

Diversifying Syllabi 2018 Text Summary and Teaching Tips

SECTION ONE: to be completed by presenter (1-2 pages max.)

Article/Essay Title: “Consuming Suffering: Eating, Energy, and Embodied Ethics” – Ch. 4 of *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times*

Author: Alexis Shotwell

Readability: Easy/**Moderate**/Difficult

Shotwell’s organization is quite clear, and she uses concrete examples throughout the chapter, but undergrads may still find it challenging and dense, especially her discussions of alternatives to an ethics of individual purity.

Thesis: In virtue of being embodied (and thus needing to eat and to use energy), we are all ethically entangled with (human and non-human) others in the world. In addition, “although these responsibilities arise from our particular and situated context—our individual lives—they are not resolvable individually. An ethical approach aiming for personal purity is inadequate in the face of the complex and entangled situation in which we in fact live” (107). Canonical ethical theories assume that there is an isolable, individual moral agent, so we should instead look toward the models of distributed cognition and “existentialist ethics of uncertain freedom” (108) to help us live ethically in light of our embodiment.

“If we orient toward eating [or using energy] as though we can personally exempt ourselves from ethical or physical ill-effects, we’re engaging in a perpetually failing purity project” (113)

Key Definitions:

To be embodied – “to be placed, sustained, affected by the world, and in turn to affect the world” (107)

Brief Summary:

Ethics and the Individual (108-112)

In this particularly useful section, Shotwell briefly and fairly surveys the major canonical ethical theories and discusses their reliance on conceptualizing people as isolable individuals. She argues that we need a “scalable” moral unit and that the individual is not such a unit.

Illustrative Cases—Energy and Eating (112-117)

Shotwell draws support from a wide range of examples and theories in this section, including the difficulty of assigning moral blame for the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster, various popular restrictions of eating that are promoted as more ethical (e.g. locavore, vegan, raw foodist, etc), and theorists who challenge people to consider microbes in the human body as morally valuable. She uses these vivid and interesting examples to further complicate any simplistic understanding of what eating ethically or using energy ethically might mean.

“Relationality does not imply relativism, but instead practices of responsibility” (117)

Are the Ethics of Embodiment Individual? (118-123)

Shotwell reviews a selection of individualist approaches to eating ethically (including a biting, humorous indictment of PETA's tactics and messaging). She critiques these theories for relying on simplification of our moral entanglements, which they then seek to remedy with *ad hoc* additions to the theory (e.g. quoting Lisa Heldke, "A vegetarian's concern with farmworker exposure to pesticide is separate from and in addition to, her vegetarianism—not an intrinsic layer of it" (122)).

Embodiment, Implication, and Encountering Suffering (123-128)

Shotwell argues that accounts of relational self-construction need to recognize that our relationality and self-construction are embodied and material and *literal*, not just narrative or conceptual. She also writes, "If we hold ethics to the level of the individual, we restrict ethical choice to those who are most privileged by and within the system" (125). Shotwell includes a substantial discussion of Donna Haraway's work.

Distributed Ethics and Opening Freedom to Others (128-135)

In this section, Shotwell proposes two useful models for conceptualizing our ethical responsibilities, given our entangled embodiment. First, she discusses distributed cognition, using the example of "who" navigates a giant Navy battle ship into harbor; she suggests that there might be similar distributed ethical responsibilities. Second, she draws on Simone de Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity* for its "extremely useful account of how to understand the conditions for ethical decision-making while taking account of systemic oppression" (130).

"To take up Beauvoir's injunction to unfurl freedom to others, and to pair it with the idea that manifesting freedom will rely on a distributed or social model of ethicality, adds a usefully normative guidance for acting based on relationality and connectivity. I have no settled accounts for where we go from here, only a conviction that we do indeed need to work collectively toward a more collective and relational form of ethics adequate to the global and systemic crises we face" (132).

SECTION TWO: to be completed by note taker during discussion

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Author: Alexis Shotwell

Possible Applications:

- Intro Ethics
- Feminist Philosophy
- Environmental Ethics
- Animal Ethics
- Political Philosophy
- Philosophy of Law
- Moral Psychology
- Oppression & Injustice
- Existentialism

Complementary Texts/Resources:

- Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*
- Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*
- Jennifer Nedelsky, *Law’s Relations*
- *Relational Autonomy*, ed. Natalie Stoljar and Catriona Mackenzie
- Gail Weiss, *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality*
- Peter Singer, “Ethics, Animals, and Society”
- Iris Marion Young, “Guilt with Solidarity”
- Samantha Brennan, “Worlds to Come” Ch. 6 of *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times*
- Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, “It’s Not My Fault: Global Warming and Individual Moral Obligations”
- Roxanne Gay, “Ask Roxane: I’m Outraged, but Failing at Activism. Why?”
- Film: I am Not Your Negro

Possible Class Activities:

- Intuition pump: How should we respond to climate change? World Hunger? Systematic oppression?
- Go to PETA, omnivore, other websites to compare philosophies
- Video of microbes living in/on body
- Carry around trash for a week, don’t use electricity for a weekend, etc.
- Activism role play—give a situation, break into groups to negotiate