Critique and Alterity in Enrique Dussel's Decolonial Philosophy

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Abstract

This paper analyses the tension between the double focus on critique and alterity within decolonial discourses. We argue that an excess of critical thinking could lead to scepticism, whereas an overemphasis on alterity could result in dogmatism. Consequently, since both approaches end up obstructing epistemic decolonization, we argue that it is necessary to strike a balance between critique and alterity; a balance that does not resolve the tension, but seeks to reveal its underlying relation. The first section locates decolonial theory within the framework of critical theory. We highlight how Quijano, Dussel and Mignolo invoke the critical tradition, whilst simultaneously claiming that a radical departure from it is necessary. Turning more explicitly to Dussel in Section 2, we explain Dussel's analectics as a method to localize discourses, in which globally excluded perspectives are foregrounded. In the third section, we defend Dussel's universalism and rationalism against criticisms from Castro-Gómez and Vallega by interpreting him as a relational thinker. Ultimately, the paper concludes that the success of epistemic decolonization hinges on its ability to reconcile classic notions of universality and rationality in a manner that avoids dogmatism and scepticism, namely by a continual grounding of philosophical discourse in material life.

Introduction

The global momentum for decolonizing various fields, including museum collections and university curricula, reflects a growing interest in critically assessing persistent colonial influences. This scrutiny extends to academic disciplines, like philosophy, and draws heavily from the work of Latin American scholars such as Aníbal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, Walter Mignolo and María Lugones. This academic movement has led Nelson Maldonado-Torres to speak of a 'decolonial turn' in scholarship (Maldonado-Torres, 2020). Central to this shift is a critique of (instrumental) rationality within the

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European intellectual tradition, linking the common epistemic practices of the academic world explicitly to modernity and coloniality (Maldonado-Torres et al., 2018, p. 67).

In recent years, however, scholars like Linda Martín Alcoff have expressed concerns about the erosion of the intellectual foundation supporting the call for decolonizing academia. They argue that sceptical, postmodern philosophies have cast doubt on fundamental concepts like humanism, identity, progress, truth, and liberation (Martín Alcoff, 2011, pp. 77–78). Breaking radically with the project of modernity, Martín Alcoff suggests, might lead us straight into the arms of right-wing authoritarianism. In this suggestion, she echoes Wiredu (1980) and Chimakonam (2018), who, from an African perspective, have remarked that abandoning, rather than (re)contextualizing, the philosophical commitment to universality and rationality risks reinforcing narratives about rational thinking belonging exclusively to European philosophy, which decolonial theory precisely seeks to dismantle.

This paper traces these concerns back to a central tension in current debates within decolonial scholarship, namely the interplay between critique and alterity. The critical dimension of decolonial theory seeks to uncover the colonial roots of modern epistemic practices and concepts like universality and rationality. Its concern for alterity materializes in its advocacy for the validation of marginalized forms of knowledge in the pursuit of epistemic decolonization, pushing critical theory beyond its confines. The central inquiry of this paper revolves around identifying which epistemological framework – if any – is capable of reconciling both aims.

To find an answer to this question, we interpret decolonial philosophy from the broader framework of critical theory in the first section by providing a historical understanding of the term 'critique'. Nevertheless, we remark that central thinkers in decolonial discourse, such as Quijano, Dussel and Mignolo, call for a radical departure from the standard – because supposedly Eurocentric – critical theory. In Section 2, we investigate this claim by turning explicitly to the works of Dussel. We shed light on his notion of 'analectics' as a critical method to foreground excluded perspectives in a way that localizes critical discourse in the periphery. The third section addresses two of Dussel's critics, Castro-Gómez and Vallega, who contend that Dussel's commitment to rationality and universality prevents him from formulating a truly decolonial epistemology. To this claim, we respond that Dussel's work is a balancing act between critique and alterity, between dogmatism and scepticism. Through our interpretation of Dussel, we draw attention

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to the fact that such a balancing act is only possible by grounding philosophy in the universal rationality that stems from material life.

The conclusion of this paper will be that the tension between critique and alterity, especially in decolonial discourses but also beyond them, should not be understood as an inconsistency that requires overcoming, but an invitation to transition from the hegemonic substance thinking of coloniality to a relational knowing that emerges from concrete life. This relational epistemology envelops both critique and alterity by establishing transformative relations between knowers and the knowns. Therefore, rather than a relinquishment of critical thinking in favour of either dogmatism or scepticism, we argue that a renewed focus on relationality can provide the new understandings of rationality and universality that epistemological decolonization very much depends on.

1. Is Decolonial Theory a Subset of Critical Theory?

This section inquires into the *critical* dimension of decolonial theory. After a brief explanation of what we take 'critique' to mean, we explain the reluctance of decolonial theorists like Quijano and Mignolo to align themselves completely with the critical tradition. In doing so, we aim to show why decolonial theory should *not* merely be considered a subset of critical theory. The key distinction between the two, as we shall see, is marked by the notion of 'alterity', which decolonial theorists invoke to separate themselves from critical theory. A more detailed discussion of this concept, especially in Dussel's philosophy of liberation, will follow in the subsequent section.

1.a. Critical Theory

'Critical theory', in its more narrow sense, refers to Frankfurt School scholars such as Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse and others who were more or less affiliated with the *Institute for Social Research* in Frankfurt from the 1930s onwards. In its broader sense, it has also been used as referring to feminist theory, queer theory, critical race theory and decolonial theory (Celikates and Flynn, 2023). Given the wide array of thinkers that the term 'critical theory' potentially refers to, it is obviously difficult to come up with a definition that satisfies everyone. Nevertheless, this subsection draws on a brief

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history of the concept of 'critique' to come up with an adequate working definition.

In early 19th Century Europe, the concept of 'critique', in its philosophical sense, was strongly associated with Kant's critical philosophy. Kant derived the term from the Greek '*krinein*', which means to separate or to distinguish. Kant's project, as he outlines in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, is to separate or distinguish philosophy from both *dogmatism* and *scepticism*, which he compares to despotism and anarchism respectively (Kant, 1998). Dogmatism authoritatively imposes propositions without room for questioning; the reader is simply required to accept them. The epistemological danger is obvious: like the despot to which Kant compares it, dogmatist philosophy cannot rely on arguments for support and will therefore eventually resort to the use of force. Scepticism, on the other hand, amounts to the wholesale rejection of the possibility of knowledge, which, for Kant, is equally undesirable. Scepticism, after all, is self-refuting: how could we possibly know that nothing can be known?

Kant therefore outlines his philosophical project, which is to avoid both dogmatism and scepticism. For this philosophical approach, he coins the term 'criticism'. The anti-dogmatism of criticism consists of the fact that it inquires into the *conditions* of (the knowability of) things – it does not stop at the phenomenal realm but proceeds towards its transcendental conditions. Whereas dogmatism claims to understand truth in itself and scepticism denies the possibility to know anything whatsoever, critique proceeds by inquiring into the *possibilities* of knowledge. Kant's critical project is fundamentally about leading phenomena back to their conditions, conditions that (against the sceptic's contention) can be *known*. This questioning of the conditions of the given is the most important characteristic of critical theory (*cf*. Horkheimer, 2021). As is well known, for Kant, these conditions were *inter alia* the subject's transcendental categories of understanding, through which he was able to distinguish (*krinein*) between the knowable and the unknowable.

Today, critical theory still stands in this Kantian tradition, insofar as its central project revolves around the inquiry into the conditions of (social, political, economic, historic, *etc*.) phenomena. The critical project was first radicalized by Hegel and Marx, who turned to the historical conditions of Kant's transcendental subjectivity itself. Both argued in their own way that the rational subject was, in fact, the product of historical struggles, which explains why contemporary critical thinking pays so much attention to the

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analysis of power relations. The reason why critical thinking is nowadays more associated with Marx than with Hegel, however, can be explained by turning to a second characteristic of critical thought.

Critical thinking seeks to move beyond analytical description, into the realm of the normative. Although this normative dimension was already present in Kant,[1] it is best exemplified by Marx, whose final thesis on Feuerbach has by now almost turned into a cliché. To paraphrase, Marx argues that the point of critical thinking is not only to interpret the world, but to change it. The precise relation between interpretation and change remains a fundamental point of contention in critical theory. Whereas some have taken Marx's comment as a call to relinquish philosophy in favour of revolutionary activism, Vattimo and Zabala (2011) have shown that interpretation, or viewing things in light of their historicity, can constitute a revolutionary act in its own right. For now, it suffices to underline that critical theory cannot be thought of in merely descriptive terms.

For a third and final characteristic of critical thinking, we turn to Adorno's and Horkheimer's classic work *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the central thesis of which holds that '[myth] is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002, p. xviii). The book deconstructs the rationality/irrationality binary by showing how mythology and enlightenment are equally grounded in the effort to install the subject as master over nature by means of instrumental reason. However, in doing so, the subject inescapably repeats the natural violence that it was so eager to escape in the first place. By exposing the dialectic that relapsed the continent of enlightenment thinking into the barbary of Nazism, Adorno and Horkheimer underscored that rational thinking may be problematic in itself. This critique opened the door to decolonial scholars who challenge the supposed neutrality of contemporary scientific practices.

This very brief genealogy of critical theory, up to the first generation of Frankfurt School thinkers, allows us to work with a definition of critical theory that encompasses three facets. First of all, critical

[1] The ethical root of Kant's *prima facie* epistemological discussion of critical reason has been convincingly argued for by O'Neill (2015). Importantly, O'Neill (p. 30) points out that Kant's formal account of critical reason as 'lawfulness without lawgiver' (*Gesetzmäßigkeit ohne Gesetz*) allows for different ways of thinking to be considered 'rational'. As we will go on to show in this paper, for Dussel, both theoretical and practical reason find their content in the alterity of concrete life.

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theory inquires into the *conditions* of things; it refuses to take them simply for granted and is, hence, anti-dogmatic. Insofar as it actually claims to *know* these conditions, it is also anti-sceptic. Secondly, critical theory practises critique not for its own sake, but in the pursuit of *change* in the broadest sense of the word. Thirdly, critical theory ventures into the heart of epistemology itself, problematizing *rational thinking*, especially in its instrumental manifestations, by exposing its possibly violent implications.

1.b. Decolonial Theory

It is not difficult or controversial to show that decolonial theory fits the above-mentioned characteristics of critical theory perfectly. Nevertheless, for the purposes of our argument, it is important to make explicit *how* decolonial thinkers put the above-mentioned characteristics into practice. To that end, we turn to the writings of Aníbal Quijano, the Peruvian sociologist who Mignolo and Walsh credit for having provided the groundwork of decolonial theory (2018, p. 23). Especially his two essays 'Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality' and 'Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America' have become classics in the field. Both essays develop Quijano's concept of 'coloniality of power' (*colonialidad del poder*), which he uses to designate the lingering political, social and cultural domination of Latin America, Africa and Asia by Europe.

Quijano discusses the social classification of human beings into racial categories – or *racialization* – as one of the most distinctive moments in the formation of modernity. Quijano argues that the European colonial imposition of a supposedly universal paradigm of knowledge based on Cartesian subject-object dualism, which allowed for the reification and commodification of knowledge in the world market, cannot be understood without taking into account processes of racialization (2007, pp. 171–174). Eurocentric subjectivity, one could paraphrase Quijano, developed by means of negation of the particular non-subjectivity that was conceptualized as the non-European other. This resulted in a binary, dualist and Eurocentric epistemology, which was enforced parallel to the spread of European colonial supremacy across the globe (2000, p. 542). Quijano's proposition that the contemporary paradigm of knowledge generation is, in fact, hegemonic by virtue of its origin in European colonialism – where hegemony is understood as the particular assuming the representation of the universal (*cf*. Laclau

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and Mouffe, 2001, p. xiii) – is commonplace in today's decolonial discourse (*e.g.*, Mbembe, 2016, p. 33; Mignolo, 2007, p. 450).

Quijano adds to this observation that the colonial dualisms (rationality/irrationality, civilized/barbaric, modern/traditional, *etc.*) are supplemented by an epistemic ideal of totality. This ideal depicts society as a closed, hierarchical arrangement of functional relations between the whole and its parts. It assumes a singular historical progression for the entire totality and a rationality that requires every component to conform to this overarching logic (2007, p. 176). According to Quijano, this totalitarian logic led to the creation of the current 'world-system', a totality characterized by the coloniality of power, capitalism and Eurocentrism (2000, p. 545).

This investigation into Quijano's thinking suffices to conclude that his work places him firmly in the critical tradition: his assertions explicitly thematize colonialism as a necessary *condition* for modernity, in which European scientific and philosophical *rationality* played a key role, with the ultimate goal of *changing* the current world-system in the process of epistemic decolonization. Quijano outlines the particular process of change he has in mind:

> epistemological decolonization, as decoloniality, is needed to clear the way for new intercultural communication, for an interchange of experiences and meanings, as the basis of another rationality which may legitimately pretend to some universality. (2007, p. 177)

This quote is important, as it underlines that Quijano does not object to rationality and universality *per se*, but only to their current configurations in the world-system. The key question is, of course, what this new rationality and new universality entail.

Although it is safe to say that decolonial theory, insofar as it elaborates the project outlined by Quijano, expands upon the existing critical tradition, it would be controversial to reduce decolonial theory to a mere subset of critical theory. That is because many decolonial theorists have underlined that classical (Frankfurt School) critical theory is insufficient to rely upon as a theoretical framework for carrying out the decolonial project. In fact, one of the most cited papers in decolonial scholarship, 'Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-Coloniality' by Walter Mignolo, opens by specifically inquiring into the relevance of the critical project for decolonial studies.

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Mignolo echoes our observation that the essence of critical theory resides in the questioning of the given, rather than taking it for granted. He then goes on to state, however, that critical theory has to be 'taken further, to the point and project of de-linking and of being complementary with decolonization. That is, as the foundations of the non-Eurocentered diversality of an-other-paradigm' (2007, p. 485). The route he envisions to arrive at this 'other paradigm', Mignolo describes as follows:

> When *critical theory* becomes de-colonial critique it has of necessity to be *critical border thinking* and, by so doing, the de-colonial shift (decolonization of knowledge and of being) marks the Eurocentered limits of critical theory as we know it today, from the early version of the Frankfurt School, to later post-structuralists (e.g. Derrida) and post-modernists (e.g. Jameson). (2007, p. 485)

Mignolo goes on to argue that critical theory of the Marxist type is insufficient to address today's problems, because – generally speaking – the most fundamental differential in the contemporary world is not that of class, but of race. He points to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* and Anzaldúa's concept of 'border thinking' as examples that can help take critical theory 'to the negated side of the epistemic colonial difference: to the geo- and bio-logical negated locations of knowledge and understanding' (2007, p. 487).

This border thinking, Mignolo underlines, 'delinks' (from Quijano's concept of *desprenderse*; Mignolo, 2007, p. 453) from the Totality (*i.e.*, totalitarianism) of Western epistemology, the Frankfurt School and postmodernism included (2007, p. 493). Mignolo insists that the decolonial project is 'beyond' classical critical theory because it explicitly departs from 'the experience of humiliation and marginalization that have been and continue to be enacted by the implementation of the colonial matrix of power' (2007, p. 492). What Mignolo advocates here, in short, is the *localization* of critical discourse in the periphery, *i.e.*, taking up the particular perspective of the marginalized. This 'obsession' with localizing discourse in the margins has, in fact, been present in decolonial philosophy since Dussel's early formulations of liberation philosophy (2022, p. 49). The concept of localization is deeply intertwined with the decolonial concern for *alterity*, as we shall see in the following section.

Mignolo envisions border thinking as an operation that mobilizes colonial and imperial differences as mediators to establish the connection between various excluded and marginalized perspectives.

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The aim of this border thinking is to delink from hegemonic universality and replace it, in line with Quijano's decolonial project, with a new rationality and a new universality, or rather, to use another concept of Dussel, a pluriversality (2007, p. 498). As we have seen, Mignolo insists that this border thinking is *critical*. But what could he mean by this? Let us review two options.

1.c. Decoloniality between Scepticism and Dogmatism

If Mignolo is using the term 'critical' in the classical sense outlined above, this would imply that critical border thinking is either an extension of, or largely compatible with, existing critical theory. This would, however, contradict the necessity for radical change that Mignolo's concept of 'delinking' calls for. Alternatively, one could assume that Mignolo accords a different meaning to the term 'critique', one that comes in sight through processes of epistemic decolonization. From the standpoint of classical critical theory, this would however raise the question whether these processes of epistemic decolonization are not themselves dogmatic or sceptical. If the critique, to which epistemic decolonization ought to be subjected, is itself the product of that very process, what guarantees do we have that this process will not lead us down the path of dogmatism or scepticism?

With this question, we arrive at the central tension of this paper, namely the call to 'shift the geography of reason' in an effort to do justice to *alterity* on the one hand (*cf*. Gordon, 2011), and the requirements of *critical thinking* on the other. As we have argued in this section, it is evident that discourses of decolonization draw extensively upon the critical tradition. They rely on this tradition to analyse the power structures and historic conditions that lay behind contemporary epistemic discourses. In this regard, they are *critical* in the classical sense. At the same time, however, decolonial theorists like Quijano and Mignolo advocate going beyond the critical tradition by means of epistemological decolonization, because Eurocentric critical thought allegedly continues to be versed in coloniality. Hence, they argue that critical thought as we know it is incapable of genuine interaction with marginalized epistemologies. Going beyond the critical tradition, in turn, implies foregrounding – by means of border thinking – perspectives that have been marginalized and racialized by the colonial matrix of power. As we will explain shortly, this is the result of the decolonial concern for *alterity*.

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The tension we draw attention to stems from the fact that a concern for alterity is not *ipso facto* critical. In fact, this concern could be outright *dogmatic*, when one grants validity to viewpoints only because they are excluded. Some perspectives are, after all, excluded from contemporary epistemic discourses with good reason, for example, because they are deeply rooted in sexism or racism – perspectives that decolonial scholars are themselves, it seems, eager to exclude as well. Some decolonial scholars would, in a critical move, respond to this point by calling attention to the fact that the current academic standards, which we use to evaluate epistemic practices, are by no means neutral: they are historically conditioned by colonial structures, and therefore require changing.

At the same time, however, an overly critical stance could obstruct decolonial aims as well. Namely, by considering all knowledge as being conditioned by coloniality, the critical stance risks ending up at the *sceptical* (or relativist) position where epistemology is reducible to politics, economics, societal actors, *etc*. Apart from the question how, in such a perspectives, one can account for one's *knowledge* of these colonial conditions in a way that does not expose the coloniality of that very knowledge claim, it is also difficult to explain how different epistemic practices are possible if there is 'no outside' (or *alterity*) to coloniality (*cf*. Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 108). What is required, therefore, is an epistemological framework that explains how the transformation of knowledge configurations is possible, without abandoning either critical thinking or the concern for alterity. In the following section, we will discuss how Dussel takes up this task.

2. Are Critique and Alterity Compatible?

After providing some insight into the concept of 'critique' in the first section, we begin this one by turning to the concept of 'alterity'. The philosopher most commonly associated with this concept is arguably Levinas. He has described metaphysics as the desire for the other, whose alterity (otherness, *alterité*) is always at risk of being absorbed into the identity of the thinker or the possessor (1990, p. 21). However, there is always an Absolute other (*l'absolument Autre*, arguably God) that resists this reduction to the sameness (*le Même*) of the subject and whose primary, nonviolent revelation in the face (*visage*) of the other forms the *relation* between sameness and alterity that constitutes the very possibility

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of what Levinas conceives of as first philosophy: ethics (1990, pp. 211–215).

Ethics, for Levinas, amounts to the effort of doing *justice* to the alterity of the other, of resisting the annihilation of this fundamental difference into the identity of any given philosophical/political/cultural system/concept/discourse, *etc*. Along these lines, epistemic decolonization can be understood as the ethical process through which non-violent engagement with epistemic discourses that are excluded from the global economy of knowledge becomes possible. This makes epistemic decolonization an exercise in ethics *par excellence*. Be that as it may, the question that the previous section left us with, is whether this decolonial ethical exercise can be critical, or rather reverts to dogmatism or scepticism. This question becomes especially pertinent for thinkers like Levinas, who have advocated an *unconditional* acceptance of the other. Can such an unconditional acceptance be reconciled with critical thinking?

2.a. The Analectical Method

Let us turn to the works of Enrique Dussel for some insights into this matter. Dussel was not primarily a semiotician (*e.g.*, Mignolo) or sociologist (*e.g.*, Quijano), but first and foremost a philosopher and theologian. As a theologian, Dussel was especially involved in liberation theology, an authentically Latin American approach to theology which started out from a preferential option for the poor (Gutiérrez, 2014, pp. 69–70) and whose adherents were engaged in (and persecuted for) their involvement in liberatory struggles across the continent. Although Church leaders such as Joseph Ratzinger (2004, pp. 483–485) notably deemed liberation theology a Marxist rebranding of Catholicism and, hence, at odds with Church doctrine, liberation theology's critique of the concept of 'development' would prove a highly influential precursor for contemporary decolonial movements (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 142).

The (partially) theological origin of the Latin American decolonial movement explains the particular attention it has always paid to the topic of alterity (and the theological concepts that, conceptualized as the Absolute other – God – come with it). More precisely, one could say that decolonial philosophy, such as Dussel's, and liberation theology share one fundamental aim: rendering the 'other' *concrete*. The other should not be abstracted 'away' into some noumenal realm, nor interpreted as a mere instantiation within a larger global narrative, but should be thought through its historical, political,

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economic situatedness. Dussel, especially in his later works, takes up this task through a rereading of Marx through Levinas and of Levinas through Marx (Allen & Mendieta, 2021, pp. 8–9). In doing so, he seeks to leave room for both radical critique and radical alterity.

Dussel is especially interested in the ethical dimensions of Marx's thought and has repeatedly criticized the Western Marxist tradition from Lukács onwards for having overlooked this aspect of Marx's work (2013, p. 398). That is why, from the end of the 1960's onwards, the focus of Dussel's work has been on reading Marx not solely as a critic of ideology and political economy, but as the precursor of a *critical ethics* as well (2013, p. 398). Dussel's critical ethics, as an attempt to reconcile critique and alterity in the decolonial discourse, can best be explained by an examination of Dussel's concept of 'analectics'.

In his early work, for example *Philosophy of Liberation*, analectics (from Greek '*analogos*', meaning 'beyond logic' but also 'analogous') is presented as a philosophical method that contrasts with the dialectical one. Dussel describes the latter in Levinasian terms, as the movement of totality, the 'expansion of "the same" that assassinates "the other" and totalizes "the other" in "the same"' (1985, §2.5.4.3). The dialectical process Dussel has in mind interprets every other as an instantiation of the same. An everyday example of this would be the interpretation of *other* cultures using the *same* concepts of one's own culture. The dialectical process overcomes all differences, but comes at a double cost. First of all, by reducing the other to an instantiation of the same, one annihilates an irreducible alterity – for example, by ignoring fundamental cultural differences. Second of all, this process renders genuine change impossible, as the totality of sameness incorporates every alterity and does not allow itself to be radically challenged or changed by this otherness.

For Dussel, genuine change can therefore only occur in, what he paradoxically refers to as, 'the exteriority of internal transcendentality' (1985, §4.3.7.5). This interior transcendentality echoes the Marxist notion of the proletariat being both inside and outside of the capitalist system. For Marx, the paradoxical place the proletariat occupies in the capitalist system is the reason why change can only come from them. Analogous to this train of thought, Dussel envisions analectics as a philosophical movement that supports this internal exteriority by departing from an affirmation of it (1985, §5.3.4). In other words, it is only by means of affirming alterity that true liberation can be achieved (1985, §2.6.5.3). In a different essay, Dussel criticizes the first generation of Frankfurt School thinkers

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for not having thematized the disruptive affirmation of alterity that Dussel finds in Levinas (1985, §5.3.3; 2022, p. 63–64). Dussel argues that this is precisely the reason why classical critical theory has not been able to develop an ethics in the fundamental meaning of the term.

That is not to say that Dussel's philosophy of liberation is a mere reiteration of Levinas's ethics of alterity. Already in his early work *Method for a Philosophy of Liberation*, Dussel provides a critique of Levinas. Dussel explains that the alterity that Levinas speaks about is so absolute that it veers towards equivocity. In other words, any meaningful discussion of this other becomes impossible (or unethical) because every concept profanes the other's otherness. The consequence of this, Dussel argues, is that Levinas could simply never envision this other to be an Indigenous American, an African or an Asian (1974, p. 181). Levinas's ethics simply doesn't allow for a rethinking of the history of philosophy from its 'underside', namely the Latin American periphery, because any determination of the other automatically constitutes a violation. This leads Dussel to the conclusion that, where the first generation Frankfurt School disregards otherness (or *alterity*) in favour of critique, Levinas disregards concreteness (or *critique*) in favour of alterity, which makes ethical discourse and action impossible. The analectical method is precisely intended to reconcile the Frankfurt School's materialism with Levinas' transcendence, critique with alterity, theory with praxis, logic with ethics.

The concrete goal Dussel has in mind for his analectical method, as mentioned in the introduction, is localizing discourse. For Dussel, philosophy is not only about propositions (*enuntiationes*) but also about the place where those philosophical propositions are articulated (*locus enuntiationis*). Before philosophizing, it is worthwhile to reflect on questions of location: who am I and from where do I speak. This should not be understood as a capitulation to relativism. For Dussel, the challenge has always been to think how, from a particular context (*e.g.*, the Latin American periphery) philosophical insights with global validity can emerge (2022, p. 59). The aim of the localization of discourse is to foster an intercultural philosophical dialogue that helps modernity transform into what Dussel calls *trans*-modernity. In line with Dussel's analectics, it does so by starting from an affirmation of the *outside* (alterity) of the dominant academic institutions (2022, p. 311).

In short, Dussel's analectics presents us with a transformative view of liberation, not as anarchy but as the creation of a new order incorporating elements of the existing world (1985, §2.6.3 *ff.*). This

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transformation may include destructive moments but is ultimately constructive, as it emphasizes ideational organizing and institution-building akin to some forms of democratic socialism (Martín Alcoff, 2017, p. 19). This is reflected by the interdependency of dialectics and analectics; dialectics *critiques* beings by relating them to their conditions, revealing possibilities for resistance and change by uncovering the potential for *alterity* to emerge. This way, Dussel conceptualizes his critical ethics as an alternative to blind faith or irrationality (2013, p. 206). As a philosophical method, analectics reshapes traditional logical categories by replacing strict identity (A=A) and difference with a logic of analogy based on similarity and distinction. According to this hermeneutic logic, concepts are never fully demarcated and meanings continually diverge and converge.

We will end our discussion of Dussel's analectical method with the remark that the concept of 'analogy' was historically used by medieval philosophers to meaningfully discuss God while respecting the ontological distinction between the finite and the infinite. This makes it not all that surprising that Dussel, too, engages in theological vocabulary to describe his analectical method, which departs from the 'revelation of the Other'. At times, Dussel's wording makes it seem as if the reconciliation between critique and alterity simultaneously signals a reconciliation between philosophy and theology (or reason and faith, for that matter) as well. Take, for example, Dussel's assertion that the affirmation of alterity requires a foundational faith (*fe*), in which the other is trusted (in Spanish: *con-fianza*) and their words taken to be true (*für Wahr halten*; 2020, p. 66). In his *Philosophy of Liberation* (1985, §2.4.7.3–4), Dussel states:

> What reason can never embrace – the mystery of the other as other – only faith can penetrate. In proximity, face to face, someone can hear the voice of the other and welcome it with holy respect. [. . .] Faith means to accept the word of the other because the other reveals it – with no other motivation.

It should be reminded that this faith, which forms the starting point of the hermeneutic process of (intercultural) dialogue that allows the progression of mutual understanding instead of falsification of each other's positions (Dussel, 2020, pp. 69 & 76), is both the condition of and conditioned by the current system which it seeks to criticize. Despite Dussel's occasional misreading of Derrida (*e.g.*, 2022, pp. 187–226; 2004b, p. 330; see Garbarino, 2020) and at the risk of trafficking in Eurocentric vocabulary, we remark that Dussel's position comes close to that of deconstruction, as his analectics

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revolve around the idea that conditioning is only possible from some sort of unconditioned revelation, but that this unconditioned revelation, in turn, depends on conditions in order to reveal itself. This paradoxical formulation might help better understand the relation Dussel has in mind between dialectics and analectics: the latter does not exclude the former, but rather presupposes and transforms it – by affirmation of the other. The faith Dussel speaks of is therefore neither a blind faith nor an irrational one, as the other can at most be unconditioned 'to some extent [*en alguna medida*]' (Dussel, 1974, p. 200).[2]

2.b. Dussel's Concept of Life

Dussel grounds the myriad tensions in his thought (critique/alterity, philosophy/theology, reason/faith) in an unconditional revelation. As we will discuss in this subsection, this unconditional revelation should be understood as *life* itself. Dussel's concept of life becomes more tangible when placed in the context of his ethical reading of Marx. According to Dussel, Marx views 'living labour' (*trabajo vivo*) as endowed with absolute dignity and as the absolute source of all value (2020, p. 88). Capitalism, by contrast, is criticized as the 'idolization of death' (2020, p. 111) as it appropriates and renders lifeless the value it extracts from the living community.[3]

The living community, for Marx and Dussel, is *external* to the capitalist system. In order to make this externality more concrete, Dussel points to Marx's well-known writings on fetishization, which Marx contrasts with critique. Dussel draws attention to the fact that critique always retraces relationships, while fetishization continuously seeks to abstract from them (2020, pp. 92–93). This gives us an essential indication of why life, as living labour, is external to capitalism: because the former is rooted in the *relationality* of the community, whereas the latter negates that relationality. This means that liberation can only be truly transformative when it is rooted in

[2] The ambiguous unconditionality of the other is arguably the reason for ongoing scholarly debates about whether or not Dussel departs from Levinas in his later work (see Martín Alcoff, 2017, p. 17). We believe that the quoted passage sufficiently indicates that, even in Dussel's earlier work, he is aware of the shortcomings of Levinasian Absolute otherness.

[3] Dussel's notion of 'life' is inspired by his discovery of the influence of Schelling's concept of the source from which Being emanates (the *Ur-grund* as *Un-grund*) on Marx's work (2020, p. 118 *ff*.)

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the relationality of life itself. In his later work, Dussel formulates this in his liberation principle, stipulating 'the deontological moment or ethical-critical duty of transformation as a necessary condition for the reproduction of the life of the victim, and as an expression of the feasible development of human life in general' (2013, p. 419). The aim of all liberation, therefore, is a transformation (*i.e.*, de-fetishization) of existing structures for the sake of the exteriority of the other as a concrete living relational being.

Not only capitalism finds its 'source' in life: philosophy does so too. In fact, Dussel traces the universality and rationality of philosophy back to the concreteness of everyday life. It is, after all, from concrete life that the 'universal core problems' (*núcleos problemáticos universales*) of philosophy emerge, which are the fundamental questions that every human being faces when confronted with the 'totality of the real'. These questions are strongly connected, Dussel argues, to questions of reproduction and development of human society. The universal core problems concern, for example, questions surrounding human subjectivity, nature, freedom, ethics, *etc*. In other words, the *universal 'whys'*, as Dussel refers to them (2009, p. 500).

The universal whys lead to a formal concept of universal rationality. Dussel conceptualizes this universality as providing reasons in support of assertions that deal with the universal core problems of life (2009, p. 501). This leads to the conclusion, he argues, that the often assumed break between *logos* and *mythos* at the origin of philosophy makes no sense, as mythology is already a way of rationally responding to the core problems of humanity. The transition from *mythos* to *logos* is more a gradual process, in which terms gain in univocal precision, but lose a richness in meaning (2009, pp. 501–503).

Dussel does not favour one over the other. In line with his analectical method, he acknowledges that philosophy depends to some extent on precise terminology to function, but always and necessarily has to depart from the ambiguities of concrete material life. It is at this point that he sees a role carved out for the philosopher. The philosopher is the liminal being that traces the array of conceptual structures and categories that have been articulated as a response to life core's questions back to material life itself. Dussel speaks of 'ordering' the responses that have been provided to life's core problems, a task fulfilled by philosophers throughout space and time. He points to examples from the sociology of philosophy: the 'schools of life' in ancient Greece, the *calmécac* of the Aztecs, the sage communities in ancient Egypt, *etc*. (Dussel, 2009, p. 503). Simply put, their

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task has to been to trace back the particular to the universal and find the one amongst the many.

Let us briefly recapitulate the path traced so far. The first section outlined that decolonial scholars take a lot of inspiration from critical theory, but also argue for a departure from it. This raised the question whether this also implies a departure from critical thinking towards dogmatism or scepticism. We answered this question by turning to Dussel and his efforts to reconcile critique with alterity through his reading of Marx, which informs his decolonial critique of global capitalism. Dussel's reading, nevertheless, foregrounds the ethical aspects of Marx, retracing both economic and philosophical systems to their common origin in concrete communal life. This critical ethics, like his analectical method, neither favours critique over alterity nor alterity over critique, but seeks to put them into *relation* by showing how critique is only possible by establishing a relation with alterity.[4] Conversely, the other can only become manifest in its otherness through this critique.

This means that alterity is both the beginning and the end of critique, so to say, and critique is the beginning and end of alterity. Dussel entrusts philosophers with the task of criticizing economic, political and philosophical system by thinking them from the lived exterior relations that support them (which, as we have seen, takes its lead from Marx's de-fetishization). The critical ethics Dussel has in mind is, therefore, first and foremost an ethics of relationality. In the third and final section, we will examine the concept of relationality further.

3. Can Relational Philosophy Point the Way Forward?

Let us take a step back to ask if Dussel's undertaking to reconcile alterity with critique, whilst avoiding both dogmatism and scepticism, is in the end successful. Given their overall distance from critical theory, it is no surprise that more analytically oriented Latin American philosophers, such as Jorge Valadez (2003, p. 98) and Susanna Nuccetelli (2020, pp. 218 *ff.*), have expressed concerns about some of Dussel's positions – in particular what they perceive as a dogmatic privileging of oppressed viewpoints. However, given

[4] An example here is Dussel's critique of K.O. Apel's discourse ethics, which disregards the *material community* as the ultimate foundation of all critique (Dussel, 2020, pp. 44 *ff.*).

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the brevity of this paper, we shall restrict ourselves to two critics working from within the same discourse as Dussel, namely Santiago Castro-Gómez and Alejandro Vallega. We outline how Dussel's work more or less anticipates these counterpoints in what we believe to be the fundamentally relational dimension of his epistemology.

Like Valadez and Nuccetelli, Castro-Gómez and Vallega direct their criticism towards Dussel's envisioned engagement with marginalized perspectives (in our terminology: his concern for alterity). Castro-Gómez argues that Dussel's critique of modernity does not go far enough: he merely relocates the power dynamics of the modern episteme without fundamentally altering them. By focusing on the oppressor-oppressed relationship, in which marginalized communities are reduced to undifferentiated and passive victims of the world-system, Dussel stays within the binary oppositions that characterise modern rationality and thus perpetuates a paternalistic view of the Latin American periphery (Castro-Gómez, 2021, pp. 24, 56 & 158).

Vallega concurs, stating that the 'phenomenological experience of radical exteriority before rational discourse', which informs Dussel's analectical thinking, should lead to ways of thinking that 'no longer repeat Western modern rational justifications, concepts, and ways of comprehending the other, at least by putting these ways of thinking into question' (2014, p. 77). Vallega argues however that Dussel ultimately fails to live up to this last point, as his language and style of thinking remains wholly within Western philosophical discourse. In short, despite the fact that Vallega's reading of Dussel is less harsh than Castro-Gómez's, their assessments ultimately align: Dussel's analectical epistemology simply never delivers on its transformative promises because, in the end, it stays too close to modern rationality.

From this point onwards, Castro-Gómez develops his argument along Foucauldian lines, viewing the deconstruction of power dynamics within discursive practices as the designated method for combatting epistemic marginalization. Although this certainly diminishes the risk of 'moral authoritarianism' that Castro-Gómez signals in Dussel's alleged identity politics (2021, p. 162), it comes, we believe, at a significant cost. The framework proposed by Castro-Gómez remains overly abstract and theoretical, failing to fully engage with the concrete realities of epistemic injustices. As a result, Castro-Gómez's postmodernism does not provide a viable path for a positive, emancipatory, and transformational strategy, unlike Dussel's philosophy. As Martín-Alcoff (2000) has underlined, a nuanced form of identity politics, exemplified by Dussel, might be necessary in emancipatory struggles.

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Vallega, too, views these shortcomings of Castro-Gómez's critique of Dussel (2014, p. 175). Instead, he proposes an aesthetic approach to epistemic decolonization. Vallega's approach departs from the pre-theoretical, pre-linguistic, and pre-rational aspects of life in the pursuit of an aesthetic sensibility that allows to rethink history from concrete life (2014, pp. 197–201). Specifically, he argues for an aesthetic that 'is not the experience of pure, rational order but the undergoing and going under of one's identity through a confrontation with chance, the uncontrollable, the unexpected, the uncanny, that which is strange beyond measure' (2014, p. 198). It is the return to this pre-rational realm that, according to Vallega, will allow for new articulations of rationality beyond the modern one and a subversion of the tacitly assumed 'primacy of reason over aesthetic experience' (2014, pp. 199–200).

Although we welcome Vallega's call for a re-grounding of philosophical and scientific systems in the aesthetic sensibilities of lived experiences, we would like to stress that this reference to material life is far from absent in Dussel's work. As Vallega himself knows (2014, p. 65), Dussel's notion of life as the source of economic value is central to his reading of Marx and his philosophy as a whole. As for Dussel's rationalism, we underline that this should be understood as an effort – again – to avoid both dogmatism and scepticism. Dussel's account of rationality does not claim that reason is superior to aesthetics, but merely affirms the importance of *articulating* these aesthetic experiences. The 'opening' Vallega observes in the example he gives of Fanon's imagery in *Black Skins, White Masks*, is precisely made possible by Fanon's discursive articulation of his lived existence.

Summing up, whereas Vallega's position could be read as an expansion upon (implicit) tendencies in Dussel's work, Castro-Gómez on the other hand fails to see that Dussel's liberation philosophy is fundamentally a balancing act. Dussel's analectic endeavour to think the other in its concreteness seeks to manoeuvre dogmatism and scepticism by avoiding both a reduction of the other into its identity within the world-system ('the oppressed') and an equivocity that abstracts the other out of the world-system entirely, thereby making it unknowable and inaccessible. This explains why Dussel never aims at a total dismantling or wholesale rejection of modern rationality and instead prefers to speak of trans-modernity, incorporating the achievements of modernity but localizing them in and evaluating them from concrete lived realities (2022, p. 309).

Furthermore, Dussel underlines that the development of alternative rationalities to the modern one will take time and effort (2022, p.

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317). His position does not allow for the imposition of a new universal epistemology, which would only transform the modern-colonial epistemology to its latest, abstract form. The new epistemology Dussel has in mind has to be developed in a communal process that guarantees the universality of its rationality by a constant grounding in material life. Again, Dussel's attachment to universality and rationality should not be understood from a conservative attachment to the European tradition, but from a sincere realization that dogmatism and scepticism could lead epistemic decolonization in dangerous directions.

We pointed to the fact that, although Castro-Gómez's accusation of identity politics is, in Dussel's case, not totally unwarranted, this should be viewed as part of Dussel's balancing act as well. Dussel is keenly aware of the many complexities that his philosophy of liberation steps into, which is why allegations of naiveté on his part when it comes to his engagement with the concept of 'exteriority' always fail to convince in the end. Again, Martín Alcoff (2021, p. 61) has repeatedly called attention to the fact that combatting philosophical Eurocentrism by shifting the geography of reason necessarily involves naming social groups *in spite of* all the complexities involved. This pragmatism is simply required by the fundamental principle from which philosophy should always depart: the concreteness of material life.

We have noted that the meaning of Dussel's term 'life' is far from clear, which, to many, could be problematic if it is to function as the final arbiter of all our philosophy and knowledge production worldwide. This is reinforced by the paradoxical place this concept occupies in Dussel's work: on the one hand, 'life' acts as the ultimate condition of all our discursive practices and provides the ground which is required to avoid scepticism (*cf.* Dussel 1985, §4.1.8.6). In this regard, Dussel can be considered a foundationalist. On the other hand, life should not a understood as a substance in the classical, absolute sense, as it cannot be separated from its many articulations (or fetishizations) in political, economical, scientific, philosophical systems.

In the previous section, we have therefore argued that Dussel should be read as a theorist of relational knowing. Relational knowing acknowledges that knowers are doers who are concretely connected to their specific spaciotemporal contexts and aims to broaden and diversify the experiences that academic philosophy draws upon (Kirloskar-Steinbach, 2023, p. 138). In other words, relational knowing departs from a different starting point than the

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Cartesian subject-object dualism that has taken a central position in decolonial discourses from Quijano onwards.

This explain why the interest in relational epistemology is shared by virtually all decolonial theorists, who have repeatedly identified hegemonic, colonial thinking with the negation of relationality (*cf*. Serequeberhan, 2015, p. 92; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 135 *ff*.). Colonial rationality, it is argued, denies its own relationality and betrays its embeddedness in material life. It is a thinking that isolates and categorizes entities through binary opposition and hierarchies, rather than thinking them in the plurality of their lived relationships. The concept of relationality thwarts this dominant logic of totality, identity and difference and accepts the perspectivity of knowledge (Martín Alcoff, 2018, p. 206). Relational epistemologies also imply the relinquishment of the standard idea of philosophy as objective and impartial, in favor of a social notion of philosophy that takes into consideration the power dynamics that come with that social context (Kirloskar-Steinbach & Kalmanson, 2021, pp. 35 *ff*.).

This relational view should neither be seen as dogmatic, nor as sceptical, but as *democratic*. We share the conclusion of Martín Alcoff, who views Dussel's analectics as a means to avoid critique itself being fetishized by constantly referring to a lived reality (2011, p. 67; 2021, p. 59). By putting our epistemic processes up for negotiation, decolonial philosophy submits classical critical theory to the test that decolonial philosophy should itself be subjected to as well: that of the material reality of life.

As Kasulis (2002, pp. 36–37) has remarked, the essence of relational epistemologies is their view that relations are not merely external to us, but internal as well. In other words, relations make us who we are. This implies that relational knowing necessitates an openness to transformation and a questioning of established structures. This transformative aspect is embodied in Dussel's analectical method and liberation principle. Dussel's (implicit) relational ontology in his work conceptualizes a continually unfolding network of relations that generate the myriad beings that constitute the world as becoming. These relations are material insofar as they depend on the communal life in which the subject is sustained and from which the subject can emerge. Conversely, as continually developing in communal life, the material world is inherently relational. For Dussel, tracing back the many world philosophical traditions, including the Anlgo-European one, to these lived material conditions of existence, translates to accepting the invitation to adopt a relational

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view of reality in which the openness to change forms an integral part.[5]

It is at this point that we can fully grasp Dussel's approach to the tension between critique and alterity in his work: by viewing it from the field of relationality. The relationality of material life enables Dussel to, on the one hand, view things as part of the greater configuration of coloniality and avoid a de-historicization that would render directed political action impossible (unlike Castro-Gómez and Vallega, *cf*. Martín Alcoff, 2017, p. 21); on the other hand, he uses the field of relationality as the externally becoming ground which accounts for the generation of knowledge in its various formations. This means that relational thinking can be critical, without lapsing into an infinite regress.

4. Conclusion

This paper has inquired into the tension between critique and alterity in decolonial philosophy, underlining how this tension becomes most explicit when decolonial scholars, such as Dussel, Quijano and Mignolo, call for a departure from the (classical) critical tradition. We found that the arguments for such a departure often come in the form of affirming an *alterity* which is structurally excluded from critical discourses, such as the Latin American periphery. The affirmation of this 'otherness' does not equal a call for inclusivity, but aims to transform ongoing epistemic practices more radically in the process of localizing discourses.

Our analysis reveals that this approach risks both dogmatism and scepticism: either dogmatically asserting the absolute credibility of the 'other' or sceptically reducing knowledge to local socio-political configurations. To navigate these risks, we examined Dussel's strategy, which becomes most explicit in his reading of Marx. Dussel's critical ethics relies on rational (critical) analysis to reveal the face of the oppressed other, while also insisting on thinking this alterity in its material concreteness. Although the latter can be achieved

[5] It deserves mentioning here that Dussel's material ethics, rooted in communal life, is strongly influenced by the works of Xavier Zubiri, whom he discusses in his treatment of the subject in his *Ética de la liberación* (1998, pp. 127–128). Zubiri's critique of a static substantialism, favouring a concrete, dynamic, and evolving understanding of reality and essence, as outlined in *Sobre la esencia* (1963), notably shapes Dussel's approach.

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by grounding this critical ethics in the lived reality of material life, Dussel has always stressed the need for universality and rationality.

In doing so, Dussel challenges us to relinquish overly one-sided positions and balance the universality of critical rational thinking with an awareness of the material conditions revealed by the other's alterity, without reducing one to the other. What is needed, we have argued, is not reductionism, but relationality. Embracing relational thinking implies a balancing act much like Dussel's, in which knowledge discourses are put *in relation* with concrete material life.

Our reasoning yields three important insights. First, decolonial scholarship does not (and should not) exclude the possibility of universality, as long as this universality successfully incorporates marginalized perspectives. This implies that universality should always be open to transformation. Second, this approach to relational thinking could open new avenues for intercultural philosophical dialogue. When philosophy is seen as a practice rather than a set of static propositions, we can achieve a more inclusive meta-understanding of philosophy that embraces traditions outside the Anglo-European sphere. Third, the understanding of philosophy as a training in relational thinking necessitates a critical examination of educational practices. This is because education arguably stands out as one of the most important spheres where relationships are not merely instructed but actively developed and practiced. What insights are implied by this relational viewpoint of education? And how can this particular outlook on education contribute to fostering critical and engaged philosophers, who on the one hand acknowledge their own situatedness, whilst on the other hand aspire to universal rationality?

These questions require more (interdisciplinary) attention moving forward. Decolonial discourses would particularly benefit from an account of the *genesis* of universality and rationality within local contexts, for which Dussel's analectics could form the groundwork. Such an account would likely bolster the decolonial position against accusations of relativism or identity politics. By tracing how universal concepts and rational thought emerge from specific cultural and historical settings, decolonial scholars can demonstrate that these ideas are not the exclusive domain of any single tradition. Instead, Dussel's analectic method could form a welcome starting point to show how universality and rationality can be involved in dynamic processes shaped by diverse contributions from various marginalized perspectives.

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