

Particularity, Epistemic Responsibility, and the Ecological Imaginary

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Two thoughts animate my focus on “particularity”: thoughts that seem to pull against one another; but the tension is productive in the engagement it generates. The first thought comes from Australian philosopher Val Plumwood, who observes, wryly: “Women have represented particularity in contrast to male universality... and necessity in contrast to male freedom.”¹ This may be a small thought, but it is also risky to invoke it as a way into thinking about particularity. It seems to confirm that women and other Others (from the white patriarchal norm) should avoid what in this negative casting could amount to a *descent* into particularity: into the messiness of the concrete and the everyday, eschewing attempts to attain the higher levels of reason aligned with the universal purity of abstract detachment that transcends the commonplace. Engaging with particularity may seem to affirm Immanuel Kant’s claim that a large proportion of humanity, “including the entire fair sex,” will be unable to make unsupervised use of their rational powers² Entering this tension involves defying its negative, anti-feminist, “down among the women” implications, to reclaim its subversive and pedagogical potential.

The second thought comes from Adriana Cavarero (via Hannah Arendt) who observes: “Uniqueness is epistemologically inappropriate.” For Cavarero, in establishing the superiority of a putatively universal *logos*, “the philosophical tradition... ignores the unrepeatable singularity of each human being, the embodied uniqueness that distinguishes each one from every other.”³ She suggests that engaging responsibly with the specificities of human lives, epistemologically, pedagogically, and morally–politically, requires “us” to counter assumptions that *particularity* merits epistemic attention only insofar as it informs and sustains the universal. Hence, endorsing Cavarero’s contention and accepting Plumwood’s challenge, I consider some implications of an injunction against uniqueness — and a feminization of particularity — as it infuses Anglo-American theories of knowledge, especially the *moral epistemology* that has informed social and political practices reliant, if only tacitly, on knowing people well in their singularity. For Cavarero, even “philosophies that value ‘dialogue’ and ‘communication’ remain imprisoned in a linguistic register that ignores the relationality already put in action by the simple reciprocal communication of voices.”⁴ She cautions against imagining that the anonymous, monologic pronouncements of the white western tradition have been displaced in favour of the *relationality* she advocates.

Engagement with particularity is a recurrent theme for Cavarero. In *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, she writes:

Philosophers themselves — servants of the universal — are the ones who teach us that the knowledge of Man requires that the particularity of each one, the uniqueness of human existence, be unknowable. Knowledge of the universal, which excludes embodied uniqueness from its epistemology, attains its maximum perfection by presupposing the absence of

such a uniqueness. *What Man is* can be known and defined, as Aristotle assures us; *who Socrates is*, instead, eludes the parameters of knowledge as science, it eludes the truth of the *episteme*.⁵

This thought connects with issues I address in *Epistemic Responsibility*,⁶ and resituate in a differently elaborated conceptual framework, in *Ecological Thinking*.⁷ In each, with variations, I work from a commitment to constructing knowledge that fosters democratic, respectful cohabitation. Here, I follow those threads as they come together to inform a renewed engagement with particularity, concerned with how people can know and respond, responsibly, to diversity and “difference;” can judge, responsibly, whose testimony merits a hearing; can oppose practices of determining whose knowing is thwarted in structures of incomprehension and intransigence. Although this issue — “the one and the many” — is as old as western philosophy, its urgency is enhanced in this bureaucratized and digitalized–mechanized twenty-first century, when so many categories into which people must fit, and into which the unfamiliar, the strange are required to fit, are too crude, too limited, and limiting to recognize those thus categorized as more than a “what.” Examples abound. They attach in part to the crudity of stereotypes; and to cases such as one I cite in *Ecological Thinking* where Canadian biologist Karen Messing, studying women’s workplace health, finds that, for workers’ compensation bureaucracies and academic granting agencies, the statistical rarity of some workers’ stories of their symptoms casts them as *too particular*, too idiosyncratic in their detail to warrant inclusion in funding proposals or find a place in applications for health benefits. Hence they slip through the cracks of public acknowledgment and support.

Pursuing Cavarero’s thought requires us to revisit ancient reminders that a language of pure particulars could neither be spoken nor understood. Hence focussing on particularity may seem to ignore warnings such as Wendy Brown’s against an “excessive specificity... [that] sacrifices the imaginative reach of theory,” where she detects a return to positivism; or Robyn Weigman’s against a “particularist reduction whereby the... distillation of bodies from knowledge yields an understanding of *identity studies* as the sole institutional domain within which the complexity of power cannot possibly be thought.”⁸ From a different direction, it may appear to propose a descent into quotidian detail and concern with the particular that has long been women’s lot, freeing men to occupy themselves with matters of universal import. These are apt cautions. Because none of these consequences would be politically effective, advocating a turn toward particularity invokes several caveats. Its purpose cannot be to reclaim the individualism feminist and antiracist critique has condemned. Particularity and uniqueness are conceptually and ontologically distinct from individualism in their philosophical genealogy, significance, and effects. Thus, a turn toward particularity must navigate a treacherous passage between the stark invisibility and inaudibility generated by the *logos* in Cavarero’s reading, and the scattered dissolutions that endorsing pure particularity could entail. These are the issues that concern me here.

Particularity has not been entirely ignored in Anglo-American ethics and epistemology. Even pre-feminist and pre-difference-sensitive moral judgments

often come down to evaluating particular actions with, to, and on particular people; and sensitivity to particularity is not new for feminist or other postcolonial epistemologists. Whereas Anglo-American epistemology has sought to suppress particularity for its tendency to obstruct clear paths to the universal, feminist and other critical epistemologists have started from the particularities of women's lives and the lives of people otherwise Othered in hegemonic discourses and practices. They have charted the significance of knowers' situatedness in particular — if multiple — relations to the circumstances, events, and people they seek to know, and in relation to other knowers. In its hospitality to the once outrageous question “Whose knowledge are we talking about?” feminist epistemology has prepared the ground for addressing the issues Cavarero raises. Yet, there are differences.

The epistemology that has silently informed classical *moral* theory has indeed sought to subsume the particular under general universal precepts, if often appropriately so in the interests of impartiality. Nonetheless, the unique, the “case” that does not fit, tends to disappear in such judgments for want of sufficiently sensitive taxonomic resources for addressing it. This disappearance is troubling in its implications for knowing across differences and for the politics of testimony. Failure to fit is rarely a neutral, objective property. As Michel Foucault shows in his reference to items that cannot find a place “within the true (*dans le vrai*),” it is as often a consequence of the limitations of the *episteme*; of entrenched patterns of judgment, themselves open to critical analysis.⁹ Although there is extensive work on moral particularism in mainstream philosophy, one example illustrates a different aspect of my worry. In “Moral Perception and Particularity,” Lawrence Blum advances an analysis sensitive to moral particularities, to show how subjective variations in perceptions of salience feed into diverse judgments of situational specificity.¹⁰ Yet his analysis highlights a facet of Cavarero's approach where she parts company with analyses of particularity in Anglo-American philosophy, feminist and otherwise. While Blum's analysis follows a typical third-personal pattern, showing how *X* perceives *Y* in particular (*Z*) circumstances, Cavarero's recommendations are addressive, relational, and expressed in a language that recalls Annette Baier's and my arguments for a language of “*second persons*.” Significant is the place Cavarero grants to “relating narratives” where “relating” refers to narratives that forge *relations* between and among people, and those that *relate* particular circumstances and responses: conveying the “who” which disappears into the “what” of third-personal tellings. The difference is not minor. Yet relationality for Cavarero is no mere dyadic, two-voiced replica of the monologic singularity of abstract individualism. It is from a reciprocal relationality such as she — still following Arendt — advocates that social, political, and *epistemic* community and affiliation are generated and sustained between and among selves who bear only a distant resemblance to the unified, frozen self of modernity. Enigmatically, Cavarero observes:

[W]omen are usually the ones who tell life-stories...like Penelope, they have since ancient times, woven plots with the thread of storytelling...Whether ancient or modern, their art aspires to a wise repudiation of the abstract universal, and follows an everyday practice where the tale is existence, relation and attention.¹¹

How these thoughts connect with the materiality of oppression and marginality is a question such peaceable narration is challenged to address, but Cavarero's emphasis on mutual exposure opens space for engaging with it, especially when *epistemic* responsibility figures prominently among responsibility's modalities.

In thinking about relationality Cavarero is indebted to Arendt's work on *natality*, in its attentiveness to the exposure of the newly born: an exposure that is ongoing, constitutive of human lives from birth to death. It is an exposure many philosophers of modernity, in their press toward achieving autonomy and the "buffered self" (in Genevieve Lloyd's phrase¹²) have sought to escape and indeed to deny. This "self" fears the mutual exposure of its "thrown-ness" into the world. Yet people are fundamentally, on-going-ly exposed to one another: exposure, either in attempts to paper it over and defend against it, or in epistemic practices that endeavour to understand, protect and honour it, is instrumental in shaping personal, educational, social, and political interactions, all the way down.

These thoughts find echoes in recent social epistemology, where testimony¹³ — epistemic exchange among people in the real world — has achieved a new centrality, making way for engaging, indeed relationally, with knowledge.¹⁴ Noteworthy are the seemingly small yet far-reaching effects of linguistic shifts in some of this work, away from monologic, third-person propositional variants on the "S knows that *p*" rubric, to the language of speakers and hearers: from a spectator model of knowing, toward an interactive, addressive, and responsive mode. Edward Craig's *Knowledge and the State of Nature* and Miranda Fricker's *Epistemic Injustice*¹⁵ are landmark texts: they open spaces for thinking away from regarding testimony merely as information-conveying statements reporting everyday "facts," toward engaging with testimony as relating in both of Cavarero's senses; and as exposure, involving vulnerability, and requiring trust. Equally significant is the attention some social epistemologists give to extended examples of situated, hence particular, epistemic negotiations. Such elaborated testimony is enacted in narrating back and forth, generating relations between teller(s) and hearer(s) that in their political implications, whether benign, malign, or neutral exceed the one-liners uttered on a putatively level playing field on which some testimony literature still relies.

Where reliance on the "S knows that *p*" rubric enabled epistemologists to imagine they could transcend the vicissitudes of the world by establishing universal, a priori necessary and sufficient conditions for "knowledge in general," Craig, as his reference to the "state of nature" signals, returns to the world as the place where knowledge is made, conveyed, and adjudicated. A distinction he draws is germane to his shift to an addressive mode. He observes, "There are informants, and there are sources of information...Roughly, the distinction is between a person's telling me something and my being able to tell something from observation of him."¹⁶ Craig focuses on engaging with people as informants, where "the distinctive relation of believing another person" is pivotal and epistemic emphasis is on the engagement and the information exchanged.¹⁷ At issue is the speaker's responsibility: someone who acts as my informant is giving me her *assurance*, affirming that I can rely on what she says. A certain particularity is involved, according to the detail of the

situation, for it matters who the “other person” is: a responsible hearer will not believe just anyone, unless for quotidian information — about the time of the train, the location of the bank. Hence responsibility is not the speaker’s alone: it is relationally enacted. In the attention he accords to the informant, the innovative aspect of Craig’s approach is apparent: this is no touristic, spectator theory but one where people acquire knowledge from and with one another “as subjects with a common purpose, rather than as objects from which services, in this case true belief, can be extracted.”¹⁸ By contrast, treating people as sources of information involves a level of objectification not unlike what is involved in knowing the age of a tree by counting its rings (his example).

Nonetheless, Craig’s discussion of informants makes no mention of the *politics* of testimony, of asymmetrical social–epistemic positionings of speaker and hearer, or of the multiple ways in which even relating to people as informants can play into their vulnerability or erase their particularity. Recall Cavarero’s remark about philosophies that value dialogue, ignoring the relationality of reciprocal communication. Dealing with people as informants can be as smooth and straightforward as Craig proposes *only* if speaker(s) and listener(s) are situated on a level playing field, with equal expectations of claiming a place to speak and of being believed. Beyond simple exchanges of neutral information, such ease of communication can rarely be taken for granted.

With these cautionary comments in mind, I cite an example that shows attentiveness to particularity at work in a situation that, as I read it, conveys what is at issue in Craig’s distinction, and shows how engaging with people as informants — as *who* they are — invokes urgent, yet elusive, responsibility requirements. Telling a story about a development project in Africa, as I do, is fraught with interpretive problems, for the levels of ignorance and unknowing are multiple. They are compounded by the tenacity of an instituted social imaginary that blocks possibilities of knowing whereof one speaks; and further compounded in the story I tell, in my voice, re-telling a story told by another, where the voices of those I tell about are not audible. Thus, the story highlights the hermeneutic complexity of the case I am advancing and points toward wider implications, for everyday and educational practices, of claiming to know people across differences.

The story is about a project initiated in 2007 by the United Kingdom in Katine (a province in rural north-east Uganda), sponsored by the *Guardian* and *Observer*, by Barclays Bank, the African Medical and Research Foundation (Amref), and Farm-Africa. Investigative journalists from both supporting newspapers frequently spend time there, one of whose articles I draw on here. She is Madeleine Bunting, a columnist I often read in the *Guardian*, whose book on the German occupation of the Channel Islands in World War II is an exemplary historical investigation. These remarks suggest, too briefly, why I read her story as offering plausible, credible evidence: I “know” her work well enough to place my trust, cautiously, in her epistemic and testimonial integrity. She writes:

My hunch is that it would take several months of living down one of those long, meandering dirt paths in the bush to begin to understand how a Ugandan woman sees her life. The first

thing a westerner doesn't grasp is the scale of Africa; they always have a 4x4 to jump into, which will speed them to Kampala with its hospitals, shops and embassies. For millions of African women, every journey involves hours of walking. Three hours to a council meeting, two hours to visit an antenatal clinic, an hour to visit a friend to borrow a pen, an hour to get a malaria tablet. At least.

The second aspect of rural African poverty which is so hard to grasp is that most village women have very few manufactured belongings. A couple of dresses, a pair of flip-flops, a few mugs and bowls, a sliver of soap. You need to have nothing to know how precious an exercise book is. It's strange how difficult this scarcity is for us to imagine; on the *Guardian's* Katine website, bloggers urged Katine residents to build their own desks. "It's not difficult, I could teach them in a couple of days," asserted one of these armchair development advisers. But who buys the nails — possibly an eight-hour round shopping trip — and with whose money? Where do you get the planed wood in a country where wood is an extremely valuable resource?...Who transports it to the remote school? Our lives are so conditioned on the availability of what we need that we have no inkling of what it might be like to live with constant unmet need.¹⁹

These minutiae of the everyday are constitutive of the lives lived there: of *who* these women are, as Bunting engages with them. Admittedly, we hear her voice, not theirs. We must surmise that her questions, the everyday details she is beginning to understand, come from her involvement in what Martin Heidegger might call the *allgemeine Alltäglichkeit* of these lives. The details attest to a familiarity, a level of relationality unlike the superficial glance of a tourist. Unsurprisingly, Bunting is not unequivocally praised for seeing and naming the materiality of those lives: criticisms abound in the "Comment is Free" section of the *Guardian* site, as indeed they should in an epistemic climate that eschews the authoritarianism of truth by fiat. She may not be seeing accurately, she may be seeing through a pair of glasses on her nose (paraphrasing Ludwig Wittgenstein) that prompts her to observe certain things and occludes others: she may not know whereof she speaks.²⁰ But she opens a path toward rendering intelligible some of the minutiae of these lives. Through the mazes of these jumbled assemblages of what might and might not be, of whom to believe and why, of how to know what one will never perceive in the way the *S* of mainstream epistemology readily did when he (or sometimes she) knew that *p*, knowing the particularity, the uniqueness, of the unfamiliar and the strange has to occur. Here, epistemic responsibilities are myriad and delicate.

In such circumstances, where people need to know enough to think well, ask appropriate questions, talk intelligently with colleagues, students, and officials, offer support, testimony is the main source of knowledge. Few people will or can go to see for themselves; fewer will be able to relate well enough with the Katine women to know them responsibly. Thus where to place belief, how to accord credibility wisely, looks for answers to sources whose capacity to provide good enough reasons needs always to be evaluated. Such evaluative practices are integral to acquiring, exercising, and teaching appropriate social-cultural epistemic literacy in twenty-first century societies, where what "we" claim to know about people and places near and far from "home" involves elaborated and remote versions of Bertrand Russell's knowledge by description. These practices are increasingly contestable in post-positivist recognitions of the politics of knowledge and testimony. Hence, acknowledging the multiple interpretability of such tellings, I call this a story, a narrative,

whose tellers are implicated in its form, content, and circulation. It offers a point of entry into an area to be investigated, not an established collection of facts. Such stories fall between philosophical anthropology–ethnography and precisely situated literary works, novels. Although their self-presentation is more factual than fictional, they perform a function akin to the effects of certain novels which (for Moira Gatens) “seek to challenge, re-form and transform dominant social imaginaries in order that they may become more inclusive, more ethical, and more just.”²¹ I read Bunting’s story within this frame.

On this understanding, epistemology incorporates a larger hermeneutical and dialogical component than dislocated, decontextualized analyses have done: both the situation and the “meta-situation” call out for sensitive analysis. So there is a temerity, a tentativeness, in telling and hearing such stories — they make “us” think. If we think well, they may generate some degree of relationality: a stretching of the imagination that could make thoughtful action possible. Analogously, in her article “White Ignorance and Colonial Oppression Or, Why I Know so Little About Puerto Rico,” Shannon Sullivan asks not only why she knows so little about Puerto Rico, but how and why the situation of her life in affluent white America, where she has learned and not learned about it, the assumptions and stereotypes that go unquestioned, have contributed to her knowing so little: to what she calls the ignorance/knowledge that had passed for knowing.²²

Sullivan’s interest is in how the United States’ educational system played into the successful colonization of Puerto Rico, constructing Puerto Ricans “as similar enough to white U.S. citizens to be capable of Americanization;” in how the “epistemic relationship” between the U.S. and Puerto Rico is “more complex than the simple opposition between ignorance and knowledge indicates.” The idea of ignorance/knowledge is effective, and humbling, in how it “denies, or at least places under suspicion the purported self-mastery and self-transparency of knowledge;” in how it helps us “to peek behind knowledge of Puerto Rico to see what unknowings help compose it:” unknowings on which it relies for perpetuating the policies and practices that sustain “Porto Rico’s” colonial status.²³ So, Bunting’s Katine story points to the need to peel away such colonialist unknowings as enable an “armchair observer” to superimpose his “knowledge-in-general” of what *he* would have done onto a situation about which he can at best claim ignorance/knowledge, filtered through a social imaginary conditioned by availability and a systemic incapacity to conceive of the day-to-day materiality of real scarcity. Although the Katine project and the situation of Puerto Rico are so remotely analogous that a comparison risks doing epistemic violence, some of the issues are comparable, and worth considering.

Attending to such urgent particularities — the cost and effort of obtaining nails, the scarcity of wood, the distances to be walked in the heat, wearing flip-flops — attending attentively and imaginatively, allowing them to unsettle the complacency of a social imaginary based on plenty, not scarcity—imagining beyond them to multiple other possibilities that *are not*, opens the way to the “doxastic shock” often required to begin repairing epistemic injustice. It destabilizes the taken-for-granted familiarity presupposed in assumptions of human sameness and uniformity of living

conditions; exposes the systemic and systematic harms such assumptions enact in keeping the un-namable invisible and beneath notice, ensuring that they continue (in Cavarero's words) eluding "the truth of the *episteme*." To address them I turn to the third section of this essay: the ecological imaginary.

The instituted social imaginary of the affluent white western-northern world is one of taken-for-granted availability and access: a way of life where individual self-reliance is a virtue, and it is easy to sustain the illusion that such virtue is its own reward, for "most people," leaving that term vague, are positioned, by their own efforts, to achieve their "goals" and fulfill their "needs." Such needs are imagined to be natural, the *sine qua non* of a viable human life; scarcity is temporary and contingent: it can and should be "fixed." These thoughts derive from what, in *Ecological Thinking*, I call an imaginary of mastery and control, for which ethical self-mastery, political mastery over unruly and aberrant Others, and epistemic mastery over the "external" world pose as readily attainable goals. These discourses of "mastery" (using Val Plumwood's term²⁴) are so closely woven into the social imaginary as to be imperceptible except in their absence, and unchallengeable. They enlist ready-made, easily applied categories to contain the personal, social, and physical–natural world within a neatly manageable array of "kinds," obliterating particularities and differences to assemble the confusion of the world into maximally homogeneous units.

In *Ecological Thinking*, I claim that an ecological remapping of the epistemic terrain can initiate transformations in the social order capable of destabilizing the epistemologies of mastery, unsettling their hegemony. It is wary of master narratives, premature closure, and reductionism: it may appear to restrict the range of definitive knowledge. Yet it maintains vigilance for careless, too-swift knowings that fail to do justice to their objects of study. It is about imagining, articulating, endeavouring to enact principles of ideal cohabitation. Hence the ecological subject differs radically from autonomous man, whose presumed mastery over all he surveys allows surveying to substitute for engaged participation and mastery to suppress diversity in the interests of instrumental simplicity. Hence, ecological thinking offers a conceptual frame within which to construct a theory of knowledge and subjectivity responsive to particularity, diversity, and community; responsibly committed to knowing well and to countering the oppressions and exclusions the epistemologies of mastery sustain.

Implicit in these reflections is a suggestion that narratives — relating narratives — play a part in highlighting incongruities that can destabilize an established imaginary, although it would be naive to propose that narratives *tout court* offer the solution to this problem, for no narrative can tell "the whole story." Yet, revisiting Gatens's proposal, novels, and certain stories including the one I have told, following Bunting, "seek to challenge, re-form and transform dominant social imaginaries in order that they may become more inclusive, more ethical, and more just." Viewed as "creative cultural criticism," following Gatens, they contribute to enabling people to begin to think our/their way out of an entrenched imaginary, where educating our imaginations and the imaginations of our students, children,

colleagues, and other interlocutors is among the most important tasks facing “us” in our positions of privilege and trust, as educators.

Still, complexities and reservations abound, for one cannot assume that a story, either factual or fictional, should be taken at face value, nor can it be read as unequivocally “true.” There are many ways of reading stories: literally, as “offering just the facts;” cautiously, in recognition that no single narrative can do that; phenomenologically, for its part in stripping away, “bracketing” complacent assumptions about how well “we” know or understand or imagine circumstances so radically unlike ours that they only, with difficulty, find a place within the imaginary of having, and plenty, and availability; or heuristically, for the “doxastic shock.” “Knowing” from stories may require approaching them “blank,” with a suspension of belief and of disbelief. Even people approached openly, respectfully as informants may be unreliable narrators, wary, and ready to manipulate the truth rather than tell it straight. Nor can I conclude that engaging with particulars will always destabilize complacent assumptions in the same way, yet working by analogy, lessons may be learned. We may come away with ignorance/knowledge: yet ignorance/knowledge, too, provides a starting place for dislodging an entrenched social–epistemic imaginary, as Sullivan shows. Pedagogically, educationally, engaging with particularity has immense value, for careful teachers and mentors can work with it to generate a just measure of strategic scepticism which students — and all of us — require in this age of mass manipulation by what poses as “information.” Bunting’s comment about the difficulty for the “haves” to imagine how it is not to have shows how crucial it is to responsible educational practice, both institutional and “everyday,” to educate our imaginations and the imaginations of our students to stretch beyond the familiar, to acknowledge and respect strangeness, and to recognize the caution required in treading respectfully on unimaginable territory, in assuming to know too much from too narrowly imagining.

All of this said, I end without concluding: with some ambiguities, aporias, for none of these matters come down to either/or choices: thinking about them provides more questions than answers. For a start, it is not always certain that “the Other,” “the oppressed” *wants* to be known in her, his, or their particularity: people are private, closed, for reasons that demand respect, despite the implausibility of the “buffered self.” Consider Cynthia Cockburn’s remark in a different context about interviewing conflict survivors, where researchers have to be mindful that “the researched take greater risks and lack the mobility, resources and choices available to the researcher” who must respect their not-telling as fully as she respects their telling.²⁵ Hers is a reminder of the need, even in engaging relationally with particularity, to honour “our” opacity to one another, while recognizing that opacity within exposure cannot be conveyed in the formulaic knowledge claims that have been the stuff of which epistemology is made. Honouring opacity requires a commitment to listening and negotiating across differences, even if the result is a deeper commitment to preserving silence; “to holding open a space for not knowing.”²⁶ Testimony is often so specific to a situation, a “who,” that if it is to contribute without doing epistemic violence to the intelligibility of the experience, it needs, perhaps impossibly, to be

accorded an initial presumption of credibility, in its uniqueness, even as hearers and speakers strive to achieve a meeting place in what may be uncharted epistemic territory. The problems are exacerbated by a realization integral to feminist, phenomenological, and postmodern thinking that particulars, whether material or human, are neither unmediated in their particularity, nor unmixed in the liberal sense of unified transparent wholeness. Nor are they stable, fixed once and for all. So knowing particulars is both urgent and, in any definitive sense, impossible. Knowledge is always unfinished, incomplete, precisely because of the open-endedness of experience and meaning: for our scholarly and pedagogical practice to be epistemically responsible, we need to be open about the limits of our knowledge, for we perform an injustice both to ourselves and to our students and colleagues if we are resistant to declaring them.

As I observed, I have been revisiting the problem of the one and the many, of debates about “thisness,” ancient problems about universality and particularity. Returning to my warnings about a language of pure particulars, it is clear that abstraction is essential for communication in almost any form to take place. The task is to determine when abstraction abstracts too much, moves too far from the concrete, from particular harms, neglect, and urgencies, sanitizing them to the point of insulating them against the acknowledgment without which they cannot be brought to the level of intelligibility necessary for addressing them adequately. Yet my initial claim, following Cavarero, is more enigmatic than I suggest, because it is after all not true that philosophy does not deal with particulars. As a social institution, philosophy must come to all it does, knows, classifies and discusses, with applicable — or not — categories and classifications, if engagement is to be possible at all. The conundrum that has caught my attention is about how to retain and honor particularity while enlisting resources ready at hand and not yet readily available, to work toward its intelligibility, not as a *what* but as a *Who*. To dispel a misconception I may have generated about Cavarero’s work: from my reading, it may seem that she concentrates on narrators thinking and talking in comfortable exchanges, in polite, stable society, to the neglect of conflict, marginalization, and oppression. To correct that impression, I again quote *For More than One Voice*:

The reevaluation of the vocalic that I am here proposing, although it has good reasons for opposing itself to the political logocentrism, does not aspire to a definitive liberation from politics, but rather posits a different way of thinking the relation between politics and speech....As Arendt invites us to consider, the question lies precisely in thinking the elementary criterion of a politics that valorizes the relationality of the unique beings that manifest themselves actively through speech, leaving aside the imperialism of the Said.²⁷

She goes on to observe, “The protagonist of this politics is a speaker who, leaving aside his or her belonging to this or that identity group, this or that language, communicates him- or herself first of all as voice.”²⁸

Thinking about these tangled, ambiguous issues prompts me to declare a closing debt — which could have been an opening debt — to Patti Lather, especially to her comments, first, that “the practice of failure is pivotal for the project of feminist inquiry in negotiating the crisis of representation, the loss of faith in received stories

and predictable scripts;” and more urgently to her question: “what would practices look like that hold the limits of our knowing as a good thing?”²⁹ For me, now, this is the question.

1. Val Plumwood, “The Politics of Reason: Toward a Feminist Logic,” in *Representing Reason: Feminist Theory and Formal Logic*, eds. Rachel Falmagne and Marjorie Hass (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 21.

2. See Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: “Male” and “Female” in Western Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1994), 66.

3. Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. Paul A. Kottman (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2005), 9.

4. Cavarero, *For More than One Voice*, 16.

5. Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, trans. Paul A. Kottman (New York: Routledge, 2000), 9.

6. Lorraine Code, *Epistemic Responsibility* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1987).

7. Lorraine Code, *Ecological Thinking: The Politics of Epistemic Location* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

8. Wendy Brown, “The Impossibility of Women’s Studies,” 31, and Robyn Weigman “Feminism, Institutionalism, and the Idiom of Failure,” 60; both in *Women’s Studies on the Edge*, ed. Joan Wallach Scott (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008).

9. Michel Foucault, “The Discourse on Language,” in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. Rupert Swyer (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972). Foucault writes: “Mendel spoke the truth, but he was not *dans le vrai* (within the true) of contemporary biological discourse,” (224).

10. Lawrence Blum, “Moral Perception and Particularity,” *Ethics* 101, no. 4 (1991): 701–25.

11. Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 54.

12. Referring to Charles Taylor’s talk of “the ‘buffered’ disenchanted self” in the modern world, Lloyd argues that the “loss of providence exposes that buffered modern self to new vulnerabilities,” in Genevieve Lloyd, *Providence Lost* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 322.

13. See C.A.J. Coady, *Testimony: A Philosophical Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Michael Welbourne, *Knowledge* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001); Michael Welbourne, *The Community of Knowledge* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1986); and Jennifer Lackey and Ernest Sosa, eds., *The Epistemology of Testimony* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006).

14. See in this regard, Lorraine Code, “Testimony, Advocacy, Ignorance: Thinking Ecologically about Social Knowledge,” in *Social Epistemology*, eds. Adrian Haddock, Alan Millar, and Duncan Pritchard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

15. Edward Craig, *Knowledge and the State of Nature: An Essay in Conceptual Synthesis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); and Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

16. Craig, *Knowledge and the State of Nature*, 35.

17. The words are Richard Moran’s, “Getting Told and Being Believed,” in *The Epistemology of Testimony*, eds. Jennifer Lackey and Ernest Sosa (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 274. I have benefited from Moran’s analysis.

18. Craig, *Knowledge and the State of Nature*, 36.

19. Madeleine Bunting, “Two Years on, Katine offers much to Celebrate — and much to Feel Frustrated About,” *Guardian Weekly*, November 1, 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/nov/01/katine-aid-africa-west-society>.

20. The reference is to Wittgenstein, “Where does this idea come from? It is like a pair of glasses on our nose through which we see whatever we look at.” Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968), §103.

21. Moira Gatens, "The 'Disciplined Imagination': Literature as Experimental Philosophy," *Australian Feminist Studies* 22, no. 52 (2007): 30.
22. Shannon Sullivan, "White Ignorance and Colonial Oppression Or, Why I Know so Little About Puerto Rico," in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, eds. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).
23. Sullivan, "White Ignorance," 154–55.
24. Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993).
25. Cynthia Cockburn, "Introduction," in *The Space Between Us: Negotiating Gender and Identities in Conflict* (London: Zed Books, 1998), 3.
26. See Bidy Martin, "Success and its Failures," in *Women's Studies on the Edge*, ed. Joan Wallach Scott (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008), 185.
27. Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 200.
28. *Ibid.*, 208.
29. Patti Lather, *Getting Lost: Feminist Efforts toward a Double(d) Science* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 38, 60.

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