nation/affiliation, while settler and white scholars almost always remain unmarked . . . This unmarking is one act among many that re-centres settlers and whiteness as an unexceptional norm, while deviations have to be marked and named” (2021, 3n10).

¹⁸ Not everyone is mobile in this way, however, so the very content of this paper invokes a limit to its thesis: for those who inhabit bounded communities, the standard of openness may be out of place, though it will presumably still have relevance regarding the differences that show up within that world.

know what he is experiencing; they don’t feel his pain or his sadness when a friend with cystic fibrosis passes away. He also observes, however, that the premise that experience cannot be shared means being trapped within it, with doctors on the outside. So Saleh works to describe what cystic fibrosis is like by relating it to an experience that others also have, that of mopping the floor:

I’ve mopped floors . . . Except, for me, the floor is my body. I get up in the morning, and inhale a bronchodilator. Then I inhale a mucolytic. This takes up about 35mins. Then, 30mins of postural drainage, followed by 10mins of breathing techniques. Then I inhale an anti-biotic, and then some anti-inflammatory medications: approx 2 hrs total. Then my day starts: I become a grad student. I write papers. Talk to students. Prepare for seminars. And then I come back home, and do this process all over again. All of this feels a bit like mopping a floor. The floor gets dirty, so you mop it up. The next day, the floor is dirty again: you mop it up. You’re never going to, once and for all, mop the floor. You’re never going to mop the floor in a way to end all floor mopping . . . And this is what it feels like, for me at least, to go through my medical routine . . . I clean things up. And then I come home . . . and again, clean things up, again. (Saleh 2011)

With this description, Saleh grabs hold of something within the experience of another that facilitates connection with his. This example, I suggest, captures the meaning of Merleau-Ponty’s claim that, “superficially considered, our inherence destroys all truth; considered radically, it founds a new idea of truth,” as well as his claim that philosophy operates as “consciousness of rationality in contingency” (1964a 109, 111). To share something of his unshared experience, Saleh invokes a shared meaning inside of the experience of another.

We always find ourselves within situations in a lived world, and our discernment of “rationality” should not be construed as a matter of departing from them—particularly because we then deny their powerful role in cultivating our sense of what is rational—but as a matter of something to which they themselves inspire us. Merleau-Ponty writes that situations are “the source of our curiosity, our investigations, and our interest in . . . other situations” (110). In perceptual faith, we inhabit our situations also in terms of the living sense that they and we are real, and that the unfolding reality projected by them beyond them is also real. The extension of the real beyond me is given to me *in* and *by* my pre-reflective intimacy with the world. I experience myself as an inside in relation to an outside, and I am always grappling with the relation.

Speaking operates similarly, as a matter of local dynamics and exposure through them to what is beyond them. In being born, we enter into a specific language, and we desire to comprehend and become comprehensible to specific others. Local language-users constitute for us an initial, limited domain of comprehensibility, but they, and language itself, propel us beyond it. Words, gestures, meanings are translatable, legible, audible; they project the horizon of universal shareability because they can in principle be understood, though they will never be universally shared. But it is the specificities of enunciation that form the very crux in which the possibility of translation arises. We grow into language

by using words others also use, speaking as they speak, which means our linguistic habits simultaneously enclose us in specific groups and cultivate our ability to sustain exposure to others. If others’ use of words affects ours, if the way they speak changes how we wield language and what we say, then we are opened to others and dispossessed of ourselves by sharing in language. In other words, language too is the “exterior through which [we] become visible,” that through which others and their views on us are “reintegrated into subjectivity” (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 106–07). We do not simply plant ideas in the world outside of us through language, but with it the perspectives of others enter, shape, and unfold inside of us. It is as though others are in our mouths, revising our speech from within.¹⁹

Thinking and language always involve duality, insofar as their expansiveness is cultivated *in situ*, or insofar as meanings, principles, and translatability are generated from within situations and communities of enunciation. Actual thinking, as Merleau-Ponty notes in “From Mauss to Claude Lévi-Strauss,” “moves back and forth between experience and intellectual construction or reconstruction” (119). The “first principles” that are arguably the business of philosophy are the first principles *of empirical reality* and *discerned inside of empirical situations*, and thus principle and empirical situation can never be unpaired; the philosopher and the sociologist belong together. The general is always tied to—always forged in the crux of—the situational. Thinking is always this two-sided matter; we are never absolute spectators armed with abstract universal philosophical principles, and never simply involved with external, contingent facts, but with externality as the expression of meaning. We talk about things poorly and irresponsibly if we talk about them without reference to their context or presume that they are without context, but also if we imagine we are locked in determinacy. To navigate this two-sidedness and operate “in the dimension of coexistence,” philosophy should not permit itself dishonest abstraction from the situations in and by which it is inspired, but bring them self-consciously into its operation, its practitioners showing their situational markings or origins and how communicable meanings are born there, rather than allowing themselves to operate as the “unexceptional norm” (Liboiron 2021, 3n10) or acquiescing to the idea that it is impossible to think with others due to a purportedly mutually incommunicable determinacy. In what follows, let us first explore some concrete ways in which this dimension of coexistence can be navigated, at which point we will be able to diagnose some historical failures to do so.

First, the fact that we act in specific ways to fashion our situations in interaction with principles and meanings should alert us to the *meaningfulness* of one-sided specificity as expressive of principle and also therefore to the possibility that different forms of specificity, even if they appear to us as alien, could be expressions of either similar meanings or different meanings that would be compelling to us but are underdeveloped in our own worlds. *Differences* can be the very mode in which *similarities* are expressed, as well as the *concealment* in unfamiliarity of things that we could potentially care about, so we should not be misled by difference into thinking that it simply manifests a gulf between us. Regarding similarities, think, for instance, of clothing; we inherit cultural styles, and yet through them

¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty’s description of dialogue in the *Phenomenology* is helpful here: if “speech accomplishes thought,” then thinking essentially has others and externality on its horizon (2013, 370).

we express rebellion, conservatism, creativity, shyness, pride, cultural criticism, and so on. While styles can be different, the meanings and motives behind them can be shared, and so it is wrong to think of different forms of clothing simply as expressions of alien unfamiliarity. Regarding concealment: determinate forms of life tend to emphasize and thus support the complex and detailed development of certain principles and meanings while suppressing the emergence of others, such that mutual exposure can involve engagement with meaningful elements of significance that do not easily grow in the soil of our own worlds.²⁰ As a *rule*, the only way we can express meanings and principles is through the different, determinate means at our disposal. When shared, such meanings can take different expression elsewhere; when shareable, or open to being explained and understood, the unfamiliar determinacy of our expressions requires communicative clarification.

Second, however, meaning is not simply independent of its expression, and does not necessarily remain unchanged when "it" is expressed differently. Encounter with the determinate expressions of others could deepen our sense of the meaning being expressed. Rather than fixed, principles and meanings shift and expand in interaction, with their fullness lying on the horizon, not in our hands. Engagement with others and their determinacy could be the way we have of working out and discerning the depth of the principles and meanings that move us, since others can reveal greater expansiveness latent in principles we grasp only partially. Our interest in and commitment to the principle or meaning could itself be the means by which we come to appreciate the less shared specificity of the other situation, because it may also be honoured and affirmed there. The point here is to imagine neither that we share nothing nor that we could determine the content of what is shared prior to actual engagement, but to approach unfamiliar situations and those who inhabit them with the sense that only they can reveal the expansiveness of principles we hold dear and potentially illuminate to us competing or supplementary others. Think, for instance, of Lugones working through Marilyn Frye's discussion of "loving perception" and "arrogant perception," describing the perception of women of color by "White/Anglo women" and thereby revealing dimensions to the meaning of these forms of perception that Frye herself did not, dimensions that build its interpretive power (2003, 5). Mobilizing her determinate experience for the expansion of a concept or meaning, Lugones's very practice is loving—inducting an idea into a

²⁰ Thus, Hegel observes that a principle is developed in and through the relations of the existence of a determinate way of life, by being clothed

with all the wealth of its existence; the shape in which it exists is a people into whose morality, constitution, domestic, civil, and public life, arts, international relations, etc. this principle is built, and the wholly specific form of concrete history is stamped on every aspect of the people's external life. This is the material which the principle of a people has to work through, and this is not the business of one day; on the contrary, there are all the needs, skill, relations, laws, constitution, arts, sciences which this material has to develop in accordance with this principle. (1985, 44)

Such principles depend on their development by the concrete, which cannot work through all possible principles of significance to human beings.

context in which it can be more fecund. This may be the “civilization of the universal” of which Diagne (2013) speaks: the universal itself has a trajectory, where the shape it initially takes is a mere shadow of the reality it may have if it is expanded in interaction with further determinacy. Césaire speaks of enrichment of the universal by the particular:

Provincialism? Not at all. I am not burying myself in a narrow particularism. But neither do I want to lose myself in an emaciated universalism. There are two ways to lose oneself: walled segregation in the particular or dilution in the “universal.” My conception of the universal is that of a universal enriched by all that is particular, a universal enriched by every particular: the deepening and coexistence of all particulars. (2010, 152)

This “civilization” and “enrichment” of the universal makes its productive effect known also in relation to problems, such as the problem of capitalist exploitation. Capitalism is not exhaustively perceptible by one kind of perspective, for instance by those who have experience with how it takes advantage of and interacts with sexism. The scope of the problem can only be revealed through illumination of the various determinate situations with which it interacts. Capitalism feeds on oppressed communities, whether they endure ableism, heterosexism, racism, sexism, colonialism, or religious intolerance, and it benefits from non-connection among those who struggle against these various forms of oppression. For each, understanding how capitalism interacts with the other forms may be indispensable for discerning how opposition to it should be enacted. If capitalist exploitation is a piece of the infrastructure of both sexism and racism, for instance, then effective opposition to sexism may require collaboration with anti-racist groups against capitalist exploitation. We misconstrue that against which we struggle if we conceive of it only in terms of our own struggle; if it is systemic, it is broader than is manifested in our own experience, and opposition to it works best if we understand how it functions with regard to others.

A third tool for navigating the two-sided reality of determinacy and meaning is communication. If one-sided specificity does not state its meaning on its own, it implicitly posits the need for communication among those who give meaning expression in different ways. Such communication is not simply the assertion of one’s own meaning in the communicative context, but, as Laura McMahon (2021) argues, a responsive, dynamic experience that involves understanding others through *one’s own* behavioral resources but also coming to understand oneself differently through exposure to the experience of others.²¹ Communication is the medium by which meanings are revealed, and so we require guidance into specific, unfamiliar modes of expression of meanings. Since these could become our meanings too, however, this communication should be taken as potentially transformative and not simply the transfer of fixed truths. The possibility of thinking well lies on the horizon of the construction of good communicative practices, and insofar as

²¹ McMahon writes that “these projects of understanding the other and understanding oneself cannot in truth be separated: we learn to understand others in *their* own context . . . by drawing on our own experiential behavioral resources, and we come to better understand ourselves—in manners that do not leave our categories of understanding and by extension our own identities intact—in light of the experiences of others” (2021, 82; emphasis in original).

we are committed to thinking, we are committed to cultivating those practices. This is Merleau-Ponty's "second way to the universal": rather than the overarching universal of a "strictly objective method," it is a "lateral universal" of, shall we say, an interpersonal, communicative method, which is acquired "through ethnological experience and its incessant testing of the self through the other person and the other person through the self" (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 120). The nature, method, and content of this communication is therefore not ours to define. Mehta rightly notes that negotiation of the boundaries of those who participate in the conversation is "constant and unsuppressible," such that "no algorithm can be offered in advance" (1999, 43–44).

In sum, all of us draw on *mechanisms available to us locally* to give expression to *meanings and principles we experience as non-local*. Each of us has an "expressive palette," a collection of resources linked to a broader cultural reality to which we unreflectively turn for expression. Changes to this palette are the exception rather than the norm; generally, we deploy its resources to express our commitments, announce who we are, and live our everyday lives, and other meanings become intelligible to us if they make themselves known in ways that fit this palette.²² The fact that the resources upon the expressive palette differ, however, does not necessarily entail significant differences at the level of the commitments expressed through them, and should propel us to communication rather than to private observation of differences from afar. While there may be general differences of commitment expressed here, it is likely that the differences in palette will encourage the non-perception of similarity and the over-perception of difference and discourage the dialogue that would allow the meaningfulness of different commitments to emerge.

This relation between principle and specificity also offers a means of diagnosing the ways in which thinking has been elaborated in terms of destructive "centrisms." Denial of the intrinsic relation between the principled and the specific has been central to the colonial project, for one, and to the political thinking of those affiliated with colonial power. Principle is thought simply transferable to alterity and specifiable in advance of encounter with unfamiliar specificity. "Liberal imperialism," as Mehta calls it, "relentlessly attempts to align or educate the regnant forms of the unfamiliar with its own expectations" (1999, 18). The principle of inward subjectivity, of subjective freedom, is particularly useful as an alibi concealing the destruction of externality. As Quijano (2000) argues, modernity is not simply a matter of a transformation in the domain of subjectivity or the individual ego, but it is *coloniality*. Its focus on the individual ego conceals the importance, and thus

²² Hegel similarly notes that

whether something is understood or not, whether our consciousness explicitly takes hold of a content, finds and knows itself in what is an object for it, all depends on whether the object comes home to us in the shape of our accustomed metaphysics. For our metaphysics is made up of relationships familiar to us; they are the net holding all our particular insights and ideas, and they are known only in so far as they can all be caught in it. . . . If anything is to be intelligible. . . it must be brought back to a [person's] metaphysics, to the organ of [their] soul, to accordance with [their] sense. (1985, 34)

facilitates the destruction and desacralization, of the determinate practices, traditions, and institutions that constitute the specific formative ground and expressive palette of non-Western subjectivities, their induction into global powers constituted and controlled by the so-called West, and the use of the construction of race to justify Western domination.²³ Merleau-Ponty similarly argues that “liberal ideas belong to a system of violence” and are particularly effective in concealing this reality and preventing struggle against it (1969, xii). The ideal of equality, for instance, is invoked to oppose the real work of *producing* equality (think, for instance, of how “all lives matter” does this).²⁴ Fanon describes the practices for which the dreaded “Western values” are mobilized: “non-violence” for maintaining the status quo, “individualism” for undermining collective struggle, and so on (2004, 8, 23, 11). Thinking is never a matter of accomplishing universality by sacrificing specificity; rather, principles are worked out—they emerge as meaningful—in the dimension of specificity. They are a necessary pair.

Given the intrinsic relation between principle and situation, attempts to be responsible will inevitably be the occasion for setting our prejudices in motion and asserting our own perspectives.²⁵ We set interpretive partiality in motion when we act, and so such action must always be accompanied by the self-conscious effort to think its externality and by respect for the others who have the power to perceive our action differently than we do. Awareness of finitude should motivate engagement with a situation that is open to the horizon beyond it: namely, action with the support of a communicative context, action that is open to being “called in.” At the most basic level this means that our response to any moral or ethical demand that inspires action is never perfectly discharged, even after action is “completed.”²⁶ Since we are called by our situations to act without being able to grasp action’s full significance, and since we inhabit a dynamic human context in which the ground is always shifting beneath our feet, we require others around us—whether in texts or in person—who perceive differently than we do. Philosophy must be enacted as a matter of exposure and transformation rather than as authoritative self-assertion: as initiation, request, invitation. This renders the idea of universality a lateral and horizontal notion, and it demands a commitment not to lead with one’s assumptions but to have them be exposed, to oppose the temptations of abstraction and the private consultation of one’s own mind, to do the practical labor required for the production of lateral universality, and to engage widely, beyond one’s specific community.

There is a further point to notice here. While thinking and speaking can be wielded in ways that are aggressive and exclusionary, they are in principle expansive and infinitely hospitable, not decreased by the inclusion of what was previously unthought and unspoken.

²³ In Mehta’s terms, the guiding question should be: what is the “relationship that a body of ideas imagines between itself and the world?” (1999, 17).

²⁴ This example is John Russon’s, made in a 2018 guest lecture in a class at Memorial University on Merleau-Ponty’s *Humanism and Terror*.

²⁵ Consider Davis’s (1983) example of how a campaign against sexual violence conducted mostly by white women was the occasion for the mobilization of their racism, as it invoked their assumption that Black men were particularly sexually violent and Black women hyper-sexual.

²⁶ This is the “hyperbolic ethics” of which Derrida (2001) speaks.

Ontologically singular, they can be shared without decrease, unlike money, oranges, or houses. Relatedly, they do not tolerate competition but inspire distribution, since their possession by others enhances my own.²⁷ Yet we are not in charge of the ways in which we may change through interaction with what is unfamiliar, and thus we should avoid the assertion of philosophical authority and the glorification of existing knowledge and, rather than allowing this knowledge to lead the way in the mode of assimilation of what is other, letting the interaction itself lead us, in the name of the philosophical weight and significance of determinacy.

Our specificity situates us inside of structures designed to protect some from injury and conceal the injury of others. This, as well as our lack of individual effort and care, bolsters destructive prejudices of perception. But our specificity is not simply an obstacle to identification with others; rather, it is the very condition under which the sense that emerges in another's experience can come alive in ours. With work, our specificity can be mobilized to support our capacity for reckoning with that of others: through the felt character of ourselves as "one among many," where other perspectives are deeply implicated in the development of our own, and through the intrinsic connection between the specificity of situation on the one hand and the generality of thinking and language on the other. To register the challenges presented by the intersectionality argument and the critique of Eurocentrism is to register the way reality is diversely constituted, to expand communicative space, to act and speak in a way that reflects awareness of the externality we project in our very acting and speaking. These critiques themselves allow for the explicit political enlargement of the phenomenological point: we live our familiar "interiors" differently, as some of them are construed as fundamentally exterior. For philosophical and political reasons, thought and action must be directed toward the space of communication, where we struggle to preserve the possibility of the mutual exposure of perspectives, encountering these perspectives in person, on the page, and in the imagination so that we can be meaningfully expanded by them and more faithful to reality, and thus not useless in answering to the need for the world to be different. The hope that we can do so is meaningful insofar as we are in principle capable of making "outsiders" alive to the situations in which we find ourselves, capable of becoming alive as "outsiders" to the meaningful situations of others, intrinsically internally sensitive to the transformative effects of others—though greater effort is required by those who have been marked by history as perpetual insiders.

²⁷ See Plato's *Lysis*, particularly Socrates' questions to Lysis and Menexenus about their relative age, wealth, appearance, justice, and wisdom, which evoke the idea that while age, wealth, and appearance differentiate people from each other and can inspire competition, justice and wisdom are shareable and increase thereby (1997, 207b8–d3). Diemut Bubeck similarly argues that knowledge is "a public good," not "a private good fought over in an antagonistic zero-sum game," whatever the practical limits to its accessibility (2000, 193). Miranda Fricker notes that reason is that in which the "powerless" ground their counterclaims against the powerful, and "is not diminished by the cynical insouciance of others" (2000, 151).

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