Interview with Dr. José Medina

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This interview was conducted with Dr. José Medina, Walter Dill Scott professor of philosophy at Northwestern University, on October 31st, 2019 at the College of Wooster, following Dr. Medina's presentation of the 14th annual Lindner Lecture in Ethics, "Capital Vices, Institutional Failures, and Activism Inside/Outside a County Jail."

Micah Phillips-Gary: I just want to say first, thank you very much for agreeing to come and talk to us. It's an honor to have you here.

Dr. José Medina: Well, thank you for inviting me.

Kaylee Liu: So what inspired you to pursue this line of philosophy and dedicate your life to it?

Dr. Medina: Yeah. Thank you for the question. Well, I was drawn to philosophy mainly because of social and political issues growing up. You know, my family was escaping different countries and different political regimes. And we landed in southern Spain and there was a dictatorship there at the time. So it was tough. But, being in high school already and starting college, I was drawn to the criticism of society and the criticism of differing aspects of life and everything that was going on at the time in terms of people seeking freedom and different movements of liberation, like the women's movement, the sexual liberation movement and issues of race and class. So those were the interests that I had from the beginning, when I started reading philosophy and studying philosophy more systematically. Then, when I decided to go to graduate school, the issues that I was most interested in were issues that

had to do with communication, knowledge, but in relation to those issues of social criticism and social liberation, and then I realized that some of the disciplines that were addressing these issues, they were not addressing these issues from a critical and social justice point of view. Like in issues of communication, philosophy of language was focused only on theories of meaning, theories of truth, accounts of ideal communication and I was interested in precisely the opposite. What counts as misunderstanding and miscommunication? Silence? How do we break silences and how do we understand nonsense or the limits of intelligibility? So, I was more interested in the negative and the problematic side of language, communication, meaning, truth. When it comes to epistemology, the same thing, right? Most of the accounts and discussions were about understanding, knowledge, justification. And I was interested in ignorance, misunderstanding, lack of justification and how those epistemic problems and epistemic lacunas were formed and maintained. And at the time, actually, there was not a lot of discussion of social and political issues in epistemology or philosophy of language. And that started to change already when I was in graduate school around the 80s. And in particular, it was because of feminist epistemology and also some people working in critical race theory, dealing with issues of miscommunication, ignorance and so on. And then a little later in the 90s, for example, the paradigm of epistemology of ignorance started to develop with Charles Mills in particular in *The Racial Contract*, some articles by Nancy Tuana and other people talking about issues of ignorance. And then also around the same time, but also more recently in philosophy of language, there has been a social turn so that now there is a lot of social philosophy of language dealing with all kinds of issues, including hate speech, propaganda, slurs, the misuses of language or ways in which language is used for oppression, the criticism of linguistic practice and all of that. So now it is a vibrant field that I am still contributing to.

Kaylee: Could you elaborate? I guess when you said that language is a tool of oppression, I'm not really sure if this is what you're referring to, but I've heard some people talk about how "standard" English is part of the oppression because people who speak "pidgin" or "broken" English are looked down on and then it is used to oppress them, because it's like,

"Oh, you're not smart enough to speak good English."

Dr. Medina: Now, that is a great question. I was interested in those issues, linguistic variations and issues of dialect, mannerisms. And there were very few people in the standard philosophy of language that were addressing those issues, and then there were very few tools. And I thought that one of the philosophers who provided powerful, critical tools to address this was the later Wittgenstein with the concept of language games and linguistic practices and what it means to engage in a language game, to think about language and language use as an activity, as an embodied activity that is done differently by different people and how to navigate those differences. Then also, a little later, when I was a student in graduate school, I became fascinated with Pierre Bourdieu and the sociology of language and the notion of the habitus. And then also, as I was exploring these issues, as you said, the people who have written powerful essays on dialectical differences, James Baldwin and his writings on black English and how black English language was marginalized and used to stigmatize the black community. And I was very aware of that because even in some of the political contexts that I was very familiar with, political oppression contained that linguistic side, like some languages in Spain were prohibited, so that Spanish was the official language and people could not speak Catalan or Basque and other dialects were allowed, but clearly they were looked down on, like southern Spanish from southern Spain was not supposed to be equal with Spanish and Gloria Anzaldúa, for example, speaks about that all the time. In *Borderlands/La Frontera* she talks about how her Chicana identity has a lot to do with speaking a particular kind of dialect in Spanish, Chicano Spanish, which is different from Mexican Spanish and it is different, obviously, from Castilian Spanish as it is spoken in Spain. She has an entire account of how she internalized all these negative views of how she spoke and her expression and her dialect, but at the same time, it was really important for her to come to appreciate her way of speaking. It was a way of appreciating who she was and her community.

Micah: So I'm curious about the relationship between ethics and epistemology. It seems like there are these sort of epistemic vices that you talk about and it seems like, in some

contexts, there's a certain normative force that an epistemic vice has in the sense that something like incuriosity is going to be in any context, or at least in almost any context, in some sense bad, then there's some specific contexts where there's a specific sort of ethical normative force as well, like the county jails that you're talking about.

Dr. Medina: That's a great question, yeah. Most of my work in in epistemology is focused precisely around normative issues. So it is about the ethics of knowing but also the politics of knowing and these issues have become the center of attention in one area of epistemology, for example, under the rubric of epistemic injustice. Miranda Fricker's book on epistemic injustice is entitled *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* so clearly it's about how to understand knowledge and the activities that go along with the production and the dissemination of knowledge in ethical terms. What are the ethical norms that are operating there? And there are different views of how to understand the relation between epistemology and ethics and differing ethical approaches that can be applied to knowledge practices. As I was explaining yesterday, in my talk, I'm interested in different approaches, actually, in ethics as they relate to epistemology. For example, I am interested in the consequentialist perspective, at least to the degree that we have to pay attention to the consequences, the normative consequences, the ethical consequences of the way in which we produce knowledge and share knowledge. So, for example, the possible harms that can result from the ways in which we interact epistemically with each other. So I'm very interested in that, for example, the possible harms and the possible vulnerabilities that appear in epistemic practices. But then also I am interested in non-consequentialist approaches as well. So that we think about issues such as the intrinsic dignity and respect that we owe to each other. So that is something that is not within the framework of consequentialism. It is really about, you know, what is the standing, the moral standing, of a subject of knowledge and of understanding, right? And that means, "Well, if you're going to be recognized as a subject of knowledge and of understanding, you do need to be respected, your voice needs to be respected, there has to be a space for you to speak." And then within those frameworks, both the consequentialist framework and the value theory of respect and recognition and

dignity, we can talk about things like virtues and vices. Are people operating in these practices in the best way possible, or are they failing in particular ways, in normative ways? And then we can talk about specific virtues and vices, but then more interestingly we can contextualize what may amount to a virtue or a vice so that you take differing attitudes or, as I was explaining yesterday, not only attitudes, but habits, personality traits, ways of thinking and then you try to figure out, in a contextual way, whether or not that is optimal or suboptimal. And I think you're absolutely right that it is very tricky sometimes because the very same thing could be a vice in one context, but not in another context. So, almost every vice that we can think of, every epistemic vice, every vice of the mind that we can think of, could in some instances be part of proper functioning, proper epistemic functioning. So, think for example about what I was talking about yesterday, incredulity. It is not always a vice to be incredulous, right? Sometimes, there are good reasons why you should be skeptical and you should distrust and even if it is some kind of systematic distrust, if there is good reason, if there are good grounds, if you have enough evidence about, you know, distrust in something. So a typical example would be, "Well, if a fire alarm is malfunctioning all the time, like the fire alarm of the philosophy department in the building goes off every day, all the time. Now, everybody knows it." Well, the fact that you are incredulous as to whether or not there is a fire, and you don't run out of the building, in that kind of context, is not necessarily vicious. Because you have good reasons why you are incredible, right? But at the same time, if you have no good reasons why you should distract somebody or an entire group of individuals and you keep cultivating that distrust and you keep cultivating your incredulity, then that becomes a vice. The same thing on the other side, credulity. Of course credulity, being open to belief, being open to take somebody else's words at face value, credulity can be a vice, because it can be excessive credulity, it can be gullibility, right? You're gullible because you believe everything you're being told. So obviously, that doesn't work well either. So almost every attitude, like in this case, the doxastic attitude of forming a belief or not forming a belief on the basis of what you've been told, could be either a vice or a virtue or it could be in between. So it becomes something that really needs to be contextualized. And I do have a contextual perspective, which is one of the reasons why I was saying yesterday,

we need some kind of criteriom or metrics that we can apply context by context, and that is how you elucidate virtues and vices, not through a fixed catalog, so that you can simply list the things that are going to count in all context as a vice or as a virtue.

Micah: So I was thinking about this idea of epistemic neglect that you were talking about and it seems to me that, if you want to talk about a sort of neglect, it implies you have responsibilities that you're not meeting and I'm just wondering more about, if we have epistemic neglect, the corresponding epistemic responsibilities and how those are constituted—maybe that's not the right way to put it—but, what determines our responsibilities in different contexts and things like that.

Dr. Medina: That's a great question. No, you're absolutely right. That's exactly the insight here, that the notion of neglect is a powerful normative notion because it makes you think about those obligations that have not been met, right? What are the things that should have happened? What are the things that should have been done so that we don't get to that predicament? And the analogy with all the forms of neglect show that very clearly. If you think about medical neglect, well, you have that phenomenon to begin with, because there are particular things that should have happened. There are forms of medical attention and medical care that should have been there and they were not provided. When you think about child neglect, for example, child neglect is a quick way of saying there are certain forms of care and protection that children are owed. And that means that somebody has that obligation to provide the care and the protection. So, when you identify child neglect, for example, you have to go to the obligations, the responsibilities immediately, and then you have to identify, you know, who had those responsibilities. And depending on the case, it could be the parents, the grandparents, designated caretakers, but notice also that sometimes it is broader than that, right? Sometimes society at large also has a responsibility to provide the care if other people are not providing the care. So if the parents fail, other family members should step in. If nobody in the family steps in. the neighbors, the people in the community should step in and give care and protection to the child. If nobody in the community steps in, there should be institutions that compensate for that. And they

say, "No, we're going to protect our children." So you can push the very issue that you're talking about, what are the relevant responsibilities? And who has those responsibilities? You can keep pushing that issue. So in that way, it's a really useful concept and a really useful framework, I think. And I think it applies in this case of epistemic neglect as well. When you're talking about epistemic neglect, you can say, "Okay, if this person who is suffering from epistemic neglect cannot contribute to the production and dissemination of knowledge, who has responsibilities to, you know, facilitate this person's contributions?" And then in this particular case, because we're talking about detained subjects, well, it is the people who are in charge of the detention, the detention facility, the officers of that facility, the people who are policing the detained subject. And in particular forms of attempts to communicate and attempts to share knowledge, like in the case of emergency calls these inmates were trying to alert the guards that somebody was lying there, right? So they press the emergency call button. They were trying to provide that knowledge, that they were witnessing an emergency, but they were prevented from sharing that knowledge. But then you can go to the responsibilities that the guards have to detect emergencies and to share that knowledge with others. But you can go even beyond the guards, just like in the case of child neglect you may go from family members to the neighbors and the communities and then the institutions of society at large, you can do something analogous in this case and you can say, "Well, the guards failed because they have responsibilities that they didn't meet." But then when that happens, other people and other institutional structures should make sure that these responsibilities are addressed because if the people who are supposed to meet this responsibility are not meeting it, then other people should address those responsibilities. So, you can keep pressing that issue of responsibility and obligation at different levels, so that you go from the guards to the institution itself to other units, other institutions and larger social and political units that should be supervising, giving oversight to the criminal justice system and, ultimately, the general public. And the general public has some obligation to make sure that there is no such thing as a radical epistemic neglect.

Kaylee: Speaking of epistemic neglect, it obviously isn't only happening in the prison sys-

tem, right? Like, even in classrooms boys are encouraged to speak up in math and sciences and girls are told, "Well, why don't you talk about language?" So, I guess my question for you would be kind of like, as a society where epistemic neglect is so deeply structured and especially when it comes to minorities, like people of color, like queer people and even women in some cases—for example, there are very few female philosophy professors—how would we go about trying to undo this when it's such a huge system that a lot of our existence is predicated on.

Dr. Medina: Yeah, no, that's a great question. Education, actually, and educational practices including higher education and what we do at the university is a real clear example in which issues of marginalization and oppression are reflected in the epistemic dynamics. Who has a voice? Who speaks? Who is listened to? Who is given more uptake, so that when they make a contribution to the discussion that gets more traction than other contributions, right? And so on. As you said, right, there are a really important gender dynamics that we have to pay attention to. Philosophy is actually the discipline in the humanities that still has more gender imbalance than any other discipline. So, actually, similar to math, for example, and other sciences in which it is still very much the case that, as you said, the majority of the professors are male and the entire field, the American Philosophical Association, has been traditionally dominated by men. And it is only changing very slowly and especially in the in the last decade or so, like for example, in the last decade, the Eastern APA had its first female president and now we have had a few female presidents, but that has been a recent phenomenon. So, how do you change that? And I think there are all kinds of levels at which you can start changing that. So for example, in philosophy, it has to do with many things, it has to do with recruiting more women to the field, more female philosophy students, and then recruiting more women to the profession, so that more women go to graduate school, they are admitted in PhD programs, they become professors and so on. So it has to do with representation in the profession. And not just representation in the profession, but also representation in the structure of the field, including things like the APA. So that's why I mentioned how important it was to finally have a president of the Eastern

APA who was female. But then also it's not only about that, who is doing philosophy, who is teaching philosophy, but it's also about who is read in philosophy, who is part of the canon, right? And it is still the case that there are so many courses that are taught without including a single woman, even though in the history of philosophy, not only in contemporary philosophy, but throughout the history of philosophy, there have been so many important women philosophers. So it is also about the content of the courses and the syllabus and diversifying the curriculum. And it is also about the dynamics, I mean, this goes also to another aspect of what you're saying. Sometimes there are gender dynamics in the classroom that we have to be vigilant about. So, of course, if we notice that the men are dominating the discussion, for example, or there is a particular style of engagement that seems to be pushing people to the margins or inhibiting some voices, we have to pay attention to that. And sometimes it is gender dynamics, but sometimes it is racial dynamics or ethnic dynamics or linguistic dynamics, even the issue that you mentioned earlier about dialects and different languages and so on. So how is it that we do philosophy in a particular kind of English not just in English in this country, but in a particular way of using English, right? So, all those things become really important for making the profession more welcome to different groups, different styles, different perspectives and different voices.

Kaylee: Another thing I was interested in, not about your talk, but because I was eavesdropping on you guys yesterday and you were talking about queer theory, could you talk more about how that connects to the rest of your work?

Dr. Medina: Yeah, actually, I was interested in queer theory from the very beginning of my career. And at the time, it was something that was done outside philosophy. There was nobody, *almost* nobody in philosophy, who was drawing from queer theory or using queer theory. One of the people who was doing that early on was Naomi Scheman. Naomi Scheman was doing feminist epistemology and she was using Wittgenstein and doing Wittgensteinian analysis. And she introduced queer theory and also trans theory in issues of language, communication and community formation. So I was really interested in that. And one of the reasons why I was interested in queer theory, well, there were also personal rea-

sons, my own sexual orientation as a gay man and also my own activism. From my college years, I was deeply involved in queer activism. But besides those personal and political reasons, I was philosophically interested in what queer theory had to offer. And one of the things that is really interesting about queer theory is that it is a really powerful way of interrogating and undoing dichotomies, like gender binaries, for example, and sexual norms and binaries, either you're straight *or* gay, right? Either you're a man *or* a woman, right? And I was very interested in those problems that have to do with binary thinking and polarization and ways in which we are pulled into this predicament that we have to go one way or another, choose between one or the other. And queer theory is precisely about complicating those binaries and showing how problematic they can be. A part of what queering, queering a concept, queering a practice, is, is to to show how unstable these binaries are. And how problematic they are and how you can take things in many different directions. So I was interested in queer theory from that angle and I'm still working within queer theory and using queer theory in the issues that I talked about before, right? Issues of communication, issues of understanding, issues of knowledge production and the dissemination of knowledge, what queer theory has to offer there. What does it mean to queer a communicative dynamic? What does it mean to queer an epistemic practice, right? And a lot of the time it means decentering that dynamic or practice, shifting the focus to eccentric perspectives. And what that means for making the dynamics or the practice more open.

Micah: I was sort of thinking about your general approach and the idea of, you know, rather than looking at things working, sort of looking at where they break down. Would you say that's an accurate characterization?

Dr. Medina: So you're absolutely right, there is some methodological and theoretical insight that is driving that approach. And as I was explaining earlier, also, for all of my career that was there as an important piece of my of my research, right, and the way in which I was approaching these issues. I was interested in problems and how philosophy can help with normative problems and how in issues of communication and knowledge, if we start with the problems, with failures, how things break down, as you said, we can actually address our

practices and our real life problems in a direct way, so that we don't start with idealizations, "Well, this is what meaning is, this is a theory of meaning and this is a theory of communication and now you can, from that idealization, you can start applying the theory to particular practice," and then it becomes really hard to see how this purely ideal theory of meaning and communication applies to particular practices. However, if you start from the failures, how things break down, and then you start thinking about the limits of communication, the problems of communication, when there is a lack of meaning or a lack of understanding and how that is resolved, how that is addressed in actual cases, what does it mean to say that you're improving the communicative dynamic, that you're producing meaning or that you're making yourself understood, right? Then you can see in more detail what counts as doing better with constant improvement. So you go from the negative to the positive, you go from the failure, the breakdown to the proper functioning. And I think that's a more open approach, methodologically speaking, because you don't start with any assumptions about what is the ideal or what is the way in which we think about or we should think about meaning or knowledge. Rather, you start with ways in which people get stuck, and they are not able to produce meaning, where they are not able to produce knowledge, and then they figure out how to do it. And then you figure out how that process goes. So, that's exactly right. And it's interesting that there have been in different fields, really rich methodological discussions as to what is the starting point of our philosophizing. What comes first, what has methodological priority? And what is the order of explanation? Right? So that, for example, in political philosophy, there is the famous discussion around Rawls, but also around other figures, concerning ideal theory versus non-ideal theory. Charles Mills, for example, was one of the people who brought this up and put this on the philosophical agenda. He himself still wants to preserve ideal theory of some sort, but he wants to say, "But there has to be room for non-ideal theory, so that you also start with the real problems, and you do not start with the idealizations."

Micah: I haven't read a lot in political philosophy, but is it correct to say that's sort of more of a pragmatist approach. It just reminds me in some ways of Peirce in the sense that inquiry

begins with doubt, something like this. I'm just trying to make connections.

Dr. Medina: No, that is a very good connection. In fact, one of the most influential, non-ideal theorists in political philosophy is Elizabeth Anderson and Elisabeth Anderson is precisely giving arguments for non-ideal theory from the point of view of pragmatism. So her work is grounded in American pragmatism, John Dewey and other pragmatists. She's saying, we have to start with the actual practices, we have to start in the middle of things, right? We have to start with how things are, and the way in which people do things, and then figure out from there, how we can improve those practices, right? And it is not a rejection of idealizations in every sense, it's not a way of rejecting that we should appeal to ideals, but it is a way of saying, "Well, those ideals should be grounded in actual practices. Those ideas should emerge from people's lives and people's lived experiences." Peirce himself was a pragmatist and there are a lot of idealizations in his framework. He talks about the end of inquiry as this ideal that we're trying to reach, but he made very clear that that ideal is an ideal that we're supposed to be approaching from the point of view of the actual practices and how they evolved. So yeah, it is definitely something that you can find in the pragmatist tradition and you can think about it pragmatically.

Kaylee: Where do you think the future of philosophy is headed and do you think it's headed in an interesting direction? What are your predictions for the field?

Dr. Medina: Yeah, that is a difficult question. I guess I'll mention a couple of things that are important for that question in my mind. One is that there has been an increasing interest in public philosophy, and in general in connecting philosophy with public life, which of course does not mean that we should all be doing philosophy in any particular way. It's not that we should all do applied ethics or anything like that or applied philosophy, but it is about thinking of how the different ways in which we do philosophy have a contribution to make to public life, whether it is, for example, people doing philosophy of science, or epistemology, and how that should have an impact in discussions about the role of science and knowledge in public life, right? Or whether it is normative issues that we address in

philosophy, in ethics, in political philosophy, in other areas, well how *that* should have an impact in public life. And in a way, it is taking very seriously that philosophy shouldn't be something that is done only in academia and is done only by a select few in this elitist way. But philosophy is something that is pursued in all walks of life and plays a role in all areas of life, and we should connect what we do in philosophy departments and in the field of philosophy with all these discussions that are happening in different ways, in public life and in public discourses. And it's interesting that the American Philosophical Association was not paying a lot of attention to public philosophy until recently, but now, they created a task force on public philosophy and the recent report now that is available at the APA website. So public philosophy, that's something that philosophy departments can use for outreach, connecting with all kinds of parts of society, high schools, the political life of communities, contributing in different ways to enrich the life of the community. So that's one thing, a public philosophy thing. Another way in which the profession seems to be changing, or at least there is the possibility of changing, is by becoming more diverse. There are more women in philosophy than ever before, right? More minorities are being recruited to philosophy and now we are paying attention to more philosophical traditions, not just the European Western tradition, but also African American philosophy, Latin American philosophy, Asian philosophy. So, that is really important because, even though these different ways of doing philosophy are not well represented in the profession yet, now they are there and there is an increasing interest in paying attention to how these different philosophical traditions connect, or they fail to connect, right? How is that there hasn't been more of a dialogue that connects different world philosophies? So that's another way in which the profession may be changing. And it will be an interesting development in the change of philosophy.

Kaylee: Thank you so much for letting us interview you.

Dr. Medina: Yeah, thank you.