Journal of Confucian Philosophy and Culture, Vol. 45 (February 2026): 5-21
DOI: 10.22916/jcpc.2026..45.5
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Scholar's Corner: Confucianism in and for the Modern World

Does Truth Have a Gender?

Jin Y. Park*

I. Philosophy and Truth

Philosophy often presents itself as a search for truth, and truth is frequently qualified as "universal." This claim to universality functions as a source of legitimacy for the truth a given philosophy advances. The adjective "universal" also carries an implication of objectivity: truth is understood as universal rather than local, objective rather than subjective, a characterization that is taken to guarantee its universal validity and authority. Yet even a brief reflection on this millennia-old habit of philosophical thinking reveals a paradox at its core.

How does the universal take place or become known to us, humans, and philosophers in particular, whose perspectives are inevitably limited and whose embodied existence unfolds within specific local contexts? How is objectivity possible when philosophers themselves are subjects who inquire into the very issues they examine? The underlying assumption seems to be that we can suspend or overcome our subjective and limited perspectives through logic and rational thinking according to some of modern European philosophy, or through practices of mind cultivation in major East Asian philosophical traditions. If this is the case, how close can a philosopher come to universality and objectivity? How might we assess the degree of approximation achieved in this pursuit, if it can be called an achievement at all?

The question becomes especially poignant when we consider the ramifications of philosophy's claim to seek truth through universality

* Jin Y. Park is William Fraser McDowell Chair Professor of Philosophy and Religion and Chair of the Department of Philosophy and Religion at American University. E-mail: jypark@american.edu

and objectivity, since these ideals have often presupposed a specific gender and locality as conditions for their realization. Women have been excluded from candidacy as subjects capable of realizing the aims of truth-seeking, just as non-Western thought traditions have been marginalized when the West has claimed exclusive ownership of philosophy and its pursuit of truth.

But what is the truth that philosophy claims to discover, and how do we, as embodied subjects, encounter that truth in the lived world? Are universality and objectivity the only measures by which philosophical truth should be judged? Or are there alternative ways of conceiving the aims of philosophy and, accordingly, different understandings of truth and of how we gain access to it that can help us develop more nuanced views of the world and become better human beings? If our conception of truth changes, does philosophy's position on gender (and on non-Western philosophies) change as well? And if so, does this also transform our understanding of what philosophy is and how it ought to be practiced? Let us reflect on these questions and consider how philosophy and gender and, more broadly, truth and gender can cross-fertilize in our time.

II. Truth and Gender

The Buddhist worldview holds that nothing in the world possesses a permanent or independent essence. A being exists only through an intricately interconnected network of causes and conditions. The image of Indra's Net in Huayan Buddhism depicts a being as a transparent jewel situated at a knot in an infinitely extended net, with each knot likewise holding a transparent jewel. When one jewel is perceived, what appears is the reflection of all other jewels. This image captures the Buddhist understanding of identity. A being exists through context and relationality, through causes and conditions, rather than through any unchanging essence. As such, Buddhism began with a radical rejection of hierarchical evaluations of beings, such as the caste system in India at the time of the Śākyamuni Buddha. Yet despite this ontological challenge, Buddhism did not fully embrace gender equality.

The monastic community, as the gathering of the Buddha's followers, was initially closed to women. Among the Buddha's female followers were his aunt Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī, who raised Siddhārtha after his mother's death, and his wife Yaśodharā. According to traditional accounts, it was only after Ānanda, the Buddha's disciple, repeatedly appealed to the Buddha, arguing that women practitioners required a space for religious practice, that the Buddha reluctantly agreed to establish a monastic order for women. Even then, this permission was granted under conditions that later came to be known as the Eight Chief Rules (Ch. *bajingjie*; K. *palgyeongye,* 八敬戒). These eight rules apply exclusively to nuns and not to monks. Most strikingly, they stipulate that a nun who has lived in the monastic community for a hundred years must defer to a monk who was ordained that very day. Taken together, the Eight Chief Rules place Buddhist nuns at all levels below monks of any rank. The subordination of women to men is explicit and unmistakable.

Scholars have offered various interpretations of these rules. Some suggest that they reflect the social conditions of the time rather than the Buddha's original intent. In India around the fifth century BCE, when it was considered unsafe for women to live independently and when society was deeply patriarchal, an explicit declaration of gender equality may have created harmful consequences both for Buddhism and for women practitioners themselves. Regardless of the historical accuracy of these explanations, it is understandable that such concerns could have influenced the formation of this record within Buddhist tradition. Other scholars have gone further, suggesting that the Buddha himself may not have opposed gender equality, and that discriminatory elements in early Buddhist texts were introduced by later generations of his followers. This raises a perennial question in discussions of gender and discrimination: who records history and whose voices are preserved (Bancroft 1987).

What is crucial, however, is that this patriarchal legacy continues into the present. The Eight Chief Rules remain operative in contemporary monastic communities, including those in South Korea. In South Asia, such patriarchal regulations contributed to the disappearance of full ordination for nuns, and female Buddhist communities have

made sustained efforts to revive these ordination lineages in recent decades.

Beginning in the late twentieth century, Buddhist scholars increasingly turned their attention to the patriarchal dimensions of Buddhist tradition. This shift was partly connected to broader changes in scholarly orientation, including the influence of feminist movements and the growing presence of women in academia, although scholars working on issues of gender and religion are not exclusively women.

In the context of Korean Buddhism, women played a pivotal role from the earliest stages of its history on the Korean peninsula. Women were ordained alongside male practitioners, and some traveled to Japan to help transmit Buddhism. However, Buddhist tradition itself has often asserted that women lack the conditions necessary to attain enlightenment. Among the so-called five conditions required for becoming a Buddha is being born male, which implies that women cannot attain enlightenment in their present lives. Instead, women are encouraged to accumulate merit in the hope of being reborn as men in a future life. This claim is more than paradoxical. If Buddhist philosophy rejects the existence of an enduring essence, on what basis are women deemed inherently incapable of attaining enlightenment? The logic is, at the very least, deeply inconsistent.

This problematic claim of the tradition must have been recognized by some people over the time. Buddhist texts often referred to as body transformation literature depict this problem. The *Lotus Sūtra*, one of the major Mahāyāna texts, for example, includes the well-known story of the eight-year-old daughter of the Dragon King, who demonstrates extraordinary mental and spiritual capacity. One of the Buddha's disciples, Śāriputra, is visibly unsettled by this young, non-human, female being's assertion of having attained awakening. He rebukes her by insisting that a woman's body is defiled and therefore incapable of serving as a vessel for enlightenment, implying that the dragon girl's claim cannot be true. In response to Śāriputra's criticism, the dragon girl instantly transforms her body into that of a male and proceeds to demonstrate her awakening. At first glance, the episode seems to affirm that the gender does not matter in the path to enlightenment. Yet the narrative raises a troubling question. Does this story truly affirm

that women can attain enlightenment as women, or does it instead suggest that women must become men in order to complete the path to awakening?

A story in the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, another major Mahāyāna Buddhist text, appears to address this question more directly. In this account, a goddess declares that she has attained enlightenment. Once again, Śāriputra, celebrated as the wisest among the Buddha's disciples, challenges her claim, insisting that women are incapable of attaining enlightenment. In response, the goddess transforms herself into a male and simultaneously transforms Śāriputra into a female, thereby demonstrating the transitory nature of bodily form. Through this act, the goddess makes clear that the gendered body cannot constitute an obstacle to enlightenment and that women, even in female bodies, are capable of awakening.

These episodes lend themselves to a distinctly feminist interpretation. Yet, such a reading appears to have had little influence on broader Buddhist understandings of gender equality until the late twentieth century, when feminist scholars began to situate these stories within the context of gender discrimination in Buddhist thought and practice (see Peach 2002). It remains puzzling that the tension between Buddhism's philosophical rejection of essentialized identity and its persistent gender hierarchy did not provoke wider reflection earlier, especially given the presence of body transformation narratives that explicitly dramatize this contradiction.

However, we can also consider a different interpretation about the fact that body transformation literature had not much influence on gender equality in Buddhist tradition. Since the authorship of Buddhist scriptures remains unknown, we are left with an unresolved question about the human mind that recognized and articulated these internal contradictions while allowing them to remain largely ineffective in transforming social realities. At the same time, the very existence of such narratives points to an important insight: the recognition that access to truth is not limited by gender, nor is the capacity to seek truth determined by bodily form, even though this insight remained largely confined to the margins of the tradition and unrealized in patriarchal society. This is the space in which ideas and reality collide. In most

cases, such collisions result in ideas being defeated by social and historical realities. Yet identifying the existence of this tension urges us to renew our perspective and to look more closely at what may lie beneath established traditions. As awareness of the chasm between ideas and reality accumulates, it can precipitate a rupture in the lived world. This, I would suggest, is the power of attending to gender in our philosophizing, even though most of the world's major philosophies and religions have been patriarchal.

Here is another example of an inkling of gender awareness within a patriarchal tradition. In contrast to the broader Buddhist tradition's claim that women are incapable of attaining enlightenment, as discussed earlier, some Seon masters encouraged their female disciples to engage in Seon meditation and urged them to pursue enlightenment. Seon master Jingak Hyesim 眞覺慧諶 (1178–1234) stands out in this context in Korean Buddhism. A successor of Seon master Bojo Jinul 普照知訥 (1158–1210), who is widely regarded as the founder of Korean Seon Buddhism, Hyesim played an essential role in popularizing *hwadu* 話頭 meditation, or meditation focusing on a critical phrase.

Hyesim's *Recorded Sayings of National Teacher Jingak of Jogye* (Jogye Jingak Guksa Eorok 曹溪眞覺國師語錄) preserves an extensive record of his teachings to disciples, including instructions addressed to female monastics. Due to the scarcity of sources concerning female monastics, it is difficult to determine how many female disciples Hyesim taught. Scholars must therefore rely on indirect evidence, such as funerary inscriptions or clues within the recorded sayings of male masters that indicate the gender of particular disciples. Even so, at least four female disciples can be identified in Hyesim's *Recorded Sayings* (Jorgensen 2026).

Hyesim explicitly urges his female disciples to practice rigorously so that they may realize awakening. He draws on materials relevant to women practitioners and refers to female practitioners in China who are said to have attained enlightenment. Although the number of cases involving female monastics in Hyesim's *Recorded Sayings* is very limited relative to the overall scope of the corpus, their presence nonetheless indicates that, despite the conventional Buddhist claim that women lack the capacity to attain enlightenment, female practitioners did in

fact pursue awakening, and some male teachers supported their efforts (Kim 2011a).

Modern times ushered in significant changes in women's engagement with Buddhism. This transformation was due in part to the ideals of modernity, which emphasized the equality of all beings, and in part to the large-scale reconfiguration of Korean society's social structures and value systems during its transition to modernity. The first meditation hall for nuns was established in the late 1910s at Gyeonseong Hermitage of Sudeok Monastery. A fully institutionalized Seon monastery for nuns was established later at Unmun Monastery in the 1950s. Such institutional support, though gradual, made it possible for female practitioners to become more visible within the patriarchal worlds of Buddhism and Korean society.

One such figure is Kim Iryeop (1897–1971). A first-generation Korean feminist and writer who later became a Buddhist nun, Iryeop articulated a vision of the equality of all beings grounded in the Buddhist teaching of no-self, which rejects the existence of fixed identity. In her writings, she states: "The self, creativity, original mind (*pon chŏngsin*), Buddha nature, truth, original heart (*pon maŭm*), and equality are all synonyms. At their root, they designate the original identity of all beings in their existential and pre-existential state, which cannot be expressed either pictorially or linguistically" (Park 2014, 36).

Gender equality is not explicitly articulated in this passage, yet one can discern an underlying commitment to equality between genders, a concern that had been central to her activism prior to her ordination. Her vision of equality at this point is not limited to human beings or even to sentient life. She insists that even a fragment of a broken tile possesses a right to freedom. This radical inclusiveness reflects her insistence that "truth cannot be verbalized" (Park 2014, 36), a claim that recurs throughout her writings.

Truth cannot be verbalized, since verbalization inevitably involves division and valuation. Division and valuation, in turn, rest on human-made systems of categorization. If truth is universal and objective, it cannot be fully captured in language. How, then, do we know what truth is or whether truth occurs or is embodied, if it is something that can be realized but not articulated? In the Buddhist tradition,

this question underlies the importance of mind cultivation, which brings a person closer to glimpsing what truth might be through direct experience of reality. The ineffability of truth, however, does not indicate an agnostic attitude. Rather, it should lead people to attend to the embodied dimensions of truth, that is, to the actions through which truth is approximated and enacted in the world.

Seon Master Daehaeng (1927–2012), the founder of the Hanmaum Seon Center, offers, in this sense, a more practical and even mundane understanding of truth. In one of her dharma talks, she describes truth as follows: “Truth is not something astonishing, mysterious, or grand. Could it be that truth is, in fact, very simple? What more could it be than the capacity to grieve with one another, to cherish one another, to understand one another, and to hold one another’s pain?” (Hanmaum Seonwon 2022, 230–31).

Daehaeng’s description of truth stands in sharp contrast to more familiar metaphysical definitions of truth. At first glance, Iryeop’s insistence that truth cannot be verbalized and Daehaeng’s claim that truth lies in caring for one another might appear to occupy opposite poles. Yet their shared message is clear: truth is not something to be fixed or possessed but something that must be embodied in everyday life. When understood in this way, truth may appear more versatile; yet it necessarily calls for individual engagement in encountering truth and attending to its implications for oneself as well as for others (See Park 2025b).

III. Truth, Gender and Their Locality

Attention to the embodied character of encountering truth, or its modes of appearance, as seen in the cases of Iryeop and Daehaeng, allows us to better appreciate recent Confucian scholars’ engagement with Confucianism and gender. Confucianism has long been identified as a patriarchal tradition, and gender and Confucianism have often appeared to be an uneasy pairing. Over the past few decades, however, Confucian scholars have begun to challenge this long-held view and propose a more constructive relationship between the two.

This shift in assessing Confucianism's relation to women has given rise to a number of important questions. For instance, does criticizing Confucianism solely for its patriarchal character, implicitly or explicitly, risk portraying women as powerless subjects devoid of agency? Is it plausible to assume that, throughout its long history, women merely acquiesced to subjugation, lacking any awareness of themselves as beings seeking meaning and value? These questions have prompted scholars to approach Confucianism and gender through alternative frameworks, exemplifying what Rita Gross calls the "revalorization" of a tradition: a critical reassessment of inherited interpretations shaped by patriarchal power and recovering meanings obscured by dominant, center-authorized voices and restoring marginalized perspectives (Gross 1993).

It is undeniable that certain passages in classical Confucian texts are discriminatory toward women and, at times, overtly misogynistic. In the *Analects*, for example, Confucius groups women together with the "small" or inferior person (Ch. *xiaoren*, 小人) (17.25). In the *Mencius*, women are admonished to be obedient to their husbands (*Mengzi*, Book III, B.2). Similarly, *The Canon of Documents* (*Shujing*) declares that a woman's raised voice brings disorder to the household ("Zhou Shu," "Mu Shi"). These passages and more have long served as key textual evidence in critiques of Confucianism as a fundamentally patriarchal tradition.

Despite the reality of such patriarchal elements, scholars have also demonstrated that overt forms of women's subjugation, whether in domestic or public spheres, do not exhaust the Confucian tradition. For example, the theory of *yin/yang* has often been cited as evidence of male (*yang*) dominance over female (*yin*) within Confucianism. Feminist scholars would re-articulate the complementary relation of the *yin/yang* structure. As Lee Sook-in, a Korean Confucian scholar, writes, "In the complementary nature of *yin–yang*, there exist man and woman, but in the oneness of *yin–yang*, there exists only the human" (Lee 2005, 325). Along similar lines, creative reinterpretations of Confucius's concept of humanity (*ren*) have brought it into dialogue with feminist care ethics (Yi 2000).

In a manner analogous to Buddhist studies' questioning of who records and transmits history, Confucian scholars have begun to ask why women's voices and experiences are so conspicuously absent from the textual record. Whereas early studies of Confucianism and gender focused primarily on assessing the extent of its patriarchal structures, more recent scholarship has shifted toward recovering the voices silenced through the historical enactment of patriarchy. Through this exploration of how women exercised agency within Confucian contexts, some scholars further suggest that such inquiry points to the possibility of what might be called "female sagehood" within Confucianism (Kim 2017, 178).

One such figure in Korean Confucianism is Gang Jeongildang 姜靜一堂 (1772–1832), a female Confucian thinker whose life and work have recently drawn scholarly attention. Like most women in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Confucian Joseon Korea, she lived primarily as a wife, mother, and daughter-in-law. What distinguishes her, however, is her determined pursuit of self-education, an endeavor that required what Philip J. Ivanhoe and Hwa Yeong Wang describe as something akin to "guerrilla activity" (Ivanhoe and Wang 2023, 21) for women seeking learning while fulfilling extensive domestic obligations.

Despite domestic and societal constraints, Jeongildang managed to study and write, often on behalf of her husband who repeatedly failed the civil service examinations and eventually settled into teaching the Chinese classics at a local Confucian academy. Several years after her death, her husband published her writings under the title *The Extant Writings of Jeongildang* (靜一堂遺稿) in 1836. This publication made her one of the very few women of the Joseon dynasty whose writings were published in this manner.

One of the epitaphs included in *The Extant Writings of Jeongildang* is dedicated to her daughter Gyesuk 季淑 (29th day, 8th month, 1814—4th day, 1st month, 1815), who died at just over four months of age. Jeongildang and her husband had nine children, all of whom died in infancy, before they had learned to speak. Gyesuk was their ninth child. From a twenty-first-century perspective, when South Korea's infant mortality rate stands at approximately 2.8 deaths per 1,000 births (less

than 0.3 percent), one cannot but wonder how it was possible that all nine children died before reaching their first birthday.

Jeongildang's succinct epitaph records the material conditions surrounding her daughter's death. She notes that when the child was born, she did not have sufficient breast milk. The family therefore relied on help from others to feed the infant as early as the child was only seven days old and supplemented with rice gruel when necessary. Eventually, however, the child died. It is impossible to measure the sorrow of parents who lost nine children in infancy. Jeongildang memorializes the short life of her daughter by carefully recounting the circumstances of her passing.

In doing so, she reflects philosophically on the reality of death and attempts to console herself by invoking the Confucian understanding that all that is born must die. She even quotes Mencius: "There is nothing that is not according to fate [*ming*, 命]" (7A.2; Ivanhoe and Wang 2023, 234). From this perspective, her daughter's death, too, must be accepted as part of the inevitable cycle of life and death, and also as her fate. Yet Jeongildang immediately complicates this acceptance by adding: "The short life of this child is surely the result of fate, but is it not also the fault of human failure?" What does she mean by "human failure"? She does not specify. Yet the circumstances she records could point to poverty as she said: "it was no surprise that she [the infant] became ill. Her family was poor and it was a year of famine" (Ivanhoe and Wang 2023, 233). That is, the infant did not have sufficient nourishment to survive. Whose failure, then, was it?

The abstract truth that all that is born must die, or that all events unfold according to fate, could not fully subdue the anguish of a mother who lost an infant child. If such undeniable and universal truths are indeed "truth," what do they offer in the face of such loss? Jeongildang ends the epitaph with a poignant admission: "I cannot set aside my grief! And so I have written down a record of it. Is this not letting my emotions go too far? If only those in later times will forgive me and not plow over [her grave] and ruin it" (Ivanhoe and Wang 2023, 234).

Mourning is often accompanied by regret, by questions of *what if*? Yet in the case of Gyesuk, a child who died at five months, even regret seems like a luxury. What could this "what if" have been? *What if*

Jeongildang had had enough milk to feed her child? *What if* the family had been wealthier? What would be required to achieve such a financial situation at that time? What if. . .? These questions do not come easily, because the nature of "human failure" is so convoluted in this case that it becomes impossible to locate a clear point of origin from which these what ifs might meaningfully begin. In the unbridgeable gap between the clarity of philosophical truth and the absurd reality of her child's death, Jeongildang locates her sorrow and her wish that others would not plow over her daughter's grave. Would this eulogy have been written differently if it had been authored by a man?

In fact, such an epitaph would ordinarily have been written by the father. In this case, however, it was Jeongildang who composed it, as she did many other texts that bear the note "Written on Behalf of My Husband." We cannot know whether a male author would have approached the death of a five-month-old child differently. Yet the significance of this text does not lie in discovering, identifying, or categorizing a specifically "women's philosophy." Rather, it lies in Jeongildang's capacity to inquire into truth of human existence while confronting the unbearable reality of her infant child's death. In raising the question of "the fault of human failure," Jeongildang succinctly demonstrates herself to be a philosopher, struggling to navigate between the world of what *should be* and what *is*, between universal truth and the truth of human existential reality.

IV. Truth, Gender, and Power

When we consider philosophy and gender, the issue must be understood not within the isolated category of gender, but within the broader context of power in its various forms. Put more simply, thinking about gender in relation to philosophy's claims to truth is not an issue limited to gender alone. As I have argued elsewhere, a marginal position in one category shares the foundational logic of the center across multiple levels of marginalization (Park 2025a). The universal truths articulated from the center often fail to align with the lived realities of those at the margins. Can such truths still claim universality and objectivity? If so,

what value do they retain?

The author of *Confucian Feminism* (2024) preemptively defines her work as a "philosophical project," by which she means an inquiry into how Confucianism *should* be read rather than how it has historically been understood or practiced. She further observes that when a project such as Confucian feminism is undertaken, a special demand for "justification" often arises because of Confucianism's long-standing patriarchal tradition. By contrast, comparable liberatory projects grounded in Western philosophical traditions are rarely subjected to the same level of scrutiny, despite their own histories of patriarchy and exclusion, including the marginalization of non-Western peoples.

Western critiques of Confucian gender inequality, the author argues, have often positioned Western feminism as the sole liberator of women, including those in non-Western societies. Such critiques overlook the fact that women in different cultural contexts have lived under distinct social conditions and confronted different challenges. Moreover, positioning Western feminism as a universal narrative of women's liberation reproduces forms of cultural colonialism that persist even after the retreat of geographical colonialism. When I teach Kim Iryeop in my classes, students often ask whether she belongs to the first, second, or third wave of feminism. I remind them that women in different societies engage with different traditions, and that the historical trajectory of Western feminism cannot be applied universally to women around the world. By doing so, I must justify why Iryeop's feminism merits attention, even though it does not correspond precisely to any single phase of Western feminist trajectories.

To exist at the margins often means that one's existence itself requires justification. One must continually explain why one deserves to exist at all. And the conundrum faced by women's philosophy is shared by the philosophies of multiple layers of marginalized groups: non-Western philosophy; the philosophy of the economically disadvantaged in capitalist societies; the philosophy of disability in ableist societies; and the philosophy of workers. Philosophy and labor have not always formed a favorable combination. Women, in particular, have long borne primary responsibility for domestic labor, a condition that has deprived them of the time and resources necessary to articulate

their ideas in more abstract terms (see Kim 2025). Yet when members of such marginalized groups, constrained by time and labor-intensive lives, articulate their life experience, their works are often treated as not "philosophy" but something else. That has been the logic that women's works have been excluded from the institutionalized philosophy.

When I suggest that, by raising the question of "the fault of human failure," Jeongildang succinctly demonstrates herself to be a philosopher, this is not meant to trivialize the act of philosophizing. Rather, recognizing such a moment reveals how shifting the perspective of philosophy alters our understanding of meaning-making, value production, and the very domain of philosophy itself. Acknowledging the nature of women's philosophy introduces what Kim Heisook, a Korean feminist philosopher, calls a "shift in perspective," one that carries significant implications for inclusiveness and opens new approaches to philosophy and the figure of the philosopher (Kim 2025, 26).

Slightly more than a century after Jeongildang, the Korean philosopher Bak Chiu (1909–1949) defined a philosopher as follows: "A thinker is not someone extraordinary, but a person who can hear, with force and clarity through the 'heart,' the cries of reality, the urgent calls reality directs toward us in search of resolution" (Bak 2010, 15). Jeongildang clearly perceived the absurdity of human existence through her heart and gave voice to it. She sought a meaning that went beyond universal statements about the life cycle of living beings or the workings of fate, turning instead to the significance of the existence of a particular being, her daughter. How she attempted to confront or respond to this question beyond the composition of her eulogy remains open to interpretation in her writings. Did she find an answer through her study of Neo-Confucianism, by discerning a deeper meaning in the ritual practices that structured everyday life and thereby becoming, as has been suggested, "the real agent of what she was doing" (Kim 2011b, 82)? Or does the Neo-Confucian worldview ultimately leave this tension unresolved for her?

From this perspective, the particularities of embodied existence, such as gender, ethnicity, and social class, should not function as

grounds for exploitation or discrimination against certain groups of people. Rather, they should open the horizon of our philosophizing, urging us to acknowledge the complexity of existence and reflecting on the very meaning of philosophizing.

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