

Introduction

The purpose of this book is to engage with some of the most urgent epistemological and ontological effects of public skepticism and doubt in relation to climate change, in the twenty-first-century Western-Northern world and beyond, viewing these effects through a lens focused on entrenched but often misguided assumptions about how such matters can responsibly be known, lived, engaged. Harms across a broad social, political, demographic, and geographic spectrum consequent upon industrial pollution, tobacco smoking, global warming, ecological devastation, and a vast range of interconnected private and public practices encouraged and condoned by such doubts, are much in the public eye in the twenty-first century. They are impressively analyzed and debated in Naomi Oreskes's and Eric Conway's 2010 book *Merchants of Doubt*: a text that figures centrally among the catalysts for this engagement with such practices.¹ It is the source of the title: "Manufactured Uncertainty," which is intended as a challenge to socially embedded assumptions about the taken for granted "certainty"—the rarely contested "reliability"—of publicly announced and analysed scientific findings related to "environmental"/ecological matters in many twenty-first-century Western-Northern societies and academic institutions.

The term "environmental" is itself contestable in that it centers "us"—we human beings—who are the very people who invoke it: hence the reflections to follow favor a language of ecology/ "ecological," wherever

1. Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010).

it is feasible/plausible.² Most significantly, I intend to show, such ongoing harms attest to deep-seated social-political-ontological assumptions about who we are—we who pose such questions—and about how we understand and enact our place(s) in the world. Their significance for feminist-, race-, place-, class-specific and other interconnected areas of twenty-first-century theory and practice remains underexamined: it is here that many of these interventions will focus. When skeptics appeal to a margin of uncertainty in climate change science, with the aim of generating and fueling incredulity and justifying resistance to regulating social and individual behaviors, they commonly defend a conception of freedom—of Liberty—assumed uncontestedly to be theirs, to pertain universally, and to be unjustly threatened by contentions that they cannot/should neither consume nor pollute as they will. Hence this text engages with some of the damaging effects of lived assumptions about freedom and entitlement in the twenty-first-century Western world: assumptions which vary across human and situational-circumstantial diversity, yet whose cumulative effects are reciprocally reinforcing. These engagements invoke ethical-political questions about epistemic responsibility (a responsibility to know carefully and well): they prompt fundamental yet diverse ontological questions about who “we” are and how “we” can live responsibly, together and separately, in the human, natural, and social-political world. A principal goal of this project, then, is to generate a rethinking of (often tacit) socially and philosophically entrenched convictions about universal human sameness, about “our” entitlement to consume and pollute as “we” will, and about responsibilities—epistemic responsibilities—to know carefully and well. A guiding hope is that it will prompt educators and activists to engage in deliberations/disputations that could animate radical shifts in the sedimented policies and practices that govern quotidian and public-political action in the affluent white Western world, especially where (contestable) assumptions about human “sameness” prevail, too often with coercive consequences.

In short, these thoughts generate probing questions about *who “we” think we are*: we who write, and think, and speak as diversely educated and multiply privileged members of affluent twenty-first-century societies:

2. For an excellent analysis of the significance of speaking of “ecological” as contrasted with “environmental” thinking, see M. Hazlett, “‘Woman vs. Man vs. Bugs’: Gender and Popular Ecology in Early Reactions to Silent Spring,” *Environmental History* 9 no. 4 (Oct. 2004), pp. 701–29.

we who, across a wide range of significant senses, have made the world for which we are now accountable. “We” need urgently to find/discover/craft ways of restoring and preserving that world for people who are not so fortunate: for the ignored and oppressed; for future people, species, and less affluent, neither secure nor privileged populations who must live with the effects—the consequences—be they positive or negative, of “our” ways of living. Here, social justice is an overarching issue. Thus, the framing of this inquiry is ethical-epistemological-ontological-political. It is articulated from a position shaped by feminist and postcolonial engagements in recognizing that knowing responsibly and well, singly or collectively, is *sine qua non* for responsible social action *now*—where “responsible” incorporates responsiveness and recognition in engaging with people, places, practices, theories, things, and situations “on their own terms,” so far as this is possible. A central contrast is with practices of superimposing categories and explanations that subsume differences under preformed classifications, with inadequate attention to how an appropriate “fit” could or should be achieved. In its commitments to thinking communally, socially, collaboratively, cooperatively—even *contrarily*—across human, other than human, and situational differences, the position I will articulate eschews the radical individualism of Western philosophy and social theory to focus on knowing/knowledge making as a cluster of socially enacted practices.

Rethinking and reenacting *who we are* in ways sufficiently powerful to dislodge these sedimented convictions is the hardest yet the most urgent task for this inquiry, as it is, if perhaps tacitly, throughout the world as we find it. To practice such a philosophy and develop such pedagogical practices requires—*must* require—engaged questioning that is ontologically-epistemologically radical, challenging—upheld as those assumptions are by the instituted social-political-epistemic imaginary in which we (diversely privileged) inhabitants of the affluent West/North live and think and have our being, however obliquely or contrarily. Engaging seriously in these thoughts and the actions they inspire calls for crafting, and living, critically renewed conceptions of human subjectivity across a range of personal, social, political, collective levels, while reconstructing sedimented conceptions of ethical-political engagement in/with the other-than-human world, both animate and inanimate. Requirements such as these are distantly analogous to late-twentieth-century Western-Northern consciousness-raising practices in that they call for critical genealogical analyses of who “we” are and how “we” are accustomed to

live: analyses conducted in ways sufficiently discerning to unsettle fixed expectations that inform many of “our” everyday thoughts and actions. They must be sufficiently radical to engage historically and cross-culturally with the “absolute presuppositions,” thus named by R. G. Collingwood, critiquing the neoempiricist assumptions of early analytic philosophy, in their “trickle-down” effects in/for twenty-first-century lives.³ This is the hardest requirement: it is easier to engage in revisionary ways of doing, thinking, knowing. But to practice a philosophy that requires unsettling and reconceiving basic assumptions about *who we are* is ontologically epistemologically radical, upheld as these assumptions are by an instituted social-political-epistemic imaginary (following Cornelius Castoriadis) in which “we” inhabitants of the West live and think and enact our *Being*, however obliquely or contrarily. In this respect, the project has a particular bearing on educational practice, for “we” who are educators carry a special responsibility to know such issues responsibly and well, to allow that knowledge to inform our pedagogical practices, to open inquiry for those who live alongside us, depend upon us, and come after us.

I am suggesting that projects engaged in exploring interconnections between “human rights and the environment” are commonly impeded by locating their point of departure so high up on a quasivertical explanatory structure that they presuppose too much and truncate inquiry in so doing. In failing to start from the ground up, from engaging critically with the enactments of human subjectivity they unquestioningly presuppose, such inquiries too often produce insufficiently radical analyses and understandings. Here, then, a prerequisite to living well with the complexities of climate change skepticism and its multiple, multiply uneven implications for social justice is a critical-creative engagement with deeply embedded yet often uncontested assumptions about human subjectivity and agency as these silently inform the social imaginary of the white affluent Northern-Western world, and as they tacitly shape ecological/environmental thinking in its social-political effects. Such assumptions run counter to the substance and manner of the ecological thinking and engagements I advocate.

Skepticism in the iterations to be addressed here covers a range of practices and attitudes that stretch from outright denial that there could

3. See R. G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), who advocates a transformation of metaphysics from a study of being or ontology to a study of the absolute presuppositions or heuristic principles that govern fixed ways of being and knowing.

be any knowable cause for concern about the state of the world—“nothing to worry about”—through to insistent contentions that productive ecological debate needs to take as its point of departure the fundamental, challenging question “*Who do we think we are?*” A tacit assumption prevails in common parlance and in philosophical discourse alike that “we” know quite well who we are and, by extension, know the scope and limits of the rights, needs, and entitlements consequent upon claiming, and enacting, these “identities.” Often, without further inquiry, such judgments presuppose a settled, complacent, quasi-essentialist understanding of what it is to be (generically) human, in itself and in its actions, relations, and situations: an understanding that is neither ethically nor epistemologically innocent nor immune to challenge. It is vital to revisit and interrogate it because such settled, uncontested assumptions rarely take widespread, warranted (= healthy) skepticism into account. Even though presupposition-free analysis is surely impossible, a quasi-genealogical analysis of the discernible constitutive assumptions that animate a line of inquiry and a settled way of life can be invaluable in establishing a point of entry into investigations that risk presupposing too much from the outset. These are among the questions, I suggest, that should animate philosophical-ecological deliberations at multiple levels—ontological, epistemological, ethical, political—in working toward developing conceptions of viable ecological theory and practice and of ecological subjectivity. Here, feminist inquiry in its diverse iterations claims a significant place among issues that call for disputation and resistance. The skepticism—frequently virulent—that has fueled blatantly (if covertly) oppressive ways of life, sustaining exclusionary patterns and practices of social-political life and policy, has generated decades—centuries—of purposefully ignorant ageist, sexist, racist oppression throughout the Western/Northern world: it has worked cruelly to exclude unimaginable numbers of people from the very possibility of “being human.” In many such iterations, skepticism can be harmful, individually and collectively. Yet, skepticism is multifaceted, complex, and also often—if paradoxically—healthy. In its quotidian iterations, it commonly manifests, quite simply, in persistent and/or episodic doubt and denial about trivial or complex issues ranging from reluctance/refusal to believe a range of everyday empirical knowledge claims, through to socially-politically complex, frequently fraught affirmations, challenges, and policies.

Pertinent for the discussions throughout this book is *climate change skepticism* in its multiple modalities. The issue is visible and palpable in a diverse range of doubt and denial across practices and populations,

together with a range and variety of uncontested practices—and of collective “self-denial”—that permit these practices to thrive. A plausible (if self-centered) back story focuses on the losses, be they social, material, or selfish—that certain denials enable. In the twenty-first century, the “haves” are deeply, even ferociously, reluctant to have less. But there are more complex forms and patterns of resistance/reluctance, more plausibly uncertain beliefs and practices. Hence, to the contrary, some skeptics (at times with justification) are convinced that even well-informed resisters underestimate the insistent threats of climate change and hence are frustrated when/if they encounter stubborn incredulity. There are those who resist the unanimity that may fuel critical resistance, or who worry about a consensus emerging from tendencies to aggregate disparate issues, with the consequence that vital-to-address irregularities, anomalies, disappear into the (admittedly urgent) generalities. Clearly, none of these epistemic practices can promise certainty, but their enactments need to be held open to disputation: to keep inquiry alive and alert. Issues of certainty and uncertainty are germane to such practices as they are enacted, or acted upon, in the wider world. While professed uncertainty may be an energizing and/or a frustrating, practice-shaping concept, in the positivistic legacy, it has often seemed to be the only plausible epistemological stopping place, and not unreasonably so.

This said, it needs also to be acknowledged that “skeptic” is an ambiguous term in its iterations across diverse circumstances. In present-day Western/Northern societies, tobacco use is a paradigmatically clear, even simple example, where a—frequently tacit—conviction prevails that its dangers have been established, whether or not people choose to act accordingly. Skepticism manifests widely and diversely in this and analogous matters. For purposes of this discussion, it arises urgently in debates surrounding the (putative or otherwise) dangers of climate change, especially in the variability of denials and contestations that permeate the discourse, and in the intensity of denials and oppositions. Denials range from simple (or not so simple) refusals to countenance assertions that there could *be* any issue, any cause for alarm, to affirmations of true urgency, evident in contentions that there is no time to waste: it is happening now. Frustratingly, evidence for or against can be mustered and/or contested across a range that runs from fear and urgency to skepticism often reinforced in “demonstrations”—usually experiential—of certainty to declarations that there is no cause for alarm. Setting the issues out

in this way is by no means a declaration of sheer, bald incredulity. It is, rather, an attempt to point toward the multiple potential readings of “absolute certainty,” which, oxymoronicallly, it would appear, are meant to bring disputation to an end, to establish the “truth.” As to where such truths could reside, again disagreements persist. Presumably, there are good scientific and experiential readings on “either side.” Were there not, these debates would long ago have been settled. But since the situation itself has clearly *not* been settled despite seemingly endless investigations and contestations, it might well be (humanly) impossible for *the truth* to emerge—even if an expectation of so definitive a conclusion is reasonable, despite the open-ended “nature” of the putative subject of inquiry. Hence, policy development is closely tied to something akin to a specific “world view” that supports or contests certain lines of action and inquiry on a local and a (putatively) global scale.

Climate change skepticism itself is multiply ambiguous and diverse in its iterations. Oreskes and Conway, for example, suggest that many such skeptics are committed to generating incredulity, thereby animating and justifying fervent resistance to measures designed/determined to regulate consumption across a range of practices, populations, and policies, often for reasons of local or personal social gain.⁴ Some are skeptical about the very possibility of consensus on these issues, and for diverse reasons, not all of them commendable. Others are skeptical because they declare the current IPCC climate change position to be too gentle—insufficiently urgent—contending that it underestimates the severity of the threat climate change currently poses.⁵ Doubts may be generated by a breed of epistemic distrust prompted by the concerns of ordinary folk about the difficulty of determining whom to trust, not just at an amateur, everyday level but globally, in situations where these “ordinary folk” are reliant on the expertise of others, whose good faith has to be taken on trust. In hesitations prompted by such diverse iterations of doubt, it is rarely easy to claim certainty, whether in thought or in action.

Puzzling in a rather different, if equally compelling, way are issues of certainty and/or uncertainty as these have been central to epistemological

4. Oreskes and Conway, *Merchants of Doubt*, esp. pp. 10–35.

5. My thanks to an anonymous reader of this manuscript for comments on these thoughts.

deliberation in Anglophone philosophy, at least since Ludwig Wittgenstein engaged them provocatively in *On Certainty*.⁶ Skeptics commonly appeal to a margin of uncertainty to uphold *and* justify reluctance to declare certainty in knowing, whether individual or “collective,” for some specified collectivity. Frequently, inquirers/would-be knowers withhold assent not merely out of perversity, but out of a justifiable wariness of exceeding the (perhaps yet unknown) boundaries of knowledge/truth. That said, a still more earnest reason for caution is—simply or not so simply—about exceeding the limits of the knowable, hence about going forward on shifting ground. Here, methodological critique may also claim a place in focusing on the—highly plausible—worry that the evidence accepted will almost certainly be partial, in both senses of the word: hence that it may be impossible ever to determine “the truth.” And yet, the truth—“the conclusion”—will most likely be partial, ephemeral even though it would be careless to conclude that, therefore, ongoing inquiry is futile. Such a compromise would be unsatisfactory for numerous inquirers and in multiple epistemic situations. But for purposes of this project, now, I am suggesting that inference to the best explanation, however overworked it is as a contention, is often the most plausible—if interim—conclusion. It offers a way of “going on” and resists dogmatic closure. So even with climate change, which is clearly in process now, at the time of writing, it would still be implausible to declare certainty. So climate change, in a curious way, serves as a quasi-paradigmatic epistemic conundrum: How will “we” who are in the midst of it *know* when/if we really know and understand it, at least well enough to act wisely?

That said, it is vital to note—and try to understand—that climate change is a more complex, multiply contested, diversely manifested and experienced phenomenon than these too-brief suggestions imply. Claims about its causes and dangers vary widely, to the point where the very plethora of such challenges works to truncate aspirations for arriving at reasonable, collective, action-promoting conclusions. There may seem to be good reasons to reserve judgment in light of the clear inadequacy of such responses: reasons to postpone the inquiries for another day. Yet such delays would leave these issues untouched, and troubling in their ongoing persistence. Hence, I am contending, there are urgent, persistent—if multiply, locally diverse—*epistemic* responsibilities, both

6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1968).

collective and individual throughout present-day societies, that urge sustained, wide-ranging ecological inquiry across a broad range of local and global living.

In the early days of twentieth-century white Western *feminist* ecological philosophy, with Val Plumwood eminent among its pioneering thinkers, questions about subjectivity were much in evidence, especially with respect to tacitly patriarchal colonizing theories and practices shaped by a curiously clumsy set of ontological connections between Woman generically conceived, and Nature. A feminization of “caring about nature,” and not a laudatory one, was a strong contender in fostering such an orientation. So for Plumwood, “the rationalist tradition” in philosophy has been “inimical to both women and nature,” especially in the connections it fosters between the “human self” and a range of instrumentalist practices.⁷ To such aversions she attributes the conceptual aridity of pre-1990 environmental philosophy. On this issue, it is worth quoting her at length: Plumwood is justly critical of an account of ethics—and, by extension, of the “self”—in which “reason and emotion are sharply . . . opposed . . . and ‘desire, caring, and love’ are regarded as merely ‘personal’ and ‘particular’ as opposed to the putative universality and impartiality of [rational] understanding.” Gendered alignments of reason with masculinity and emotion with femininity are unmistakable here. Likewise, traditionally “feminine” emotions are cast as untrustworthy, in contrast with “a superior, disinterested (and . . . masculine) reason.”⁸ For Plumwood, the task of what I call *ecological thinking* and practice is that of “reconceptualizing the human and reconceptualizing the self.”⁹ The project requires an extended critique of “the egoistic self of liberal individualism” and a turning away from instrumentalism, in moving toward viable-in-the-long-term conceptions of selves-in-relationship—more precisely, in positive, mutually respectful relationships, be they cordial or contestatory. Likewise, Plumwood sees instrumentalism as “a way of relating to the world which corresponds to a certain model of selfhood . . . conceived as that of the *individual* who stands apart from an alien other and denies his own relationship to and dependency upon

7. Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 142.

8. Plumwood, *Feminism*, p. 3.

9. Plumwood, *Feminism*, p. 5.

this other.”¹⁰ Entitlement is a predominant motif. Such a stance is so routinely taken for granted in affluent white Western-Northern societies that “we” have to learn to see it for what it is and to understand the presumptuousness of its deep-seated, tacitly endorsed ontology.

The shift Plumwood envisages here is no mere change in superficial everyday epistemic habits, nor does it entail transferring allegiance from one group, club, or political forum to another. It is more in the nature of an extended collective-cooperative conversion and learning process, performed gradually, perhaps thoughtfully—often angrily—with persistent, sustained effort. Thus, while no argument is required to confirm the aridity of a theoretical stance for which solitary, instrumental man is the guiding character ideal, its traces silently affirm the presence of a *presupposed thinking-acting self* who may seem to be race- and gender-neutral but whose presumptive maleness or even (*per impossibile*) gender neutrality tacitly perpetuates the constitutive effects of default andro-centered postures and values in and in relation to fellow living beings and to the wider natural world. Nor is such instrumental masculinity a characteristic of all men, but in the Western philosophical tradition, it refers—if tacitly—to (presumptively) white men: to the man of reason whose emblematic philosophical and social-political status Genevieve Lloyd productively deconstructs in her 1983 landmark text, *The Man of Reason: “Male” and “Female” in Western Philosophy*.¹¹

By contrast, my thinking here takes its point of departure from the following manifesto with which I conclude the introduction to *Ecological Thinking*:

Thinking ecologically carries with it a large measure of responsibility—to know somehow more *carefully* than single surface readings can allow. It might seem difficult to imagine how it could translate into wider issues of citizenship and politics, but the answer, at once simple and profound, is that ecological thinking is about imagining, crafting, articulating, and endeavouring to enact principles of ideal cohabitation.¹²

10. Plumwood, *Feminism*, p. 18.

11. Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: “Male” and “Female” in Western Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1994). In the twenty-first century, one might suggest that the ideal has been displaced by or devolved into that of *homo oeconomicus*.

12. Lorraine Code, *Ecological Thinking: The Politics of Epistemic Location* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 24.

These thoughts bring social epistemology and ethical-political theory together in relation to matters ecological, and to Anglophone feminist and antiracist theories of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries: they pick up the threads at places where these lines of inquiry intersect. This conceptual frame extends into matters of vulnerability, incredulity, ignorance, and trust: modalities unevenly distributed across populations of internal diversity and of diverse relations to/with the rest of the world. Hence social justice issues—which are at the core of this inquiry—cannot be investigated in one-size-fits-all analyses: they have to strike a balance across human, other-than-human, and situational particularity, multiplicity, and commonality. They lead into questions about education, human rights and the environment, the politics of care in techno-science, and the public cultivation of ignorance and doubt in climate change skepticism, that foster an atmosphere of incredulity and distrust.

These many years later, such conclusions are less plausible than they could have been then. The ideals they affirm are increasingly elusive in times of often brutal scarcity in a time when identity politics—ontologically and materially—contests simple assumptions about human sameness and equality of aspiration. Tacit egalitarian expectations crafted in the affluent early Western-Northern “modern” world continually, and brutally, come up against their own practical-ontological expectations to expose the limited reach of such aspirations. Thoughts such as these pose fundamental, challenging questions about who we think we are; we who have made the world for which we are now accountable, who need to craft ways of restoring, renewing, preserving that world for others who come after us and/or live alongside us; other generations, genders, cultures, races, and species who must live with the effects of our practices. I want, therefore, to urge speaking and hearing the question “Who do we think we are?” provocatively, normatively, not as a rhetorical question, but as an outraged political-ontological challenge posed in astonished dismay at presumptuous behaviors, intrusive or offensive assumptions, fantastic-extraordinary achievements. Posing it in this way invokes social justice as both a fundamental and an overarching ethical-epistemological-political concern, spoken from positions shaped by feminist, postcolonial, and other Others’ engagements in recognizing that knowing responsibly (whether singly or collectively) is *sine qua non* for responsible social action. The addressive formulation emphasizes the question’s necessarily interactive character. It contests tacitly or overtly individualistic ontological presuppositions and practices.

These thoughts pertain principally to Anglo-American analytic philosophical orthodoxy where “individuals” are starkly “individual” (if rarely individuated) and, in consequence, supremely self-interested. A principal goal of thinking ecologically, therefore, is to unsettle an epistemological orthodoxy that upholds widespread white Western/Northern ontological convictions about discretely self-contained human individuality, citizenship, and homogeneity as these underpin “our” presumptive entitlement to live, consume—and pollute—as we will. This goal prompts “us,” as educators and activists, to engage in determining how to generate radical shifts in going assumptions about “the ontology of the self,” in policies and practices that govern quotidian public-political social structures in the affluent white Western world. One vital piece would be to instill a measure of caring and of humility—of affect—that, Plumwood notes, is too often held at a distance from *bona fide* questions about knowing, or polluting, even though it is germane to engaging with them well. This claim is one of the hardest to defend and the most vital to enact.¹³

A principal contrast is with practices of superimposing categories and explanations onto events, situations, and “people” that subsume differences under preformed categories, with inadequate attention to whether an appropriate “fit” is achieved/achievable. It is perhaps an inadvertent practice, yet one that is endemic in background ontological assumptions that inform the epistemologies and the ethical-political theories and practices of the current white Anglo-American mainstream. Hence, in George Yancy’s aptly titled volume *The Center Must Not Hold*,¹⁴ a vital catalyst is this very question: Who do “we” think we are in taking for granted our entitlement to live as we do? It is implicit, to cite a small sampling of examples: in Susan Babbitt’s analysis of the rarely noticed “whiteness” of the philosophy practiced in most English-speaking universities, with its multiple exclusionary effects; in Shannon Sullivan’s thoughts about how present-day Anglo-American philosophy’s upheld secularity, particularly

13. Consider Mick Smith’s critique of “the ethical” in modern society, where he writes: “The heartfelt aspects of ethics—of love, care, and sympathy—are turned into social currency to facilitate trade-offs between people with different interests and aims.” Mick Smith, *An Ethics of Place: Radical Ecology, Postmodernity, and Social Theory* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), p. 65.

14. George Yancy (ed.), *The Center Must Not Hold: White Women Philosophers on the Whiteness of Philosophy* (Lanham, Md: Lexington Press, 2010).

in the United States, works to discourage people of color from participating in the discipline because “[I]n many philosophical circles, to be a person of faith is to be perceived as ignorant, backward, and primitive”; in Alexis Shotwell’s explorations of the effects of “whiteness as method” in sustaining a wide range of exclusions and oppressions.

Borrowing a conceptual framing from Robert M. Figueroa and Gordon Waitt, I propose that openness to the potential *epistemic* legitimacy of “affect, materiality, creativity, and multiplicity” creates spaces for capacious ways of recognizing ecological subjectivity, where “[n]ormative elements of moral terrains include embodied narratives about what behaviours are permissible, who belongs where, how we perceive the moral status of other bodies (human and non-human), and the ways in which we establish moral, social, and political identities in embodied relations to space and place.”¹⁵ Their reference is to indigenous Australians’ requests, addressing would-be climbers, that they respect the sacredness of Uluru in ways that require them not just to *know* differently, but to *be* different from how they have assumed they can be in regarding the natural world as up for grabs—or for climbing!—at anyone’s whim. It requires endeavoring to *know* Uluru not by the colonizers’ label “Ayers Rock,” with all this possessive implies, but as a sacred site that is not theirs (= the climbers’) to appropriate, and where climbing counts as appropriation: it calls for a reconceived ontology, and an ethics of place sufficiently sensitive to *recognize* specificities and particularities in ways that respect and honor them. It calls upon people to rethink their (often hyper-individualized) sense of self, of place, and of ownership, to move away from convictions of autonomous entitlement while working to achieve respect for an otherness that is not theirs to obliterate or to own, and whose standing is not theirs to define or to dispute. Citing just one striking example, the “Who do you think you are?” question could be posed challengingly to the young white man who insists, disregarding explicit aboriginal requests about respecting Uluru, “I climbed it anyway. But, that’s just the way I am. I’m not going to not climb it.”¹⁶ *Who* does he think he is?

15. Robert M. Figueroa and Gordon Waitt, “Climb: Restorative Justice, Environmental Heritage, and the Moral Terrains of Uluru-Kata National Park,” *Environmental Philosophy* 7 no. 2 (Fall 2010), p. 147. A ban on the climb of Uluru took effect on October 26, 2019.

16. Figueroa and Waitt, “Climb,” p. 151.

How these thoughts bear on larger ecological-epistemic projects of developing principles of ideal cohabitation might be puzzling. But working away from the radical individualism and the universal entitlement endemic in white Western Anglo-American philosophy and social theory, endeavoring to think and act empathically, communally, co-operatively across human and situational differences is germane to responding fittingly to ecological harms and/or benefits in their specificity and generality. Their impacts cannot responsibly be known or enacted in one-size-fits-all approaches. Contesting the tenacity of the center simultaneously contests the applicability and pertinence of situation-insensitive policies and of remedial measures elsewhere, in their diversity and particularity.

Engaging knowledgeably in/with circumstances such as these is ontologically challenging for it requires rethinking, re-enacting *who we are* in ways sufficiently sensitive to dislodge such entrenched convictions. This is the hardest, most urgent requirement: it is easier, more imaginable, to think and participate on the surface, so to speak, in revisionary ways of doing, thinking, knowing. But to practice a philosophy and develop a pedagogical practice which requires—indeed, which *must* require—such rethinking and reenacting is ontologically-affectively-epistemologically unsettling; it has to be a gradual, careful process. Requirements such as those I have noted are distantly analogous to late twentieth-century consciousness-raising practices: they call for radical critical-genealogical analyses of who we are and how we are accustomed, unthinkingly, to live. Such analyses might well unsettle many of the expectations that inform “our” everyday thoughts and actions: such is their (justifiable) power. Although their work is by no means complete, the effects of feminist, postcolonial, and antiracist consciousness-raising projects and practices have been far-reaching in ways that are exemplary for unsettling these and analogous ecological practices.

Without doubt, as I have noted, so fundamental a requirement is difficult to fulfill: it is easier to devise revisionary, surface ways of doing, thinking, knowing. But to practice a philosophy that requires unsettling and reenacting—“making strange”—long-standing assumptions about *who we are* is ontologically and epistemologically radical, upheld as these assumptions are by an instituted social-political-epistemic imaginary (following Cornelius Castoriadis)¹⁷ in which we inhabitants of the affluent

17. Cornelius Castoriadis, “Radical Imagination and the Social Instituting Imaginary,” in Gillian Robinson and John Rundell, eds., *Rethinking Imagination: Culture and*

Western-Northern world live and think, however obliquely or contrarily. In Castoriadis's analyses, the social imaginary is neither static nor fixed. Its allegiance to an Enlightenment conception of reason in which a transcendent knowing subject dispassionately contemplates and investigates the world as *he* finds it is held in place by what Castoriadis calls an *instituted social imaginary*: "a world of social imaginary significations whose instauration as well as incredible *coherence* goes unimaginably beyond everything that 'one or many individuals' could ever produce."¹⁸ To it he opposes the idea, and the energy, of an *instituting* imaginary through which imaginatively initiated counterpossibilities interrogate the going social structures, radically and persistently, to destabilize their pretensions to "naturalness" and "wholeness," thereby initiating a new making. Castoriadis's interest is in how the imaginary of (Western/Northern) late capitalism produces and sustains unjust social hierarchies, perpetuates a mythology of the instrumental innocence and neutral expertise of scientific knowledge, and generates illusions of benign connections between power and knowledge: in how its assumptions about relations between "individuals" and societies work to create and legitimate structures of domination and exploitation. An *instituting* imaginary, by contrast, is a vehicle of radical social critique. It is about exposing, learning to understand, and working to reconfigure the power-infused rhetorical spaces where knowledge making and circulating occur. The larger vision is global, but the activities—the praxes—ordinarily occur locally. Such contestations grow out of what Castoriadis applauds as the critical-creative activity of a society or a social group that manifests in its capacity to put itself in question, prompted by a recognition that—as a society—it is incongruous with itself, with scant reason for self-satisfaction.¹⁹ (There are historical precedents, of which Voltaire's *Candide* counts among the best-known, still-pertinent examples.²⁰) In this regard, educators' epistemic responsibilities need to include constructive, affective engagements with matters ecological. This vital knowledge has to inform our pedagogical practices.

Creativity (London: Routledge, 1994). (See my references to Castoriadis in *Ecological Thinking*, pp. 123–25.)

18. Cornelius Castoriadis, *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy: Essays in Political Philosophy*, ed. David Ames (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 62, emphasis in original.

19. See my discussion of Castoriadis in *Ecological Thinking*, p. 195.

20. Voltaire (1694–1778), *Candide*, trans. Daniel Gordon (Boston: Bedford St Martin's, 1999).

Such a responsibility could/should be realizable, also, in generating an intelligent skepticism in our students, colleagues, and other interlocutors about the taken-for-granted rightness of who “we” are and how “we” live. Responsibility-in-action of this nature is writ large, for example, in the activities of such early twenty-first-century political protest groups as the Occupy movements.

In her 2001 book *Retrieving Experience*, Sonia Kruks suggests: “[T]oo strong an identification with others permits us to deny the responsibilities . . . born of our own location.”²¹ I cite this claim on the way to articulating a “healthy skepticism” about the reach of the aggregated first-person plural pronoun “we” and about the extent and the quality of “our” epistemic and affective capacities to understand one another, whether “personally” or “situationally,” across stark otherness. Yet I mean also to affirm that, in putatively “free” societies, human lives are, if variously, structured by responsibilities to endeavor to do just that, if never perfectly to achieve it. Although things, lives, situations, and experiences are neither so homogeneous nor so commensurable as blithe appeals to an unmarked “we” assume, neither is radical incommensurability a tenable assumption, especially when/if it is invoked as an “excusing,” “exonerating” factor to justify epistemic or moral-political inertia or consciously sustained modalities of ignorance, of unknowing in hierarchically structured societies and social-political movements.

It is vital, then, to the achievement and maintenance of social justice broadly conceived, for would-be knowers to work, collaboratively and singly, toward developing an apt measure of *hermeneutic* understanding with respect to negotiating knowledgeably and empathically with one another across diverse situations, “identities,” and circumstances. I invoke hermeneutics to affirm that this “imperative” is vital, yet not starkly cognitive in a positivist-derivative empirical sense: such cognition, conceived positivistically, would carry neither the capacity nor the license to address/interpret/understand the multiple *affective* dimensions of being human, in concert with or apart from the cognitive dimensions of lives situated outside the tacit norms of epistemic sameness (by which I mean, to differing degrees, most lives). Thus, Sandra Bartky is appropriately wary of the persuasive force of assumptions that *knowing*, properly conceived, reduces to acquiring information. She advocates working

21. Sonia Kruks, *Retrieving Experience: Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 158 (emphasis added).

toward “a knowing that transforms the self who knows, a knowing that brings into being new sympathies, new affects as well as new cognitions and new forms of subjectivity . . . in a word . . . a knowing that has a particular affective taste.”²² Such ways of knowing are continuous with those intended to inform ecologically oriented consciousness-raising and the social-political activities it generates. There is no infallible true-false mechanism for ticking off the putative items of knowledge that “relational” knowing of these kinds requires or can achieve: the process may be fraught, even dangerous in its capacity to distort, intrude, and/or enact damage.²³ Here one might locate the source of empiricist-analytic resistance to acknowledging the epistemic value of such affect-infused inquiry, especially for the—admittedly unquantifiable—understandings it enables. Yet, affect in its multiple modalities is integral, and indispensably so, to thinking and acting well ecologically, interactively in its literal and its derivative, quasi-metaphorical senses.²⁴

At its best, the attentive, temporally extended, process-observant, *listening* dimensions of Bartky’s proposal signal radical—and epistemologically worthy—departures from the punctiform, one-off, dislocated knowing articulated in true-or-false propositional form, of standard late-twentieth-century Anglo-American epistemology, with its veneration of a presumptively individual “view from nowhere.” A further example amplifies this claim: Bronwyn Hayward (referring to Hannah Arendt) argues for what I perceive as the ecological-epistemological significance of good, attentive listening—across diverse experiences, understandings, and/or “takes” on specific situations and events. Addressing the complexities of developing strategies for rebuilding a city intelligently, in Christchurch, New Zealand, following the 2010 earthquake, Hayward notes: “[M]aking room for dialogue and listening seems a prudent strategy if we wish to develop an idea of ‘determinative morality,’ or a vision of what we

22. Sandra Bartky, “Sympathy and Solidarity: On a Tightrope with Scheler,” in Diana Meyers, ed., *Feminists Rethink the Self* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1997), pp. 178–79. I discuss Bartky’s view in *Ecological Thinking*, chapter 6.

23. See my “‘I Know Just How You Feel’: Empathy and the Problem of Epistemic Authority,” in Lorraine Code, *Rhetorical Spaces: Essays on (Gendered) Locations* (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 120–43.

24. Pertinent is Clare Hemmings’s, “Affective Solidarity: Feminist Reflexivity and Political Transformation,” *Feminist Theory* 13 no. 2 (Aug 2012), pp. 147–61, to which I return in chapter 5.

ought to do, not just what we ought *not* to do.”²⁵ Much of mainstream Anglo-American epistemology, with its constitutive individualism and concomitant emphasis on propositional verifiability, claims scant conceptual resources for evaluating such unquantifiable/unverifiable cognitive practices as listening, disputation, and dialogue: it is impoverished in consequence. Hayward’s comment points toward an urgent need for communal practices of engaging, intelligently and affectively, in (often extended) listening practices, in complex social-political situations where simplistic, one-size-fits-all propositions modeled on the “S knows that *p*” structure are inadequate to the task of understanding well enough to enable acting well, generically, so to speak. Helpfully instructive is Donna Haraway’s 1997 plea for a critically engaged politics of science-knowledge, where by “critical” she intends practices of inquiry that are “evaluative, public, multiactor, multiagenda, oriented to equality and heterogeneous well-being.”²⁶ There she applauds a then-Danish “practice of establishing panels of ordinary citizens, selected from pools of people who indicate an interest, but not professional expertise or a commercial or organized stake, in an area of [science and/or] technology” who engage in temporally extended processes of hearing testimony, reading briefs, deliberating among themselves, and reporting to a wider public.²⁷ Such processes foster what she has called “situated knowledges.” I reiterate this view for its consonance with the practices Hayward gestures toward in the deliberative strategy she advocates and for its capacity to dislodge the emblematic individualism, for ecological inquiry, of the “pure research” conducted in the ivory towers, from which Haraway distances her analyses.²⁸ The point is not, implausibly, to discredit factual knowledge *tout court*, either in general or for ecological purposes, but to be ever mindful of its scope and limits.

25. Bronwyn Hayward, “The Social Handprint: Decentering the Politics of Sustainability after an Urban Disaster” in Peg Rawes, ed., *Relational Architectural Ecologies: Architecture, Nature and Subjectivity* (London: Routledge 2013), p. 240.

26. Donna Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium. FemaleMan Meets_OncoMouse* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 95.

27. Haraway, *Modest_Witness*, p. 96.

28. In like vein, Kristin Shrader-Frechette advocates deliberative democracy as a civic virtue. In her view (indebted to Iris Marion Young), it “demands commitment to universal justice, to listening to others . . . to avoiding blind rage, violence, and nihilism” (my italics). *Taking Action, Saving Lives: Our Duties to Protect Environmental and Public Health* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 10.

Space does not permit a fuller articulation of epistemic resources beyond the confines of analytic epistemology, but there are multiple such resources in so-called “continental” philosophy, especially in its hermeneutic iterations. They tend not to announce themselves as epistemological—perhaps from a resistance to the formality of the label itself—but their effects are frequently to enrich cognition beyond the confines of propositional knowing, and specifically, to engage *listening* as a central modality of epistemic practice. In an example of how listening attests to a fundamental human capacity to open oneself to the world, also—if differently—consonant with Bartky’s resistance to the “knowledge-as-information” model, Martin Heidegger writes: “[L]istening to . . . is Dasein’s existential way of Being-open as Being-with for Others.”²⁹ The idea of listening as fundamental to being human and as ontologically constitutive of social being (*Mitsein*) points to the artificiality and the limitations of models of knowledge reliant on discrete input-output fact finding. Hence, with regard to the guiding question “Who do we think we are?” it would be implausible to respond that we are creatures for whom *seeing* isolated medium-sized physical objects (such as cats on mats), isolated from their surroundings, is believing/knowing; nor can such stark individualism serve ecological purposes well.³⁰

This evocation of Heidegger is intended to claim him, unequivocally, neither as an ecological thinker nor as a profeminist,³¹ but to

29. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 206. “Dasein” is Heidegger’s term for human being. Literally, it translates as “being there” and is evocative for discussions such as this in its affirmation that human lives are always situated, somewhere, there. A useful resource (among many) in this regard is Krzysztof Ziarek, *Inflected Language: Toward a Hermeneutics of Nearness: Heidegger, Levinas, Stevens, Celan* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994).

30. For further thoughts on such matters, see Steven Vogel, “Nature as Origin and Difference: On Environmental Philosophy and Continental Thought.” *Philosophy Today*, SPEP Supplement, 1998, pp. 169–81.

31. Here I am indebted to Trish Glazebrook’s analysis in “Heidegger and Ecofeminism,” in Nancy J. Holland and Patricia Huntington, eds., *Feminist Interpretations of Martin Heidegger* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), pp. 221–51. In “Introduction 1—General Background,” Huntington notes that for Heidegger: “All understanding occurs on the basis of a mode of affective attunement that colors our perception and the overall way in which the world appears intelligible to us” (p. 10).

draw attention to his hitherto rare (in Western-Northern epistemology) emphasis on *listening* as ontologically-affectively fundamental to human being *tout court*, by contrast with the primacy accorded, in dominant Anglo-American epistemic discourse, to on-off propositional knowledge claims reporting visual or tactual “givens,” uttered as though to everyone and, in effect, to no one. It is to emphasize the *impotence* of such affect-free approaches to generate viable understandings of complex social-political-ecological situations.

So, for example, Trish Glazebrook convincingly observes:

[T]he truth of modern science, and the truth of technology are ways in which human being knows nature. But *Denken* and *Besinnung* are thoughtful, respectful, and thankful relations to nature, rather than its reduction to object and resource. Heidegger’s vision is an ethic of reciprocity and care, the very vision for which ecofeminists call that stands in marked contrast to what has been diagnosed and rejected as a logic of domination by both.³²

These ways figure among the relational modalities listening invokes: they are antithetical, and helpfully so, to individualistic/positivistic ways of knowing; nor, strikingly, do they presuppose or initiate an artificial separation between ethics and epistemology. Such thoughts are integral to analyses and practices of what I have elsewhere called epistemic responsibility.³³ They may not be ubiquitously appropriate or epistemologically productive, but they attest to a way of thinking for which the world/the earth does not reduce to (Heideggerian) “standing reserve,” a term that, for Heidegger, refers to regarding the world as merely an energy resource, a thing to be used. Putting the point strongly, Heidegger writes: “[E]verywhere everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately on hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further ordering. We call it the standing-reserve [*Bestand*].”³⁴ Further, he cau-

32. Glazebrook, “Heidegger and Ecofeminism,” p. 243.

33. Lorraine Code, *Epistemic Responsibility* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1987).

34. Martin Heidegger, “The Question concerning Technology,” trans. William Lovitt, in David Farrell Krell, ed., *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 298.