

At the Cost of Solidarity—Or, Why Social Justice Needs Hermeneutics

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My concern in this essay is with a recent development in social justice activism which I believe to be counterproductive to attaining the goals of social justice itself. Some forms of social justice activism appear to draw from a particular version of standpoint theory, which asserts that those who are marginalized in society have privileged knowledge about the nature of social reality. This knowledge is grounded in the “lived experience” of oppression—only those who have experienced oppression firsthand “know what it’s like.” The experience of social reality from a marginalized position in society therefore reveals something true about the social world which is inaccessible to “dominantly situated” knowers who do not know what it is like to experience such oppression.

I will argue that this line of thinking has a tendency towards (but, importantly, does not necessarily entail) what I will call *epistemic isolationism*.² Epistemic isolationism is the idea that only members of marginalized groups can understand “what it’s like” to be a member of that group and therefore, those members have privileged access to certain kinds of knowledge that outsiders—especially those who are dominantly situated—are ill-equipped to understand, much less critique. I believe epistemic

¹ I am very grateful to the editors of *Analecta Hermeneutica* and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on this essay.

² I employ this term as an homage to Mary Midgley, who coined the term “moral isolationism” (“Trying Out One’s New Sword,” in *Heart and Mind: The Varieties of Moral Experiences*, rev. ed. [London: Routledge, 2003], 80–87).

isolationism rests, not simply on the claim that some in our society have privileged knowledge because of their lived experience, but also on the claim that the knowledge embedded in the lived experience of oppression is *not communicable* to those who do not have direct experience of it. It is often thought that because privileged knowledge of social reality comes from lived experience, it must be incommunicable; this is because lived experience itself is incommunicable.³ I call this the *incommunicability thesis*. If the incommunicability thesis is true, then those who have such lived experiences have not only epistemic privilege, but also epistemic *authority* over members of other groups insofar as those experiences are concerned. That is, if lived experience is both privileged and incommunicable, then those who do not have such experiences must simply accept claims about the social world from members of marginalized communities as authoritative.

While I am deeply sympathetic to the goals of social justice—including the recognition of the reality of different lived experiences—I believe that epistemic isolationism is inimical to the goals of social justice. Arguing for epistemic isolationism may well be a way to grant marginalized communities a kind of epistemic authority. But this epistemic authority is purchased at the cost of meaningful solidarity, which must rest on mutual recognition and respect. Indeed, maintaining that lived experience is incommunicable undermines the impetus for members of other groups to even try to understand the experiences of members of marginalized communities. As such, it risks reinforcing current social dynamics rather than transforming them. Simultaneously, it runs the risk of encouraging members of marginalized communities to see those who are dominantly situated as being incapable of understanding—in extreme cases, of being epistemically or morally inferior. When the incommunicability thesis is accepted and epistemic isolationism is embraced, I worry it will become increasingly acceptable to pursue political goods through expressions of power and dominance by some groups over others. I believe this to be fundamentally at odds with what I take to be the goals of social justice—namely, goods like human emancipation, dignity, mutual recognition, and respect. In short, insofar as standpoint theory encourages people, especially activists, to accept the incommunicability thesis, it feeds into epistemic isolationism and becomes harmful to the very causes of social justice that it is invoked to promote. Therefore, standpoint theorists should explicitly reject the incommunicability thesis and distance themselves from epistemic isolationism.

³ For example, Francis Fukuyama remarks that lived experience is thought to be inaccessible to others (*Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018], 109).

Yet, at the same time, it is plausible that members of various communities have privileged insights into the nature of social reality. Assuming this is true, then how can we recognize this fact without falling into the trap of epistemic isolationism? Imitating Paul Ricoeur's method of seeking out a middle path, I will try to chart a path between the extremes of saying everyone has access to the same body of knowledge, on the one hand, and saying that the knowledge which some have privileged access to can never be shared, on the other. That is, I accept that some individuals, because of their lived experience, have unique insights into the nature of social reality. But I will also argue that the incommunicability thesis (upon which epistemic isolationism rests) is false.

The trick, of course, is to show how such communication is possible while not erasing the "otherness," the difference, of the lived experience of marginalized communities. Following Hans-Georg Gadamer, I suggest that philosophical hermeneutics lives in the "in-between"—in the tension between recognition of common humanity and the recognition of differences in lived experience. In short, I will argue that while knowledge grounded in lived experience may be privileged in the sense that some have initial access to it while others do not, it does not follow that this knowledge is incommunicable, because lived experience *itself* is communicable. Consequently, the tension between the recognition of shared universal humanity and of different lived experiences can be reconciled in the communication of contingent human experiences. In this way, hermeneutics can accommodate the main thrust of standpoint theory while simultaneously providing the grounds for a robust form of solidarity built on mutual recognition and mutual respect. This solidarity can then serve as a solid foundation for social justice advocacy.

In what follows, I will try to identify what precisely is behind the idea that those who are not a member of a relevant group cannot understand "what it's like" to be a member of that group. I will focus on one contemporary form of standpoint theory—feminist standpoint epistemology—as one important source of the idea that marginalized people have privileged knowledge of the world because of their "lived experience." I focus on feminist standpoint epistemology as opposed to other standpoint theories since feminist standpoint epistemology is especially well-developed as an explicitly *epistemological* theory and my concern is with privileged (and potentially incommunicable) knowledge claims. Second, I will try to tease out a set of features characteristic of lived experience as it was originally developed by Wilhelm Dilthey and suggest that, contrary to popular parlance, there is nothing in the notion of lived experience itself that entails it is necessarily incommunicable. On the contrary, Dilthey's focus on lived experience came from his conviction that lived experience

could be transmuted into a communicable public form through art, especially literature. Third, and finally, I will argue that the philosophical hermeneutics of Dilthey, Gadamer, and Ricoeur show us how lived experience can be communicated to others. If this argument is right, then the incommunicability thesis is false and epistemic isolationism is undermined. At the same time, in showing how lived experience can be communicated, philosophical hermeneutics points to a robust form of solidarity which is founded upon mutual recognition and respect, a better foundation for social justice activism than authority.

Standpoint Epistemology and Epistemic Isolationism

So, what is feminist standpoint epistemology? In a recent essay, Briana Toole suggests “[f]eminist standpoint epistemologies are comprised of three core theses: situated knowledge, epistemic privilege, and achievement.”⁴ Rebecca Kukla expresses the “situated knowledge” and “epistemic privilege” theses when she writes that standpoint epistemologies argue “that some inquirers have contingent properties that give them access to kinds of knowledge that are not available to others.”⁵ More specifically, many versions of standpoint epistemology maintain that these properties include “social positions of marginalization and structural disadvantage” and that they yield not only knowledge but “*better, more objective* knowledge than others have.”⁶ The first two theses are closely linked with the third—the achievement thesis. Indeed, those who would characterize contemporary standpoint epistemology as a simple matter of having a perspective from a particular social location misunderstand standpoint epistemology.⁷ A standpoint cannot be reduced to a simple perspective. For one thing, a perspective is something that one might have simply by virtue of being a member of a group or having a particular identity. So, we might say that a woman occupies a certain perspective simply by virtue of being a woman. By contrast, a standpoint is something that one *does* or *achieves*; it is not granted solely by having a certain identity.⁸ One must take up a certain way of attending to the world and understanding one’s life

⁴ Briana Toole, “From Standpoint Epistemology to Epistemic Oppression,” *Hyphatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 34, no. 4 (2019): 599.

⁵ Rebecca Kukla, “Objectivity and Perspective in Empirical Knowledge,” *Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology* 3, nos. 1–2 (2006): 81.

⁶ Kukla, “Objectivity and Perspective in Empirical Knowledge,” 81, emphasis in original.

⁷ Toole, “From Standpoint Epistemology to Epistemic Oppression,” 600.

⁸ See Sandra Harding, *Whose Science/Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women’s Lives* (Milton Keynes, UK: Open University Press, 1991), 127.

experiences. This “taking up” requires “consciousness-raising” or developing a “critical consciousness” or “oppositional consciousness”¹⁰ or “the education which can only grow from struggle to change [social] relations.”¹¹ It is only by doing this kind of work that one can achieve a standpoint which allows for a position of epistemic privilege.

Toole suggests that feminist standpoint theory has gone through two major iterations: first, there were the earlier “materialist” manifestations of standpoint theory, and then there was a progressive shift to “social” manifestations, which increasingly have focused on the lived experience of marginalized people.¹² With this in mind, perhaps it is worth offering some brief highlights of the genealogy of standpoint epistemology leading to its contemporary form.

Sandra Harding tells us that feminist standpoint epistemology is “conventionally traced” to the master–slave dialectic in Hegel.¹³ The idea that the dynamic between master and slave can be understood from the standpoint of each—yet better from the perspective of the slave’s activities—was then developed by Marx into the standpoint of the proletariat. In the 1970s, this dynamic was “transformed to explain how the structural relationship between women and men had consequences for the production of knowledge.”¹⁴ According to Susan Heckman, Nancy C. M. Hartsock’s influential work of the early 1980s borrowed heavily from Marx, arguing that “it is women’s unique standpoint in society that provides the justification for the truth claims of feminism while also providing it with a method with which to analyze reality.”¹⁵ For Hartsock, the feminist standpoint is related to the gendered material working conditions of society that allow for a privileged insight into the nature of

⁹ Toole, “From Standpoint Epistemology to Epistemic Oppression,” 600. On consciousness raising, see Johanna Oksala, “In Defense of Experience,” *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 29, no. 2 (2014): 398.

¹⁰ Nancy C. M. Hartsock attributes the notion of “oppositional consciousness” to Chela Sandoval (“Comment on Hekman’s ‘Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited’: Truth or Justice?” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 22, no. 2 [1997]: 732).

¹¹ Nancy C. M. Hartsock, “The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism,” in *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and the Philosophy of Science*, ed. Sandra G. Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (Dordrecht, Netherlands: D. Reidel, 1983), 285.

¹² Toole, “From Standpoint Epistemology to Epistemic Oppression,” 601, 604.

¹³ Sandra Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is ‘Strong Objectivity?’” *The Centennial Review* 36, no. 3 (1992): 442.

¹⁴ Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology,” 442.

¹⁵ Susan Hekman, “Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 22, no. 2 (1997): 341.

society itself. Reflecting the Marxist form of the “hermeneutics of suspicion,”¹⁶ the feminist standpoint allows one “to go beneath the surface of appearances to reveal the real but concealed social relations.”¹⁷ And, true to the achievement thesis, this insight “requires both theoretical and political activity.”¹⁸

In the late 1980s, sociologist Dorothy E. Smith argued that the male standpoint has been blind to certain important questions about women. For example, women’s role as caregivers was, historically, conceived by men as “natural,” and so whether such roles *were* natural or socially constructed was never considered.¹⁹ For Smith, correcting this imbalance requires “foregrounding [the] actual lived experiences”²⁰ of women by starting from “where we are actually located, embodied, in the local historicity and particularities of our lived worlds.”²¹

By the early 1990s, Harding had brought standpoint theory explicitly into conversation with philosophy of science, arguing that the generation of knowledge is not standpoint neutral, but rather contingent upon the standpoint that the knower has. This position involves a suspicion of the objectivity of the sciences as traditionally conceived.²² For Harding, knowledge is irreducibly situated—one cannot simply shed one’s perspective and take up a “God’s-eye view.” But standpoint epistemology does not rest with, say, reprising Kuhnian arguments about the theory-ladenness of experience. Rather, the argument is that historically disadvantaged groups, by virtue of their marginalized position in society, have unique access to truths about the world that would be hidden from those in dominant positions. One’s social situation serves as a starting point for what one can know or fail to know. But, far from throwing out objectivity, standpoint epistemologists like Harding recast it in a new way, arguing that rejecting aperspectivalism opens the door to a plausible form of perspectival objectivity.²³

Feminist standpoint epistemology, like other forms of feminism, has developed in conversation with a number of internal criticisms. Important for our purposes here is the criticism that feminism was insufficiently attentive to the way that

¹⁶ See Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), 32–36.

¹⁷ Hartsock, “The Feminist Standpoint,” 304.

¹⁸ Hartsock, “The Feminist Standpoint,” 304.

¹⁹ Dorothy E. Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987).

²⁰ Hekman, “Truth and Method,” 347.

²¹ Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic*, 8.

²² See Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology.”

²³ Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology.” See also Kukla, “Objectivity and Perspective in Empirical Knowledge.”

lived experience is “discursively constituted” (i.e., shaped by the language and concepts that we bring to experience as a result of being raised in a certain culture). A powerful version of this poststructuralist criticism is made by Joan W. Scott in her 1991 essay, “The Evidence of Experience.”²⁴ For Scott, the reliance of earlier feminism on experience reflected an uncritical foundationalism. She claims that some formulations relied on “a prediscursive reality directly felt, seen, and known,” which functioned to grant “an indisputable authenticity to women’s experience.”²⁵ The unfortunate result, Scott argues, is that feminism has been blind to the fact that relying on women’s lived experience essentially reifies (i.e., treats as objective and real) and reinforces the identity categories (e.g., “woman”) that it sought to challenge, thus undermining its own ability to criticize the dominant order.

While recognizing the importance of Scott’s work, other feminists have pushed back. For example, Johanna Oksala has argued that Scott seems to think that if identities are socially constructed, then lived experiences are as well. Yet, to claim that experiences are reducible to discourse runs the risk of saying that various experiences of oppression did not even exist prior to the language to describe them. At the extreme, this might be taken to imply that marginalized people are simply fabricating their experiences of oppression. On the contrary, Oksala argues, while women’s experiences may be inflected or shaped by prevailing discourses, they are “never wholly derivative of or reducible to them.”²⁶ What is needed, according to Oksala, is a rehabilitation of experience without returning to pre-discursive phenomenological accounts of the embodied experience of females: “First-person accounts of experience are indispensable. . . for a politics of solidarity based on recognition and sympathy.”²⁷

I want to suggest that some theorists have been incorporating both Scott’s poststructuralist criticism and the responses to it into standpoint epistemology, resulting in a new form of feminist standpoint epistemology. Importantly, following Oksala’s lead, this has meant an attempt to rehabilitate lived experience in new ways. Yet, while Oksala thinks we should listen to marginalized people “not because they are in possession of some authentic truth about reality revealed only through suffering or oppression, but simply because their perspective is different from ours,”²⁸ many contemporary standpoint epistemologists really do want to assert epistemic privilege—the viewpoint of marginalized people is not just different, but better.

²⁴ Joan W. Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (1991): 773–97.

²⁵ Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” 786–87.

²⁶ Oksala, “In Defense of Experience,” 396.

²⁷ Oksala, “In Defense of Experience,” 397.

²⁸ Oksala, “In Defense of Experience,” 401.

One way to rehabilitate lived experience in the wake of the poststructuralist criticism while still holding on to epistemic privilege has been to make use of Miranda Fricker's notion of *hermeneutic injustice*. Toole explains: "A hermeneutical injustice is one in which a marginalized knower's 'social experience remains obscure and confusing, even for them' because those experiences are excluded from collective understanding."²⁹ In other words, marginalized people have lived experiences of oppression, but they cannot articulate or even make adequate sense of their own experiences. This is because the epistemic tools they have acquired from culture for understanding social reality come from dominantly situated knowers. Since dominantly situated knowers have not experienced the relevant kinds of oppression, those experiences have never been properly conceptualized. Consequently, marginalized people lack the resources to understand their own experiences. In fact, some theorists have argued that the epistemic deficiency in culture may mean that in some cases marginalized people may not even recognize their experiences as oppressive.

The way to remedy this situation, Toole argues, is through the sharing of experiences within marginalized communities. This amounts to "consciousness-raising"—the bringing to collective consciousness of a shared experience. Once the experience is recognized within the community, it can be named. The proper naming or conceptualization of an experience can "[throw] into sharp relief an experience that had been somewhat vague" before.³⁰ The development or acquisition of these concepts might be regarded as a culminating achievement of developing an oppositional consciousness.

As I understand it, part of the point of feminist standpoint epistemology is to raise up those who have been marginalized by offsetting a lack of social or political privilege with epistemic privilege. Creating new epistemic tools as means of social change coincides with Audre Lorde's oft-quoted line that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."³¹ The claim is that the epistemic tools of the dominant standpoint will invariably support those who are already dominant in power. Therefore, one needs new epistemic tools to facilitate human emancipation.

²⁹ Toole, "From Standpoint Epistemology to Epistemic Oppression," 608. Toole is citing Miranda Fricker, "Epistemic Oppression and Epistemic Privilege," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 25 (1999): 208.

³⁰ Toole, "From Standpoint Epistemology to Epistemic Oppression," 605. Toole relates how learning the term "colorism" played this role in making sense of her own lived experience.

³¹ See Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007), 110–13.

The result of this process of concept creation is that marginalized knowers have conceptual resources that dominantly situated knowers lack and therefore have a better understanding of reality than dominantly situated knowers. Toole acknowledges that communication of conceptual resources is theoretically possible, but worries there will still be a problem of “uptake.”³² If dominantly situated knowers refuse the concepts, then they will simply not understand the experiences of marginalized people as marginalized people themselves do. The conceptual resources of dominantly situated knowers simply “will not make salient those features of the world that the marginalized knower’s conceptual resources attend to. As a result, the dominant knower can use this fact to preemptively dismiss the knowledge claims of a marginalized knower, as well as to dismiss the conceptual resources required to understand those knowledge claims.”³³

It seems apparent to me that when this rejection happens, it would be the result of lacking the relevant lived experience, of experiencing the world as a marginalized person who has attained the relevant achievement does. Yet, it is reasonable to ask why dominantly situated knowers should adopt the conceptual resources of marginalized people without first understanding the need for them. As currently conceived, contemporary feminist standpoint epistemology implies that accepting the conceptual resources must precede seeing the world as a marginalized person would. But this puts dominantly situated knowers in the position of adoption of those conceptual resources and the resulting understanding of social reality simply on authority. As far as I can tell, the standpoint epistemologists’ position seems to rely on an unstated assumption: namely, that lived experience itself is incommunicable. After all, if lived experience were communicable, if dominantly situated knowers could experience the world *as* a marginalized person would without adopting conceptual resources, then they could make an informed judgment about whether new concepts were indeed necessary. As it is, contemporary standpoint epistemology appears to underwrite the incommunicability thesis and epistemic isolationism.

What is needed, I believe, is an account of how it is possible to share marginalized people’s lived experience along with the kind of consciousness that allows those experiences to stand out from the stream of lived experience as a meaningful unity—to see experiences *as* marginalized people who have the relevant consciousness see them. That would enable dominantly situated knowers to accept the conceptual resources of others based on recognition and understanding rather than

³² Toole, “From Standpoint Epistemology to Epistemic Oppression,” 606.

³³ Toole, “From Standpoint Epistemology to Epistemic Oppression,” 610.

authority. In what follows, I hope to show that Dilthey's original understanding of "lived experience" bears a striking resemblance to what contemporary standpoint epistemologists have been discussing. Yet, as I will show later in this essay, there is one important difference: Dilthey rejects the incommunicability thesis.

Lived Experience

Recently, Ian McIntosh and Sharon Wright have pointed out that "there is a strong tendency for the term 'lived experience' to be used with little or no clarification about what it might mean or imply."³⁴ So, it is important to pin down where the notion of "lived experience" comes from and what it amounts to. Here I want to suggest that the notion of lived experience was originally developed into a form readily recognizable to us today by the German hermeneutic philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey.

German has two words for experience—*Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*—and in the 19th century, there were substantial discussions about the nature of these two forms of experience. *Erfahrung* suggests a kind of experience which is taken as a source of information about the world, as when we learn "by experience" not to touch the hot stove.³⁵ Thus, *Erfahrung* implies a kind experience which is in principle universally accessible and therefore communicable.

But it is *Erlebnis*—practically a neologism in Dilthey's time—that is translated into, and therefore underwrites, our current understanding of "lived experience." Gadamer suggests that the notion of *Erlebnis* has its roots in the romantic reaction to the Enlightenment and modern, industrial society—especially as found in the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.³⁶ More recently, Francis Fukuyama has also traced the lineage of "lived experience" to Rousseau, suggesting that his *sentiment de l'existence*, the primordial or original consciousness of the first humans before the distorting effect of dominating societies, lies at the heart of what would later "morph" into the contemporary "lived experience."³⁷ And there can be no doubt that in contemporary parlance, "lived experience" carries with it this romantic overtone of an authentic

³⁴ Ian McIntosh and Sharon Wright, "Exploring What the Notion of 'Lived Experience' Offers for Social Policy Analysis," *Journal of Social Policy* 48, no. 3 (2019): 450.

³⁵ H. P. Rickman, ed. and trans., "Introduction," in *Dilthey: Selected Writings*, by Wilhelm Dilthey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 29.

³⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989), 62–63.

³⁷ Fukuyama, *Identity*, 31–32.

experience of the self which is clouded by dominant and dominating structures of society and therefore serves as the basis of political resistance.

Erlebnis suggests an experience as subjectively perceived or undergone (note the inclusion of *Leben*, “life,” in *Erlebnis*). *Erlebnis* therefore does not, as experienced, admit of universality or reproducibility, but has what we might call an indexical character—it is an experience as undergone from a unique, lived perspective. As such, *Erlebnis* implies the *immediacy* of direct experience; it has the quality of something raw and pre-reflective.³⁸ Indeed, as Dilthey writes, “A lived experience is a distinctive and characteristic mode in which reality is there-for-me. A lived experience does not confront me as something perceived or represented; it is not given to me, but the reality of lived experience is there-for-me because I have a reflexive awareness of it, because I possess it immediately as belonging to me in some sense. Only in thought does it become objective.”³⁹ Consequently, an *Erlebnis* is originally not objectified in one’s consciousness: “the experience is not an object which confronts the person who has it, its existence for me cannot be distinguished from *what* is presented to me.”⁴⁰ This might be taken to imply that *Erlebnis* is only our inner, subjective experience of an outer world. Yet, this would be misleading because “[l]ived experience is not restricted to a consciousness of our state of mind, but also involves our attitude to, and thus awareness of, external reality.”⁴¹

Crucially, *Erlebnis* suggests experience which is emotionally valenced and value-laden. For Dilthey, we do not confront the world as lacking meaning and value—a set of neutral facts, say—and then subsequently *add* meaning or value to it because of our subjective reactions to or feelings about it. Rather, objects in the world show up in our experience already charged with significance because of their relationship to our own purposes and goals. For example, when I am rummaging in my garage for a ladder to change a lightbulb, I do not simply “observe” in a detached way the desk that is blocking my access to the ladder—I perceive it *as* an obstacle because the object shows up in my experience as being related to my goals and purposes. Thus, *Erlebnis*

³⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 61.

³⁹ Wilhelm Dilthey, “Fragments for a Poetics (1907–1908),” trans. Rudolph A. Makkreel, in *Poetry and Experience*, ed. Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 223.

⁴⁰ Wilhelm Dilthey, “The Construction of the Historical World in the Human Studies,” in *Dilthey: Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. H. P. Rickman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 184, emphasis in original.

⁴¹ Rudolf A. Makkreel, *Dilthey: Philosopher of the Human Studies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 148.

carries with it the connotation that “lived experience” is personally affecting—that it is significant, that it matters.⁴²

Moreover, while *Erlebnis* represents the most basic level of conscious experience, it is also a coherent whole. So, while *Erlebnis* is a fundamental experience, it stands in contrast to “raw feels” or “qualia” or “sensation”—the “one great blooming, buzzing confusion” of un-organized, unconceptualized experience, in William James’s memorable words.⁴³ *Erlebnis* is not a construct built out of constituent parts to which it could subsequently be reduced.⁴⁴ Consequently, *Erlebnis* occupies a middle position between the false dichotomy of an inert and meaning-less external world on the one hand and mere subjective inner feeling on the other. Indeed, for Dilthey, the very distinctions between subject and object, self and world, are analytic distinctions which only arise through reflection on lived experience.⁴⁵

Further, Dilthey also talks about *an Erlebnis*. So, *Erlebnis*, a “lived experience,” is not simply the stream of consciousness itself for Dilthey, but is also a nexus of meaning, a unity that “stands out” from the flow of life *as* an experience.⁴⁶ Dilthey writes that “[a] lived experience is a unit whose parts are connected by a common meaning.”⁴⁷ Offering us as an example the death of a loved one, Dilthey points out that this experience confronts us as a “separable immanent teleological whole” which “possesses a unity in itself.”⁴⁸ As Dilthey puts it, “That which forms a unity of presence in the flow of time because it has a unitary meaning is the smallest unit definable as a lived experience.”⁴⁹ In fact, English allows for a similar use of the word “experience” when we say of a road trip or a wedding, “it was an experience.” Such experiences “erupt from or disrupt routinized, repetitive behavior” and call for us to find meaning in what has disoriented us with pain or pleasure.⁵⁰

Thus, as Gadamer points out, there is an inherent ambiguity in the notion of *Erlebnis* which Dilthey built into it from the start—it means “both the immediacy, which precedes all interpretation, reworking, and communication, and merely offers a starting point for interpretation—material to be shaped—and its discovered yield, its

⁴² Rickman, “Introduction,” 29.

⁴³ William James, *Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1 (New York: Dover, 1950), 488.

⁴⁴ Dilthey, “Fragments for a Poetics (1907–1908),” 224.

⁴⁵ See Makkreel, *Dilthey*, 217.

⁴⁶ Victor W. Turner, “Dewey, Dilthey, and Drama: An Essay in the Anthropology of Experience,” in *The Anthropology of Experience*, ed. Victor W. Turner and Edward M. Bruner (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 35.

⁴⁷ Dilthey, qtd. in Lawrence K. Schmidt, *Understanding Hermeneutics* (London: Routledge, 2006), 38.

⁴⁸ Dilthey, “Fragments for a Poetics (1907–1908),” 224, 225.

⁴⁹ Dilthey, qtd. in Schmidt, *Understanding Hermeneutics*, 38.

⁵⁰ Turner, “Dewey, Dilthey, and Drama,” 35.

lasting result.”⁵¹ The trick, Gadamer tells us, lies in “seeing these meanings as a productive union: something becomes an ‘experience’ not only insofar as it is experienced, but insofar as its being experienced makes a special impression that gives it lasting importance.”⁵² Indeed, Gadamer suggests, “[i]f something is called or considered an *Erlebnis*, that means it is rounded into the unity of a significant whole.”⁵³ These lived experiences, understood as significant wholes, can then be related to similar units of experience in one’s own life, in others’ lives, or those preserved in culture, further amplifying their meaning and significance.

Interestingly, Gadamer suggests that it is this feature of *Erlebnis*—that its proper form requires being “rounded into the unity of a significant whole” which stands out from the flow of consciousness—gives grounds for thinking of it as “an achievement.”⁵⁴ In the hermeneutic tradition, this achievement is usually linked up with language—the correct word or description discloses or reveals the truth of an experience. Max van Manen comments that “[t]he essence or nature of an experience has been adequately described in language if the description reawakens or shows us the lived quality and significance of the experience in a fuller or deeper manner.”⁵⁵

Dilthey claims the true nature of an *Erlebnis* is most easily seen when one reflects back on an experience in memory and distills the “essence” of the experience as singularly meaningful and important.⁵⁶ When one does this, one can then take the further step of bringing it forth as an expression. Expressions of lived experience “can range from emotional exclamations and gestures to personal self-descriptions and reflections to works of art.”⁵⁷ For Dilthey, the richness of lived experience means that one cannot simply understand one’s life or experiences fully through introspection—rather, self-understanding requires the mediating steps of externalization. Ultimately, Dilthey believed that our lives are now so complex that only literature is able to properly give expression to it.⁵⁸ Such externalization is necessary for self-understanding because “[a]n expression of lived experience can contain more of the nexus of psychic life than any introspection can catch sight of. It draws from depths

⁵¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 61.

⁵² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 61.

⁵³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 66.

⁵⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 66.

⁵⁵ Max van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), 10.

⁵⁶ Dilthey, “The Construction of the Historical World in the Human Studies,” 185.

⁵⁷ Rudolf Makkreel, “Wilhelm Dilthey,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Archive*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2021 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/dilthey/>.

⁵⁸ Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi, eds., “Introduction,” in *Poetry and Experience*, by Wilhelm Dilthey (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 3.

not illuminated by consciousness.”⁵⁹ However, this also means that because the meaning of lived experience cannot be exhaustively understood through self-reflection, we have to approach our own experiences like we approach the understanding of others or of a text—from the outside in.

Finally, *Erlebnis* is intrinsically temporal because our very conscious life is temporal.⁶⁰ All lived experience is inextricably linked to our past and our future, and its meaning bears this imprint.⁶¹ Thus, while itself a coherent whole of meaning, an *Erlebnis* is also part of a broader whole—that of one’s life. In other words, understanding one’s own life involves a hermeneutic circle relating various important experiences to one another across the entirety of one’s whole life. In this respect, the meaning of any particular lived experience is unavoidably open-ended, because the meaning of the part shifts in its relation to the other parts and to the whole.

By way of illustration, consider a melody. In a melody, there is a string of individual notes, but the “meaning” of each of the notes is inextricably linked to the notes that come before and after it. In a piece of music, the significance of each note is inflected by all of the other notes. Or, to move one step closer to human life, we can think of a story or narrative. In a story, the meaning of any event is shaped by the events that come before and, especially, the events that come after.⁶² The meaning of a man and a woman meeting at the beginning of a story is shaped retroactively by the ending of the story. The significance of that first event will be very different if the story ends with the couple being wed as opposed to the woman being killed in a car accident. Similarly, lived experiences are also part of “one’s story” and are therefore shaped by what came before and will be recast by what happens later. Therefore, the meaning of a lived experience is always open-ended because it is bound up with the larger whole of one’s total life. As Gadamer puts it, “[e]verything that is experienced is experienced by oneself, and part of its meaning is that it belongs to the unity of this self and thus contains an unmistakable and irreplaceable relation to the whole of this one life. Thus, essential to an experience is that it cannot be exhausted in what can be said of it or grasped as its meaning.”⁶³

Here there is a strong resemblance between lived experience and a text. Much like a text, while we can distinguish between better and worse interpretations and some

⁵⁹ Wilhelm Dilthey, *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences*, ed. Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 227.

⁶⁰ Dilthey, “The Construction of the Historical World in the Human Studies,” 184–86.

⁶¹ Dilthey, “Fragments for a Poetics (1907–1908),” 225.

⁶² See Stewart Goetz and Joshua W. Seachris, *What Is This Thing Called the Meaning of Life?* (London: Routledge, 2020), 153–58.

⁶³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 67.

interpretations might be ruled out flatly as insufficient, it is never possible to claim that any particular interpretation is final and authoritative for all time. It is always possible to bring new questions and new assumptions to a text and to tease out new meanings. Likewise, it is always possible to tease new meanings out of lived experiences.⁶⁴ Consequently, while an *Erlebnis* is a coherent unity of meaning, it is never closed to further interpretation, even by the person undergoing the experience: “*To be historically means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete.*”⁶⁵ Importantly, all of this amounts to saying that, while lived experience is immediately available and has an initial interpretive intelligibility, it cannot serve as the basis for an uncritical form of experiential foundationalism.⁶⁶ Thus, Scott is quite right that “[e]xperience is at once always already an interpretation *and* something that needs to be interpreted.”⁶⁷

To sum up: lived experience is (a) an indexical and value-laden experience, which is (b) formed into a significant whole of meaning, that (c) reaches its proper form in expression, and which (d) is temporal and therefore always open to further interpretation.

Philosophical Hermeneutics and the Incommunicability Thesis

As we have seen above, contemporary feminist standpoint epistemology implies that the achievement of obtaining a standpoint involves finding the hidden meaning of one’s lived experiences, which is, as van Manen puts it, “usually hidden or veiled.”⁶⁸ The *true* meaning of an experience may not be obvious—even to those who experience it. This is why even marginalized or oppressed people are sometimes not aware of their own oppression. Lived experience may be necessary for insight into the nature of social reality, but it is certainly not sufficient. Rather, it requires understanding one’s experiences in a certain way—it requires a particular kind of “critical consciousness” or “oppositional consciousness” or what might be called, true to the hermeneutic tradition, a form of “seeing-as.” This consciousness could perhaps be facilitated by

⁶⁴ Cf. Makkreel, *Dilthey*, 254.

⁶⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 302, emphasis in original.

⁶⁶ It is worth pointing out that if lived experience were exclusively something private or ineffable like qualia, it could not serve as the basis for political resistance because one would be utterly unable to recognize when others have had similar experiences. On the contrary, since individuals *can* recognize structurally similar experiences—even in the absence of a word which distinctively names a phenomenon—we can infer that these experiences are in fact not completely ineffable or private.

⁶⁷ Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” 797, emphasis in original.

⁶⁸ van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience*, 27.

language, which attempts to distill the nexus of meaning in the lived experience. But, as discussed earlier, dominantly situated knowers will likely resist the interpretation embedded in the word; they will not think that it reveals the true nature of social reality. They will not see it “as” someone who has achieved the relevant kind of consciousness does. If they had the right kind of consciousness, then they could see the legitimacy of the word. But since they lack the appropriate consciousness, they reject the word. Therefore, one cannot simply convey the truth of one’s experiences to someone, especially someone from another identity group, who has not already taken up the relevant kind of consciousness.

So, the question becomes: Can we communicate lived experience in a way that can at least temporarily grant someone the kind of consciousness necessary to see lived experience *as* those in marginalized communities with the relevant achievement do? And if so, how? If lived experience, along with the proper kinds of “seeing-as” can be communicated, then the incommunicability thesis is false, and both it and the epistemic isolationism which rests on it, should be abandoned.

In this section, I will argue that philosophical hermeneutics—especially the work of Dilthey, Gadamer, and Ricoeur—provides a framework for communicating and learning from the lived experience of members of marginalized communities. Philosophical hermeneutics recognizes the distinctive experiences of marginalized communities without falling into the trap of treating them as utterly alien to those from other groups. Difference need not lead to incomprehension; rather, it creates the positive possibility of seeing and understanding the world otherwise than one currently does. That is, the differences in our lived experiences open the possibility of learning from the lived experience of others. How is this possible?

Dilthey believed that individuals are, to a significant extent, the products of their culture and time. This means that, for Dilthey, people in different eras would have had quite different mental lives. Accordingly, properly understanding cultural artifacts (i.e., expressions of lived experience) across historical distance requires distinctive but rigorous methods. What is interesting, however, and important for my purposes here, is that Dilthey maintained that this was possible. He believed that there was enough in common, by way of shared humanity, for people to understand one another across the barriers of time and culture through their expressions. In fact, Dilthey maintained that one could “re-experience” (*Nacherleben*) what it would have been like to live in another culture or in another era through extensive research and, through an exercise of imagination, come to recreate in oneself experiences similar to what a person of that time and/or culture would have had. While Dilthey reminds us that such a process is never complete—one cannot simply put oneself completely into

the inner life of another—he also believed that “[o]n the basis of lived experience and self-understanding and their constant interaction, there emerges the understanding of other persons and their manifestations in life.”⁶⁹ In other words, for Dilthey, different lived experiences do not mean that we cannot understand one another, but rather can serve as a way of augmenting one’s understanding of the world across the barriers of time, culture, language, and the like.

Similarly, Gadamer believed that the fact that we are historically constituted and always already part of a tradition with its own horizon of meaning did not mean that learning from others’ experiences was an impossibility. Rather, it was the necessary condition of the possibility of learning from others. I believe this feature of Gadamer’s thought can be seen clearly from his own use of the word “standpoint”⁷⁰ and the closely related “horizon”⁷¹ which our standpoint gives rise to. According to Gadamer, the culture and language that one is raised with is both the limitation, and the condition of the possibility, of any kind of understanding. Gadamer called the set of cultural beliefs embodied in languages “prejudices” (*Vorurteile*). For Gadamer, “*the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being*” precisely because we are often not aware of the prejudices that we have.⁷² These prejudices make possible, but also limit, our understanding of the world. That is, as historical and linguistic beings, we have standpoints which serve as the vantage points from which we view the world. There is no such thing as a “view from nowhere”—there are only views from particular standpoints.

The metaphors of standpoint and horizon suggest that without a standpoint, one would have no horizon of understanding—one could not see at all. That is, having a standpoint is what makes understanding possible in the first place. But they also suggest that our horizon of understanding is bounded. However, this boundedness is not by any means static and so does not close us off from others, from other standpoints. On the contrary, it is more accurate to say that the horizon, by its very nature, calls us to transcend or supersede our parochial view. Indeed, part of the point of realizing that our understanding is limited is to push us to realize that we need to dialogue with others, that we need others to get beyond our own limited understanding of the world. After all, our own prejudices are not only parochial, they may in fact be wrong. Thus, the realization of our limited horizon serves as the driving force to engage with others who are different from ourselves as a means of being able to correct

⁶⁹ Dilthey, qtd. in Schmidt, *Understanding Hermeneutics*, 38.

⁷⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 303.

⁷¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 302.

⁷² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 276–77, emphasis in original.

or expand our horizon. As Gadamer puts it, “[t]he possibility that the other person may be right is the soul of hermeneutics.”⁷³ When we encounter others who are different from ourselves and come to an understanding with one another, we learn; we experience a “fusion of horizons” and find our understanding of the world simultaneously broadened and transformed.⁷⁴

Gadamer’s key insight is that this fusion of horizons is made possible by relating what is unfamiliar to what is familiar (e.g., our pre-existing beliefs, knowledge, etc.). Therefore, understanding, indeed human life itself, is a constant mediation between what is familiar and what is unfamiliar. It is by recognizing similarity in difference that we can understand others, even if we do not have the same culture or life experiences. Of course, the process of mediation between sameness and difference is, for Gadamer, never complete. We never simply assimilate what is different, but rather are involved in something like an ongoing conversation or dialogue with difference, which results in a constantly shifting and adapting horizon. In short, our standpoint is by no means fixed or immutable. Philosophical hermeneutics lives in the “in-between” space of sameness and difference, of relating what is new and different to what is old and familiar without *reducing* it to what is old and familiar. The impetus behind philosophical hermeneutics is precisely the conviction that we must engage with those who have different lived experiences and different standpoints in order to learn.

While Gadamer argues for the possibility of learning from others with different lived experiences, I think it is Ricoeur who best demonstrates how to turn this into an actuality. Ricoeur accepts Gadamer’s criticism of the romantic idea that one could simply shed one’s own standpoint and step into the mental life of another. On the other hand, Ricoeur maintains that certain uses of language enable writers to open up a possible world to readers—a world into which the reader may step, orient herself, and then return to the “real” world with a new way of seeing it.

Of special relevance for my purposes here are Ricoeur’s writings on poetic discourse. For Ricoeur, poetic discourse is an umbrella term for language whose referential function differs from the descriptive referential function of ordinary and scientific language.⁷⁵ The use of “poetic” in “poetic discourse” or “poetic language,”

⁷³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, qtd. in Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 124.

⁷⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 306.

⁷⁵ Paul Ricoeur, “Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation,” in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Lewis S. Mudge (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1980), 100. See also Paul Ricoeur, “Naming God,” in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 232.

Ricoeur tells us, is not meant to pick out a particular genre, but to point to the function of a certain kind of writing “as the seat of semantic innovation, as the proposition of a world, and as the instigation of a new understanding of oneself.”⁷⁶ For Ricoeur, discourse is essentially about a world. In descriptive or scientific discourse, this reference is to the empirical world of objects. What is distinctive about poetic discourse is that it “suspends” the ordinary referential function which is proper to descriptive or scientific discourse⁷⁷; there is what might be called an “impertinence of reference.” Ricoeur believes that the disruption of first-order reference to the empirical world creates the possibility of a second-order reference. Ricoeur writes that it is his “deepest conviction” that “poetic language alone restores to us that participation-in or belonging-to an order of things which precedes our capacity to oppose ourselves to things taken as objects opposed to a subject.”⁷⁸ Thus, “the abolition of first-order reference, an abolition accomplished by fiction and poetry, is the condition of possibility for the liberation of a second order of reference that reaches the world not only at the level of manipulable objects but at the level Husserl designated by the expression of *Lebenswelt*, and which Heidegger calls being-in-the-world.”⁷⁹

It is integral to Ricoeur’s notion of poetic discourse that it can “intend being, but not through the modality of givenness, but rather through the modality of possibility.”⁸⁰ In Ricoeur’s words, “[t]exts speak of possible worlds and of possible ways of orientating oneself in those worlds.”⁸¹ In poetic discourse, the “world of the text is what incites the reader, or the listener, to understand himself or herself in the face of the text and to develop, in imagination and sympathy, the *self* capable of inhabiting this world by deploying his or her ownmost possibilities there.”⁸² In being freed from the limitations of purely descriptive language, poetic discourse gains the power to *redescribe* the world.

Crucially, in conveying possible ways of “being-in-the-world,” one communicates not a simple description of objects, but lived experience itself—including its indexical quality, its emotional valence, value-ladenness, significance, and so on. The temporal structure of narrative allows for one to encode not just objects

⁷⁶ Ricoeur, “Naming God,” 232.

⁷⁷ Ricoeur, “Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation,” 100.

⁷⁸ Ricoeur, “Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation,” 101.

⁷⁹ Paul Ricoeur, “Philosophy and Religious Language,” in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 42.

⁸⁰ Ricoeur, “Philosophy and Religious Language,” 43.

⁸¹ Paul Ricoeur, “Metaphor and the Main Problem of Hermeneutics,” in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work*, ed. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart (Boston: Beacon, 1978), 144.

⁸² Ricoeur, “Naming God,” 232, emphasis in original.

and events but their *significance* or *meaning*—that is, it enables one to communicate how they show up in lived experience. In short, the narrative structure of some poetic discourse enables the reader to obtain a kind of “seeing-as”⁸³ or take on a particular kind of consciousness and therefore enables the reader to see the world as another sees it. In Ricoeur’s words, poetic discourse like fiction “is not an instance of reproductive imagination, but of *productive imagination*. As such, it refers to reality not in order to copy it, but in order to prescribe a new reading.”⁸⁴ Poetic discourse “makes reality appear in such and such a way.”⁸⁵ In saying that poetic discourse has the power to create possible worlds which thereby redescribe reality, Ricoeur is claiming genres like narrative have the ability to tell us something new and essential about the real world. Art—especially temporal art like literature and film—offers us a way of communicating lived experience by opening a possible world which others may enter and imaginatively experience the world as we experience it.

In short, literature enables a fusion of horizons, where the reader finds her own horizon of understanding expanded through an encounter with the lived experience of another. The literary critic C. S. Lewis, though not a hermeneutic thinker himself, writes movingly of the experience of reading literature which “heals the wound, without undermining the privilege, of individuality. There are mass emotions which heal the wound; but they destroy the privilege. In them our separate selves are pooled and we sink back into sub-individuality. But in reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself.”⁸⁶ Lewis makes clear that he believes that part of the point of reading literature is to “become these other selves,” to know them through imaginative lived experience, we might say.⁸⁷ Likewise, Simone de Beauvoir claims that literature enables the reader to enter another “world” where “another truth becomes mine without ceasing to be other. I resign my own ‘I’ in favor of the speaker’s; and yet I remain myself.”⁸⁸ Good literature, as well as narrative, story-telling, films, and

⁸³ For example, see Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny, Kathleen McLaughlin, and John Costello (Toronto, ONT: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 245.

⁸⁴ Paul Ricoeur, “The Narrative Function,” in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 292–93.

⁸⁵ Ricoeur, “The Narrative Function,” 293.

⁸⁶ C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 140–41.

⁸⁷ Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, 139.

⁸⁸ Simone de Beauvoir, qtd. in Sonia Kruks, “Women’s ‘Lived Experience’: Feminism and Phenomenology from Simone de Beauvoir to the Present,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Feminist Theory*, ed. Mary Evans et al. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage), 83, 84.

so on, are all ways of bringing someone to understand and to feel “what it’s like” to be someone else.

Conclusion

So, is lived experience communicable? Yes, it is communicable through artistic expressions like literature. Communicating an event as a marginalized person experiences it requires bringing others along a narrative in such a way as to encounter the lived experience in the relevant way—through adopting a particular kind of consciousness or “seeing-as.” That is, one must communicate the lived experience *as* a nexus of meaning which stands forth but is connected with a greater whole—the narrative of one’s life. Bringing someone into the stream of one’s consciousness and unfolding the narrative of one’s life enables the reader to take on the relevant kind of consciousness such that the particular lived experience is able to stand forth *from* that stream of consciousness as a coherent and significant whole. Therefore, literature’s temporal structure enables one to properly contextualize a lived experience so as to communicate it to someone who has not had the experience themselves. This communication allows dominantly situated knowers to make informed judgments about, and ultimately recognize the legitimacy of, certain conceptual constructs rather than accepting them by authority.

Moreover, entering into another’s lived experience compels the reader to “see” those who have experienced marginalization and oppression—to make them visible and to dignify them. Put another way, reading literature which expresses the suffering (and joys) of others, compels the reader to recognize the humanity of marginalized members of their community in and through the sharing of lived experience. Simultaneously, the attempt to communicate one’s experiences is itself an act of recognition of the humanity of dominantly situated knowers and, importantly, calls that humanity forth. The mutual recognition and mutual respect that is the consequence of sharing experience, I suggest, can serve as the basis of a robust form of solidarity.

By contrast, in implying that lived experience is incommunicable, activists and theorists move towards the idea that understanding entails agreement and any disagreement simply signals an inability to understand—that is, to epistemic isolationism. Once this move is made, lived experience grants not only epistemic privilege—in the sense of enabling specific insights into the nature of social reality—but epistemic authority, where dominantly situated knowers must simply accept what

marginalized people say about and how they conceptualize their lived experience. This final move is, I believe, politically toxic. It implies that solidarity built on mutual recognition and respect is impossible and that political gains towards social justice can only be made by breaking citizens into groups whose only relationship is one of power. To accept epistemic isolationism is to trade solidarity for authority, mutual recognition for power.

Yet, I suspect any apparent inversion of power dynamics between dominantly situated knowers and marginalized communities granted by epistemic isolationism will turn out to be illusory. And here I echo a point made by Charles Taylor in “The Politics of Recognition.” In the context of responding to multiculturalists’ insistence on the expansion of the canon, Taylor suggests that perhaps what respect requires of us is a *presumption* that the works of, say, “non-Western” cultures have value. Similarly, I believe very strongly that there should be a presumption that members of marginalized communities have something important to say because of their lived experience of social reality. However, Taylor goes on to suggest that to offer favorable judgments of the works of other cultures “on demand” requires an act of “breathtaking condescension.”⁸⁹ In the same way, when activists encourage dominantly situated knowers to adopt conceptual resources without critique, they are inadvertently encouraging dominantly situated knowers to patronize marginalized people, ultimately preventing them from recognizing marginalized people as fully equal to themselves. Because epistemic isolationism does not permit mutual recognition, equality, and respect between people of different communities, it cannot serve as the basis of a meaningful and lasting form of solidarity and political power. If activists attempt to trade mutual recognition and respect for power and authority, they will likely end up with neither.

Lived experience *can* serve as the basis of important knowledge about our social reality and as the basis of meaningful solidarity between people of different communities. But only if we reject the incommunicability thesis. The presumption I am advocating here does not mean the uncritical acceptance of another’s authority, but rather the eagerness to listen to stories, narratives, and the like in the posture of wanting to expand one’s horizon and better understand the sufferings and joys of fellow citizens. As Kwame Anthony Appiah has recently written, “[t]alk of lived experience should be used not to end conversation[s] but to begin them.”⁹⁰ Therefore,

⁸⁹ Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 70.

⁹⁰ Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Why Are Politicians Suddenly Talking about Their ‘Lived Experience?’” *The Guardian*, 14 November 2020,

while I believe the original three theses of standpoint epistemology are plausible, the incommunicability thesis is false and harmful and should be explicitly rejected. When this is done, standpoint epistemologists and the activists who draw from their work will be in a better position to foster political solidarity and bring about meaningful social justice reforms.