

# Reciprocal Recognition and Epistemic Virtue

Celia Edell\*

## Abstract

*Using the concepts of epistemic virtue and vice as defined by José Medina, and reciprocal recognition as outlined by Glen Coulthard, I argue that the Canadian state is currently in a non-reciprocal relationship with Indigenous peoples as a result of epistemic failure on the part of the state. This failure involves a surface-level recognition of Indigenous peoples at the same time as the manifestation of the epistemic vices of arrogance, laziness and closed-mindedness. The epistemic injustice framework alongside a critique of the politics of recognition can help shed light on what is going wrong between the settler state and Indigenous peoples. Moreover, by appealing to grounded normativity, an Indigenous ethical framework, I argue that a land-based ethics of reciprocity can help us move toward reciprocal recognition and equality, if we are epistemically humble, curious and open-minded to it.*

Glen Coulthard argues that the relationship between the Canadian state and Indigenous peoples is one of non-reciprocal recognition. Drawing from the literature on epistemic injustice, in particular José Medina's notions of epistemic virtue and vice, I argue that this non-reciprocal recognition involves an epistemic failure by the current Canadian state. Finally, I argue that the Canadian state must expand its concept of recognition to involve epistemic virtue to achieve a relationship of reciprocal recognition and reconciliation. My paper is divided into three main sections: in section one I argue that Coulthard is describing a form of non-reciprocal recognition that is

---

\*L'auteure est étudiante à la maîtrise en philosophie (Université McGill).

distinct from lack of recognition or misrecognition; I call this third form of recognition *surface-level recognition*. I connect this surface-level recognition to the framework of epistemic injustice through the works of Rebecca Tsosie, Kristie Dotson and Linda Martín Alcoff. In section two I explain the notion of epistemic vice, as described by Medina, and argue that the current recognition of Indigenous groups by the Canadian state is non-reciprocal precisely because it manifests these vices. In section three I explain the notion of grounded normativity, an Indigenous land-based ethical framework described by Coulthard and use Medina's concept of epistemic virtue to link grounded normativity to reciprocal recognition. I argue that this land-based ethics of reciprocity can help us move toward reciprocal recognition and equality, if we are epistemically humble, curious and open-minded to it.

First, it is important to clarify the idea of the 'state' to which I will refer throughout this paper, specifically with regard to the relationship between the state and its individual office-bearers and citizens. The social ontology literature on collective agents is not in agreement on whether complex collective actors such as states can have agency, group intentions or a unified self-understanding.<sup>1</sup> I remain neutral on the issue of whether the state constitutes a group agent, and instead proceed with the claim that epistemic vices of the 'state' correspond to the epistemic vices of the individuals who make up and represent the state (i.e. office-bearers). In other words, individual office-bearers are representatives of the state and can exhibit epistemic vices and/or virtues. If the office-bearers exhibit vice, especially if a vice is widespread among office-bearers, I understand the state to exhibit that vice.

## 1. Recognition and Reciprocity

The politics of recognition refers to the theory that justice in contemporary politics is largely shaped by the need or demand for recognition by groups. It is concerned with the way our personal identities are dependent on dialogical relations with others and with the way equal recognition in public spheres affects legal and political

---

<sup>1</sup> E.g. Epstein, B. (2015), *The Ant Trap: Rebuilding the Foundations of the Social Sciences*; and Tollefsen, D. (2015), *Groups as Agents*.

rights and benefits.<sup>2</sup> Most commonly, the politics of recognition is used to illuminate and justify the demands of social/political movements, as well as understand the oppressive conditions these movements are up against. The end goal of the politics of recognition is not a difference-blind society. Instead, it strives to recognize, maintain and cherish difference forever.<sup>3</sup> This is because our identities are understood to be partly shaped by recognition. Recognition is a way of framing interpersonal relations through people's normative and psychological status to one another. It is an attitude held by someone in the public realm, often by a political or some other authoritative institution, which is meant to recognize the particularity of a social group and its group-based rights.

There are two types of harmful relations within the politics of recognition: (i) lack of recognition and (ii) misrecognition. Both the absence of recognition and misrecognition can distort a person or groups' identity in the eyes of others as well as for themselves. To deny recognition to a person or group is to thwart their desire for authenticity and ability for self-esteem. Misrecognition, particularly by an authoritative institution, deforms a groups' identity, thereby "saddling its victims with a crippling self-hatred".<sup>4</sup> In cultivating an attitude toward others, the balance of power between groups is unsurprisingly relevant. Reciprocity plays an important role in determining whether recognition satisfies the demands of oppressed peoples.

Yellowknives Dene<sup>5</sup> and political theorist Glen Coulthard's book *Red Skin, White Masks* offers a detailed critique of the current politics of recognition which exposes the ways in which the recognition offered to Indigenous groups in Canada is non-reciprocal. He argues that colonial relations of power do not "depend solely on the exercise of state violence, [their] reproduction instead rests on the ability to entice Indigenous peoples to *identify*, either implicitly or explicitly, with the profoundly *asymmetrical* and *nonreciprocal* forms of recognition

---

<sup>2</sup> Taylor, C. (1994), « The Politics of Recognition », p. 34.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>5</sup> Yellowknives Dene, or T'atsaot'ine, are a band of the Athapaskan-speaking Dene, one of five main groups of the Akaitcho Dene First Nation of the Northwest Territories.

either imposed on or granted to them by the settler state and society”.<sup>6</sup> Coulthard includes nonrecognition and misrecognition under the concept of non-reciprocal recognition. This makes sense as the failure to recognize a group is a failure to grant them a “vital human need” in an other-dependent world.<sup>7</sup> Misrecognition is non-reciprocal in that it imprisons the misrecognized in a “distorted relation-to-self”.<sup>8</sup> While these non-reciprocal forms of recognition are an important area to explore in the politics of recognition, I am here interested in another kind.

The form of non-reciprocal recognition of oppressed groups described by Coulthard does not correspond to failure to recognize. It does not obviously misrecognize either. Instead, this form of recognition grants (or imposes) a kind of formal *surface-level recognition* to oppressed peoples without sufficiently acknowledging the historical and structural injustices that perpetuate that groups’ position in the social hierarchy. In the Canadian context, this involves the cultural recognition of Indigenous peoples (e.g. by granting certain cultural rights via self-government and land claim packages) while maintaining the generative structures of colonialist, racist, and patriarchal state power over Indigenous peoples and land.<sup>9</sup> It also involves the revision of historical injustice to create a sharp divide between past events and present structures. In other words, surface-level recognition involves “largely symbolic gestures of political inclusion and recognition” for the purposes of containing Indigenous political assertiveness.<sup>10</sup> When non-reciprocal and awash with epistemic vice, recognition can create and preserve the illusion of equality without altering the hierarchical relation between those being recognized. It offers formal recognition while remaining non-reciprocally dependent on the resources of the oppressed, offering little to nothing in return. I argue that surface-level recognition results from the epistemic failures of a colonial state.

---

<sup>6</sup> Coulthard, G. (2014), *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*, p. 25.

<sup>7</sup> Taylor, C. « The Politics of Recognition », p. 26.

<sup>8</sup> Coulthard, G. (2014), *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*, p. 30.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

Recognition without reciprocity is and will continue to be shallow and epistemically vicious. This is because reciprocity is necessary for equal social relations, structures, and patterns. Consider, for example, the importance of reciprocity in linguistic communication. Kristie Dotson takes up Jennifer Hornsby's model of a 'successful linguistic exchange' to highlight relations of dependence between speakers and audiences (in a racially-hierarchical society), and the related need for reciprocity. Hornsby writes:

I give the name "reciprocity" to the condition that provides for the particular way in which successful illocutionary acts can be performed. When there is reciprocity among people, they recognize one another's speech as it is meant to be taken: An audience who participates reciprocally does not merely (1) understand the speaker's words but also, in (2) taking the words as they are meant to be taken, satisfies a condition *for the speaker's having done the communicative thing she intended*.<sup>11</sup>

Reciprocity is vital here because of the other-dependent nature of linguistic exchange. Speakers depend upon audiences for uptake and participation in order to be understood and successfully recognized as knowers. Dotson connects this to the silencing faced by oppressed peoples, in that "to communicate *we all need an audience willing and capable of hearing us*. The extent to which entire populations of people can be denied this kind of linguistic reciprocation as a matter of course institutes epistemic violence".<sup>12</sup> Dotson's work on epistemic violence, including but not limited to her work on linguistic asymmetry, is crucial for theorizing the epistemic dimensions of oppression.

Dotson's analysis of the need for reciprocity is useful because linguistic exchange will always involve other-dependence; a speaker will always depend on their audience for uptake. Recognition of a

---

<sup>11</sup> Hornsby, J. (1995), « Disempowered speech », p. 134, quoted in Dotson, K. (2011), « Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing », p. 237.

<sup>12</sup> Dotson, K. (2011), « Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing », p. 228.

social group and its group-based rights will also always involve other-dependence. In a hierarchical society this will involve those lower on the hierarchy depending on the recognition of those hierarchically above them. In a free and equal society this will involve everyone depending on everyone else *equally*. The absence of hierarchical differentiation between classes of people is the necessary condition for reciprocity and equality. In a reciprocal relation, we still depend on the recognition of others (as does a speaker in linguistic exchange) but our dependence is compatible with our freedom. We are free and equal because we are no longer controlled or silenced by the other.

As it currently stands, other-dependence works against oppressed groups. For example, in a hierarchical society built upon the legacy and structures of colonialism, stereotypes about a group facilitate a recurring failure by privileged groups to reciprocate oppressed people's attempts at exchanges. Indigenous peoples were, historically, stereotyped as "too savage" to merit legal rights or to engage in a reasoned discourse about the nature of their rights", which meant that they "lost the authority to interpret their own history and culture, as well as their authority to protect themselves from further appropriation".<sup>13</sup> This is an instance of the hierarchically privileged denying recognition to those positioned lower in the social hierarchy (a hierarchy which is a result of imperialism, colonialism and violent racism). The issue is complicated by the fact that Indigenous groups have now been granted formal recognition from the Canadian state, and yet the colonial history continues to harm Indigenous peoples "because the legal and policy structures that determine their contemporary rights, as well as their ability to gain redress for historic wrongs, are built on a model that disregards indigenous values and excludes them from full participation in the social and epistemic practices of dominant culture".<sup>14</sup> Indigenous peoples are still forced to depend on the recognition of the state, whereas the state is not dependent on (or even interested in) them. In other words, formal recognition does not guarantee reciprocal recognition.

For Linda Martín Alcoff, reciprocal intersubjective interdependence must involve a "recognition of an irreducible

---

<sup>13</sup> Tsosie, R. (2017), « Indigenous Peoples, Anthropology, and the Legacy of Epistemic Injustice », pp. 357-358.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 359.

difference, a difference that [...] would maintain the Other's own point of departure, the Other's own space of autonomous judgment, and thus the possibility for a truly reciprocal recognition of full subjectivity".<sup>15</sup> Freedom through reciprocal interdependence will recognize, preserve and celebrate difference, while leaving space for those whose different ways of life have been harmed or destroyed to re-establish their autonomy. In Coulthard's words, "true equality will allow for the colonized to re-establish themselves as self-determining: as creators of the terms, values, and conditions by which they are to be recognized".<sup>16</sup> Reciprocity is a necessary condition for this true equality.

Coulthard is rightly concerned with the hierarchical other-dependence present in Canada's relationship to its Indigenous communities. He argues that insofar as the hierarchical relationship is not threatened, the recognition is not reciprocal. The non-reciprocal recognition offered by the Canadian state essentially offers nothing because, as Fanon argues in response to Hegel, those in power do not *need* recognition from the oppressed.<sup>17</sup> What they need is their labor and resources:

In relations of domination that exist between nation-states and the sub-state national groups that they "incorporate" into their territorial and jurisdictional boundaries, there is no mutual dependency in terms of a need or desire for recognition. In these contexts, the "master" – that is, the colonial state and state society – does not require recognition from the previously self-determining communities upon which its territorial, economic and social infrastructure is constituted. What it needs is land, labor, and resources.<sup>18</sup>

This results in a 'domestication' of the terms of recognition so that they do not challenge the colonial foundation which is the basis

---

<sup>15</sup> Alcoff, L. (2006), *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*, p. 218.

<sup>16</sup> Coulthard, G. (2014), *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*, p. 39.

<sup>17</sup> Fanon, F. (1991), *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 220.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

of the relationship. So long as the legal, political and economic framework of the colonial relationship between Indigenous peoples and the settler state of Canada remain unaffected, the state is willing to negotiate, grant and impose cultural recognition of Indigeneity. From the side of the state, recognition will involve an institutionalized accommodation of cultural difference which is always reconcilable with colonial sovereignty and capitalist market economy.<sup>19</sup> For this reason, Coulthard understands the current non-reciprocal relationship to be characteristic of relations between colonial master and colonized. He is pessimistic about the possibility of true reciprocal recognition which goes beyond the surface-level. While I agree that the relationship between colonizer and colonized (which characterizes the relationship between Canada and Indigenous peoples) cannot be truly reciprocal without radical compromise on the side of the state, I am optimistic that the discourse on epistemic virtue and vice can point us to the *kinds* of recognition which are merely surface-level and the kinds which are potentially more reciprocal.

## 2. Epistemic Vice and Non-Reciprocal Recognition

To understand what is going wrong in instances of non-reciprocal recognition, beyond the obvious dissatisfaction of Indigenous communities, it is helpful to make use of literature on epistemic vice. José Medina describes three epistemic vices that arise in interactions between “significantly different epistemic others” and create or sustain oppression.<sup>20</sup> For an epistemic agent to be “significantly different” from oneself could mean, among other things, that the agent is significantly more socially and economically privileged than oneself (having access to information and educational opportunities, along with a credible voice and authority). This is not to say that oppression always results in epistemic disadvantage, as it may also involve some epistemic advantages not available to the privileged. In fact, Medina argues that the epistemic vices he describes as “in the way of knowledge” are grounded in the character of the privileged or

---

<sup>19</sup> Fanon, F. (1991), *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 66.

<sup>20</sup> Medina, J. (2013), *Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination*, p. 27.

powerful, as constitutive of their very social identity.<sup>21</sup> These are vices of the privileged, specifically to do with their interactions with those who are (significantly) less privileged. Following Medina, I will use ‘epistemic vice’ to mean “a set of corrupted attitudes and dispositions that get in the way of knowledge”.<sup>22</sup> I argue that the current recognition of Indigenous groups by the Canadian state is non-reciprocal precisely because it manifests these vices.

Medina describes the vices of *epistemic arrogance*, *epistemic laziness*, and *closed-mindedness*. Epistemic arrogance is a kind of cognitive self-indulgence or superiority often present in the cognitive psychology of the powerful and privileged.<sup>23</sup> It is the indulgence in a delusion of “cognitive omnipotence that prevents [the state] from learning from others and improving”.<sup>24</sup> In order to “rule without resistance”, the powerful and privileged will try to avoid knowledge which calls their own opinions and authority into question.<sup>25</sup> Unsurprisingly, using privilege and power to safeguard one’s opinions against any resistance does not result in good epistemic habits. It results in the accumulation of distortions, oversights and stereotypes. For instance, by normalizing and downplaying the injustices perpetuated by the state against Indigenous peoples and their cultures, the state can (attempt to) rule without resistance. Even in acknowledging its wrongdoings, by positioning them *in the past*, the state can avoid addressing the ongoing issues of colonialism. It does all of this, in part, through an arrogance which sees no reason to listen to less privileged perspectives.

Epistemic laziness is having the privilege of not knowing or not needing to know. This can apply to certain perspectives or entire domains with which the privileged and powerful do not *need* to familiarize themselves. Medina describes the domain of the “mechanisms of oppression that create marginalization, subjugation, [...] social death [and] physical extermination, such as genocide” as

---

<sup>21</sup> Medina, J. (2013), *Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

rendered invisible to those in positions of power.<sup>26</sup> It is not necessary for their survival, as it is for the oppressed, so the privileged become epistemically lazy. As a result, a “habitual lack of epistemic curiosity atrophies one’s cognitive attitudes and dispositions. Continual epistemic neglect creates blinders that one allows to grow around one’s epistemic perspective, constraining and slanting one’s vantage point”.<sup>27</sup> In short, this kind of ignorance out of luxury is detrimental to the epistemic perspective of the privileged. Moreover, it also harms those who lack the privilege and power to ignore the reality of social harms. For example, the government of Canada’s reluctance to and delay in inquiring into the systemic causes of violence against Indigenous women and girls, over 1200 of whom have been reported missing and/or murdered, has allowed the violence to continue without proper attention. The systemic and structural mechanisms of oppression which create or allow for the staggering number of Indigenous women and girls brutalized and lost to violence have gone (and in many ways still go) unnoticed by the non-Indigenous politicians and police in power. This helps explain why, in 2014, then-Prime Minister Stephen Harper rejected an inquiry into the murdered and missing Indigenous women, saying it wasn’t “high on [the Canadian government’s] radar” (CBC). It is a luxury to not need to know what structures are facilitating violence against an entire community. This luxury, though, results in serious epistemic laziness which harms the oppressed and reinforces the ignorance of the privileged.

The last epistemic vice described by Medina is closed-mindedness. This is when “one’s mental processing remains systematically closed to certain phenomena, experiences, and perspectives”.<sup>28</sup> The result is an eroded epistemic trust of and ability to learn from others. A closed-minded person (or group of people) pathologizes the perception, reasoning and testimony of those whose experiences destabilize their own perspective. Like the other vices, it is a structural and systematic epistemic character flaw. For example, Medina describes how one can become blind to practices of social violence

---

<sup>26</sup> Medina, J. (2013), *Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination*, p. 33.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

(such as genocide or torture) “as a result of an active effort not to see, no matter what the evidence may be; as a result of a constant distortion and description that leads the subject to be open only to the denial of the phenomenon in question”.<sup>29</sup> In this way, Canada seems closed-minded toward the long-lasting legacy of the residential school system, instead focusing on positioning the harms in the past. In Coulthard’s words, the Canadian government “goes out of its way to fabricate a sharp divide between Canada’s unscrupulous ‘past’ and the unfortunate ‘legacy’ this past has produced for Indigenous people and communities in the present”.<sup>30</sup> This temporal divide is a strategy of closed-mindedness in that it is an active effort not to see, a re-description of the phenomenon of settler-colonialism as an event, rather than a structure. This avoidance strategy may not be a conscious decision by government officials, but there are serious epistemic erosions that happen when entire perspectives are pathologized and overlooked. In other words, the epistemic vices I have outlined may be more comfortable for the Canadian government representatives/officials but remaining ignorant will not lead to an equal and reciprocal relationship between the state and the Indigenous peoples.

When the three vices of privileged epistemic subjects converge, they form what Medina calls *active ignorance*. Active ignorance is well exemplified in a now-infamous non-Indigenous Canadian politician’s flippant dismissal of an Indigenous reconciliation proposal. In 1975, the Dene Declaration, which sought a political arrangement of self-determination and resolution of land claims, was dismissed by the then minister of Indian Affairs Judd Buchanan as “gobbledegook that a grade ten student could have written in fifteen minutes”.<sup>31</sup> Buchanan reacted with an arrogance about what is worthy of genuine consideration, a lazy neglect of those perspectives beyond his own, and a closed-mindedness that allowed him to dismiss the input of an Indigenous political organization representing the Dene people and their ancestors. As an actively ignorant subject, Buchanan reacted

---

<sup>29</sup> Medina, J. (2013), *Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination*, p. 35.

<sup>30</sup> Coulthard, (2014), *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*, p. 121.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

with a “battery of defense mechanisms [...] and can be blamed not just for lacking particular pieces of knowledge, but also for having epistemic attitudes and habits that contribute to, create and maintain bodies of ignorance”.<sup>32</sup>

Having explained epistemic virtue and vice and applied it to understanding the relationship between the Canadian government and Indigenous peoples, it is clear that the current relationship is not reciprocal. Moreover, the presence of these epistemic vices *explains* the non-reciprocity described by Coulthard. Indigenous peoples need cultural, political, and economic recognition from the state in order to survive under the conditions of colonialism. The state does not *need* recognition from Indigenous communities, it needs their land and resources. A truly reciprocal relationship is the only way to equality; however, it is not obvious how to achieve this. The state’s attempts have sometimes been admirable in their goals (for instance, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s (TRC) mandate to commemorate and educate regarding residential schools), but they fall short because they remain shot through with epistemic vice and firmly planted in the language and concepts of settler-colonialism. Even in attempting to correct unjust distributions of power, the state does not examine or correct the current forms of domination which *give rise to* these injustices.

### **3. Epistemic Virtue, Reciprocal Recognition and Grounded Normativity**

In contrast to the non-reciprocity which characterises the colonial state’s current relationship with Indigenous peoples, (some) Indigenous communities have what Coulthard calls a ‘grounded normativity’, a land- or place-based ethical framework which is fundamentally different from the non-reciprocity resulting from epistemic vice. Grounded normativity is oriented around “struggles not only *for* land, but also deeply *informed* by what the land as a mode of reciprocal *relationship* [...] ought to teach us about living our lives in relation to one another and our surroundings in a respectful,

---

<sup>32</sup> Medina, J. (2013), *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination*, p. 39.

nondominating and nonexploitative way”.<sup>33</sup> I will now argue that this grounded normativity, which places reciprocity at the centre of our relationships to the land and to one another, is an important alternative perspective which requires the attention of an epistemically virtuous state. In this section I will use epistemic virtues to elaborate this notion of grounded normativity and its relation to reciprocity to argue that it offers a possible framework for reconciliation.

To be clear, Coulthard is a member of the Dene Nation, and refers to his own community’s use of grounded normativity in their analysis of colonial dispossession. Of course, not all Indigenous communities will have the same ontological framework. That said, I believe the Dene Nation’s ethics, as presented by Coulthard, offer something worthy of non-Indigenous people’s curiosity and consideration. Through such an investigation, an epistemically virtuous state can learn a great deal about how to hold a reciprocal relationship, which, as I have argued, is necessary for equality.

This place-based ethics, which informs the Dene Nation’s land-claim proposals and demands for recognition, positions the land as “an ontological framework for understanding *relationships*”.<sup>34</sup> The grounded normativity described by Coulthard does not understand land or place as a material object, even as a profoundly important or sacred material object. Instead, land is understood as a field of relationships of things to one another.<sup>35</sup> Land is always relational; humans are as much a part of the land as the animals, rocks, trees, lakes, and so on. Just as we hold obligations to other people, we hold obligations to the land, animals, plants and lakes. If we meet our obligations, the land, animals, plants and lakes will reciprocate and meet *their* obligations to humans. This is how the Dene Nation survives. It is a mutually interdependent relationship between human and animal, plant and animal, lake and plant, and so on. This interdependence also includes past and future generations as well as other people and communities. We are inseparable from the

---

<sup>33</sup> Coulthard, G. (2014), *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*, p. 60.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

expansive system of interdependent relations. Coulthard calls this an “ethic of reciprocity”.<sup>36</sup>

I wish to argue that if the state can incorporate the notion of grounded normativity into its recognition of and relationship with Indigenous peoples, reciprocity becomes much more possible. To do that, epistemically *virtuous* attitudes will be necessary. According to Medina, epistemic virtue is “a character trait that constitutes an epistemic advantage for the individual who possesses it and for those who interact with him or her: roughly, a set of attitudes and dispositions that facilitate the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge”.<sup>37</sup> Medina describes these as characteristics of oppressed subjects as a result of living under conditions of oppression. That said, he does not take these virtues to be universal features of oppressed subjects, nor exclusive to them. He also argues that these epistemic virtues are not automatic, but rather acquired. This means that although certain subjects tend to have access to different virtues, they have the possibility to learn or improve.<sup>38</sup> This is important for my purposes insofar as I will argue that the state can learn to incorporate these virtues into its perspective.

The first epistemic virtue is that of epistemic humility. Not to be confused with an undermined confidence, humility is to have a “humble and self-questioning attitude toward one’s cognitive repertoire”.<sup>39</sup> which allows one to identify cognitive gaps that need filling. As the opposite of the epistemic vice of arrogance, epistemic humility entails not taking one’s own beliefs and perspective as beyond investigation or doubt. It is allowing oneself to qualify and

---

<sup>36</sup> Coulthard, G. (2014), *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*, p. 62.

<sup>37</sup> Medina, J. (2013), *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination*, p. 30.

<sup>38</sup> This relates to Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr.’s account of *willful hermeneutical ignorance* which she takes to be maintained by a refusal to acknowledge developed epistemic resources. Pohlhaus articulates the ability to acquire better epistemic habits in order to reveal what is not obvious from where one is situated (Pohlhaus Jr., G. (2012), «Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice: Toward a Theory of Willful Hermeneutical Ignorance », p. 732).

<sup>39</sup> Medina, J. (2013), *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination*, p. 43.

question one's beliefs. If the government of Canada were to cultivate this kind of humility, it may realize the cognitive deficits within its own perspective. The state may be able to recognize that reconciliation cannot be forced from one side, but rather, it requires reciprocity and dialogue. It requires government officials to have some degree of doubt that they have all the answers, so that they can turn to Indigenous perspectives to fill the epistemic gaps. I suggest the notion of grounded normativity as a starting-point for filling those gaps. What non-Indigenous Canadians may not know about reciprocal relationships can be learned through this ethical framework, if we are humble enough to question our own perspectives. Institutionally, the state can, for example, establish and maintain equitable representation of Indigenous voices in policy development, funding, and service delivery, including Indigenous 2SLGBTQ people and youth, and inclusive of diverse Indigenous cultural backgrounds. This would be a tangible step toward making the state aware of the epistemic gaps that exist and begin working toward filling them through interdependent and equitable hermeneutical resources.

Closely related to this is the second epistemic virtue, curiosity/diligence. A subject who recognizes what they do not know is also able to cultivate intellectual curiosity that motivates them to fill in their cognitive lacunas. Medina argues that it may be very difficult for the oppressed to fill these gaps because "social arrangements and circumstances get in the way of these subjects doing the requisite work to achieve knowledge: in some cases because they may not have the time or opportunity; in other cases because they may be forbidden from doing so".<sup>40</sup> I emphasize this because for a privileged subject (or group of subjects) such as the federal government, these obstacles are not a significant hindrance. The state cannot use circumstance, time, or opportunity as an excuse not to learn and fill the gaps of their knowledge. If they are properly motivated, the state has the resources. Indigenous communities have been offering their perspective for years, it is up to the state to cultivate curiosity about what they are offering. For example, the Dene Nation has offered several proposals, agreements, and land claims to the Canadian

---

<sup>40</sup> Medina, J. (2013), *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination*.

government informed by the ethic of reciprocity.<sup>41</sup> The state has yet to show genuine curiosity regarding this ethical framework and how it might improve the relationship between them and Indigenous communities.

The final epistemic virtue outlined by Medina is open-mindedness. For oppressed people, it is often an unwritten requirement of surviving an oppressive condition that they see reality through the eyes of those in certain social positions. They “have no option but to acknowledge, respect, and (to some extent) inhabit alternative perspectives, in particular the perspective of the dominant other(s).”<sup>42</sup> This “double consciousness” (a concept in race theory first coined by Du Bois) is likely not something that the privileged and powerful can simply *choose* to take on. The federal government certainly cannot just decide to inhabit an alternative perspective, especially one that is starkly anti-colonialist. However, there are ways that the state can acknowledge and respect alternative perspectives. In some ways, the TRC attempts to do this by researching, documenting and preserving the testimonies and experiences of residential school survivors. However, it is not so easy for the powerful to reverse their vision to see through the eyes of an oppressed social position. As a result, the TRC “temporally situates the harms of settler-colonialism in the past and focuses the bulk of its reconciliatory efforts on repairing the injurious legacy left in the wake of this history. Indigenous subjects are the primary object of repair, not the colonial relationship.”<sup>43</sup> I raise this issue not to argue that it is *impossible* for the state and other privileged persons to truly acknowledge and respect alternative

---

<sup>41</sup> Since forming the organization in 1969, the Dene Nation (formerly called the Indian Brotherhood of the Northwest Territories) has made a consistent effort to negotiate the relationship between the Dene people and the Canadian state. To this day, the Dene Nation is engaged in programs advocating for Dene health, education, community development, legal issues, land and resource development and communications. Its advocacy is fundamentally informed by the framework of grounded normativity described by Coulthard, a member of the Dene First Nation (Coulthard, G. (2014), *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*, p. 65).

<sup>42</sup> Medina, J. (2013), *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination*, p. 44.

<sup>43</sup> Coulthard, G. (2014), *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*, p. 127.

perspectives, but rather, that it will necessarily involve a departure from their existing point of view. For the federal government, it will involve a departure from their settler-colonialist values in order to recognize what was harmed in the process of colonization. In contrast to how the state often articulates reconciliation, it is not just Indigenous subjects who need our attention, it is the state's relationship to them that is the primary object in need of repair. For example, the recent Final Report from the National Inquiry into the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls names Canada's past and current colonial policies, actions, and inactions toward Indigenous peoples as genocide. The Final Report demands the swift implementation of their 231 calls for justice as steps to end and redress this genocide. The obligation of the state goes beyond repairing the effects of past residential schools, it requires addressing the perennial violence against and oppression of Indigenous peoples in current Canadian society. To recognize and understand these colonial practices, policies, and omissions as genocidal may require an open-mindedness toward alternative perspectives regarding the ongoing harms perpetrated by the state. The work put into this Final Report, including testimony from family members and survivors of violence against Indigenous peoples, is a generous act of offering the perspective and reality of Indigenous experiences and oppression. The Canadian state must be open to it if we are to move forward toward reciprocity.

Just as active ignorance is the converging point of all three epistemic vices, there is a convergence of all three epistemic virtues. Medina calls this *subversive lucidity*.<sup>44</sup> Subversive lucidity means "having the potential to question widely held assumptions and prejudices, to see things afresh and redirect our perceptual habits, to find a way out or an alternative to epistemic blind alleys, and so on".<sup>45</sup> In terms of the state, this will mean questioning their own approaches to reconciliation, their appropriation of the terms of recognition, being open to new perspectives that might challenge them, and seeing the possibility for reciprocal and equal interdependence. Obviously, this lucidity will not happen overnight. In fact, there are good reasons for

---

<sup>44</sup> Medina, J. (2013), *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination*, p. 44.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

Coulthard's pessimism about the politics of recognition in general. Rather than arguing for the practical possibility of this truly reciprocal recognition and relationship, I have argued that epistemic virtue is the best way forward toward something like it. Without the state incorporating epistemic virtue into their practice and recognition, there is no chance of real understanding, let alone reconciliation. Epistemic virtue, then, offers valuable tools for the federal government and all non-Indigenous Canadians to approach their relationship with Indigenous communities with less arrogance, laziness and closed-mindedness. Insofar as reciprocity is necessary for equality, Indigenous Canadians already have the concept of reciprocity central to their way of life. Using the framework provided by epistemic virtue, the state of Canada and its citizens are better equipped to understand and remain open to their contributions and ideas.

#### 4. Conclusion

In their demands for recognition from the Canadian government, the Dene Nation seek to “protect the intricately interconnected social totality of a distinct *mode of life*; a life on/with the land that stressed individual autonomy, collective responsibility, nonhierarchical authority, communal land tenure and mutual aid, and which sustained [Indigenous peoples] economically, spiritually, socially and politically”.<sup>46</sup> Insofar as the Dene Nation seeks a reciprocal, interdependent and non-hierarchical relationship with non-Indigenous Canadians, its demands are largely consistent with the kind of recognition which makes equality possible; one in which there is no hierarchy to shame or obscure those lower down, and we are all equally other-dependent.

Coulthard is clear that the goal of reconciliation should not be a “more accommodating, liberal regime of mutual recognition”.<sup>47</sup> Reciprocity is much more involved than that. A truly reciprocal relationship between the state and Indigenous peoples will have to address the structural and economic features of colonial oppression.

---

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Coulthard, G. (2014), *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*, p. 65.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

It will have to address and alter the underlying power relations involved in the settler state's claim to sovereignty. It will have to address the very nature of the state-form as a normatively appropriate mode of governance over Indigenous peoples. These are radical revisions to the recognition approach currently afforded to Indigenous peoples and their territories. It is not a change that will happen overnight, but the subversive lucidity created by the convergence of epistemic virtues is a condition for possibility of this kind of radical change. Without self-reflection, self-questioning, and curiosity, the prospect of stepping away from colonialist values is seriously diminished. As Taiaiake Alfred argues, the goal must be a 'deep interconnection' between human beings and other elements of creation.<sup>48</sup> The land-based ethic of reciprocity is just that, and alongside the cultivation of epistemic virtues, can lead the Canadian state toward addressing the generative structures which brought about unequal recognition, rather than focusing on fixing only their effects.

In order to achieve a reciprocal and equal relationship which allows for truly mutual and interdependent self-determination for all, epistemic virtues are absolutely necessary on the part of the privileged. The Canadian state cannot continue to appropriate the terms of recognition to maintain economic and political control over the group that they are "recognizing". In order for the relationship to improve, the state must be epistemically humble about their knowledge of the situation and how it might be improved. The state must be intellectually curious and use their time, opportunities and resources to do the requisite work and achieve the relevant knowledge. I have argued that a good place to start is the place-based ethics of grounded normativity offered by the Dene Nation. Finally, the state must be open-minded to the perspectives of others. This includes the way of life described by and about the Dene Nation, as well as the other Indigenous communities offering their perspective on reconciliation and recognition.

This paper has argued that in order to achieve a reciprocal relationship between the Canadian state and Indigenous communities in Canada, the concept of recognition must be connected to

---

<sup>48</sup> Coulthard, G. (2014), *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*, p. 35.

reciprocity and epistemic virtue. The current demand for recognition by Indigenous peoples is being met with epistemically vicious attitudes on the part of the state, quelling any chance for reciprocity between them. I have argued that reciprocal recognition, which is sought by Coulthard and supported by Dotson, Tsosie, and Alcoff is only possible through epistemic virtue. By adopting epistemically virtuous attitudes and dispositions, the Canadian state might be more able to understand and adopt the framework of grounded normativity offered by the Dene nation.

### Bibliography

- Alcoff, L. M. (2007), « Epistemologies of Ignorance: Three Types », Dans Sullivan, S. et Tuana, N. (dir.), *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, Albany, State University of New York Press, p. 39-58.
- Alcoff, L. M. (2006), *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Alfred, T. (2008), *Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto*, 2nd ed. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Alfred, T. (2005), *Wasáse: Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press.
- Asch, M. (2010), « Dene Nation (organization) » dans The Canadian Encyclopedia, December 12. <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/dene-nation/>.
- CBC News, (2014), « Full Text of Peter Mansbridge's Interview with Stephen Harper », December 17. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/full-text-of-peter-mansbridge-s-interview-with-stephen-harper-1.2876934>.
- Coulthard, G. (2014), *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.
- Dotson, K. (2011), « Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing » *Hypatia*, vol. 26, n° 2, pp. 236-257.
- Epstein, B. (2015), *The Ant Trap: Rebuilding the Foundations of the Social Sciences*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Fanon, F. (1991), *Black Skin, White Masks*, Charles Lam Markmann (trans.), Boston, Grove Press.
- Fraser, N. et A. Honneth, (2003), *Redistribution or Recognition: A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, London, Verso.

- Hegel, G.W.F. (1991), *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, édité par Allen W. Wood, trad. Nisbet, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Hornsby, J. (1995), « Disempowered speech », *Philosophical Topics*, vol. 23, n° 2, p. 127–47.
- Medina, J. (2013), *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Mills, C. (1997), *The Racial Contract*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press.
- Ortega, M. (2006), « Being Lovingly, Knowingly Ignorant: White Feminism and Women of Color », *Hypatia*, vol. 21, n° 3, p. 56-74.
- Pohlhaus Jr., . (2012), « Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice: Toward a Theory of *Willful Hermeneutical Ignorance* », *Hypatia*, vol. 27, n° 4, p. 716-735.
- Quijano, A. (2000), « Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America » *Nepentia*, vol. 1, n° 3, p. 533-580.
- Rawls, J. (1971), *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press.
- Rousseau, J. (1968), *Letter to M. D'Alembert on the Theatre in Politics and the Arts*, trad. Allan Bloom, Ithaca, Cornell University Press.
- Rousseau, J. (1987), *On the Social Contract*, trad. Donald Cress, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company.
- Sullivan, S. et N. Tuana, (dir.) (2007), *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, Albany, State University of New York Press.
- Sullivan, S. (2007), « White Ignorance and Colonial Oppression: Or, Why I Know So Little about Puerto Rico », dans Shannon, S. et N. Tuana, (dir.), *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, Albany, State University of New York Press, p. 153-172.
- Taylor, C. (1994), « The Politics of Recognition », dans Gutmann, A. (dir.), *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, p. 25-73.
- Tollefsen, D. (2015), *Groups as Agents*, London, Wiley.
- Tsotie, R. (2017), « Indigenous Peoples, Anthropology, and the Legacy of Epistemic Injustice », dans Kidd, I. (dir.), *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*, London, Routledge, p. 356-369.