

ARTICLE

Making Philosophy Matter

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(Received 04 February 2025; revised 25 March 2025; accepted 27 March 2025)

Abstract

This article contends that philosophy is losing its standing because of its tendency to treat its own practice as an exercise in thinking about the world. When we treat ourselves and our colleagues as thinkers of the world, we isolate both our research and each other from the world. This is affecting the way philosophers and their work are perceived by others, and subsequently, if and how they are received as contributors to public discourse. One potential solution is to acknowledge that philosophy *matters* in the material sense: we must return to our bodies as (1) sites of meaning-making and discovery and (2) the condition that ensures philosophical practice remains a worldly activity. We make philosophy *matter* by making our research *matter* and each other *matter*.

Keywords: embodiment; Geophilosophy; New Materialism; philosophical practice

Have you ever tried to convince a practising real estate solicitor that, actually, if they just adopted a more phenomenological attitude to drafting that new client's lease, if they just read a bit of Husserl, maybe got to grips with the phenomenological, transcendental, and eidetic reductions, they could reconceive wildlife on the client's land as more than mere things on property but as fellow inhabitants?

I have, and I do not recommend it. Every sentence I speak, I can feel myself drifting further away from my lawyer friend. Halfway through my well-rehearsed argument in defence of Husserl's *Lebenswelt*, I can see their eyes glaze over. They are (rightfully) thinking things like: "What does eidetic mean?" and "I can't lose another client to these pie-in-the-sky ideas" and, most painfully, "Is this not all purely academic?" The conversation ends there, and I note to myself: this does not matter to them.

These are all valid criticisms that correctly lay the blame at my feet. I have failed to enter their world. In their eyes, I engage in harmless speculation, a frictionless spinning that would rather charter ineffectual flights of fancy over the world than get stuck into the muck of reality. How can academic philosophers improve their standing in the world? How can they escape the charge of being "purely academic"?

1. Rejecting the body; rejecting the world

1.1. Overcoming intellectual asceticism

In my view, we can address this issue by examining how academic philosophers approach their practice. For example, Lou Marinoff diagnoses philosophy's decline partly in terms of macro-political forces and partly in terms of a lack of imagination or engagement with the world.¹ He then reimagines philosophical practice as a political programme peopled by philosophical counsellors that seek to "return philosophy to the marketplace from whence it came."²

I approach philosophical practice differently. Instead of emphasising the political dimension of philosophical practice or accusing philosophers of turning away from the world, this article claims that when philosophers treat philosophical practice as a thinking of the world, they are preparing for their own self-isolation from it.

This modelling of practice on thought is driven by an intellectual asceticism rooted in Plato's Socrates. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates famously defines philosophy as the "practice for dying and death" because the soul can only operate at 100% philosophical efficacy when it has escaped the distracting and deceiving influences of the body.³ This has encouraged interpretations of Plato's Socrates as taking a hard line against the body. This elevation of the mind at the expense of the body has had a significant and lasting effect on the trajectory of Western philosophy. We are now in a position where the modern academic philosopher is predominantly identified as a thinker of the world.

Colleen Zoller's *Plato and the Body: Reconsidering Socratic Asceticism* challenges this interpretation of Plato's Socrates in an effort to undermine this hard-line intellectual asceticism in Western philosophical practice. Denigrating the body and excluding it from philosophical practice erodes our connection to the world. It isolates the philosopher and their work. Just as the Scholastic philosophers struggled to explain how disembodied angels commune with terrestrial beings, without our bodies, we have no means of being in or interacting with the world. Moreover, denying the body also undermines our claim to care about the world. As Zoller warns, "When we devalue the physical, we lessen concern for all that is linked with it—women, people of color, the other animals, and nature itself."⁴

1.2. Making philosophy matter

Academic philosophy matters when it is welcomed into the world of which it speaks, and the way in which the philosopher can better ingratiate themselves into this world is through the act of *mattering*. This notion of *mattering* draws on recent attempts to apply the ideas of New Materialism—matter is not a passive thing, but agential, meaningful, and intra-active—to practice-based research.⁵ For philosophers to *matter*, they must acknowledge their bodies as real sites of philosophical activity. This is not a call for more philosophies "of" the body. Instead, we must allow our body its moment in the analysis, production, interpretation, and application of meanings. For philosophy to *matter*, we have to acknowledge that we philosophise "with" the body.

¹ Marinoff 2002, chap. 1.

² Marinoff 2002, 12.

³ Plato 1992, 64a.

⁴ Zoller 2018, 9.

⁵ Coleman, Page, and Palmer 2019.

There are two key ways of *matter*ing:

1. **We have to make our research *matter*.** We need to engage with our research in a way that brings it to life in the world of others. This means engaging the sensibilities of the body before we can speak to the mind.
2. **We have to make each other *matter*.** We need to find a way to demonstrate that philosophers have always already been involved in the world. We have to treat each other as working in and caring about the world, not abstracting from it.

2. Making our research matter

2.1. Why philosophy matters

Good philosophy draws people into unfamiliar orbits of understanding and practice. It encourages others to engage in their own form of philosophical inquiry. Entering new orbits enriches our collective ability to attend to the most pressing issues of our time. Philosophers *matter*, therefore, when they do more than transmit knowledge—when they encourage others to do philosophy.

But this is an unenviable task. We break free of the gravitational pull of established beliefs by the propulsion of our own willingness to go elsewhere. Philosophers do not pull people out; they make philosophy *matter* for others by creating clear and appealing lines of inquiry for them to pursue on their own.

2.2. Making philosophy edible

We make our research *matter* by respecting its edibility. The edibility of research evokes a worldliness of meaning that necessitates embodied engagement. Mouthing babies are perfect examples of both literally and metaphorically taking a bite out of everything. Their growing sense of what is and is not edible is both the means and consequence of their embodied engagement with the world.

Philosophical practice is no different. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, a 17th-century nun, playwright, and distinguished poet, famously argued that philosophy happens in the kitchen.⁶ Her almost alchemical account of the frying of eggs in butter, oil, and syrup evokes an ontological dimension to cooking.⁷ Sor Juana made her work *matter* by respecting its edibility: she located it in the world and predicated its discovery on her embodied engagement. More importantly, she presented it in a way that invited others to draw on their own embodied experiences as analogues to make their own sense of the world. We call this analogical reasoning.

2.3. The physical labour of analogical reasoning

Plato's Socrates was a master of analogical reasoning. He drew on everyday phenomena, such as leaky jars or being in a cave, as relatable points of reference to help his interlocutors grab hold of his abstractions. "But Socrates, what do you mean by the difference between appearance and Forms?" "Ah. Imagine yourself trapped in a cave. All you can see are the shadows on the wall cast by objects outside the cave. These shadows are the appearances.

⁶ Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz 2014, 185.

⁷ Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz 2014, 184.

The objects casting the shadows are the Forms.” These analogies give material purchase to the abstract. They provoke a sense of worldly familiarity in us, and then invite us to draw on our own embodied experiences to make them meaningful.

I believe that this type of analogical reasoning is a form of physical labour because it draws on embodied experiences. When imagining myself stuck in a cave, I can almost feel the qualitative difference between shadows and the objects casting them. I am invited to inhabit the cave and navigate the logic of the analogy through my body.

This physical labour is more than a rhetorical flourish to engage non-philosophers. It is fundamental to philosophical inquiry. As philosophers, we make philosophy *matter* for ourselves by invoking our own embodied experiences to make sense of the world. The more time we spend filling other people’s philosophies with worldly experience, the more edible that library of meanings becomes. We cultivate expertise. We make philosophy *matter* for others by first acknowledging this fact. Only then will we remain aware of the need to provoke in others the same call for embodied, analogical reasoning that we allow for ourselves. To engage their minds, we must first speak to the sensibilities of their bodies.

3. Making each other matter

3.1. *Philosophy’s reputation*

Identifying philosophical practice with thought has two effects. First, it narrows the scope of philosophical inquiry to questions about what other people *think* about the world. Second, it presents philosophers as operating from an otherworldly perch, free from the concerns of the real world. Both reinforce the false reputation of philosophers as engaged in “purely academic” work. The onus is on us, philosophers, to correct the record.

3.2. *Geophilosophy and inhabiting the Earth*

In *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, Friedrich Nietzsche offers a way of making philosophers matter. He is confronted by a problem: How do we make the pre-Socratics relevant to 19th-century sensibilities? Why care about Thales when we have Newton? For Nietzsche, “the only thing of interest in a refuted system is the personal element. It alone is what is forever irrefutable.”⁸ Personality becomes an expression of philosophical meaning. Nietzsche’s task is not to provide a theoretical exposition of an allegedly failed system but to grant us a glimpse into their personalities as essential features of their philosophy.

In a recent talk on Geophilosophy at the University of Dundee, Didier Debase invoked Nietzsche’s appeal to personalities to argue that a philosopher’s way of inhabiting the Earth is a valid object of philosophical inquiry:

For Nietzsche, these philosophers (pre-Socratics) are not just producing theories. They are producing affect and precept...and this affect and precept is not a history of the philosopher but a history of inhabiting the earth.⁹

Geophilosophy accepts two things: philosophy is a contingent phenomenon that emerges from the Earth, and the way a philosopher inhabits the Earth is part and parcel of their

⁸ Nietzsche 1998, 25.

⁹ Debase 2025.

philosophy. As Debase later puts it: “If you want to know who is Heraclitus, you have to see how he inhabits the earth of the Ancient Greeks.”¹⁰

3.3. *Getting in the room with Merleau-Ponty*

One way to make philosophers *matter* in the sense intimated by Nietzsche and Debase is to acknowledge their embodied status. The weight of embodiment can knock philosophers off their otherworldly perch. Engaging with how a philosopher inhabits the Earth while practising philosophy can broaden our understanding of their work.

A good example is Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*. In it, Merleau-Ponty develops an account of embodied subjectivity. He famously claims that the body, not the self, is the true subject of perception.¹¹ We can engage with Merleau-Ponty’s claim in two ways.

Traditionally, we analyse the substantive claims of the text. What did Merleau-Ponty think about the body? What arguments did he make? Can we check the empirical veracity of his underlying premises? There is, however, another dimension to Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. We can get in the room with him. In doing so, our inquiry expands from “What did Merleau-Ponty think about the body?” to “What did Merleau-Ponty do when engaged in philosophical inquiry?” We then see that Merleau-Ponty not only thinks about the body but also recruits it as a method of critique. Rather than getting caught up in the ongoing debate as to whether empiricism or intellectualism better explains perception, Merleau-Ponty takes his own body for a test drive to see which side of the argument, if any, better comports with reality. Getting in the room with Merleau-Ponty opens us up to this practical side of his philosophy.

To make each other *matter* in this sense, we need a smidge of irreverence. We have to intrude on each other’s lives. Like the apprentice carpenter who watches their teacher at work, we too must place ourselves in the room with other philosophers. We are the spiders that keep the exiled Spinoza occupied, the hidden nanny-cam keeping tabs on the lotus-positioned Descartes, or the annoying intern nibbling at the heels of Latour, clipboard and pen in hand.

4. Philosophising with the body

So, how do we make philosophy *matter*? We make philosophy *matter* by acknowledging that we philosophise with the body. This means reminding philosophers that they always already *matter*. We make research *matter* by acknowledging the worldly status of meaning and predicating its discovery on embodied analogical reasoning. We must find ways to invite our audiences to engage in this reasoning, to raise their own worlds up to make sense of our abstractions. We make each other *matter* by treating other philosophers (even the dead ones) as always already philosophising in the world. By emphasising their embodied status, we can engage with how philosophers inhabit the world as well as what they think about it.

Author contribution. Håkon Evjemo is a PhD student at the University of Dundee. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty, Bergson and Schelling, he is currently asking what it means to philosophise with the body, instead of merely doing a philosophy of the body. His research asks if and how our body is involved in philosophical and legal practice, and how embodied practices can supplement transitions to ecocentric models of governance.

Conflicts of interest. The author declares none.

¹⁰ Debase 2025.

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty 2005, 239.

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