On Responsibility and Phenomenological Methodology: Carving Critical Principles Out of Neocolonial Relations

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There is something Eurocentric about assuming that imperialism began in Europe.[1]

In her erudite work *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Gayatri Spivak notes that she "repeatedly attempt[s] to undo the often unexamined opposition between colonizer and colonized implicit in much colonial discourse studies."[2] Spivak partly identifies her reasons for undoing oppositions between colonizer and colonized based on her understanding that "many of us [minoritized, colonized peoples] are trying to carve out positive negotiations with the epistemic graphing of imperialism."[3] For Spivak, the effort by "us" for a positive project within the graphing of multiple epistemes denies a too-easy oppositional stance. Indeed, her use of the word "carve" is important insofar as it suggests modes of engagement and ways of interrogating the relational dimensions — to self and other — within imperialism. Insofar as the figures of both the colonizer and colonized occur though imperialism, it is crucial to try to attend to this unexamined relationship and its role in the shaping and reshaping of sociality. In other words, what in this "epistemic graphing of imperialism" is carved out as positive negotiations and/or carved up as "unexamined opposition"?

The essay "Opting out of Neocolonial Relations" by Frank Margonis provides an opportunity to likewise think about the carvings that occur in social relations within schools and among teachers and students. Within the field of philosophy of education, Margonis has been a committed scholar in examining what regularly goes unexamined as neocolonial relationality, providing philosophical resources for the disrupting and potential opting-out of such relations in the context of the United States. More specifically, he has framed important discussions for philosophers and practitioners alike by placing central policy issues and situated classroom interactions in conversation with reinterpretations and reappraisals of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Dewey, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Charles Mills among others.

In such instances, one bears witness to the various modes of carving out educational relations within imperialism. Yet Margonis, *as a carver*, has a quite different emphasis from that of Spivak. Whereas Spivak textually undoes the opposition between colonizer and colonized deconstructively, Margonis uses a Merleau-Pontean phenomenological existentialism to survey the social field. To clarify the terms a bit more, Spivak stands between the textualized figures of colonized and colonizer and methodically carves a critique in both directions whereas Margonis would appear to work in a less multidirectional way. That is, we get a clear analysis of the ways minoritized youth are caught in neocolonial relations imposed by powerful historical scripts with Margonis, but we have less of a description, textual or otherwise, of how imperialism/coloniality operates positively and negatively as principles of responsibility within minoritized communities themselves. Clearly, both Margonis and Spivak are deeply invested in analyzing the enduring asymmetries in social

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relations based on race, class, age, and gender. But how do philosophical methods influence the way we carve up the world or, rather, orient us to seeing, hearing, and listening to some things and not others.

While I can only begin such a discussion here, I would broach the topic by seeking from Margonis some of his insights on a broader issue of philosophical methodologies used in the interrogation of relationality. In the context of his essay, I would appreciate some assistance in better understanding his interpretation of the social sciences and their role in his phenomenological existentialist method. For example, Margonis considers an ethnographic account of the Punishing Room and the students therein to say something about how "the reductive character of the principle of responsibility commonly leads to destructive educational acts." I think this is an important and defensible interpretation. Nonetheless, even in the more restricted place of this school, the suggestion of the principle of responsibility as an extension of neocolonial relations begs for more data, most especially data from within Rosa Parks Elementary across the grade levels of those represented in the Punishing Room. That is, we need more ethnographic or sociological data as to how this particular school community constructs responsibility — in classrooms, among teachers and staff, within the community — and how it is that these students had been identified as failing in their responsibilities and thus placed in the Punishing Room. Similarly, we have no information on how the families of these students construct principles of responsibility or enact the maintenance of those principles. This seems especially important in navigating relational patterns that promote responsibility among the particular youth of Rosa Parks and, for some of Margonis's broader arguments, minoritized youth generally.

The question of how to provide philosophical interpretations of social scientific (ethnographic) data calls forth questions on methodologies. How does one read ethnographic or sociological research for a phenomenological existentialist interpretation that attends to the most relevant and robust information available? Moreover, to return to my comparison with Spivak, these are texts (not first-hand experiences) and how one reads matters for the kinds of arguments and claims that one makes. As suggested above, it is the family- and community-based principles of responsibility that are missing from the analysis, as well as further comments on (1) whether or not Margonis would interpret them as neocolonial and (2) where or how the principles of responsibility across the broader community intersect with teachers. By focusing on the "poem" developed in the Punishing Room, we are led away from how this broader community would discuss how the action or inaction landed the poet in the Punishing Room. What vision of responsibility does this community give us? Margonis's readers are left needing more background information in order to wrestle with his broader claims of the principle of responsibility as a hallmark neocolonialism. In this way, I want to open a discussion about methodologies used to understand social relationality, as it might assist in giving an analysis of relational responsibility within the school and surrounding community and community institutions — church, social clubs, sports team — for a richer interrogation of principles (or relational responsibility).

Merleau-Ponty's Methodological Ambitions

If I understand something of the intervention that Maurice Merleau-Ponty made in beginning anew Husserlian phenomenology, it involved the critique of Max Scheler's disembodied phenomenological subject located outside society and history and a criticism of Martin Heidegger along similar lines. More importantly for my comments here, Merleau-Ponty critiqued these figures for continuing to oppose philosophy and science. As Jérôme Melançon notes, "Merleau-Ponty's reflection on the relationship of philosophy and science is always also a relationship of philosophy with the social world."[4] Drawing on "The Philosopher and Sociology," Melançon also goes on to characterize how

> Merleau-Ponty affirm[ed] his refusal of a pure philosophy and of a pure sociology. There is a solidarity between all forms of thought and they are only possible because of their intertwining; positing a pure philosophy and a pure sociology would be reverting to the alternative between intellectualism and empiricism — adversaries that Merleau-Ponty ceaselessly tried to show were accomplices and which only seem to force us to choose a side.[5]

If these are fair characterizations, just as Merleau-Ponty's reconsideration of phenomenology took place in the context of Scheler and Heidegger on one side, and of Claude Lévi-Strauss and structural functionalism on the other (as well as logical positivism), Margonis too could consider anew his phenomenological existentialist analysis, perhaps with Charles Mills and W.E.B. Du Bois on the one side and D.C. Philips's characterizations of postpositivism on the other. With regard to the latter, Phillips characterizes postpositivism as an understanding of research that is "a fallible enterprise that attempts to construct viable warrants or chains of argument that draw upon diverse bodies of evidence that support any assertions that are being made."[6] "The wise researcher," he goes on to write, "will use quality evidence of different kinds, and will weld it all into a coherent case the parts of which strengthen and support each other."[7] Research, then, in a postpositivist worldview attempts to make warrantable claims or arguments using quality evidence that provides a coherent case, recognizing that such claims are imperfect and not ultimate. The evidence for making claims can be of different kinds resulting from differing methodologies — phenomenological, sociological, historical, ethnographic, and so on.

With this in mind, I return to the arguments for the neocoloniality of the principles of responsibility, as they provide the overall backdrop for students in the Punishing Room. Margonis relies upon not only ethnographic and sociological methods but also the methods of historical and textual analysis. In this way, he can be read as enacting postpositivism. But I find little of this work directed at the question of how the principles of responsibility are developed and articulated *within* minoritized communities. With the above considerations in mind, we are able to pursue the question of carving in both directions: How do minoritized communities talk about failing principles of responsibility, and what should be done in such circumstances? Margonis's wider consideration of the principles of responsibility through a fully articulated revision of a phenomenological existentialist methodology via Dubois, Mills, and Phillips would be highly useful for philosophers and others concerned with carving out positive relations in this space conceived as that of the epistemic graphing of imperialism.

Conclusion

In closing, I want to return to Spivak's comments on undoing oppositions and the complexities of the political effects of our methodological choices. She writes in a more extended passage,

> my goal, specific to my pedagogic-institutional situation, is a repeated attempt to undo the often unexamined opposition between colonizer and colonized. Therefore, I must show that there are strategic complicities [between dominant philosophical, literary and critical figures in this intellectual tradition and that of native informants and elites operating within their own spheres].[8]

Relying here on language that Margonis would likely recognize as that of phenomenological existentialism — "my pedagogic institutional situation" — Spivak speaks to the ways in which undoing the opposition between colonizer and colonized includes the challenge of interrogating their strategic complicities. This is difficult to do in some forms of phenomenological existentialism, as they fail to provide an analysis of minoritized communities' principles of responsibility and where they may converge with or work to carve out a positive relation within imperialism, complicitly or otherwise.

But we must also be clear about the challenges of double critique where we try not to reason carefully on such questions of responsibility. As many indigenous scholars have rightly noted, the most sensitively developed and rigorously framed critiques of minoritized communities by native scholars and their allies can and are used as a weapon against these communities. Thus, while our methodological choices need to foster the ability to pursue the many directions that careful thinking (about responsibility in this instance) would need to take up, our target is imperialism, not these communities.

But to repeat my earlier point, in critiquing neoimperialism and neocolonial relations, Margonis might seek to revise his phenomenological methods so as to take into greater account the community's description of principles of responsibility and how they address moments when youth breech those principles. Doing so can assist in undoing the colonizer/colonized relationalities by interrogating the more fluid set of negotiations of minoritized peoples within imperialism. A renewal of a phenomenological existentialist method informed by Mills, Du Bois, and Phillips will be helpful for philosophers of relationality who are trying to use a wide range of data in the service of positive forms of existence in institutional and pedagogical climates of imperialism. I look forward to thinking with him about such interventions.

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1. Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 46.

2. Ibid., 46.

3. Ibid., 65.

4. Jérôme Melançon, "Thinking Corporeally, Socially and Politically: Critical Phenomenology After Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu." *Bulletin d'analyse phenomenologique* X, no. 8 (2014): 18.

5. Ibid. 19.

6. D. C. Phillips, "A Guide for the Perplexed: Scientific Educational Research, Methodolatry, and the Gold Versus Platinum Standards. *Educational Research Review* 1 (2006): 17.

7. Ibid., 25.

8. Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 46.