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**Intellectual Imagination: Knowledge and Aesthetics in North Atlantic and African Philosophy**

Omedi Ochieng

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OMEDI  
OCHIENG

THE  
INTELLECTUAL  
IMAGINATION

KNOWLEDGE AND AESTHETICS  
IN NORTH ATLANTIC AND  
AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY



## THE INTELLECTUAL IMAGINATION



THE  
INTELLECTUAL  
IMAGINATION

Knowledge and Aesthetics in North Atlantic  
and African Philosophy

OMEDI OCHIENG

University of Notre Dame Press

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## C O N T E N T S

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Acknowledgments      vii

Introduction. Groundwork for the Intellectual Life:      1  
Ontology, Imagination, and Praxis

1      Radical Knowledge: Toward a Critical Contextual      9  
Ontology of Intellectual Practice

2      Embodied Knowledge: Intellectual Practices      75  
as Ways of Life

3      Radical World-building: Notes Toward a Critical      147  
Contextual Aesthetic

4      Geographies of the Imagination: Figurations      207  
of the Aesthetic at the Intersection of African  
and Global Arts

Conclusion. Theses on the Intellectual Imagination      235

Notes      251

Bibliography      283

Index      297



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## INTRODUCTION

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# Groundwork for the Intellectual Life

*Ontology, Imagination, and Praxis*

In winter's twilight, when the red sun glows, I can see the dark figures pass between the halls to the music of the night-bell. In the morning, when the sun is golden, the clang of the day-bell brings the hurry and laughter of three hundred young hearts from hall and street, and from the busy city below,—children all dark and heavy-haired,—to join their clear young voices in the music of the morning sacrifice. In a half-dozen class-rooms they gather then,—here to follow the love-song of Dido, here to listen to the tale of Troy divine; there to wander among the stars, there to wander among men and nations—and elsewhere other well-worn ways of knowing this queer world. Nothing new, no time-saving device—simply old time-glorified methods of delving for Truth, and searching out the hidden beauties of life, and learning the good of living. The riddle of existence is the college curriculum that was laid before the Pharaohs, that was taught in the groves by Plato, that formed the *trivium* and *quadrivium*, and is to-day laid before the freedmen's sons by Atlanta University. And this course of study will not change; its methods will grow more deft and effectual, its content richer by toil of scholar and sight of seer; but the true college will ever have one goal—not to earn meat, but to know the end and aim of that life which meat nourishes.

—W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

“What constitutes intellectual practice? Where are intellectual spaces? When is intellectual work produced? Who is an intellectual? Why intellectualism?” These questions—about the definition, meaning, scope, justification, and normativity of intellectual practice—are the insistent, urgent questions animating this book. The overarching ambition of this book holds that robust and rigorous thought about the form and contours of intellectual practices are best envisioned in light of a comprehensive *critical contextual ontology*—that is, a systematic account of the context, forms, and dimensions in and through which knowledge and aesthetic practices are created, discovered, embodied, performed, disseminated, translated, learned, and critiqued.

Three implications immediately emerge if this is granted. First, that intellectual practice is best understood only against the background of a deep and thick social ontology. Second, that questions about the what, where, when, who, and why of intellectual practice—that is, about the definition, form, objects, methods, embodiments, and justification of intellection—are best engaged as inextricably entangled questions rather than separate, scattered investigations. It follows, then, that the manifold forms of knowledge—historical, performative, empirical, rational, and imaginative—are interanimated. Third, that the normative horizon of intellectual practice consists in their flourishing as ways of life. Accordingly, intellectual practices—when acknowledged as ways of life—are dialectically constitutive of the good life and the good society.

These theses, undoubtedly controversial within the dominant philosophical systems of the moment, continue to find resonance in lost, defeated, or otherwise attenuated practices. From the Mediterranean to Melanesia, Africa to the Americas, intellectual practices—from critical inquiry to the making and performance of the arts—were seen as all of a piece with the fabric of everyday life.<sup>1</sup> If, within these societies, particular intellectual schools emerged, this was to the end of articulating a comprehensive vision of the good life. In ancient Greece, for example, various schools of philosophy conceived of the intellectual life as precisely a way of life. But, as the renowned French scholar Pierre Hadot argues persuasively, this conception of the intellectual

life underwent a thoroughgoing transformation when Christianity's hegemony in antiquity reduced philosophy to a theoretical study.<sup>2</sup> Modernity both completed and cemented this transformation with the transmutation of wisdom into epistemology,<sup>3</sup> ethics into morality,<sup>4</sup> and aesthetics into taste.<sup>5</sup>

The technology that alchemized intellectual practice into propositional knowledge was the establishment of disciplinary faculties, perhaps the singular most consequential invention of the North Atlantic research university. Within these disciplines, two developments in particular were notable. First, the ascendance and, later, dominance of scientific paradigms of knowledge—and, crucially, their adoption in the social sciences—resulted in the widespread conviction that legitimate epistemological practices were those that were value-neutral or objective. Second, and closely related to the first, was the notion that aesthetic artifacts and performances—that is, literature, music, paintings, dance, film, and so on—increasingly came to be seen not only as lacking in knowledge content but also as fully realizable only if they were apolitical.

These developments did not take place in a historical vacuum. The North Atlantic university was embedded in a political economy furrowed and seeded with the proceeds of imperialist conquest, human trafficking, and colonial subjugation.<sup>6</sup> These proceeds in turn established the endowments that funded far-flung anthropological forays in search of the “savage” other, which fired philosophical speculation on the irrationality of the “primitive” native, and which flourished in an elaborate taxonomy of human racial classification in the biological sciences. The upshot, then, was not only the seizure of the commanding heights of global politics and economics by the ruling powers in the North Atlantic world but also the violent appropriation and erasure of knowledges and imaginations of the global south.

A significant task of the present project, then, consists in proffering an alternative account of the intellectual life that is critical of this modern *episteme*. Against the compartmentalization of knowledge encouraged by the machinery of disciplines and departments in the modern research university, I want to offer an outline of what I shall refer to as an *articulated* practice of the intellectual life. Such an account, I will

argue, not only endeavors to break the oppositional binarisms of modern knowledge—fact versus value, science versus the humanities, truth versus art, politics versus aesthetics—but also seeks attunement with fugitive forms of knowledge pulsing below the frequencies of supremacist discourses.

To be sure, this project takes its distance from other discourses that have sought to challenge the ruling presumptions of modernity. It holds no brief for a nostalgic return to autochthonous *epistemes*—be that, for example, an Aryanist<sup>7</sup> discourse that claims ancient Greece as the origin of “Western” civilization, or an Afrocentrist<sup>8</sup> discourse that traces its lineage back to ancient Egypt. Quite apart from the dubious historiographical decisionism involved in declaring origins by fiat, prelapsarian projects (Philhellenism and Egyptophilia being prime examples) are awash in an untowardly romanticism. Nor—as I shall argue at length in later chapters—do I find especially convincing recent spirited neoclassical and medieval retrievals of lost intellectual practices.<sup>9</sup> For one, ancient philosophies such as the famed oeuvres of Plato and Aristotle presuppose an elaborate metaphysics that have not stood up well to the deliverances of the best scientific and humanistic critique. Moreover, for all that ancient philosophies conceived of intellectual work as a way of life, they ultimately proffer a far too narrow account of the life of the mind. As John M. Cooper has argued in his *Pursuits of Wisdom*, for the ancients “only reason, and what reason could discover and establish as the truth, could be ultimately an acceptable basis on which to live a life—and for them, philosophy is nothing more, but also nothing less, than the art or discipline that develops and perfects the human capacity of reason.”<sup>10</sup> Against this impoverished account of rationality, I want to proffer a layered and richly woven intervention that conceives of the intellectual life as the realization of knowledges in all their spectacular diversity—historical, performative, empirical, rational, and imaginative.

But the most pressing reason why I want to depart from ancient, modern, and postmodern accounts of the intellectual life has to do with my alternative understanding of what an intellectual ontology consists in. In my account, the intellectual life is inextricably embedded, entangled, and engendering of a *social ontology*. There is

thus a dialectic between larger social structures—politics, economics, and culture—and the ideas, arguments, and reasons that are constitutive of intellectual flourishing. This argument cuts against both ancient accounts of intellectual ontology—which I characterize as “inflationary”—and modern accounts of intellectual ontology—which I consider to be “deflationary.” Plato, to pick one canonical ancient, posits the philosophical life as the best form of life because it involves the pursuit of the knowledge of Forms. Given his belief that philosophers are alone guided by reason, he advances as ideal a social ontology in which the *philosophoi* are a permanent ruling strata. I characterize Plato’s account as “inflationary,” not only because its extravagant metaphysical presuppositions are held as determinative of an earthly social ontology but also because of the inflationary role it assigns the philosopher over and above other forms of life.

But if the Platonic account is inflationary, the research program in the sociology of knowledge that emerged in the modern university is determinedly deflationary. For the sociologist Emile Durkheim, “social life must be explained not by the conception of it formed by those who participate in it, but by the profound causes which escape their consciousness.”<sup>11</sup> What is particularly problematic about this account is the manner in which it casts the realm of consciousness—ideas, arguments, representations, mentalities—as reflective of an anterior social structure. In doing so, it offers a reductionist account of the intellectual life. Ideas in this account are seen as little more than post hoc rationalizations.

It shall be part of this book’s goal, then, to critique both the “inflationary” idealism and the “reductive” materialism that characterize dominant accounts of knowledge articulation. Against ancient inflationary intellectual traditions, modern deflationary disciplinary divisions, and postmodern social constructionist conflation, this project endeavors to proffer a vision of the intellectual life as precisely a critical contextual practice. In doing so, it advances a critical contextual account that does justice to the political, economic, and cultural structures within which intellectual life is embedded as well as to the ideas, reasons, and imaginations that in turn constitute and illuminate the structural formations of society.

As pointed out above, this book intends to situate itself as a dialogue in global philosophy. As such, it is undergirded by a critical stance toward the parochial perspective that now reigns dominant in North Atlantic philosophical discourse. To be sure, this book does not seek to offer a comparative account of how North Atlantic philosophy contrasts with philosophical worldviews in other parts of the world. Such efforts at comparative philosophies, I hold, too often falsely assume a view of the world as neatly divided into civilizational or cultural blocs. Against this view, I begin from a stance that takes philosophies and the societies they are embedded in as entangled and responsive to one another. I focus most insistently in two philosophical traditions that I have most familiarity with—that of African and North Atlantic philosophical discourses. The implicit argument of this book is to invite readers to consider how a close critique of intellectual practices in Africa and the North Atlantic world may serve as a propaedeutic toward a robust account of a truly global vision of intellectual practices as ways of life. The upshot of such efforts, this book contends, is nothing less than planetary practices on what makes for good societies and good lives in the twenty-first century.

#### OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

Chapter 1 outlines the constitutive context within which the intellectual life is embedded. The chapter begins by mapping what I shall refer to as a critically contextual ontology—a systematic, comprehensive account of knowledge as emergent in actually existing contexts as opposed to idealized scenarios. Specifically, I argue for an ontology of knowledge as irreducibly contextual, embodied, rhetorical, social, interpretive, and critical. The thick account of intellectual ontology is advanced with an eye to a broader argument that an adequate account of knowledge can only be possible if we take seriously the nonideal conditions under which humans create knowledge. That is, insofar as humans are embodied creatures, who, moreover, live and think in historical contexts riven with power and violence, a robust account of the meaning and value of knowledge ought to begin not with the ideals

striven for in articulating knowledge but rather with actually existing practices of knowledge articulation. It is only against this background that I proffer a normative account of knowledge articulation. The upshot, I aver, is that knowledge articulation is best conceived of as a way of life—indeed, as constitutive of the good life.

If chapter 1 is concerned with the ontology of knowledge articulation, chapter 2 takes a turn toward fleshing out archetypal embodiments of the intellectual in the twenty-first century. This chapter neither intends to offer an exhaustive listing of all existing intellectual embodiments nor is it aimed at advancing the ideal type of the intellectual. Rather, I aim to sketch the potentialities and limits of various dominant practices of intellectual life in the current historical moment. By doing so, I gesture at the utopian horizon that every particular intellectual practice intimates.

Chapter 3 articulates an aesthetic ontology—that is, a comprehensive, systematic account of the context, nature, and form of aesthetic invention, performance, dissemination, and reception. I argue that a fully realized aesthetic ontology involves the structuration of form toward the robust exploration of a four-dimensional asymptotic horizon: *participatory embodiment*, *knowledge*, *politics*, and *meaning*. Such an account of aesthetic praxis, I argue, suggests a thoroughgoing critique of the binary oppositions that are currently dominant in the understanding of aesthetics—specifically, those that pit aesthetics against participatory embodiment, against knowledge or truth, against politics, and against existential meaning. One upshot of this argument is that aesthetic practice goes beyond the creation and critique of artworks. Rather, a robust aesthetic ontology reveals that aesthetic practice is constitutive of the well lived life.

Chapter 4 then takes a turn toward the concrete by engaging with contemporary aesthetic practices. I do so through a close reading of five major aesthetic theories: a *communalist aesthetic*, characteristic of the long African quincentenary marking precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial encounters on the continent; an *elemental aesthetic*, largely the result of North Atlantic discourses about Africa; a *pedagogical aesthetic*, with a particular focus on the doyen of African letters, Chinua Achebe; a *mythopoeic aesthetic*, championed by the Nobel

laureate Wole Soyinka; and a *late modernist aesthetic*, which I shall illustrate through a critique of J. M. Coetzee's oeuvre. My goal in this chapter consists in testing the aesthetic theory articulated in chapter 3 by bringing it into dialogue with some of the most acclaimed bodies of artistic work emergent from the African continent. This is toward a broader goal of engendering a global aesthetics oriented by the question of how aesthetic embodiment, practice, and realization can contribute to robust practices of the good life and the good society.

Finally, this book concludes by turning to the rhetorical genre of the theses to distill the irreducible commitments and the imaginative horizons of this book. In forty pungent, succinct theses, I offer a call for a radical practice of intellectual life. That radical practice, I aver, invites an acknowledgment of the social ontology from which intellectual practices are embedded. But it also demands a rigorous appreciation of the constitutive power and potentiality of intellectual production. Ultimately, what I hope to accomplish by these theses is to unfold what is critically at stake in knowledge and aesthetic production. To wit—that intellectual practice at its most realized enacts the life of the mind as a way of life.

What are the ends of intellectual practice? What ought critical thought aspire to, hold itself accountable for, harness its energies toward? The ambition of this book consists in an inquiry into the contexts, forms, and practices of thinking. By thinking, I want to foreground a mode of intellection and kinesthetics that is irreducibly speculative—that is, one that dialectically articulates the relationship between the actual and the modal, the evental and the ordinary, the uncanny and the sublime. It is to this adventure in speculative thinking to which I invite readers in the chapters that follow.

# Radical Knowledge

## *Toward a Critical Contextual Ontology of Intellectual Practice*

Intelligent practice is not a step-child of theory. On the contrary theorizing is one practice amongst others and is itself intelligently or stupidly conducted.

—Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*

This chapter articulates a *critical contextual ontology*—that is, a systematic, comprehensive account of the nature and lineaments of knowledge articulation in actually existing contexts. As such, the idea of a critical contextual ontology offers a significant inflection on traditional epistemology. If epistemology is often understood to be the study of knowledge and justified belief in abstraction from actually existing contexts, a contextual ontology situates knowledge articulation as a practice embedded in political, economic, and cultural structures. At the same time, however, it is precisely critical not only insofar as it advances a resolute critique of the idealizing currents in standard epistemological accounts but also because it seeks to reimagine—but not discard—normative theorizing. The argument, rather, holds that normative theorizing should proceed only against the background of a thick social ontology.

In an earlier work, I proffered a critical account of what such a social ontology ought to look like.<sup>1</sup> This chapter will therefore not restate these arguments. Instead, it pushes further to investigate the contours and forms that intellectual practice would take if embeddedness, embodiment, entanglement, encounter, and engenderment were given serious consideration. In what follows, I proffer an account of knowledge as irreducibly contextual, embodied, rhetorical, and social. Such an account, I go on to argue, yields a critically normative revisioning of knowledge as the interanimation of historical, performative, empirical, rational, and imaginative practices.

#### MAPPING AN ONTOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

##### Knowledge Is Embedded Contextually

We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need friction. Back to the rough ground!

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigation*

To speak of knowledge as embedded contextually is to affirm its emergence within a natural ontology—that is, that the world is a spatio-temporal entity that contains no sentient disembodied beings such as spirits or gods. Within such a naturalistic ontology, knowledge is contextual insofar as it is constituted in and by time, space, language, and practice.

The notion of knowledge as contextual cuts against Plato's epistemological legacy. Plato proffered a conception of knowledge as that which is possessed when the *nous* achieves an identical, unmediated contemplation of the Forms, eternal and changeless reality. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato vividly paints his vision of the lover of wisdom (the philosopher) who possesses absolute truth. He tells Phaedrus:

Now a god's mind is nourished by intelligence and pure knowledge, as is the mind of any soul that is concerned to take in what is appropriate to it, and so it is delighted at last to be seeing what is real and watching

what is true, feeding on all this and feeling wonderful, until the circular motion brings it around to where it started. On the way around it has a view of Justice as it is; it has a view of Self-control; it has a view of Knowledge, not the knowledge that is close to change, that becomes different as it knows the different things which we consider real down here. No, it is the knowledge of what really is what it is.<sup>2</sup>

Plato's view is straightforwardly transcendental and absolutist. The absolutist ontology proffers at least three propositions about ontology. First, it conceives of ontology as *singular*, in the sense that it claims that the being of the world is ultimately foundational on a single thing, in this case the Forms. Second, the substance posited as ultimate being is *transcendental*. It denotes an entity that not only is completely divorced from matter and human activity but that in some forms is beyond human comprehension or understanding.<sup>3</sup> Third, the absolutist ontologist claims that the substance underlying reality can never *change* and, insofar as it can ever be discovered, it renders the epistemic discovery itself unchangeable, certain, absolutely true. Plato's absolutist ontology bears a weighty legacy in the epistemologies that have been claimed or appropriated by North Atlantic philosophers.

But to say that knowledge is "contextual" does not also mean a fall into willy-nilly relativism. The very notion of context means that there exist contours and constraints to knowledge articulation. Moreover, there is a mind-independent context—call it "the brute world"—that would exist without humans. This of course does not mean that the world is simply "given" and is thus passively absorbed by humans. Knowledge, within this account, is ineluctably entangled with agency.

### Knowledge Is Embodied

If someone says, "I have a body," he can be asked, "Who is speaking here with this mouth?"

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*

Among humans, sentient awareness has often—but not always—found extension in three inextricably intertwined *embodied* capacities: that

of language, emotion, and rationality. Language emerges from a human faculty to generate and develop auditory and visual symbols and signs for communication, expression, and action. Emotions, on the other hand, are embodied (conscious and nonconscious) qualitative states of being (which include sensations, feelings, and desires) that are experienced relationally and institutionally and that in certain cases yield particular forms of knowledge about the objective world (judgments). Humans share with other creatures certain emotions such as fear, anger, and revulsion. Moreover, some kinds of emotions are also intentional and cognitive, that is, involve evaluations about external states of affairs and, moreover, orient humans to the state of the world.

Emotions are deeply intertwined with another capacity within the human, that of rationality. Rationality is conceptualized in this context as the ability of humans to make inferences of logical and empirical entailment, implicature, and presupposition; inferences about probability and possibility; and inferences about cause and effect. Emotion is necessary to rationality insofar as certain inferences about creaturely intentionality can only be made on the basis of affective attunement to other creatures' emotional status. Conversely, humans can significantly modify their emotional responses by means of reason and argumentation. As such, emotions are subject to rational critique as to whether they are warranted or unwarranted.

There are several salient implications that follow from taking seriously the embodiment of knowledge articulation and the capacities constituted by embodiment. Reckoning with embodiment—and the full panoply of embodied capacities—explodes the idealism/materialism dualism that has vexed the larger part of North Atlantic philosophy. It will be recalled that Descartes argues that the *cogito* (“I think, therefore I am”) is the indubitable foundation upon which the superstructure of knowledge is to be built. The mind, in Descartes' view, is self-transparent, yielding representations of innate ideas. Though Descartes is anxious to find an absolute foundation to prop up every other knowledge claim about the external world, in the end he has no answer for the thought experiment that an evil demon may be manipulating his thoughts. He therefore resorts to the claim that God guarantees correct access to his thoughts. In its appeal to God as

the guarantor of external reality, the Cartesian project—though idealist in its starting place—rearticulates Plato's transcendental ontology.

Cartesian ontology bears a weighty legacy in debates about epistemology in philosophical discourse. Even those who did without his appeal to God clung to his *cogito* as the irreducible starting point for epistemology. Moreover, it is not simply that North Atlantic philosophy—exemplified, for example, by Kant's transcendental unity of apperception and Fichte's will—clings tenaciously to a residual idealism. It bolstered the “epistemology first” mythos that now dominates the discipline of philosophy; the assumption, within traditional North Atlantic philosophy, that epistemology constitutes the privileged core of philosophy.

The flaws of the Cartesian project, however, remain as glaring as ever. The mind, according to the Cartesian formulation, is posited as the executive “cause” of bodily behavior or actions. The first problem is that, insofar as the mind is posited by Descartes as a substance or entity of some sort, it remains a mysteriously ghostly cause that seemingly has no position in physical space.<sup>4</sup> Gilbert Ryle famously diagnoses one possible source of Descartes' error as a “category mistake”—the erroneous classification of a term or phrase that belongs in one logical category by classifying it in another category. From the fact that there exist “mental processes” and “bodily processes,” it does not follow that these are references to “two different species of existence.” Rather, the sense in which a person speaks of *existence* when referring to the mind differs from that in which she or he speaks of the *existence* of bodies.<sup>5</sup> Consider, Ryle points out, a foreigner who, when watching his first game of cricket and having learned the functions of the bowlers, the batsmen, the fielders, the umpires, and the scorers, goes on to ask: “But there is no one left on the field to contribute the famous element of team-spirit. I see who does the bowling, the batting, and the wicket-keeping; but I do not see whose role it is to exercise *esprit de corps*.”<sup>6</sup> As Ryle points out, the foreigner's mistake is in supposing that team spirit is another thing or entity that one can point to as supplementary to all of the other special tasks performed by each player on the field. Rather, it is “the keenness with which each of the special tasks is performed, and performing a task keenly is not performing two tasks.”<sup>7</sup> Descartes,

Ryle argues, commits a similar category-mistake: “The belief that there is a polar opposition between Mind and Matter is the belief that they are terms of the same logical type.”<sup>8</sup>

Of course, it does not follow that the problematic aspects of dualism thereby render an eliminativist reductionism attractive either. A physicalism that denies *qualia*—that there is such a thing as being a certain sort of organism that feels or experiences *in an irreducibly particular manner*—fails to engage with such a large dimension of the organic world that it loses any claim to naturalism, whatever its pretensions. Against then the inflationary claims of dualism and the reductionism of mechanistic physicalism, a critical perspective would argue for an *emergent physicalism* wherein the mental is emergent but not reducible to the physical. Such a theory has the virtue of indicating that the mind and the body are not two substances but one—a physical substance—but without denying the unique dimensions of the brain that make it central to consciousness.

Moreover, reckoning with embodiment also means complicating the dualism between an “internal,” “private,” and “individual” mental realm and an “external,” “public,” and “social” realm. Knowledge is thoroughly social because the mind is embodied. Because the brain does not subsist in a vat, the mind is shaped by the social world within which it is embedded. Through the processes of socialization, any talk of “external” social structures and “internal” phenomenological consciousness is rendered moot through the formation of a *habitus*. A *habitus* denotes a complex of dispositions that are durable—that is, that designate a person’s predisposition, tendency, propensity, inclination, and liability; a habitual bodily comportment; a way of being. Moreover, a *habitus* designates a complex of generative, transposable dispositions.<sup>9</sup>

Thus understood, a robust and expansive conception of knowledge articulation as an irreducible dialectic of *knowledge that* (propositional knowledge) and *knowledge how* (performative knowledge) comes into view. Of all the legacies of Cartesian thought, perhaps none has been as dominant within the modern mind as the “intellectualist legend,” the supposition “that the primary exercise of minds consists in finding answers to questions and that their other occupations are merely

applications of considered truths or even regrettable distractions from their consideration.”<sup>10</sup> This model of the intellect casts theorizing as a private “internal monologue or silent soliloquy.”<sup>11</sup> The upshot is “the absurd assumption . . . that a performance of any sort inherits all its title to intelligence from some anterior internal operation of planning what to do.”<sup>12</sup>

The notion that intelligent performance is merely the application by the agent of particular regulative propositions runs aground under the scrutiny of logical and empirical critique. The first objection is that the claim that a private criterion or rule is ostensibly adverted to before any action can be undertaken raises conundrums of an infinite regress or vicious cycle: there’s an infinite regress in the claim that to act intelligently, one must master particular regulative propositions, but since such mastery of regulative propositions are in themselves intelligent or stupid acts, one must have had particular propositions about this mastery of intelligent acts, thus triggering another trailing off to the next propositions of propositions, or, looked at from another perspective, spinning the wheel of a vicious cycle. “The consideration of propositions is itself an operation the execution of which can be more or less intelligent, less or more stupid. But if, for any operation to be intelligently executed, a prior theoretical operation had first to be performed and performed intelligently, it would be a logical impossibility for anyone ever to break into the circle.”<sup>13</sup> The upshot is that “when I do something intelligently, i.e. thinking what I am doing, I am doing one thing and not two. My performance has a special procedure or manner, not special antecedents.”<sup>14</sup>

Thus, against the notion that practices are simply the application of rules, they are best conceived of as articulated performances. That is, competence involves less the mastery of propositions and more what Bourdieu calls a “feel for the game,” a holistic “flow” of conscious and unconscious bodily practices. Practices are textured competences, existing at the intersection of beliefs, perception, memory, and style. For that reason, they seem at once utterly familiar because they are repetitive, and completely new because they are innovative. Competent performance of a practice appears as a seamless flow of exigence, the *kairotic* seizure of time, and the perfect alignment of bodily

comportment, gesture, expression, and tone. A paradigmatic example is the art and practice of telling jokes. There is many a wit who, when challenged to cite the maxims or canons for constructing and appreciating jokes, is at a loss of what to say. A person's actions are a seamless "flow" of the conscious and the unconscious. Mental concepts such as heeding and minding involve, not the two-worlds legend of a mechanical doing and a spiritual or mental heeding, but rather the activation of a disposition to do one thing in a particular way.<sup>15</sup> A "grocer is not described as 'grocing' now, but only as selling sugar now, or weighing tea now, or wrapping up butter now."<sup>16</sup>

For all the verve, however, with which Ryle devastates Cartesian dualism, his positive theory of consciousness lends itself to charges of a weak behaviorism. His account largely focuses on giving a semantic account of dispositions—that is, what it means to state that a person is acting in a particular way. He argues that while dispositional statements are not categorical, witnessable facts, they are nevertheless "testable, open hypothetical and what I shall call 'semi-hypothetical' statements."<sup>17</sup> Ryle rightly wants to reject the notion that one has to peep into a subject's "secret grotto" of a mind in order to explain her behavior. But it is possible to offer an account that rejects the notion that behavior is ultimately mysterious because one has no access to the inner workings of a person's mind, while still insisting that there is indeed such a thing as phenomenology—not only in the form of qualia but also in accounting for the importance of belief and the efficacy with which belief often, though not always, structures behavior.

*Knowledge that* and *knowledge how* are articulated and inextricably entangled, but not reducible to one or the other. It is arguable that most forms of knowledge have a dimension of knowledge that and knowledge how. Rather than reducing knowledge that to knowledge how (as Ryle's account is often tempted to do), or retreating to the ghostly machinations of the Cartesian philosophy of mind, or simply opposing these forms of knowledge (as some Heideggerian and Bourdieusian epigones have been inclined to do), a nonreductionist account stresses the interanimation of cognitive, affective, and kinesthetic capacities. Within such an account, propositional knowledges are no longer seen as isolable facts but rather are understood only against

the background of a social ontology. On the other hand, various competences—such as swimming or riding a bicycle—while not reducible to conceptual representations are for all of that sensory-motor capacities that are inflected by agents' abstract conceptions of size, speed, distance, volume, force, weight, and so on.

Moreover, the embeddedness of bodies in time and space should shatter any notion of knowledge how as arationally instinctual or irrationally habitual. According to Bourdieu, models of action must pay attention to the notion that practice is always enacted in *time*: "To restore to practice its practical truth, we must therefore reintroduce time into the theoretical representation of a practice which, being temporally structured, is intrinsically defined by its *tempo*."<sup>18</sup> In his study of Kabyle society, Bourdieu is critical of accounts given by Mauss and Levi-Strauss of peasant societies' practice of gift exchange. These accounts explain the practices of gift giving and receiving as predicated on formal rules of reciprocity wherein a proffered gift stimulates a reciprocal counteroffer. Bourdieu disagrees, arguing that the giving and receiving of gifts take place in and through time and space according to the agents' *habitus*—which, crucially, involves agents' notions of the possible and the impossible, the right and wrong. In his study of Kabyle society, Bourdieu notes that even highly ritualized practices are subject to innovation and manipulation by social agents.<sup>19</sup> Because such actions take place in and through space and time, they are inevitably ambiguous; the agents are never completely certain as to their outcomes. Thus, these performances are also *contingent* and are always performed at the risk of error, failure, and information asymmetry. It follows then that such performances are *constitutive* insofar as they create as much as iterate.

One salutary upshot of thinking through how embodiment inflects knowledge articulation involves reckoning with the vexed place of subjectivity in epistemology. Call this *somatotivity*, for the complex of embodied competences emergent at the intersection of socialization and individuality, articulated in the performances of a social practice, and instantiated in the distinct individual "style" or signature that marks every individual's particular way of performing a social practice. Human capacities (for rationality, emotions, and language)

ge) are articulated intersubjectively and transsubjectively. Moreover, embodiment inscripts human knowledge within particular social collectivities riven with power and hierarchy—in the contemporary historical conjuncture, that means able-bodied/disabled, gender, sexuality, race, class, status, profession, religion, age, geographical location, political ideology, and so on.

Because humans are embodied, relational beings, human knowledge is charged with interests, values, and emotions. Human perspectives are never simply neutral but are always already vibrant with interest, anticipation, desire, fear, disgust, hate, delight, and love. Human knowledge then is interpretive insofar as it intertwines perceptions, affect, and interests. One upshot is that human knowledge is *finite* and *partial*. This is so because human capacities are limited and finite. To be a biological creature demands the acknowledgment that one is a vulnerable, afflicted, disabled, and dependent person.<sup>20</sup> Scientists, humanists, and artists are embodied, and as such articulate knowledge not only in “ideal” conditions of satisfaction, health, trust, joy, and hopefulness, but also in varying states of hunger, sickness, disability, fear, and anxiety. Moreover, human capacities in time atrophy and die out. Death is the inevitable horizon against which individual humans live. Additionally, by virtue of existing within space and time, human capacities can only be extended so far. Of course, humans are capable of extending their knowledges not only through cooperative activity with other humans and other nonhuman animals and creatures but also through technological instruments. Even so, there will always exist limits to how much can be known by humans, even if such limits can never be completely inscribed a priori in human practices. Finitude, it ought to be noted, is not necessarily negative. That is, it is not always to be decried or transcended. It is also positive insofar as particularity also offers plurality. Plurality is the condition of possibility for creativity; it is *constitutive* of possibility, productive differences, and innovation.

The theory of somatativity articulated above overlaps with, even as it differs from, dominant theories articulated in the North Atlantic academy. Two particularly require greater scrutiny: Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical theory and Judith Butler’s performativity theory. Goff-

man's theory is outlined in his influential book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956). He argues that individuals construct the self by performing particular roles to different observers or audiences. For Goffman, the self is ultimately a product of how individuals manage the impressions they create in others and the impressions about themselves that they glean from others. The self

does not derive from its possessor, but from the whole scene of his action, being generated by that attribute of local events which renders them interpretable by witnesses. A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute a self to the performed character, but this imputation—this self—is a product of a scene that comes off, and is not a cause of it. The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited.<sup>21</sup>

Human communication processes, Goffman argues, are “a kind of information game—a potentially infinite cycle of concealment, discovery, false revelation, and rediscovery.”<sup>22</sup> Impression management involves contestation, negotiation, and collusion, as individuals strive to define the situation. Goffman notes the difference between the persona that individuals enact in what he calls “front stage” settings—public or professional interactions—and “back stage” settings—situations in which individuals feel that they can “let their hair down,” such as in the home or in the bedroom. Perhaps one difficulty with Goffman's theory is that his analysis is rooted in the assumptions of methodological individualism. One failing of this methodology is that it may obscure the structural forces that exert power on the individual to be oriented toward the art and craft of constant impression management. Nor does Goffman historicize “front stage” and “back stage” settings. The danger then is that his account universalizes the split between “front stage” and “back stage” contexts and fails to show how this split emerged in the crucible of liberal capitalist modernity and its obsessions with the “public” and “private” divide. Second,

Goffman does not sufficiently engage how differentials in power affect who is able to engage in impression and the forms of impression management that are enacted. For example, the very poor are almost always under surveillance and denied any resources for impression management, people with severe disabilities often are not accorded “back stage” settings into which they can retreat, and so on. Conversely, it is not for nothing that Henry James defined aristocracy as “bad manners organized”—the extremely powerful are famously boorish and utterly sociopathic, not because of anything essential about them but because they have free reign to behave as they will without consequences. Goffman’s description of performance as “management” may thus be more telling here than he supposed; his theory describes a preoccupation of a very distinct group, that of the “professional managerial class” notable not only for its obsession with individual branding but also for its anxiety to mystify its class belonging.<sup>23</sup> Third, Goffman’s account scants the biological (psychological and emotional) capacities and dispositions of being human as these are articulated with social formation. Concerned to break with the Romantic conception of the self as emergent from some “inner” core, his account nevertheless flirts with a vulgar behaviorism in not engaging sufficiently with the phenomenology of performance. Moreover, a deeper engagement with the psychic and emotional landscape of performance would have significantly complicated his rather flat portrait of impression management as a universal feature of human interaction. For some—for example, persons diagnosed with certain strains of Asperger syndrome—impression management presents multiple challenges.

Judith Butler’s performativity theory draws insights from John Austin’s speech act theory in constructing a poststructuralist theory of action. Her theory then proceeds to offer an account deeply influenced by Derrida’s theory of language, Althusser’s Lacan-inflected psychoanalytic theories of subject formation, and Foucault’s theory of power. Austin, it will be recalled, brings notice to a set of linguistic utterances that “do things”—that is, that call particular relationships or activities into being.<sup>24</sup> Butler extends this insight in calling to attention how gender is similarly constructed. Performativity, she argues, is “the discursive mode by which ontological effects are installed.”<sup>25</sup> The utterance

“it’s a girl” is far from an innocent report on an ontological state of affairs; rather, it inaugurates a process of “girling,” which then proceeds apace through socialization.

Butler, however, is critical of Austin’s speech act theory. She faults Austin’s account for holding that speech acts always secure uptake. According to Butler, Austin’s mistake lies in making the presumption that the speaker who utters a performative speech act always has the authority to make the utterance: “The subject as sovereign is presumed in the Austinian account of performativity: the figure for the one who speaks and, in speaking performs what she/he speaks, is the judge or some other representative of the law.”<sup>26</sup> On the basis of her reading of Austin’s speech act theory, Butler is critical of feminist and antiracist theorists who have advocated for the legal regulation of pornography and racist hate speech. According to Butler, these theorists are mistaken because they presume that “speech is the immediate and necessary exercise of injurious effects.”<sup>27</sup>

Butler’s critique of Austin is weakened in part by a wooden, literalistic reading of his examples. As a result, she is disposed to read his examples not as contextually specific instantiations of performatives but rather as exhausting all and every possible circumstance within which speech acts may be uttered. Nonetheless, it may be said of Austin’s account that he leaves severely undertheorized the conventions that make possible the uptake of a speech act. He does not take into account how conventions are articulated through a history of power differentials, how certain conventions are “hegemonic” in the precise sense that they no longer need a recognized official in place to enforce adherence to them. In many jurisdictions, for example, a particular activity may be formally “illegal” and yet this says nothing about what governs actual relations within the jurisdiction. In other words, there may be a deeper social logic to a structural context than the formal one that is publicized.

But if Austin is dangerously close to characterizing “context” as altogether too transparent, Butler mystifies context. She is at pains to emphasize the indefinability of context. In a characteristically Derridean two-step, she moves from noting that contexts are not “static” to an outright absolutization of the fluidity of contexts.<sup>28</sup> She repeats

the same maneuver in pointing to the possibility that pornographic and racist speech acts need not necessarily perform the injuries that they are purported to perform: "That no speech act *has* to perform injury as its effect mean that no simple elaboration of speech acts will provide a standard by which the injuries of speech might be effectively adjudicated."<sup>29</sup> But, of course, from the fact that hateful speech acts are not *necessarily* injurious, it simply does not follow that particular historically situated racist speech acts are *never* injurious. For a theorist that came onto the scene with strident denunciations of binarisms, it bears noting how Butler is in this instance committed to all or nothing false dilemmas.

Butler also is anxious to disavow any resonances between her account of performativity and that of theatrical performance. For Butler, theatrical performance offers a problematic metaphor for understanding action because, she claims, it relies on a conception of the self that preexists the performance of a role. Butler's performativity vehemently refuses any notion of a "subject"—which she regards as carrying with it modernist senses of an "essential," "stable" self who "originates" action. Rather Butler's poststructuralism characterizes action as akin to a cat constantly chasing after its tail. "Performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed by a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject."<sup>30</sup> It is indubitably true that the fleshly character of the body is always already inscribed discursively. Butler however absolutizes this and thereby erases the body's biotic creatureliness—constituted by blood and bones, lymph and ligament, kidneys and cartilage—and renders it simply as an "effect" of discursive regimes. To be sure, the materiality of the body—its form as flesh and blood, capable of pain and pleasure, hunger and thirst, not infinitely malleable—is of course always saturated with sociality. But that precisely demands a recognition of the body's *temporal* and *spatial* location, its diverse but nonetheless determinate *morphology*, its irreducible *creaturely* wants and needs, and its inevitable *mortality*.

Butler's thin account of embodiedness redounds negatively in her thought about agency. Her account of performativity allows that subjects may exercise a measure of agency through repetitions with differences such as parodying gender norms and ironic speech acts. Her paradigmatic figure of agency is the drag queen. But, ultimately, her conception of agency is anchored on allegories of intersubjective encounters—thereby taking for granted the deep background of ecology, social institutions, nonhuman- and human-caused events, and social movements, as well as linguistic-phenomenological meaning—thereby failing to offer radically imaginative accounts of ecological, social, ethical, and existential transformation.

Butler's performativity theory offers bracing critiques of dominant essentialist myths about embodiment—and her ethical turn offers a more promising direction in teasing out the phenomenological dimensions of violence and resistance—but it is ultimately unhelpful to those who want to think of embodiment within the *longue durée* of ecology and the ineliminability of creatureliness, as these are entangled in sociopolitical relationships across history and time. Her work is especially unrewarding for those who desire to engender radically transformative forms of life attuned to global as well as existential flourishing.

### Knowledge Is Rhetorical

How hard we find it to bear, and how we wriggle and turn in search of either transcendental guarantee or a skeptical escape.

—Hilary Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy*

I define rhetoric as the symbolic and performative articulation of social reality and meaning. Seen as such, an understanding of knowledge as rhetorical at once raises at least three vital implications. First, rhetorical study takes seriously the *form* within which knowledge warrants are articulated by. By form, I mean the constitutive elements of utterances, including embodiment, media, language, and style. This not only

goes against traditional philosophy's conception of form as ancillary to knowledge articulation but also challenges traditional philosophy's desire for the transparency—that is the instrumentality—of bodies, media, and language. Second, rhetorical study demands attentiveness to the processual dimensions—that is, temporal and spatial embeddedness and movement—of knowledge articulation. This means that rhetorical study challenges any clear divide between the “context of discovery” and the “context of justification.” Rather than a single-minded focus on knowledge as “product,” rhetorical study invites wide-ranging engagement with the full panoply of methods of inquiry—the use of reason (justification, argumentation, logical coherence), empirical inquiry (embodied experience, experimentation, propositional accuracy, historical narrative), creative/artistic thought (literature, film, dance, etc.), and theoretical inquiry. Third, rhetorical study emphasizes the performative dimension of knowledge articulation. By performative, I primarily mean the constitutive dimension of utterances and actions such that empirical reality is not simply described but is also reorganized and transformed in the process of being mapped. These three dimensions demonstrate the contingency of knowledge articulation. Thus, to speak of the rhetoricity of knowledge articulation is also an insistence on the openness of inquiry.

Language, of course, constitutes a particularly contested dimension of rhetoricity. Conceived of as a constitutive dimension of rhetorical articulation, language ought to be seen first and foremost as *contextual*. That refers not only to the fact that symbols are arbitrarily chosen by certain collectives to hold particular meanings but also that those symbols are held in place by convention. Moreover, each word gains meaning against a tapestry of history and in relation to a chain of other terms. Thus the meaning of a particular term is intelligible only against a social background within which language users have been socialized.

Language is also contextual insofar as meanings in language are *socially polysemic*. Language is not simply and never completely determined by individual idiosyncrasies. Though humans are born with innate capacities to acquire language, specific language acquisition takes place through socialization. Even so, there is constant contesta-

tion within social collectives about the meaning of signs and symbols. Language, as formative of the deep structure of a society, is subject to constant contestation. Often, the social forces within a society that are hegemonic establish one or two languages as the official languages. Moreover, even within the deep variations within a single language, hegemonic forces often establish a particular dialect as “standard,” against which every other variation compares. Within speech, particular intonations become so hegemonic that speakers of the dominant tongue regard themselves as “accent-less,” while stigmatizing or identifying every other variation as “accented” or as a “dialect.”<sup>31</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin has spoken of the *heteroglossia* of languages within a discursive field; the fact that every official language carries within it internal stratifications and differentiations.<sup>32</sup> Thus, no language is pure. As a result of constant interchange among speakers of various languages, all languages are *polyglossic*—that is, all languages have extensively borrowed words, phrases, syntax, and so on from other languages. Lastly, all uses of languages carry within them the signature of the individual, the ensemble of socialization, personality, idiosyncrasy, panache, and orientation to monologue, dialogue, or omnilogue.<sup>33</sup> Given variations in the use of language, meaning always has about it something of the amphibolous and indeterminate.

Seen in light of the contextual emergence and embodied engenderment of language, meanings come into view as emergent in a field of tension consisting in the interaction of *referential*, *performative*, and *expressive* dimensions. A language’s *referentiality* is constituted at the nexus of embodied activity, intentionality, and contextual reference. Its *performativity* refers to the manner in which language does things, performs certain actions. And its *expressivity* refers to the manner in which language functions as a means of discharging affect.

The theory of language articulated above cuts against three theories of language that are widely prevalent in social discourse: the idea theory of reference, linguistic determinism, and Derridean deconstruction. The idea theory of reference, propagated most famously by Thomas Hobbes, argues that language references private mental events. For Hobbes, words function as “marks” for thought, enabling the person using the words to remember his/her thoughts. This theory has

fueled the widespread notion that in order to determine the meaning of a word, one has to have access to the private intentions of a person in order to determine what the person means. The most prominent objection to this theory is the fact that language acquisition often involves socialization into the uses of language. Thus, language acquisition is not primarily a matter of inventing a new language. Moreover, logically there is simply no criterion of correctness for determining whether a private word has been used correctly. The theory makes the very practice of disputing the meaning of a term essentially empty, thus rendering language as a means of communication unintelligible. Indeed, even the individual who claims to have particular private words as markers of her thoughts has no way of finding out if she is using words correctly. This is because if she claims that a certain word enables her to remember sensation S, she has to devise another word to help her determine whether she has applied the word correctly—given that every event of naming is subject to error. But this in turn would demand yet another word to ensure this application is correctly adhered to and so on to infinity. This is not to mention the proliferation of words that will be needed to make her remember that S happened to her.

If the idea theory of reference tends to make unintelligible the social or shared dimensions of language, linguistic determinism inflates the power of language.<sup>34</sup> According to this theory, language thoroughly determines whether a person is able to experience perceptual and phenomenological events. Thus, the theory holds, if a word for a particular phenomenological state, P, exists within one society and does not exist within another society, its absence in the latter society means that people within that society are unable to experience P.<sup>35</sup> The theory also holds that if a society has a variety of words to describe a single object, then that must *prima facie* mean that the society has a deeper or more complex perception of the object. Thus, according to the legend widely circulated by journalistic renditions of linguistic determinism, the fact that the Inuit have a variety of words for snow indicates that they have a complex understanding of snow. One of the most widespread assumptions of linguistic determinism is a version of linguistic incommensurability, according to which various languages form discrete worlds that are wholly untranslatable. Linguistic determinism is rendered

implausible by its characterization of language as a prison house. It not only fails to account for human biological capacities of perception but also fails to engage the flexibility of languages in accommodating new words, concepts, and discoveries. Language undoubtedly shapes perception, but this formation is often subtle and is by no means total. Moreover, the avatars of linguistic determinism often trumpet the power of language to render *fine* distinctions but often fail to point out that this also indicates that language may *reify* invidious distinctions.

Derrida's theory of language is concerned to emphasize the radical indeterminacy of meaning—or in the jargon that he was to become so infamous for, that language is always already catachrestic. In his article “Signature Event Context,” an article that made him a *cause célèbre* in some North American humanities departments, Derrida pugnaciously attacks the notion that concepts absolutely correspond to words: Is it certain that to the word communication corresponds a concept that is unique, univocal, rigorously controllable, and transmittable: in a word, communicable? Thus in accordance with a strange figure of discourse, one must first of all ask oneself whether or not the word or signifier ‘communication’ communicates a determinate content, an identifiable meaning, or a describable value.”<sup>36</sup> In a decidedly odd argumentative move, Derrida stealthily sidles from an attack on an absolutist construction of the correspondence theory of signification to affirming an equally absolutist assertion of noncorrespondence. The thrust of his argument gains power from the notion that robbed of “a unique, univocal, rigorously controllable, and transmittable” meaning, words collapse into a welter of slipping, sliding signifiers. To the response that while meanings cannot be established absolutely, they gain a certain measure of felicity from the context within which they are articulated, Derrida replies: “But are the conditions [*les réquisits*] of a context ever absolutely determinable? This is, fundamentally, the most general question that I shall endeavor to elaborate. Is there a rigorous and scientific concept of context? . . . Stating it in the most summary manner possible, I shall try to demonstrate why a context is never absolutely determinable, or rather, why its determination can never be entirely certain or saturated. This structural non-saturation would . . . mark the theoretical inadequacy of the current

concept of context.” Once again, what is most notable about Derrida’s techniques of arguments is his desire to construct his interlocutors as committed to the notion that contexts *absolutely* determine meaning and that those opposed to his theory are *absolutely* certain that contexts can be rigorously and scientifically fixed. But of course, the absolutisms of a correspondence theory of meaning and that of an absolute indeterminacy of meaning are both problematic. The fact that there is “no necessary correspondence” does mean that there is “necessarily no correspondence.” Derrida’s position is of course accompanied by a curious twist. If for him signifiers are constantly glancing off one another in an elusive differentiation and deference of meaning, they are nevertheless entrapped in an inescapable metaphysical system wherein there is no outside. Thus, the split in Derrida’s rhetoric, alternating between outbursts of the revolutionary potential of the grapheme and a curiously tragic despair: “There is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics. We have no language—no syntax and no lexicon—which is foreign to this history; we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulation of precisely what it seeks to contest.”<sup>37</sup>

The importance of rhetoric in the articulation of knowledge, then, rests on an insistence on the importance of form, that is, the mediation of embodiment, language, and style in knowledge articulation; on process, that is, the temporal and spatial embeddedness of knowledge articulation; and on performativity, that is, the manner in which discourses and actions bring new realities into being.

To be sure, dominant intellectual traditions have taken it as a central article of faith that “rhetoric” is synonymous with error and falsehood. Plato’s attack against rhetoric inaugurated the genre of anti-rhetoric rhetoric. His is such a furious and sustained polemic that it takes on the quality of an Ahab-like obsession. In the *Apology*, he dismisses forensic rhetoric, rhetoric’s claim to usefulness in courts of law. In the *Gorgias*, he launches a blistering attack against rhetoricians’ claim to expertise in the political sphere. In the *Menexenus* and the *Symposium*, he mocks the rhetorical form of speech known as the epi-

deictic (that is, ceremonial speeches of “praise and blame” then exemplified by eulogies).

Plato’s specific charges against rhetoric can be roughly boiled down to four points. First, he claims that rhetoric produces belief without knowledge. In arguably his most devastating attack against rhetoric, he makes the rhetorician Gorgias admit as much. He rests his claim on the fact that rhetoric’s goal is persuasion rather than truth. Rhetoric, he states in the *Gorgias*, is a mere knack because it lacks a theory of the good. It could only get things right by accident. This epistemological failing carries ethical implications as well. For Plato, insofar as rhetoric is indifferent to truth, it is also unethical. Second, and closely related to the first charge, is Plato’s accusation that rhetoric is far more concerned with *form*—the devices of persuasion—and not *content*—truth itself. In several of his early dialogues, and especially the *Protagoras*, Plato mocks rhetoricians for what he claims is their small-minded fixation with proper language use and their monomaniacal bickering over abstruse subtleties. They love appearances (style and aesthetics) more than truth and make trivial things important while trivializing important things. Third, Plato charges that rhetoricians have evil motives and bad character. They use rhetoric as a tool for the manipulation of the populace. Moreover, Plato disapproves of rhetoricians for teaching people in exchange for money. Fourth, Plato charges that rhetoric did not have a subject matter. If the subject matter of weaving is the making of clothing, and music the composing of melodies, what then is the subject matter of rhetoric?<sup>38</sup> Plato’s question is meant to undermine the rhetorician’s claim to expertise on any subject. To be sure, Plato did at times concede the possibility that rhetoric could do *some* good. In the *Statesman*, he grants that rhetoric could qualify as a *techne* (an art) provided that it serve strictly as a vehicle for the transportation of philosophically generated truth.

To these charges, rhetoricians have pointed out that the historical record is far more ambiguous than the Platonic legacy has rendered it. First, as many historians of rhetoric have pointed out, the Sophists were by no means a school of thought with a singular ideology. Plato’s dialogues constitute a massive caricature of the Sophists. It is scarcely

possible to believe, as Brian Vickers has helpfully pointed out, that the historical Gorgias would have so readily agreed with Plato that rhetoric inculcates belief without knowledge. In Vicker's stinging words, Plato's sophistic interlocutors are little more than a "dialectician's dummy,"<sup>39</sup> crudely drawn, one-dimensional, monosyllabic characters that serve as useful foils for the idealized image of the philosopher. Second, Plato's dismissal of rhetorical truth rests on an implausible metaphysics that takes for granted a conception of truth as absolute and singular. He thinks that truth is not so much "discovered" *empirically* nor established through the performativity of language, but rather recalled.<sup>40</sup> Plato's mockery of the Sophists for their interest in the nuances of language speaks, on closer examination, to his rivals' far more sophisticated understanding of language. Plato's error lies in his conception of language as transparent, a mere vehicle for the transference of Truth. In fact, the notion of a one to one correspondence between language and reality is often confounded by the connotative and performative nature of language.<sup>41</sup> Even the seemingly unassailable charge that the Sophists were mercenaries, more concerned with making money than in inculcating virtue, crumbles under historical scrutiny. As Raymond Geuss has pointed out, "Plato was terrified by what he took to be the potentially subversive ('democratic') political possibilities of rhetoric: anyone who could pay the fees, regardless of their genealogy and family connections, could learn the art of speaking persuasively from professional teachers of rhetoric."<sup>42</sup> As to the charge that rhetoric lacks a subject matter, one could point out that such an objection rests on a category mistake. Rhetoric is the study of how embodied signs and action constitute social reality. That language and argumentation are used in a variety of subjects does not render them non-subjects. All that this could amount to is that there are a variety of rhetorical subjects, such that there are those who are experts in, say, political rhetoric and others in medical rhetoric. Lastly, there are a variety of contexts in which what is at stake is not so much the presence or absence of knowledge but rather the *will* (collective or individual) to act on that knowledge. *Pace* Plato, such a will is not an essential property that an individual has or does not have. Rather, it can be *constructed*. One of

the goals of rhetorical study is to engage in the study of the techniques of motivating people to act on knowledge.

To be sure, this does not mean that fourth-century Athenian *sophoi* (rhetoricians) were right and the *philosophoi* (philosophers) wrong. That would be a too simplistic reversal. As has been pointed out, rhetoricians were not a “school of thought” and therefore were hardly in lock-step agreement about ideology and epistemology. Moreover, many of them wrongly leapt from a salutary skepticism that the reigning *doxa* constitutes absolute truth to the rather less logical claim that all truth and morality is relative.<sup>43</sup> Thus, my purpose in revisiting this history is not to engage in a new round of mythmaking, with the Sophists this time taking the starring role. The point rather is to shred the mythology within which epistemology has long been shrouded and to open up room for a deeper inquiry into the rhetoricity of knowledge articulation.

### Knowledge Is Embedded Socially

Perhaps what is inexpressible (what I find mysterious and am not able to express) is the background against which whatever I could express has its meaning.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*

All articulations of knowledge have a social dimension. Epistemology is social insofar as beliefs are constructed through *socialization* (whether in childhood or in the graduate seminar). This is true even when one’s beliefs are derived negatively, that is, through oppositions to other sets of belief. Epistemology is also social insofar as certain beliefs are derived through *testimonies* (written, spoken, firsthand, second-hand, etc.). And, just as importantly, epistemology is social insofar as justifications for truth claims are *tested socially*. Given that first-person beliefs are often notoriously self-serving, it is important that third parties proffer a critique of one’s knowledge claims.

A major implication of conceiving of epistemology as social is that it indicates the entanglement of knowledge articulation in relations of

power. Knowledge is inflected with power in a variety of ways. One of those ways is the extent to which knowledge claims are articulated against a vast *contextual background* that can never be exhaustively spelt out. For example, certain claims rest on historical knowledges that depend crucially on several contextual exigencies and contingencies. What we know about the past, for example, often rests on information derived from those whose words were written or were thought to be important enough to be memorized and transmitted orally from generation to generation. Moreover, knowledge is inflected with power to the extent that one's *interests* often shapes one's conception of what is relevant or salient. Thus, say, one's empirical observations may be enhanced or distorted by certain experiences or social interests. For example, certain reports in the U.S. indicate that bad eyewitness identifications led to 75 percent of rape convictions that DNA evidence later proved to be wrongful. An overwhelming majority of these cases involved accusations of black men and Latinos of assaulting white women.<sup>44</sup> Another dimension through which power affects knowledge articulation is that particular *institutions* have greater resources and therefore greater power to set the agenda for discussions and to frame the terms of debate.

To be sure, a conception of knowledge as socially embedded thoroughly revises the dominant North Atlantic understanding of the purview of epistemology. As articulated by a philosopher such as Descartes, epistemology is conceived of as an individual activity that is interested primarily with determining true beliefs and the justifications or warrants for true beliefs. Locke, for his part, conceives of knowledge as essentially an individualistic enterprise and dismisses others views as just so many opinions.<sup>45</sup> One of the problematic aspects of this epistemic individualism is its contribution to the cult of the Great Man theory of epistemology (or the Argument from Genius). This romance is belied by the extensive indebtedness of claimed geniuses to other knowers.<sup>46</sup> Thus, social epistemology is critical of any epistemological account that begins with the individual.

Social epistemology does not repudiate the importance of truth and is just as concerned with warrants for justifying true beliefs. But perhaps what most stands out about social epistemology is that it is

concerned with actually existing ways in which knowledge is articulated as opposed to idealizations of how knowledge functions.<sup>47</sup> Toward the end of articulating actually existing epistemic practices, then, social epistemology has pointed to the much wider range of epistemological considerations in knowledge articulation. These include parsimony, the aesthetic elegance arguments and proofs, and the consistency and coherence of knowledge claims with other well-established or powerfully compelling theories.<sup>48</sup> In scientific discourse, tests of theories according to principles of coherence, simplicity, plausibility, and so forth are sociologically determined. Hilary Putnam offers a striking example:

[B]oth Einstein's General Relativity and Alfred North Whitehead's theory of gravitation (of which most people have never heard!) agreed with Special Relativity, and both predicted the familiar phenomena of the deflection of light by gravitation, the non-Newtonian character of the orbit of Mercury, the exact orbit of the Moon, and so on. Yet Einstein's theory was accepted and Whitehead's theory was rejected fifty years ago before anyone thought of an observation that would decide between the two. The judgment that scientists explicitly or implicitly made, that Whitehead's theory was too "implausible" or too "ad hoc" to be taken seriously, was clearly a value judgment. The similarity of judgments of this kind to aesthetic judgments has often been pointed out, and, indeed, Dirac was famous for saying that certain theories should be taken seriously because they were "beautiful," while others couldn't possibly be true because they were "ugly."<sup>49</sup>

Of course, social epistemology does not stop with simply documenting the actually existing ways in which knowledge is articulated. It also seeks to engage and critique truth claims through a radical critique of *ideological interests* and a thoroughgoing engagement with the sociology of knowledge articulation within a particular context.

The position articulated above has many affinities as well as significant differences with Alasdair MacIntyre's influential articulation of practice. MacIntyre defines practice thus:

By a “practice” I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.<sup>50</sup>

MacIntyre gives as examples of practices such activities as games (chess, football), productive activities (farming and architecture), intellectual activities (science and history), artistic pursuits (painting and music) and politics (participation in a political community). In contrast to this, he argues that certain activities do not qualify as practices (tic-tac-toe, bricklaying, and planting turnips).

MacIntyre’s concept of practice rests on a key distinction he draws between what he calls “internal goods” and “external goods.” He specifies the characteristics of internal goods as three-fold. First, internal goods, he argues, “cannot be had in any way but by [engaging in the practice] or some other [practice] of that specific kind.” Second, internal goods “can only be identified and recognized by the experience of participating in the practice in question.” He adds that those “who lack the relevant experience” of the practice “are incompetent thereby as judges of internal goods.”<sup>51</sup> Third, the realization of internal goods “is a good for the whole community who participate in the practice.” In contrast, external goods are “externally and contingently attached to” the practice “by the accidents of social circumstances.” External goods, he goes on to say, are “always alternative ways for achieving such goods, and their achievement is never to be had only by engaging in some particular kind of practice.” Moreover, external goods, “when achieved . . . are always some individual’s property and possession.”<sup>52</sup> MacIntyre’s examples of external goods are “prestige, status, money, fame, and pleasure.”

The difficulties with MacIntyre’s articulation of practices begin from what he envisions they are. Notwithstanding the diversity of practices that he mentions, the bulk of his examples portray practices in the manner of games—in other words, activities with relatively clear

boundaries and relatively quantifiable standards of excellence. Complex practices such as intellectual pursuits—the practice of the sciences or the practice of the arts, for example—or social practices—such as the practice of politics or economics—are of course far more difficult cases. For one, these practices are notoriously resistant to easy demarcation,<sup>53</sup> let alone to specifying a single standard of excellence. This is because these practices form a *deep structure*, shaped not only by a layered history but also through the interaction and contestation of different social and cultural institutions. Institutions, then, are constitutive of practices; they are part of the deep background through which agents' motives, standards of excellence, and relational orientation are formed. MacIntyre, however, seems to think that institutions are simply add-ons to antecedently pure practices. Thus he argues that while “no practices can survive for any length of time unsustained by institutions,”<sup>54</sup> ultimately these institutions are “characteristically and necessarily” concerned with external goods. Institutions, for MacIntyre, are at best vehicles for the advancement of practices; but his view of them as “externally oriented” renders them ultimately at odds with the pure ideals of practices. He contrasts the “ideals and creativity” of practice to the “acquisitiveness” and “competitiveness” of institutions. This allows MacIntyre to get the result he wants of practices as oriented by a single and pure teleological arc; but this is ultimately an unconvincing portrait of the embeddedness of subjects in institutions that deeply form their practices.

What follows from this is that MacIntyre considerably simplifies the motivational drives of participants to a practice. Consider, for example, his discussion of the motivational structure of practices: he is able to characterize prestige and pleasure as “external goods” by prying them apart from the desire for excellence. But this can only be done by reifying pleasure as a freestanding thing or object in competition with other motivations. Recall that part of socialization and apprenticeship for recruits to a guild or team is the sublimation of pleasure such that it is intermingled with notions of duty, honor, and excellence. In many cases, then, pleasure is *complexly emergent* from the performance of an activity or goal. Pleasure is then not simply one goal among others but rather *saturates* the desire to excel. In other words, agents participate

in a practice *not* because they are only in it for the pleasure but rather because among the goods emergent in the practice is a complex matrix of pleasure, duty, loyalty, and prestige (with pain often part of the mix; Kantian moral duty is often pleasurable precisely because it is intermingled with pain). My argument here is not normative, but instead empirical. It is one thing to say that agents ought not to regard pleasure or money as the goal of practices, another to pretend that such goods are metaphysically external to practice. Why do people participate in a practice such as science? Because their motives are a *mélange* of self-interested, reciprocal, sometimes altruistic impulses: to discover truth, for the sake of money, for the sake of technological innovations, because of the relationships they have cultivated with fellow scientists, because of their love for play, because science gives meaning to their lives, for prestige, in order to honor past women or racial minorities who were denied similar opportunities, so as to be good role models for present generations, and so on and so forth. In other words, the reasons are many, and they often involve the entanglement of “good,” “bad” and “neutral” reasons (that is, that in some contexts are good and in other contexts bad). Just because MacIntyre disapproves of a reason does not make it an external reason.

MacIntyre constructs a far too *communitarian* account of practices. It is communitarian insofar as it conceives of excellence narrowly as essentially determined by the insiders to a practice. This is problematic because of the “closed epistemology” of MacIntyerean practice. It is also problematic because MacIntyre does not sufficiently take into consideration the shared—if deeply contested and hard fought—historic and spatial field within which practices are emergent. Thus, for example, it may well be true that atheism and theism form different practices and therefore may well offer incommensurable standards for excellence. Nonetheless, for all that, participants to these different practices are embedded in a shared *ecology*, are *embodied creatures* and *encounter* one another. Whatever the differences in their practices, there are “grey zones” of contact and interaction among different practices. These “grey zones” indicate that no practices are completely closed off. Indeed, in many contexts, the clashes between different practices press upon the participants to proffer various forms of justifi-

cations and warrants in defense of their beliefs, priorities, or behavior. The upshot then is that practices overlap and clash and are rarely—if ever—neatly bounded epistemological archipelagoes. Moreover, because practices take place in time, because of their ecological embeddedness, because they are performed by embodied creatures of varying subjectivities, because of the relational disposition of these creatures not only to living participants but also to the dead and to posterity, there is an intersectionality and open-endedness to the performance of practice that defies MacIntyre's teleological narrativization of their structure.

The crux of MacIntyre's articulation of practices is the argument that it is only against the background of practices that the achievement of virtue—conceived of as the pursuit of excellence—is intelligible. He is right that Kantian and utilitarian theories proffer abstract theories that prescind from the richness of actual human epistemology and ethics; he is also right that Humean and Nietzschean theories are reductively emotivist and subjectivist. But MacIntyre's alternative does not seem to do better. What it gains by situating epistemological and ethical pursuits in a thick and textured social context, it loses in parochialism and provincialism (ultimately, MacIntyre's *After Virtue* pines for a very white, male, heterosexual, and Thomist-Christian world).<sup>55</sup> And if it gains in offering a psychological theory that has room for normativity in epistemology and ethics, it loses in its latent moralism.

#### TOWARD A NORMATIVE ARTICULATION OF KNOWLEDGE

The sense of danger must not disappear:  
The way is certainly both short and steep,  
However gradual it looks from here;  
Look if you like, but you will have to leap.

—W. H. Auden, "Leap Before You Look"

If it is granted that knowledge is contextual, embodied, rhetorical, and social, then the emergent question is one of epistemological

normativity—in other words, how ought we go about articulating knowledge? I argue that the terrain of knowledge ought to be an articulated epistemology. Below, I map three irreducibly intertwined practices of epistemological normativity: *a critical contextual rationality*, *a critical contextual hermeneutics*, and *a critical contextual imagination*.

### Critical Contextual Rationality

Not empiricism and yet realism in philosophy, that is the hardest thing.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein,  
*Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*

The account of rationality that is articulated herein is necessarily expansive, emergent from an appreciation of the diversity of global forms of life and responsive to the particularity and the nonsubstitutability of various goods. Rationality thus has both an epistemic and axiological resonance.

The epistemic dimension of rationality involves an appreciation of at least three capacities: nonconceptual perceptions, conceptual perceptions, and ideational articulation. *Nonconceptual perceptions*—for example, somatic proprioception—are embodied orientations to the world constituted in response to conscious or unconscious stimuli. The rationality of nonconceptual responses are evaluated on the basis of *corporeal attunement* to the stimuli—that is, the extent to which the body *skillfully* responds to the environment it is inhabiting.

*Conceptual perceptions* are emergent from shared social symbols and linguistic traditions. Conceptual perceptions are not simply a priori categories that are stamped onto an external reality; rather they emerge at the intersection of sensory perception and socialization. Conceptual perceptions are rational insofar as they are responsive to the fineness of grain of the world that they purport to describe and are consilient with the linguistic web of concepts that form the social background of which they are a part.

*Ideational articulation* consists in the ability to infer empirical and propositional entailment, implicature, and presupposition; iden-

tify causal probability, correlations, and patterns; and realize imaginative associations. The rationality of ideational articulation is a vexed question. On the one hand, ideational articulations have to be accountable to constraints of coherence and consistency. But on the other hand, insofar as ideational articulations fully account for the embeddedness and embodiedness of persons in space and time, they have to be responsive to contingency and exigence. For precisely this double-sided dimension, ideational articulations walk the tension between logical rigor and imaginative vision, conceptual precision and creative innovation.

Rationality is therefore inextricably entangled with interpretation and imagination. Rationality is interpretive insofar as it takes seriously historical and structural embeddedness. It is thus open to diversity, difference, plurality. It is also imaginative insofar as it takes seriously the play of language and the open-endedness of time.

This account of rationality cuts in three directions: a critique of idealism, a critique of bald empiricism, and a critique of Kantian pure judgment. Idealism privileges propositions as the locus of belief. According to coherentist theories of knowledge, such as that energetically propagated by Donald Davidson, “nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief.”<sup>56</sup> The problem with this is that coherentism provides no understanding of how our beliefs have a foothold in the objective world. It therefore lays itself open to charges of relativism. If idealism founders on the whirlpool of absolute subjectivism, bald empiricism offers few alternatives either. For the bald empiricist, empirical judgments simply present themselves to the subject from observations of the external world, irrespective of the beliefs that the observer may hold. It conceives of knowledge as a simple one-to-one correspondence between observation of an external reality and the beliefs of the observer. The result is the so-called “myth of the given,” the implausible notion that empirical knowledge is acquired without any presuppositions.

Kant famously sought a *via media* between empiricism and idealism. He does so in part by scaffolding his epistemology to a distinct metaphysics—a *noumenal* world that supposedly makes space for rationality, transcendent over a phenomenal world that is exhaustively

subject to causal necessity. He thereby introduces an unfortunate antinomy that has since then consumed the greater part of the oxygen circulating in North Atlantic philosophy. The metaphysics aside, he pithily sums up his epistemological insights thus: "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind. It is, therefore, just as necessary to make our concepts sensible, that is, to add an object to them in intuition, as to make our intuitions intelligible, that is, to bring them under concepts."<sup>57</sup> In other words, human cognitive architecture is so designed that the intuitional and conceptual elements of experience are necessarily and universally inseparable. But how exactly are intuitions and concepts synthesized? Kant argues that intuitional unity "presupposes a synthesis which does not belong to the senses,"<sup>58</sup> which appears to imply that intuitional constraints of sensibility are always already minimal conceptualizations. As to senses in themselves, Kant has this to say: "The senses do not err—not because they always judge rightly, but because they do not judge at all."<sup>59</sup> In the *Prolegomena*, Kant distinguishes between "judgments of perception," which only deliver subjective impressions, and "judgments of experience," which have objective validity.<sup>60</sup> Thus, by asserting the primacy of the conceptual, the Kantian synthesis would seem to lead back toward a "frictionless" idealism. His intricate architectonic of mind attributes to the faculty of judgment the objectifying role and thereby makes phenomenal properties identical to pure representational properties. The upshot is that Kant sacrifices the rough ground of the empirical world, the fineness of grain of perceptual experience, the bewildering diversity of phenomena, for the sublimity of coherence and order.

The epistemic dimensions of rationality are inextricably intertwined with the axiological. Insofar as conceptual ideation only gains intelligibility against a historical and contextual background, and insofar as the space of reason is worked out intersubjectively, political and ethical considerations are constitutive of any robust rational imaginary. This immediately means that instrumental forms of reason are questionable. Such forms of reasoning fail to engage with the value of the ends and not simply the means to the realization of certain goods. It also follows that accounts of practical rationality that construe rationality as the maximization of an agent's existing desires are mistaken

not only insofar as they fail to contend with the variety of conflicting desires but also because certain desires may be ethically repugnant. Nor will prudential rationality do either if that is taken to be an avowal that an agent ought to pursue courses of action that most effectively advance his or her interests. Even putting aside vexed questions about the reconcilability of ethical considerations to interests, prudential rationality may often demand that the agent sacrifice truth for flourishing.

What makes a critical contextual rationality particularly robust is that it begins by situating agents within a rich, intersubjective social ontology. It therefore not only illuminates but also makes available for critique the deep historical and social background within which claims of rationality are made. This allows for an appreciation of the diversity and variety in what counts as rationality and yet at the same time—because rationality is taken to be a *practice*—allows for the critical scrutiny of various claims to rationality. Moreover, a critical contextual rationality makes salient the intertwinement but also irreducibility of the epistemic and axiological dimensions of ideation.

### Critical Contextual Hermeneutic

Western philosophers have always gone on the assumption that fact is something cut and dried, precise, immobile, very convenient, and ready for examination. The Chinese deny this. The Chinese believe that a fact is something crawling and alive, a little furry and cool to the touch, that crawls down the back of your neck.

—Lin Yutang, as cited in James L. Christian, *Philosophy: An Introduction to the Art of Wondering*

*Interpretation* is an irreducible constituent of knowledge articulation. Interpretation is herein envisioned as an intellectual practice that enacts the arts and crafts of judgment—conceived of expansively as theoretical, methodological, and critical-contextual practices of description, explication (clarification, complication, and elucidation), understanding, analysis, explanation, translation, evaluation, and transformation.

Interpretation, then, is emergent and constitutive of context. A critical hermeneutic—conceived here as the moment when interpretation is transformed into *criticism*—begins with an understanding of context as neither undifferentiated nor transparent. What constitutes a particular context is always deeply contested. Moreover, because contexts are emergent from the intersection of historical forces and spatial movements, they are dynamic and protean.

A critical hermeneutic historicizes and maps at least four dimensions of context: emergence, performance, dissemination, and reception.<sup>61</sup> The *context of emergence* names the political, economic, and cultural conditions of possibility for the invention of artifacts, performances, and practices. The *context of performance* refers to the time-space in which artifacts, performances, and practices are articulated or enacted, the temporal and spatial fabric within which an association, image, story, narrative, idea, or vision takes shape on a page, a stage, a platform, a canvas, a classroom, or comes to fruition on the street. The *context of dissemination* tracks contestations over circulation, translation, and canonization of artifacts, performances, and practices. The *context of reception* is concerned with the forms in which interpreters interact with artifacts, performances, and practices. Of course, these contexts are inextricably interanimated and irreducibly entangled; they are layered, overlapping, dialectical, co-constitutive and recursive ecologies of authorship, performance, circulation, and reading.

The context of emergence, within the terms of a critical hermeneutic, is reconfigured in at least two ways. First, it is conceived of in naturalistic terms. Second, it is conceived of as entangled, that is, as dynamically brought into being through social relationships. An account of the context of emergence as naturalistic just refers to the manner in which the ontology, epistemology, and axiology of social structure ought to be seen as constituted by historical and structural events. Thus the naturalism that is made salient in this argument works within emergent and supervenient assumptions rather than reductionist logics. Such a critical hermeneutic, for that very reason, resolutely stands against the *hermeneutics of faith* and the *hermeneutics of suspicion*.

The hermeneutics of faith refers to a stance of interpretation whose imagination is constituted by beliefs and practices of obedience, love, or responsiveness to divine or supernaturalist beings. Its orientation is informed by a posture of worship toward texts deemed “holy” by the putative religious tradition of adherents.<sup>62</sup> The critique of the hermeneutics of faith must begin by distinguishing at least three of its major variants: *inflationary* accounts of faith, *deflationary* accounts of faith, and *sensus divinitatis* faith. Inflationary accounts of faith define faith as beliefs that lie “beyond” the limits of reason. Faith involves a kind of belief that is, in Kierkegaard’s sense, “absurd.” The paradigmatic example of this kind of belief is that of Abraham, a character in the Hebrew Bible, who demonstrates his faith by defying his experiential love for his child and the conventions and morals of his culture by agreeing to sacrifice his son. Fideists hold that faith is then a sort of “leap” beyond ordinary human reason. Inflationary accounts of faith fail for familiar reasons that befall divine command imperatives.

Deflationary accounts of faith are determined to argue that faith is simply the irreducible foundation of all epistemological stances. “Faith,” according to this view, amounts to what is taken for granted by a community of knowers. Thus, for example, an empiricist will take it for granted that her senses are reliable—and, in that sense, the deflationary faithful would argue that the empiricist has faith in the reliability of her senses. Similarly, a rationalist will take it for granted that her reasoning faculties are intact and, in that sense, has faith in her rational capacities. A variant of the deflationary account of faith in hermeneutics is the claim that “faith” is synonymous with “trust.”<sup>63</sup> Thus, given that “trust” is indispensable for interaction in any society, the claim goes that faith is similarly an everyday phenomenon. In that sense, hermeneutics of faith who attempt to ground their beliefs in virtue theory are arguably committed to some kind of deflationary account of faith. To these virtue hermeneutics, faith makes no more demands on us than would be required for the sustainability of any community.

But deflationary accounts of faith are just as unconvincing as inflationary ones. To begin with, it is still beholden to a foundationalist picture according to which the entirety of its orientation to the world rests on the will of gods or God. Second, the critical inquirer

distinguishes between assumptions *of* an inquiry and faith *in* those assumptions. For the critical inquirer, such assumptions are provisional. The holding of these assumptions is contingent on the articulation of the forms of evidence adduced. In cases where there is conflicting evidence, the critical inquirer declares that she is agnostic on the question at issue, pending the gathering of decisive evidence and the articulation of the best theoretical explanation. This allows for various inquiries to be articulated, while rejecting the foundationalist *episteme* that theists consider sacrosanct. It also allows that if two or more forms of evidentially supported theories are in conflict, one need not conjure up a *deus ex machina* to plug up the holes of our ignorance. This differs from the theist who *a priori* decides that his belief is the right answer. Third, the critical inquirer is alert to the interaction of her assumptions with evidence from multiple forms of inquiry—empirical, rational, sociological—and alters these assumptions if decisive theoretical explanations come to light. It is doubtful if most theists allow that any new evidence can alter their beliefs about the existence or character of their god. Fourth, the assumptions held by the critical inquirer are evaluated in part on the skein of other assumptions they generate, the empirical historical record that they lay claim to, the logical implications of holding to these beliefs, and these beliefs' consilience with multiple articulations of knowledge. The credibility of hermeneutical warrants is evaluated on the basis of the strength of the presuppositional chains holding together an argument. For example, it is not simply that the theist believes that "God exists." That belief entails empirical, ethical, relational, and logical demands—ahistorical or extra-historical claims of beings that existed before the inauguration of time; empirical claims that require the acceptance of miracles and other supernatural events; sociological claims that assert that other religious groupings are globally wrong while only one "predestined people" are privy to revealed Truth; ethical demands that one offer adequate apologetics for texts of terror.<sup>64</sup> As against the extravagant demands of theistic assumptions, compare this with the pared down meta-ethical assumptions held by the critical inquirer. No doubt these assumptions are emergent from thick historical, rational, and sociological assumptions and will fur-

ther prompt their own formidable array of propositions—but hardly as extravagant as that required by the theist.

Calvinist theology, a strand within the Christian religious tradition, posits that faith emerges from a faculty that God has implanted in humans known as the *sensus divinitatis*. This faculty is distinct from other ways of forming beliefs such as reason and perception. For the Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga, faith is a properly basic belief, by which he means that it is the sort of belief that has immediate warrant—that is, is not derived by inference from any other belief. Plantinga argues that faith is rational because it is “undefeated”—this is the notion that faith can withstand all rational objections leveled at it. A dissenter from Plantinga’s belief system will find the notion of *sensus divinitatis* troubling because of the manner in which it is so absolutely impervious to critical and empirical investigation, defeasibility, and doubt. Plantinga argues that atheism can be explained because of malformations in the *sensus divinitatis* in some people. It is of the nature of such assertoric propositions that one simply accepts them as given or finds them absurd. In any case, what is most worrisome about Plantinga’s epistemology is its defensive posture toward knowledge. What counts as knowledge is what is undefeated. One would think that if there are compelling arguments on both sides of a vexed debate that otherwise cannot be settled decisively in favor of one side, this would be a reason for agnosticism. Not so for Plantinga, who thinks it sufficient that there is no knock-down definitive argument that can bring down the entirety of his views—never mind that there is probably no such knock-down argument for any sufficiently comprehensive ideology, let alone one that posits ethereal and supernatural entities as well as (*sensus divinitatis*) faculties inaccessible to any but the initiated. Plantinga’s anti-evidentialist posture—cashed out in his sympathy for the thoroughly refuted theistic argument of “intelligent design”<sup>65</sup>—indicates how his epistemological stance offers grounds for the *rationalization* of a priori beliefs rather than engagement with critical beliefs.

The hermeneutic of faith is certainly not a preserve of theistic-minded approaches to interpretation. Worship is everywhere present

in secular contexts, as is seen in the veneration of personalities (celebrities and charismatic politicians, for example), Dionysian baths of collective hysteria (sports fandom, music concerts, amusement parks), and the rites of human sacrifice that the nation-state exacts in war and in retributive punishment (the death penalty). Indeed, it has been the innovation of the modern state to develop a formidable secular priesthood in its academies, legal establishments, and social media equipped with its own elaborate hermeneutic cults. The Kantian deification of reason and the Hegelian mystification of history as the unfolding of *Geist* are transmutations of a hermeneutics of faith into an establishment secularist register. In England, a “humanistic” branch of this secular priesthood was manifested in Mathew Arnold’s campaign to replace religion with a humanistic education in “the best that is known and thought”—his definition of culture. Arnold’s legacy, radiating forth in the writings of T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis, envisioned a “Great Tradition” of literary monuments that would sluice the Philistine unwashed in sweetness and light. If the new theories of textuality—from deconstruction to new historicism—have been notable for their insurgent campaigns to mediate the Great Tradition through Big Theory, or to add this or that villanelle to the canon, they have kept faith with the cloistral practices of pedagogy as a pact between master and acolyte.

If the hermeneutics of faith proves a dead end, a critical hermeneutic cannot however embrace what has often been declared as its polar opposite. Paul Ricoeur named this the hermeneutics of suspicion and identified Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud as its exemplary practitioners. Perhaps what is most striking about these hermeneutics of suspicion is the extent to which they proffer various *reductionist* explanatory frames. Marx, for example, proffers a far too totalistic theory of ideology as false consciousness. Nietzsche, for his part, purports to explain everyone else’s base motives as a will to power. Freud also reduces the realm of phenomenological experience to an absolutistic teleology: “the aim of all life is death.” These deficiencies are exacerbated by the glaring lack of a *self-reflexive critique* in the hermeneutics of suspicion, of which perhaps Nietzsche’s bristling hermeneutic of contempt exemplifies.<sup>66</sup>

A critical hermeneutic also conceives of the contexts of emergence as entangled—that is, relationally constituted by historical and global political, economic, and cultural forces. Every interpretation bears the traces and grooves of deep histories and far-flung locales. It follows then that critical interpretation ought to be oriented by an historiography keen to the palimpsest of the *longue durée* and responsive to a global imaginary. Conversely, such a critical hermeneutic cuts against dominant hermeneutic frames that function according to the logics of possessive patrimony—the claim that a particular practice or artifact originated from the loins of a particular society and has been handed down from fathers to sons through the generations.<sup>67</sup> Thus, for example, the claim that certain artists—say, Shakespeare or Mozart or Flaubert—sired distinctive aesthetic artifacts that are then biologically reproduced and transmitted to future (white male) generations. Or the assumption of ownership over a distinctive practice—for example, science—as an essentially “Western” property.

Hans-Georg Gadamer offers an account of tradition that would seem to break with traditional conservatism’s pious fossilization of history. In his enormously influential *Truth and Method*, Gadamer argues that “understanding is not to be thought of so much as an action of subjectivity, but as the placing of oneself within a process of tradition, in which past and present are constantly fused. This is what must be expressed in hermeneutical theory.”<sup>68</sup> Thus, according to Gadamer, understanding takes place through the fusion of the “horizon” of the present with the horizon of the past. But Gadamer’s construction of “tradition” is altogether too acquiescent to a characterization of it in ways that only the winners of history would approve. What he calls “tradition,” many others know as the slaughter-bench of history at which entire peoples have perished in genocide, the remnant generations consigned to grinding and abject poverty, and their oral and written archives of learning and memory destroyed beyond retrieval. As Walter Benjamin points out, what is consecrated as “cultural heritage” are “spoils” in a “triumphal procession in which today’s rulers tread over those who are sprawled underfoot”: tradition, Benjamin insists, “owes its existence not only to the toil of the great geniuses, who created it, but also to the nameless drudgery of its contempora-

ries. There has never been a document of culture, which is not simultaneously one of barbarism.”<sup>69</sup> This is the bloody underside to Gadamer’s notion of tradition, and there is little in his pastoral vision that shows he has a sense of the radical losses, discontinuities, pluralities, and the irreducibly inassimilable trauma suffered by imperialized societies. He argues: “We always stand within tradition, and this is no objectifying process, i.e., we do not conceive of what tradition says as something other, something alien. It is always part of us, a model, or exemplar, a recognition of ourselves.”<sup>70</sup>

It is for this reason that there are grounds to be suspicious of Gadamer’s touting of “conversation” as the normative method for interacting with the past. To be sure, conversation must be included as one way among many for engaging the past; but to privilege it as the normative methodological ideal and metaphor for such engagement underscores Gadamer’s conservative epistemological and political horizons. Against Gadamer, a critical hermeneutic argues that it is precisely a radicalism of vision that has any hope of doing justice to the multiple histories and contexts that constitute a “tradition.” Interpretation, therefore, has to draw on multiple methods from the natural sciences to the social sciences to the humanities—from historical archaeology, comparative sociology, natural and cultural anthropology, rhetorical theory and criticism, literature, philosophy—in unearthing the “chronotope” of history. It is not only Gadamer’s suspicion of the natural sciences and social sciences, however, that forecloses avenues to these rich avenues of discovery. It is also his allergy to critical theory. His theory affirms a deference to the power of authority:

That which has been sanctioned by tradition and custom has an authority that is nameless, and our finite historical being is marked by the fact that always the authority of what has been transmitted—and not only what is clearly grounded—has power over our attitudes and behavior. . . . And in fact we owe to romanticism this correction of the enlightenment, that tradition has a justification that is outside the arguments of reasons and in large measure determines our institutions and our attitudes.<sup>71</sup>

Gadamer rejects the notion that prejudice is necessarily negative. For him, there is a positivity to prejudice. Prejudices constitute, he argues, “fore-understandings,” that is, the structures through which subjects gain a preliminary interpretation of phenomena. Even though Gadamer thinks that such prejudices are open to revision, his theory ultimately envisions such change not so much as a radical critique of social structures and power imbalances<sup>72</sup> but rather as a liquidation of the gap between horizons. Thus he argues that prejudices and fore-meanings speak to the fact that understanding always carries with it the “anticipation of completeness,” by which he means that the subject presupposes the coherence, wholeness, and meaningfulness of what is to be understood. His conclusion: “In our understanding, which we imagine so straightforward, we find that, by following the criterion of intelligibility, the other presents himself so much in terms of our own selves that there is no longer a question of self and other.”<sup>73</sup> Gadamer’s interaction with the past would appear to be thoroughly self-validating and self-aggrandizing.

A critical hermeneutic also reconfigures the context of performance through a sustained attention to embodiment as a constitutive condition of interpretation. This has the salutary effect of significantly revising understandings of subjectivity, consciousness, and agency. Specifically, the question of subjectivity—of who can interpret, when, where, why, and how—emerges as a particularly vexing dimension of embodied interpretation. Reckoning with subjectivity involves an articulation of *interpretive habitus*, conceived of as the complex tracing of the residue of macro-historical forces and micro-biographical pressures on the formation of the interpretive knower, the centripetal and centrifugal forms of power in a field of discourse that act upon the interpreter, and the cross-pressures of dispositions, affections, revulsions, inspirations, and instrumentalities that radiate in and through the interpretive knower. A critical hermeneutic, then, begins with *radical self-reflexivity*. The Italian intellectual Antonio Gramsci writes that history deposits in subjects “an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory.” But even as he strikes a cautionary note about the devastatingly daunting task of fully coming to terms with how a particular

historical era, institution, and social group inhabits its subjects, Gramsci argues that the critical project ought to begin in a ruthless confrontation with this historical inventory. It follows, then, that such a radical self-reflexivity cannot be an individualistic, introspective process—it has to be social, and it is most keenly exercised in *radical encounters* with the abjected poor, homeless, disabled, and forgotten.

A serious engagement with embodiment also expands our understanding of interpretation beyond Cartesian models that privilege the mind over the body. Moreover, it can account for the particularity of subjectivity without smuggling back the privatized, transcendental subject so central to much North Atlantic theory. Its emphasis on an embodied phenomenology, for example, differs significantly from Husserl's phenomenology. Husserl, it will be recalled, rejects the "natural attitude," what he considers to be the naïve commonsense belief that our knowledge of the external world is reliable. He argues instead for a method that he dubbed "transcendental phenomenology," through which he hopes to lay bare the very conditions of possibility for consciousness. Husserl starts from the intentionality of consciousness—the fact that the mind does not passively absorb sensations but rather is always directed toward something. In order to get a sense of the contents of consciousness, then, Husserl argues that we ought to employ a method that he calls the "phenomenological *epoche*"—the bracketing of the world in order to concentrate on mental contents that are directly experienced. Husserl's goals are ambitious: he believes that the phenomenological *epoche* leads to the discovery of the universal essences of the mind. He calls this the "eidetic reduction," because it performs a reductionist maneuver that enables the researcher to discover the universal types that are the foundation for ordinary phenomenological experiences. Husserl's method is driven by the belief that it is the only method with a pure, objective grasp of reality. Indeed, he goes as far as declaring that the phenomenological method, being apodictic, is superior to "all sciences which relate to [the] natural world."<sup>74</sup>

Husserl's transcendental phenomenology remains beholden to a Cartesian privileging of the mental and therefore suffers from many of its difficulties.<sup>75</sup> The phenomenological *epoche* reintroduces an in-

vidious mind/body split by conceiving the mental as the locus of phenomenological experience. The unhappy consequences for a theory of interpretation are threefold. First, Husserl's mentalistic approach fails to account for the fact that it is the body that orients creatures to their being in the world. Consequently, mental phenomena take as a background the sorts of perceptions emergent from bodily embeddedness and bodily intentionality. This matters for a theory of interpretation insofar as it underscores how our socio-bodily being as particular subjects—as people who are interpellated as raced, gendered, disabled, and so on—structures much of what we see, feel, smell, respond to. Second, the person engaged in interpretation is deeply *immersed* in a context. When one is reading a book, the perceptual background that makes for interpretive activity is thick: the temperature in the room, the smells of the book, the surrounding sound, the sedimentation of memory, and the affective swirl motivating the activity. Husserl narrows his phenomenology to the mental and fails to appreciate the generative depth of social context from which the activity of interpretation is emergent. Moreover, as we become more skilled in specific activities, we develop a bodily absorption in the activity. The performance takes on a life of its own, almost seeming to render its author or creator incidental to its realization. Those attending to the practice, similarly, are “caught up” in the activity, unaware of the passing of time. In other words, interpretive activity has a “flow” to it that completely absorbs the person in its movement. The danger of Husserl's theory is its mechanistic account of interpretation—it gives a disinfected, detached account of interpretation that fails to account for its embeddedness. Third, Husserlian phenomenology reinforces the erroneous assumption that mental content is transparent whereas so-called “objective reality” (including bodily perception) is opaque. But given the social depth from which interpretation is emergent, this clearly is untenable. Fourth, Husserl's claim that the phenomenological *epoché* offers an austere, pure deliverance of absolute being renders his hermeneutic irredeemably idealist and antiscientific.

These reflections on subjectivity and consciousness are also inextricably entangled with questions about agency. A critical contextual hermeneutics defines the exigence of interpretation as gripped in the

tension between *krisis* (the emergency) and *nomos* (the everyday). An interpretation charged with the exigence of crisis begins with an acknowledgment of the *irreversible cut* that every act produces. The act outstrips intentions, either good or ill; motives, be they malign or benevolent; beliefs that are clear or nebulous; and ideologies, whether systematic or incoherent. It is of little use, for example, to wax eloquently about “democracy,” “human rights,” or “freedom” once the machineries of war are airborne. Obliterated bodies, mass graves, and the inconsolable wail of survivors render all else obscene rationalizations. A critical hermeneutic attuned to the emergency, then, starts by acknowledging that the exigence to which it is a response is not only *constitutive* of new realities but also *forecloses* certain possibilities. Criticism awakened by crisis does not indulge the fantasy of a clean break. It begins *in media res*, a witness to maimed limbs, a gatherer of unraveled selves, a mourner of dead persons. It is only in the rubble of time, in the graveyards of space, that a critical hermeneutic cuts into the fabric of the temporal and spatial. The etymological trace of the word criticism from the ancient Greek word *krinein* is hereby particularly apt—criticism “separates, decides, divides.” A criticism emergent in crisis instantiates a break—however jagged, however incomplete—against the logics of violence, an incision against the flow of inevitability.

A critical hermeneutic that inhabits crisis, then, takes itself to be witness to the afterlife and forelife of catastrophe—a poisoned ecology, a politics of plunder, an economy of pillage, a brutal imagination. In doing so, a critical hermeneutics strikes a remarkably discordant note from dominant philosophical systems and practices. For what is most recognizable in regnant systems of thought is an extraordinary attachment to a hermeneutics of redemption. Some philosophers have conjured fantastical beginnings to wipe clean the slate of catastrophe: the state of nature (Hobbes), clear and distinct perception (Descartes), the original position (Rawls). Others have manufactured fantastical endings to guarantee a triumphalist result: Plato’s Myth of Er, Leibnitz’s optimal cosmic calculus, Hegel’s *Geist*. But if major philosophers have often disagreed as to whether redemption could be secured by looking to origins or endings, their results have been essentially the same—the triumph of people who are the spitting images of their creators.

Against this, a critical hermeneutic tarries in the ruins of catastrophe, huddles among refugees, waits in line with migrant workers, listens to the whimper of the dying. Their stories tell of irrecuperable loss, irreparable brokenness, irreconcilable desires, irredeemable damage. A hermeneutic is precisely critical insofar as it stands in solidarity with the weak, the forgotten, and the despised.

But precisely because a critical hermeneutic inhabits crisis, it refuses to lose sight of the *nomos* (the everyday). Interpretative agency involves attentiveness to the mundane, the deliberative, the slow, the dialogic, the familiar, the ordinary, the commonplace, the routine, and the prosaic. A critical hermeneutics involves the excavation of the marginal, worthless, useless, and disreputable. It is attuned to how drudgery can be the very marrow of creativity. The everyday (*nomos*) and the emergency (*krisis*) are not herein seen as two opposed realms. To live in the maw of capitalism is to live a life of precarity where the ordinary is a slow bleeding out of agency, relationships, and imagination. Thus, the task of a critical hermeneutic is to show that the “emergency situation” is the rule—thereby shattering antipolitical theodicies of normalcy, progress, and inevitability—in order, through critical social theory and practice, to bring about a deep crisis in the very ontology of global empire.

The third hermeneutic context is that of dissemination—which involves engagement with how artifacts, performances, and practices are circulated, translated, and canonized. To consider only the strand of canonization, for example, a critical hermeneutic illuminates and critiques the processes by which a social group appropriates and consecrates an artifact or practice for posterity. But it is not the purpose of a critical hermeneutic to demand the “inclusion” of a rival canon of artifacts that then stand in as “representatives” of excluded, minority identities. Such “identitarian” forms of activism remain hypnotized by the logic of canonization as purity and patrimony. Identitarianism is also mistaken in privileging *content* over institutional embeddedness. Rather, a critical hermeneutic maps out the process of generation as *structural* and the forms of transmission as appropriative and inscribed in the most mundane practices (pedagogy in schools, religious places of worship, and families; mass media form and content;

the exchange of material artifacts in the marketplace and elsewhere). Rather than take for granted the presentism of canonization and its propaganda about the impermeability and integrity of national or racial borders, a critical hermeneutic traces the trajectory of artifacts and ideas across both historical and spatial boundaries, notes that the circulation of such artifacts and ideas are never without (selective) gains and losses, is responsive to how transmission is far more about the induction of bodies into the deep structures of particular forms of literacy—whether written, visual, or oral—and interrupts processes by which selected cultural artifacts are deployed in cementing the cultural hegemony of a ruling class. As John Guillory has pointed out in the context of the U.S. debate on the literary canon debate, “one may reasonably question what necessary *cultural* relation a university-trained suburban manager or technocrat has to Plato or Homer by virtue of his or her American citizenship—no more, in fact, than an educationally disadvantaged dweller in the most impoverished urban ghetto. The suburban technocrat and the ghetto dweller on the other hand have very much more in common culturally with each other than either of them ever need have with the great writers of Western civilization.”<sup>76</sup> Guillory notes that the process of fitting artifacts into certain categories—“scientific vs. humanistic,” “technical vs. journalistic,” “political vs. aesthetic,” “commercial vs. artistic,” “high culture vs. popular culture,” “poetry vs. prose”—is far more decisive in the struggle over canonization than struggles over the specific works that get included in a canon. This categorization is the work of literacy, which is “not simply the capacity to read but . . . the *systematic regulation of reading and writing*, a complex social phenomenon corresponding to the following set of questions: Who reads? What do they read? How do they read? In what social and institutional circumstances? Who writes? In what social and institutional contexts? For whom?”<sup>77</sup> In the upshot, the work of a critical hermeneutical practice has to be *chronotopian*, articulated as social pedagogy.<sup>78</sup>

Finally, a critical hermeneutic articulates an interpretive frame for understanding the processes of reception. A critical hermeneutic engages at least three dimensions of reception. First, it articulates the horizon of reception within which authors articulate their works. This

involves the study of audiences that the author imagines she is orienting the work to (whether past, present, or future audiences). Not only does this involve accounting for the author's sense of her ideal readers and, slightly differently, what authors' preferred readers<sup>79</sup> or inscribed readers are, but it also involves a critique of what Phil Wander has called the "third persona." If the first persona is the speaker or author, and the second persona is the implied audience in a speech act, the third persona represents audiences that are negated by a text or utterance: "'Being negated' includes not only being alienated through language—the 'it' that is the summation of all you and I are told to avoid becoming—but also being negated in history, a being whose presence, though relevant to what is said, is negated through silence."<sup>80</sup> Second, a critical hermeneutic empirically engages actual audience up-take of utterances, whether or not the utterances are aimed at them. Audience up-take is neither absolutely idiosyncratic and individual nor absolutely monolithic and collective. The question of how much agency audiences exercise in their response to utterances is to be engaged critically (through a critique of the power structures circulating and inhabiting audiences) and empirically (through a qualitative immersion in the phenomenology of audience reception).<sup>81</sup> Third, a critical hermeneutic engages the ripple of *perlocutionary force* acting on audiences in taking up utterances. There are limits to an exact mapping of perlocutionary effects, but it will include an attention to *manifest effects* (psychological and behavioral effects taken up consciously), *latent effects* (psychological and behavioral effects that seep unconsciously in the deep structure of culture), and *wildfire or snowball effects* (those effects that move like a contagion across audience populations).

### Critical Contextual Imagination

*Imagination!* who can sing thy force?

Or who describe the swiftness of thy course?

—Phillis Wheatley, "On Imagination"

The imagination constitutes a third dimension of a critical contextual epistemology. The imagination, I posit, has at least three dimensions:

the *topographical or spatial dimension*, the *kairotic or temporal dimension*, and the *hermeneutic or intersubjective dimension*.<sup>82</sup> These dimensions, it is important to emphasize, are constitutive of the full gamut of embodied and relational capacities of human beings—including the neuropsychological, psychological, abstract, affective, ethical, and social.

The topographical imagination describes how a person's or group's inhabitation of a particular space structures their capacities, perceptions, inferences, judgments, and actions, and, dialectically, how they in turn constitute spatial relationships, judgments, and actions. Its neuropsychological manifestation emerges in the capacity for proprioception—that is, persons' ability to orient their bodies in space and time. More robustly, the topographic imagination describes a person or group's latent and manifest registration of their ecological background. For example, a trained driver is subliminally aware of an array of phenomena as she drives. She orients her driving according to these phenomena without necessarily being able to itemize every single phenomenon or task she is performing. Conceived as such, then, the topographic imagination need not take a conscious, rationalist form—rather, it may just as often be the “horizon” against which a person or group apprehends or interacts with objects in the foreground. Much of the insights of Gestalt psychology on the mind's capacity to articulate patterns, the background conditions that make salient or bring to the foreground the object of perception, and the capacity to fill in gaps in hitherto disconnected or fragmentary percepts are descriptive of the spatial imagination. It follows then that the topographic imagination is constitutive of epistemic capabilities. Questions such as how concepts, perceptions, and images “hang together,” the relationship between and among things, and the capacity to articulate mathematical deductions, to make analytic connections, and to extrapolate metaphorical possibilities are all manifestations of the topographic imagination. There is a social dimension to the topographic imagination as well. This describes a person or group's “social imaginary,” that is, the communities, institutions, and ideologies that structure a person's stance toward the world and in and by which a person orients herself in relation to others. The topographical imagination can also be exercised critically. This

would occur, for example, in the capacity to articulate counterfactual thought experiments and to make radically innovative analogical connections.

As with the topographic imagination, the kairotic imagination (from the Greek, *kairos*)<sup>83</sup> is dialectical. It refers to how persons' embeddedness within time constitutes their capacities, judgments, and actions, and how, in turn, people constitute time in and through their relationships, judgments, and actions. As an embodied capacity, the kairotic imagination is deeply structured by dispositions inscribed in the unconscious through socialization and ideology. It can thus take both nonconceptual and conceptual forms. Its nonconceptual forms constitute kinesthetic and how-to knowledges. Its conceptual forms constitute a person or group's social memory and historical imaginary. When exercised critically, the kairotic imagination involves the capacity for utopian thought against prevailing social mythologies.

The *hermeneutic imagination* describes the complex of capacities and judgments that constitute a person's or group's distinctive sensibility, phenomenology, affect, and ideology. As with the topographical and kairotic forms of the imagination, the hermeneutic imagination is emergent from the deep structure of embodied ontology and dispositions. As such, it has been formed by conscious and unconscious affinities, affections, and revulsions inscribed in the body through socialization. When exercised critically, however, the hermeneutic imagination is the capacity to be attuned to other persons' affects—for example, through love, empathy, or desire—and the self-critical ability to view one's self from the perspective of the other.

The topographical, kairotic, and hermeneutic forms of the imagination should be seen as deeply interanimated—that is, as mutually constitutive. For example, a group's historical memory is quite often constitutive of its social imaginary and vice versa. But this does not mean that these forms of the imagination are always mutually reinforcing. At times, they can be in deep tension, as when a hermeneutic inhabitation of another's sensibility is discordant with a person's historical memory.

There are a number of implications emergent from conceiving of the imagination thus. The first is that this view emphasizes the extent

to which the imagination is constituted by the ecological and social contexts of its emergence. It therefore makes salient the manner in which the imaginative faculty constrains as much as it liberates. The imagination is formed and structured by socialization, power, and ideology<sup>84</sup>—much of which is unconsciously absorbed. Modern theories of the imagination, however, are yet to emerge from the shadow cast by Romantic conceptions of mind. The Romantic tradition sees the imagination as generating, *de novo*, blindingly original and full-grown images. For the Romantics, the imagination is a tsunami pouring forth from the head of the individual genius. This Romantic account fails because it offers scant theorization of the imagination as constituted by the banalities of socialization and acculturation, but also because it fails to register the structuration of the imagination by domination, exploitation, and the will to power.

But just precisely because humans are embodied persons, it also follows that they are situated in time. Thus the imagination is not only constituted by enduring structures of constraint but is also emergent from encounters with others. It is therefore always already intersubjective. Moreover, to live in time is to be subject to the irruption of the exigent, the evental, and the sublime. The imagination, then, is as much constructed from the perduring forces of ritual, rites, and rhythms, as it is sparked from serendipitous juxtapositions, happenstance, queer mutations, and ecstatic encounters.<sup>85</sup> Imaginative knowledge exceeds grids of method, confounds quantifiers of frequency, scandalizes generalization. The imagination can be elusive and ineffable, as in Proust's madeleine moment when the taste of a cake offers a tantalizing hint of a memory; or it can be overwhelming and tangible, as in the intensity with which encounters with objects of love, hate, or desire renders all else irrelevant; or it can be diffuse and yet impossibly persistent, as when ennui, anxiety, or boredom cast a gloom over perception, thought, and action. Such an account of the imagination departs from Cartesian accounts of the imagination that incline us toward a picture of the imagination as a theater of the mind, consciously willed into being by an individual thinker. If the Romantic theory of the imagination fails to account for the latent fecundity

of ritual and repetition, the Cartesian account is altogether too enamored with method and control.

Moreover, any adequate account of the imagination must come to terms with embodiedness as an irreducible ground of its emergence. The imagination then is constituted by all the senses—visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile. And, insofar as these senses are interanimated and generative, it also means that the imagination is kinesthetic, stereoscopic, and proprioceptive. The upshot is that embodiment involves reckoning with how the imagination is activated not only through and with multiple senses but also latently (be it unconsciously or nonintentionally). For example, work in moral psychology has demonstrated how judgments of the “moral” and the “immoral” are often inflected by people’s reactions to particular smells, tastes, sounds, and so on. An understanding of the imagination as embodied sees it as constituted by and, in turn, as constituting the conscious and unconscious affinities, affections, and revulsions that structure human judgments.

Such an embodied account of the imagination offers a decisive critique of influential Aristotelian accounts of the imagination. Aristotle articulates the capacity of the imagination as derivative of sensory perception. In the *De Anima*, Aristotle theorizes perception as the inscription of impressions on a wax tablet. He states: “sense is that which is receptive of the form of sensible objects without the matter, just as the wax receives the impression of the signet ring without the iron or the gold.”<sup>86</sup> Aristotle thinks that the imagination consists in the capacity to reproduce or recall these previously inscribed sensory images. He privileges sight as the most important of the senses. Tellingly, then, his word for the imagination is *phantasia*, a name drawn from the root *phôs*, “light,” and clinking within a connotative chain of terms such as *phantazō*, “to show at the eye or the mind,” and *phainō*, “to show in light.” As previous commentators have shown, Aristotle’s account of the imagination was extraordinarily influential. Early modern thinkers such as Locke and Hobbes often quibbled with this or other detail of the Aristotelian account of the imagination, but they retained his sense of the imagination as derivative of visual impressions. It is not

just that Aristotelianism's ocularcentric theory of the imagination fails to grapple with auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile constituents and forms of imaginative knowledges, but it is also the case that it cannot account for the ineffable, the affective, and the kinesthetic forms of the imagination.

An embodied account of the imagination, furthermore, makes better sense of the *performativity* of the imagination. The imagination is dialectical insofar as it functions both *generatively* and *reflexively*. On the one hand, the imagination generates or projects sensory stimuli. Gestalt psychology is helpful in illuminating this dimension of the imagination. According to Gestaltism, perception not only works holistically through complex pattern cognitions and recognitions but also works generatively by filling in or filling out shapes. At the same time, however, the very stimuli projected and generated by the imagination gain a grip and hold on the person or group from which these stimuli are generated. The imagination thus is deeply constitutive of phenomenological consciousness.

Kantian accounts of the imagination prove deeply misleading in failing to account for the reflexivity of the imagination. For Kant, the imagination is a faculty that synthesizes various concepts, fills in indeterminate perceptions, and—in interaction with aesthetic phenomena—engages in a nonteleological *play* of trying out how various associations fit with our prior concepts. He makes a distinction between understanding and the imagination. Kant avers that understanding functions through the subsumption of sensory perceptions under certain determinate concepts. The imagination, in contrast, works through a form of playacting, according to which a person tries out how various associations fit with an idea, without having to decide that there is a single determinate fit. The Kantian account thus yields a severely stunted view of the imagination. Kant, by holding the imagination to coloring inside the lines of prior concepts, insists on its subordination to reason's oversight. Moreover, Kant does not register the reflexivity of the imagination, the manner in which it doubles back to constitute the affective and hermeneutic phenomenology of human subjects. Thus Kant does not only render the imagination secondary to

reason, he also anticipates modernity's dismissal of it as risk-free and therefore frivolous.

### Toward an Articulated Epistemology

The results of all the schools and of all their experiments belong legitimately to us. We will not hesitate to adopt a Stoic formula on the pretext that we have previously profited from Epicurean formulas.

—Nietzsche, *Posthumous Fragments*

A salutary upshot, then, of a critical contextual rationality, hermeneutic, and imagination is that it opens up a robust epistemology, one that involves a comprehensive immersion in the diversity, depth, and complexity of multiple methodologies and knowledges—from the theoretical and empirical natural sciences, social sciences, humanities, and the performing arts. The most robust theoretical knowledges come at the intersection of the critically rational, the critically empirical, the critically hermeneutical, and the critically imaginative. The task of knowledge articulation, therefore, is a rigorous mapping out of the continuities and discontinuities in human knowledges. One implication of this, already mentioned, is the rejection of theories that would define knowledge as foundationally based on a singular ontology or as proceeding from a single method. Another is the critique of reductionism, specifically the notion that certain research programs are reducible to others.

Consider, for example, the natural sciences, which in the contemporary zeitgeist have acquired perhaps the most dominant cultural prestige among human knowledges. Unfortunately, the “public picture” of science has come to be largely represented according to a singular science, namely, physics, and perhaps only a dated mechanistic account of physics. Actually existing sciences are diverse and multifarious and draw on a rich panoply of epistemological and methodological strategies. Just as physics is a science, so are other disciplines such as geology, archeology, ecology, and biology, which can only be

studied within what practitioners call *complex systems*. Consider that an understanding of much of the sciences involves appreciating the *historical dimensions of scientific practices*. Take biology, for instance. A great deal of misunderstanding of evolutionary biology, to pick one prominent strand within the discipline, involves a failure to conceive of biological processes as *historical* phenomena, as Richard Lewontin helpfully notes.<sup>87</sup> Though natural selection constitutes the dominant mechanism of evolutionary processes, historical study does reveal that genetic drift constitutes another causal factor, if on a smaller scale. Another implication is that organisms—some more than others—are not simply molded by their ecological context but rather culturally adapt and, in doing so, significantly reconfigure the niches in which they live. The point, then, is that speculative just-so narratives such as sociobiology and evolutionary psychology fail not only as natural sciences, insofar as their reductive accounts of evolutionary development misconceive the nature of natural and sexual selection, but also as *historical* sciences because they scant the mediating structures of culture and power inflecting human behavior.

Given the variety and complexity of the sciences, therefore, the notion that the sciences are progressively reducible to one basic “science of everything”—the claim, for example, that psychology reduces to biology, biology to chemistry, and chemistry to physics—is mistaken. As Hilary Putnam, Jerry Fodor, and Richard Boyd have demonstrated in pathbreaking interventions in the philosophy of mind, psychological processes can be explained in naturalistic terms—that is, as constituted of physical entities—that are nevertheless irreducible to neurophysiology.<sup>88</sup> Similarly, in biology, Philip Kitcher demonstrated that classical genetics, which accounts for the transmission of genes by meiosis, is irreducible to molecular genetics, in which genetic transmission occurs through heterogeneous causal factors.<sup>89</sup>

The criteria for evaluating the robustness of scientific theories, it is then clear, are various and complex, *pace* Karl Popper’s demands for the falsifiability of theory. Scholars have drawn attention to the value-ladenness of theories;<sup>90</sup> the imbrication and dialectic of theory and observation in scientific practice;<sup>91</sup> the idealization of explanatory models in accounting for causal significance;<sup>92</sup> the shaping of theo-

ries through considerations of consilience, congruence, and responsiveness to theoretical advances in the natural and social sciences and in the humanities; the considerations of elegance, beauty, and simplicity in judgments about the explanatory power of theories;<sup>93</sup> and the sociological facts of scientific practice.<sup>94</sup> This entails the rejection of a priori assertions of incommensurability among differing bodies of knowledge—say, the humanities and the natural sciences—even as it also demands cautious and critical articulations of continuities and discontinuities. The best scientific practices would thus be deeply informed by critical work in the humanities and the performative arts, and vice versa.<sup>95</sup>

Even so, this argument for an articulated epistemology does not claim that there is a seamless continuity between various bodies of knowledge. The precise point of antireductionism is the difficulty of establishing exactly how various entities and forms of valuation that are distinct are nevertheless intertwined and how precisely these entities interact. An *articulation* means precisely that: a mapping out of continuities as well as discontinuities, and an acknowledgment of the remainder, be it unaccounted for entities (dark energy, for instance) or our ignorance pending further study.

### *Disciplinarity, Interdisciplinarity, and the Future of Knowledge*

I am not a donkey, and I do not have a field.

—Max Weber, as cited in *Duncan Kelly*,  
“Why Max Weber Matters”

By far the most distinctive phenomenon in higher education across the world, driven by the hegemony of North Atlantic societies, is the establishment and entrenchment of modern disciplines—that is, the taken for granted supposition that knowledges can be discretely classified into the peculiarly specific domains that they currently take. Indeed, disciplinary divisions are now seen by many academics as “natural,” even “objective” divisions. This is a testament not to the truth of this supposition but rather to the success of modern technologies of socialization. For what immediately strikes a student of the history

of knowledge is the relative *novelty* of disciplinary divisions. It was only in the late eighteenth century that knowledge began to take on the kind of disciplinary forms that are now recognizable to the modern subject.

To be sure, universities, in Europe and elsewhere, long before the nineteenth century did make distinctions between differing intellectual pursuits. But it is problematic to assume that there is a seamless historical continuity between, say, the subjects studied in the European medieval university and the modern Western European and North American university. To appreciate why, it is important to critique the manner in which disciplines seek to represent what they are and do to each other and to other disciplines.

Disciplines have traditionally constituted, legitimated, and reproduced themselves through the “myth of origin,” the idea that disciplinary origin can be traced to particular Founding Fathers, either in ancient Greece or, in some cases, early modern Europe. Quite apart from its problematically patriarchal assumptions, this notion misreads the ancients by anachronistically reading their interests as identical with those of contemporary scholars.<sup>96</sup> Take, for example, one of the founding myths of analytic philosophy that its origins lie at the precise moment philosophy made itself distinct from religion, politics, economics, culture, and rhetoric. According to this reading, the *philosophoi* (philosophers) were interested in the true, the good, and the beautiful whereas the *sophoi* (rhetoricians) were interested in how to “sell” themselves and their ideas. The attractiveness of this myth for analytic philosophers is not hard to parse: it constructs analytic philosophers as solely concerned with universal truth; as above the petty and messy squabbles of politics, economics, and culture; and as epistemically and morally foundational—and therefore superior—to all other disciplines. When constrained to the use of polite language, analytic philosophers resort to the language of disciplinary specialization—it is not, they say, that they think other disciplines are inferior or illegitimate. Rather, they simply think that those other disciplines are concerned with different objects of study. For example, philosophy, rhetoric, sociology, literature, and what have you have clearly demarcated spheres of research: sociologists are interested in social structures,

rhetoricians are interested in the arts of persuasion, and philosophers are interested in truth.

Whatever the merits of these arguments as a description of contemporary disciplinary practices, it is thoroughly and comprehensively anachronistic if it is thought to describe ancient Greek schools of thought. What divided the *sophoi* (rhetoricians) and the *philosophoi* (philosophers) was not fundamentally different objects of interest but rather a substantive disagreement about the nature of wisdom. In other words, the activity of the ancients ought to be characterized for what it is: a genuine disagreement about the hard problems of truth, ethics, politics, and aesthetics. Moreover, it is misleading even as a description of early modern European inquiry. Consider that many of the early modern philosophers now deified as the embodiment of “pure” philosophers were in their own time known as much for their activity in a variety of different fields. Hume was a “man of letters,” as anxious to be considered an historian and *litterateur* as a philosopher. The actually existing Kant, as opposed to the one now taught in the contemporary university, developed courses in anthropology and geography and is responsible for introducing these courses into the German universities. As Emmanuel Eze has pointed out, “Kant offered 72 courses in ‘Anthropology’ and/or ‘Physical Geography,’ more than in logic (52 courses), metaphysics (49 times), moral philosophy (28), and theoretical physics (20 times).”<sup>97</sup> Moreover, the materials Kant assembled in his “Anthropology” and “Physical Geography” courses were used in his lectures in ethics and metaphysics.<sup>98</sup>

The historical, sociological, and rhetorical reasons for the legitimation and naturalization of disciplines as coherent systems are complex and entangled and defy any easy narrativization. But such an account would have to grapple with the alienation of labor wrought by capitalism; the articulation of discourses of white supremacy, patriarchy, class and status hierarchies, and heteronormativity as “commonsense,” taken-for-granted ideologies; and the ascendance and establishment of the natural sciences as privileged producers of knowledge.

Capitalism’s alienation of labor has, of course, been promoted as a natural outgrowth of economic growth and thus as an inevitable demand for the efficiencies of dividing labor. Such an account is,

however, woefully partial. As historical entities, disciplines are not coherent analytical definitions or concepts;<sup>99</sup> that is, they did not develop as a result of thoughtful deliberation on the precise dimensions that would make for efficient discoveries of knowledge. In historicizing disciplines, we begin to see their emergence and contours as contingent, accidental features reified by political power. Their inner workings are a concatenation of different practices, often feverishly at odds with other parts.

If capitalist alienation is one salient element in the emergence of disciplinary ideology, it is inextricably intertwined with discourses of white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity. The fabrication of the “West” as a civilizational bloc gave these discourses a genealogical pedigree. Under the color of this dubious historiographical category, the intellectual traditions of societies that were constructed as nonwhite were stigmatized as “religious,” “mythical,” and “irrational.” Immanuel Kant, for example, drew from Hume’s *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* the notion that blacks naturally and inherently lacked capacities for rational and moral achievement. When Kant articulated what he referred to as the “essence of humanity,” that which endowed the person with dignity as a member of the “Kingdom of Ends,” he meant a person like himself: white, European, and male.

Major contemporary philosophers have zealously extended this racist legacy precisely through the willful blinders of disciplinarity. As the African philosopher Emmanuel Eze demonstrated, the failure to read Kant’s *Critiques* as integrally linked to his engagement with anthropology and geography enables contemporary philosophers to avoid coming to terms with the white supremacist assumptions rife in the discipline. Thus, disciplinarity has ratified a deeply ideological account of Kant’s oeuvre, “attributable to the overwhelming desire to see Kant as a “pure” philosopher, preoccupied only with “pure” culture and color-blind philosophical themes.”<sup>100</sup>

Disciplinarity has thus served to underwrite current sociological exclusions and epistemic injustices. A refusal to engage the breadth of interests within a discipline can be used as a proxy for preventing a thorough engagement with a variety of topics. One can simply rule that

certain topics that interest feminists or critical race scholars or Africans are not “philosophy” and thus shut down the possibility of pursuing certain lines of research. Analytic philosophers in the United States ruthlessly police their membership by confronting nonwhite people with the question: “How is this philosophy?”<sup>101</sup>

But the story of disciplinarity would not be complete without accounting for the ascendance of the natural sciences and their accumulation of cultural capital in the world at large. This has tended to push many disciplines toward mimicking the methods of the sciences or, equally perniciously, has led many to believe not only that each discipline has a single legitimate method but also that certain disciplines are reducible to other disciplines. The cultural capital of the sciences was, however, established on a narrow and deeply reductionistic picture of the sciences. According to this picture, “physics”—and moreover, a very mechanistic concept of physics—was the paradigmatic science.

Most of the fissures within the social sciences and humanities were fought over attempts to remake these disciplines to conform to this narrow, reductionist, and scientistic picture of scholarship. Within the social sciences, a variety of disciplines sought to achieve scientific credentials through a methodological emphasis on quantitative data-gathering. Of those disciplines, perhaps no other has labored to achieve the semblance of scientificity with as much vigor as economics. But this has been only a matter of degree. If actually existing politics has never quite lived up to be the way political scientists wanted it to be—sanitized, predictable, technical—many in the political science discipline have nevertheless clung to an image of themselves as the “scientists” that their titles advertise them to be. Communication studies, which had started as a discipline that conceived of itself as carrying on the traditions of the ancient Greek Sophists, made a social scientific turn with the propaganda studies of the mid-twentieth century. Even history, long thought to be deeply humanistic, experienced a sharp social scientific turn.

It should be clear that this present study does not hold that the turn to “science” was bad. A distinction should be made between, on the one hand, a careful drawing upon of scientific methods, including a deep immersion in mathematical models, and, on the other hand,

*scientism*—which is the positivistic dogma of naïve realism. Scientism is conceived herein as the uncritical belief not only that the quantitative trumps or renders subsidiary all other forms of evidence but also that such quantitative pieces of evidence are self-evident, that is, are not dependent on the arts of interpretation. It is this uncritical embrace of scientism that has been, on the whole, problematic. Scientism in the social sciences and the humanities has meant that complexity has been sacrificed at the altar of simplistic model building and monocausal statistical significance. Speaking in the wake of the worst recession in the United States since the Great Depression, economist Paul Krugman argued that the economic crisis had devastated the disciplinary *doxa* of his discipline, which, till then, had been vociferously insistent that it was a science. States Krugman:

Until the Great Depression, most economists clung to a vision of capitalism as a perfect or nearly perfect system. That vision wasn't sustainable in the face of mass unemployment, but as memories of the Depression faded, economists fell back in love with the old, idealized vision of an economy in which rational individuals interact in perfect markets, this time gussied up with fancy equations. The renewed romance with the idealized market was, to be sure, partly a response to shifting political winds, partly a response to financial incentives. But while sabbaticals at the Hoover Institution and job opportunities on Wall Street are nothing to sneeze at, the central cause of the profession's failure was the desire for an all-encompassing, intellectually elegant approach that also gave economists a chance to show off their mathematical prowess.<sup>102</sup>

Thus, in the name of scientificity and quantification, economists have pretended that sellers and buyers were rational and driven by enlightened self-interest, that the “market” could perfectly determine proper prices when left to its devices,<sup>103</sup> and that therefore the economy that was most efficient was that which was not regulated. For all that these assumptions proved devastatingly misleading, they remain the cultic credo of orthodox economists.

The upshot of coming to terms with these historical factors is that it brings into question the supposed “naturalness” of disciplinary divisions. We ought to historicize disciplines, seeing them as having emerged historically. We ought to be sensitive to the contingent, accidental features that determined their contours and the conceptual joints by which they map the world. Seen as such, a number of implications present themselves.

First, a critique of disciplinarity will take seriously the fact that all forms of study are complexly entangled in power relations. The belief in “pure” knowledge is a fantasy. All disciplines hand out credentials and endorse certain people as authorities, knowers, experts, teachers, and professionals. Note also that these forms of credentialization are endowed on embodied persons. And where we have bodies, we have *culture, interests, affinities, attachments*. What this means is that power differences in the wider society are all too often reproduced at the disciplinary level—even when these power differences are justified through redescriptions and rationalizations.

Such power differences are sublimated in the language of professionalism, rigor, objectivity, merit, reputational rankings, and pedigree. Thus, the coherence of any specific discipline is significantly constituted by the fact that one faction has the upper hand in determining the rankings, job opportunities, grant funding, and access to journal publishing within the discipline. Perhaps one of the most insidious ways in which disciplines mask power hierarchies is through the transmutation of embodied nonverbal forms of communication, methodological moves, and linguistic style into principled objections to other ways of knowing. Analytic philosophy’s rhetorical repertoire, for example, consists in its ideology of innate “smartness,” its fetishism of clarity, its adversarial style, its reliance on intuitions, and its machinery of thought experiments.

A corollary to this point is that it brings into crisis the rhetoric of professionalism. It still requires emphasizing that knowledge is not only articulated within the walls of the university. Perhaps another way to put this is that it is important to distinguish between the study and understanding of a body of knowledge and the discipline within which

some—but not all—of the study is carried out. It is by no means a foregone conclusion that the best work in epistemology or metaphysics or ethics will be carried out in the discipline of “philosophy.” Perhaps one of the greatest triumphs of modern socialization is the assumption that philosophers, psychologists, rhetoricians, critics, and intellectuals are just those credentialed by universities.<sup>104</sup>

Second, if the ideology of disciplinarity ratifies a form of expertise that is used to exclude outsiders, it is just as important to bear in mind that it also imposes a false continuity and uniformity *within* disciplines. The notion that there is some metaphysical bond tying Plato, Aquinas, Descartes, Kant, and Nietzsche to Paulin Hountondji, Kristie Dotson, Raymond Geuss, and Sally Haslanger beggars belief.<sup>105</sup> An examination of the tenuous uniformity and unity claimed by disciplines can be seen in a close reading of the presuppositions of practitioners within a discipline, presuppositions that indicate just how vastly different and incompatible are their visions of the purposes and boundaries of the discipline. Early and high modern thinkers, for example, are distinguished by their attempts to radically transform philosophy. Kant posits that *first philosophy*, the foundation upon which the medieval university sought to ground its learning, could no longer be thought of as first. Before launching any philosophy, it was important, Kant thought, to establish a critical account of the very possibility of such a philosophy. Hegel rejects this Kantian goal, arguing that such an ambition was akin to “trying to learn to swim before one enters the water.” I think an argument can be made that, against both Kant and Hegel, Nietzsche discovered that there was no reason to try to construct, out of whole cloth, a new critical philosophy, for ancient societies already had traditions and individuals critical of “First Philosophy.” Nietzsche, who delivered lectures in the history of Greek rhetoric, argues, provocatively as he was wont to do, that “every advance in epistemological and moral knowledge has reinstated the sophists.”<sup>106</sup> Nietzsche even hails the sophists as his “co-workers and precursors.”<sup>107</sup>

Thus, disciplinarity is responsible for significantly narrowing the range of thought within a particular domain of intellectual practice. In

building up a myth of Great Disciplinary Fathers, disciplines succeed in diminishing the horizons of current practitioners by making them labor under the shadow of a few Masters. They thwart detailed engagements and debates not only across differing areas of study but also by preventing internal diversity *within* disciplines. Wayne Booth recounts an all too unfortunate common occurrence in his book *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric*:

In 1960, I was at a post-lecture reception in Oxford. Chatting over drinks with a don, I asked him what subject he taught. “Chiefly eighteenth-century literature. What is your field?” “Basically it’s rhetoric, though I’m officially in ‘English.’ I’m trying to complete a book that will be called *The Rhetoric of Fiction*.” “Rhetoric!” He scowled, turned his back, and strode away.<sup>108</sup>

The contemporary configurations that disciplinarity has taken under neoliberal capitalism are such that it systematically forecloses paradigm-shattering, ambitious scholarship. Sweeping, wide-ranging examinations of macro-structures have been edged out in favor of micro-trends, analytic word-parsing, and recycled “folk” prejudice. The conditions—not universal and not by any means typical, but nonetheless present—that made possible W. E. B. Du Bois in sociology, Karl Polanyi in economics, C. L. R. James in history, Kenneth Burke in rhetoric, and Sylvia Wynter in cultural studies have atrophied to the cute trivialities of Steven D. Levitt’s *Freakonomics*, the puerile thought-experiments in Jeff McMahan’s *The Ethics of Killing*, and the warmed-over banalities of Jonathan Haidt’s *The Righteous Mind*.

This point should emphatically not be read as a desire to resurrect a Great Man theory of scholarship. And neither is it a nostalgic hankering after epochs that never were. Rather, it is precisely a *socio-logical* critique of the undeniable narrowing of the intellectual imagination by the microphysics and biopolitics of neoliberal capitalism—specifically, the cultic worship of pedigree through pseudoscientific “reputation” rankings; the clipping of ambition to read and write across

disciplines; the almost complete death of writerly style; the pressure against qualitative interpretations of epochal and global phenomena; the enforcement of quietism in the guise of theoretical, methodological, and empirical modesty; the policing of thought through tribal citation patterns; and the fetish of Big Data.

To some, of course, a critique of disciplinarity will sound quaint. Within the postmodern humanities, for example, the critique of disciplinarity is now taken for granted because of the circulation of a high theory canon that cuts across several humanities fields. Even in areas beyond that of the postmodern humanities, interdisciplinarity is now a buzzword of administrative-speak, bandied about whenever the carrot or stick of grants is invoked. But consider that one of the deepest problems with the postmodern humanities—a problem that it disavows because of its eclecticism—is a persistent inability to understand power as embedded institutionally. Citation of Jacques Rancière and Alain Badiou may sound very interdisciplinary, but hiring is still done at the level of the department, and decision making still conducted at the level of the disciplinary associations (the AHA, the MLA, the APA, the NCA). Also, consider that while most professors will consider themselves interdisciplinary, what this actually amounts to is that they read certain canonical theorists in other fields—usually, white male authorities—which they then translate into their idiom. For example, while many analytic philosophers, to take a rather common example, congratulate themselves in their close association with the sciences (particularly psychology), they are proudly ignorant about other fields and theoretical discourses in the humanities (such as, say, critical race theory) which they deem unimportant. But perhaps the most significant point is that interdisciplinarity offers no attempt at a radical reimagining of scholarship. At best it means collaborating with peers in other disciplines while keeping one's fundamental assumptions intact.

A robust critique of disciplinarity, therefore, ought to go beyond a lukewarm endorsement of interdisciplinarity and proffer a radical reimagination of the social structures and practices from which knowledge and aesthetics are emergent.

INTELLECTUAL PRACTICE, SOCIAL ONTOLOGY,  
AND THE GOOD LIFE

In philosophy where one begins generally makes a difference to the outcome of one's enquiries.

—Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*

In this chapter, I have endeavored to offer an intellectual ontology of knowledge articulation. The overriding stakes for the importance of such a project consists in understanding the intellectual life as constitutive of the good life. I say so for at least three reasons. The first is to demonstrate that knowledge articulation is embedded in political, economic, and cultural structures—that is, that knowledge is a social practice. In other words, knowledge is not merely propositional but rather is an embodied, relational, and institutional practice. And precisely because knowledge is embodied, relational, and institutional practice, it must be reckoned with as a vital constituent of any adequate account of a broader social ontology. This is not only because knowledge articulation is the site in and through which a society argues and contests theories and intuitions of legitimation, justification, and value (that is, it is the locus for working out power and ideology), but it is also because it is through institutions and practices of knowledge articulation that a society imagines its visions of the possible and the futural.

There is a second reason why I argue that an adequate intellectual ontology is constitutive of the good life. This is the fact that if knowledge is understood as an embodied, social practice, then it follows that it is most robustly realized when it is understood as a way of life. To be sure, this runs against the grain of dominant understandings of knowledge production that hold that knowledge is reducible to justified, true beliefs or propositions. Understood as such, contemporary accounts of knowledge—exemplified by reigning epistemological theories—proffer thin, lukewarm accounts of the intellectual life as a serial accumulation of facts. This chapter, in mapping out an

intellectual ontology, intimates that alternative practice, one drawn to the emergence of intellectuals rather than simply knowers, is possible.

Finally, I argue, it is vital that an adequate account of an intellectual ontology be seen as a prerequisite for working out a normative theory of knowledge. This is because normative theories of knowledge that do not account for the contextual conditions of knowledge articulation invariably proffer idealized—and therefore misleading—understandings of knowledge. For example, Platonic and Cartesian theories of knowledge that characterize knowledge articulation in acontextual, disembodied, antirhetorical terms advance misleading notions of knowledge as absolutist, universalist, and unmediated. This chapter argues, instead, for normative theories that proceed from embedding knowledge articulation in a layered social ontology.

In the chapter that follows, I want to put flesh to the argument articulated in this chapter by considering different embodiments of the intellectual in the contemporary context. If, as I have argued, knowledge articulation is emergent as well as constitutive of particular intellectual ontologies, this raises the question of what sort of intellectual performances constitute the contemporary institutional and geopolitical landscape. In the following chapter, I aim to suggest a few answers to that very question.