

both—and in many ways South Africa has navigated the transition better than other post-revolutionary states. But it is to say that the current student and union movements for economic justice and internal decolonization, as well as movements for greater democratization, anti-corruption, queer liberation, and de-militarization, are both heirs to the prefiguration of the ANC struggle and at the same time movements confronting the ANC as an oppressive external force.

I will stop here on the trite conclusion that prefiguration is hard. It is multi-dimensional, dialectical, and always an impure confrontation with impurity. But it is also the most beautiful thing we people do. Our attempts to build the social, psychological, and environmental capacity to be better, richer, more flourishing people, to build “a world in which many worlds can flourish,” is a constantly evolving project carried out by damaged people inside damaged social relations across complex and contested dimensions of solidarity and opposition. We live our prefiguration on multiple fronts simultaneously, whether these be teach-ins at a campus shantytown or facing down the military in the streets of Soweto, whether fighting cops at Stonewall or figuring out how to make a queer-friendly collective space in our apartment, whether marching for black lives in Ferguson or even engaging with the brilliant work of Alexis Shotwell in an author-meets-critic session of the APA.

For an Impure, Antiauthoritarian Ethics

Michael D. Doan

EASTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

My commentary deals with the fourth chapter of *Against Purity*, entitled “Consuming Suffering,” where Shotwell invites us to imagine what an alternative to ethical individualism might look like in practice. I am particularly interested in the analogy she develops to help pull us into the frame of what she calls a “distributed” or “social” approach to ethics. I will argue that grappling with this analogy can help illuminate three challenges confronting those of us seeking a genuine alternative to ethical individualism: first, that of recognizing that and how certain organizational forms work to entrench an individualistic orientation to the world; second, that of acknowledging the inadequacy of alternatives to individualism that are merely formal in character; and third, that of avoiding the creation of organizational forms that foster purism at the collective level.

THE ARGUMENT OF “CONSUMING SUFFERING”

In “Consuming Suffering,” Alexis Shotwell takes aim at a long tradition of thought and practice rooted in *ethical individualism*, an approach to ethics that “takes as its unit of analysis the thinking, willing, and acting individual person” (109). Focusing on the complexity of our present circumstances as concerns energy use, eating, and climate change, and emphasizing our constitutive entanglement with countless others and, hence, our inescapable implication in cycles of suffering and death, Shotwell argues that “an ethical approach aiming for personal purity

is inadequate,” not to mention “impossible and politically dangerous for shared projects of living on earth” (107). Not only is ethical individualism ill-suited to the *scale* of especially complex ecological and social problems, but it also nourishes the tempting yet ultimately illusory promise that we can exempt ourselves from relations of suffering by, say, going vegan and taking our houses off grid. Clearly, then, to be against such purity projects and the ethical and political purism underwriting them is to commit ourselves to *uprooting individualism*—a commitment that Shotwell puts to work in each chapter of her book.

I find the negative, anti-individualist argument of the chapter quite convincing. Having developed related arguments in a series of papers focused on collective inaction in response to climate change,¹ I also appreciate Shotwell’s approach as an invaluable contribution to and resource for ongoing conversation in this area. Her critique of ethical individualism has helped me to appreciate more fully the challenges we face in proposing philosophically radical responses to complacency (in my own work) and purity politics (in hers). On a more practical level, I couldn’t agree more with Shotwell’s point that “we need some ways to imagine how we can keep working on things even when we realize that we can’t solve problems alone, and that we’re not innocent.”²

As Shotwell recognizes, it is not enough to keep tugging at the individualistic roots of purism until the earth begins to give way. Unless more fertile seeds are planted in its place, individualism will continue crowding out surrounding sprouts, greedily soaking up all the sun and nourishing its purist fruits. As an alternative, Shotwell proposes what she calls a “distributed” or “social” approach to ethics. Rather than taking the individual person as its unit of analysis, a distributed approach would attend to *multiple* agents and agencies, organized into more or less elaborate networks of relationships. Such agents and agencies are capable of performing actions and carrying out procedures the elements of which are distributed across time and space. For those who adopt Shotwell’s proposed alternative, the most basic moral imperative becomes “to understand that we are placed in a particular context with particular limited capacities that are embedded in a big social operation with multiple players” (130).

To illustrate what a distributed ethics might look like in practice, Shotwell draws our attention to Edwin Huchins’s celebrated book, *Cognition in the Wild*, in which he introduces the notion of “distributed cognition” by way of a compelling example.³ Consider how the crew of a large Navy ship manages to grasp the ship’s location relative to port while docking. No lone sailor is capable of carrying out this cognitive task on their own. To solve the routine problem of docking—not to mention the many, relatively predictable crises of maneuverability regularly foisted upon crews at sea—an elaborate ensemble of social and technical operations need to be carried out all at once, so cognitive processes end up manifesting themselves in a widely distributed manner. Indeed, the ship’s position is only ever “known” by an entire team of sailors geared onto multiple instruments simultaneously, in some cases for weeks and months on end.

Shotwell invites us to wonder: "Might we understand the ethics of complex of global systems in this way?" (129).

The answer, of course, is "Yes!"

. . . followed by a slightly hesitant, "But do you really mean, 'in *this way*'?"

"WHAT'S MY WORK ON THE SHIP?"

A great deal seems to hang on how seriously Shotwell wants us to take her analogy. Recall that the analogy Shotwell draws is between the shared predicament of a Navy ship's crew, on the one hand, and our shared predicament aboard an imperial war machine of far greater magnitude, on the other. Arguing from the strengths of this analogy, she eventually concludes that "Our obligation, should we choose to accept it, is *to do our work as individuals* understanding that the meaning of our ethical actions is also political, and thus something that can only be understood in partial and incomplete ways" (130).

I have to admit that I stumbled a bit over this conclusion. Yet when Shotwell invokes the language of "doing our work as individuals," I take it that she is mostly just drawing out the implications of the analogy she is working with, and may or may not, upon reflection, want to focus on the question of what our obligations are *as individuals*—a question at the very heart of ethical individualism. I take it that Shotwell wants nothing to do with the questions animating such an approach to ethics. Here, then, are my questions for her: Does an alternative to ethical individualism still need to address the question of individual obligation? Or does a consistent and uncompromisingly social approach to ethics need to find ways to redirect, sidestep, or otherwise avoid this line of questioning? In other words, *is there a way to avoid being compromised by ethical individualism and the epistemic priorities it presses upon us?* Is such compromise merely contingent, or could it be constitutive of our very being as ethically reflective creatures, or of our practices of ethical reflection?

Shotwell does acknowledge the limitations of her analogy, pointing out how it "fails at the point at which we ask where the ship (of nuclear energy use, or of eating) is going, and why" (130). Perhaps, then, she doesn't mean for us to take it all that seriously. Notice, first, that the ship's crew, as a collective agent, has a clearly delineated objective and, significantly, *one that has been dictated from on high*. Given the Navy's chain of command, there is really no question as to where the ship is going, and why. Yet as Shotwell rightly points out, "Our ethical world is not a military—not a hierarchical structure; there's no captain steering the way" (130). Unlike the question of where the Navy ship is going, the questions of where we are and ought to be going when it comes to the extraction and usage of energy sources are pressing, hotly contested, and not easily resolved to the satisfaction of all involved.

Notice, second, that the ship's crew has at its disposal certain well-rehearsed modes of collective action which, when mapped onto the officers' objectives, generate what we might think of as a *collective obligation* to bring the ship to port. In the context of an established chain

of command where decisions flow from the top down, it becomes possible for each sailor to think of their own responsibilities, *qua* individuals, in terms derived from the responsibilities of the crew, *qua* collective agent. Incidentally, this is precisely the sort of analysis of collective responsibility that Tracy Isaacs elaborates in her 2011 book, *Moral Responsibility in Collective Contexts*. According to Isaacs, "when collective action solutions come into focus and potential collective agents with relatively clear identities emerge as the subjects of those actions, then we may understand individual obligations . . . as flowing from collective obligations that those potential agents would have."⁴ "Clarity at the collective level is a prerequisite for collective obligation in these cases," she explains further, "and that clarity serves as a lens through which the obligations of individuals come into focus."⁵

What I want to suggest, then, is that precisely in virtue of its limitations, Shotwell's analogy helps to illuminate a significant challenge: namely, the challenge of recognizing that and how certain organizational forms work to entrench, rather than overcome, an individualistic orientation to the world. What Shotwell's analogy (and Isaacs's analysis of collective responsibility) shows, I think, is that hierarchically structured organizations help to instill in us an illusory sense of clarity concerning our obligations as individuals—definitively *settling* the question of what we are responsible for doing and for whom in a way that relieves us of the need to think through such matters for and amongst ourselves. Hierarchical, authoritarian structures are particularly adept at fostering such deceptive clarity, for in and through our participation in them we are continually taught to expect straightforward answers to the question of individual obligation, and such expectations are continually met by our superiors. Shotwell's analogy helps us see that expecting straightforward answers goes hand in hand with living in authoritarian contexts and that ethical individualism will continue to thrive in such contexts, significantly complicating the task of uprooting it.

"WHERE'S THE SHIP HEADING, ANYWAY?"

Recall that Shotwell ends up putting the Navy ship analogy into question because, as she puts it, "Our ethical world is not a military—not a hierarchical structure" (130). While I agree that, in our world, "there is no captain steering the way," I also wonder whether it might be worth staying with the trouble of this analogy a bit longer to see if it might help shed light on our current predicament in other ways. In the most recent book-length publication of the Zapatista Army for National Liberation (EZLN), there is a delightful series of stories borrowed "From the Notebook of the Cat-Dog"—stories which, we are warned, are "very *other*."⁶ In one such story, called "The Ship," we are invited to imagine the following scenario:

A ship. A big one, as if it were a nation, a continent, an entire planet. With all of its crew and its hierarchies, that is, its above and its below. There are disputes over who commands, who is more important, who has the most—the standard debates that occur everywhere there is an above and a below. But this proud ship was having difficulty, moving without clear direction and with water pouring in from both

sides. As tends to happen in these cases, the cadre of officers insisted that the captain be relieved of his duty. As complicated as things tend to be when determined by those above, it was decided that in effect, the captain's moment has passed and it is necessary to name a new one. The officers debated among themselves, disputing who has more merit, who is better, who is the best.⁷

Who, we might add, is the most *pur et dur*? As the story continues, we learn that the majority of the ship's crew live and work unseen, below the water line. "In no uncertain terms, the ship moves thanks to their work"; and yet, "none of this matters to the owner of the ship who, regardless of who is named captain, is only interested in assuring that the ship produce, transport, and collect commodities across the oceans."⁸

The Zapatista's use of this analogy interests me because of the way it forces us to face certain structural features of our constitutive present. In a sense, there *really is* a captain steering the ship of energy use, or of eating—or better, it doesn't matter who is at the helm, so long as the ship owner's bidding is done. The ship *really is* heading in one way rather than another, so the crew have their "work as individuals" cut out for them. And as the narrator explains, "despite the fact that it is those below who are making it possible for the ship to sail, that it is they who are producing not only the things necessary for the ship to function, but also the commodities that give the ship its purpose and destiny, *those people below have nothing other than their capacity and knowledge to do this work.*" Unlike the officers up above, those living and working below "don't have the possibility of deciding anything about the organization of this work so that it may fulfill their objectives."⁹ Especially for those who are set apart for being very *other*—*Loas Otroas*, who are "dirty, ugly, bad, poorly spoken, and worst of all . . . didn't comb their hair"¹⁰—everyday practices of responsibility are organized much as they are in the military. Finally, and crucially, the crew's practices of responsibility *really, already are* widely distributed across space and time.

If we take Shotwell's analogy seriously, then, we are confronted with a second challenge: namely, that of acknowledging the inadequacy of alternatives to individualism that are merely formal in character. Reflecting on Shotwell's proposed alternative to individualism, I now want to ask, is it enough to adopt a distributed approach to ethics? Are we not *already* working collaboratively, often as participants in projects the aims and outcomes of which are needlessly, horrifyingly destructive? And have our roles in such projects not *already* been distributed—our labors already thoroughly divided and specialized—such that each of us finds ourselves narrowly focused on making our own little contributions in our own little corners? What does it mean to call for a distributed approach to ethics *from here*, if we are already *there*?

"WHAT DID UNA OTROA SEE?"

Thus far Shotwell's analogy has helped us come to grips with two significant difficulties. First of all, it turns out that organizing ourselves with a view to acting collectively is

not necessarily a good thing, nor is it necessarily an anti-individualist thing. Seeing as how certain organizational forms help to foster and reinforce an individualistic orientation to the world, it seems misleading to treat collectivist and individualist approaches to ethics as simple opposites. Second, it turns out that adopting a distributed approach is not necessarily a good thing either. Seeing as how our current practices of responsibility *already* manifest themselves in a distributed manner, without those of us living below having the possibility of deciding much of anything about the organization of work, proposing merely formal alternatives to individualism might very well encourage more of the same, while at best drawing our attention to the current division of labor.

Taken together, these difficulties point to the need to propose an alternative to ethical individualism that is not merely formal, but also *politically contentful*. Such an alternative would go beyond offering up new destinations for the ship of extraction, production, consumption, and waste—after all, that's the sort of thing a new captain could do. Instead, it would aid us in building new organizational forms in which the entire crew are able to participate in deciding the organization of our work. A genuine alternative would also aid us in resisting the temptation to project authoritarian forms, with all the illusory clarity in responsibilities they tend to instill. Simply put, what we anti-individualists ought to be for is not just a distributed approach to ethics, or an ethics of impurity, but an *impure, anti-authoritarian ethics*. Besides, I can see no better way to meet the third challenge confronting us: that of avoiding organizational forms that foster purism at the collective level.

With this third challenge in mind, I want to conclude by considering what might be involved in "creating a place from which to see," as opposed to "creating a political party or an organization" (8).

As the Zapatista's telling of the ship continues, our attention is drawn to the predicament of the story's protagonist, *una otroa*. *Loas Otroas* were always cursing the officers and "getting into mischief," organizing rebellion after rebellion and calling upon the others down below to join them. Unfortunately, "the great majority of those below did not respond to this call."¹¹ Many would even applaud when the officers singled out individual rebels, took them on deck, and forced them to walk the plank as part of an elaborate ritual of power. Then one time, when yet another was singled out, something out of the ordinary happened:

The dispute among the officers over who would be captain had created so much noise and chaos that no one had bothered to serve up the usual words of praise for order, progress, and fine dining. The executioner, accustomed to acting according to habit, didn't know what to do; something was missing. So he went to look for some officer who would comply with what tradition dictated. In order to do so without the accused/judged/condemned escaping, he sent them to hell, that is, to the "lookout," also known as "the Crow's Nest."¹²

High atop the tallest mast, the Crow's Nest furnished *una o'troa* with a unique vantage point from which to examine afresh all the activities on deck. For example, in a game periodically staged by the officers, the sailors would be asked to choose from two stages full of little, differently colored flags, and the color chosen by the majority would be used to paint the body of the ship. Of course, at some level the entire crew knew that the outcome of the game would not really change anything about life on the ship, for the ship's owner, and its destination, would remain the same regardless. But from the angle and distance of the Crow's Nest, it finally dawned on *Loa O'troa* that "all the stages have the same design and the same color" too.¹³

The lookout also provided its occupant with an unrivaled view of the horizon, where "enemies were sighted, unknown vessels were caught creeping up, monsters and catastrophes were seen coming, and prosperous ports where commodities (that is, people) were exchanged came into view."¹⁴ Depending on what threats and opportunities were reported, the captain and his officers would either make a toast, or celebrate modernity, or postmodernity (depending on the fashion), or distribute pamphlets with little tidbits of advice, like, "Change begins with oneself," which, we are told "almost no one read."¹⁵ Simply put, the totality of life aboard the ship was fundamentally irrational and absurd.

Upon being banished to the subsidiary of hell that is the Crow's Nest, we are told that *Loa O'troa* "did not wallow in self-pity." Instead, "they took advantage of this privileged position to take a look," and it "was no small thing what their gaze took in."¹⁶ Looking first toward the deck, then pausing for a moment to notice the bronze engraving on the front of the boat ("*Bellum Semper. Universum Bellum. Universum Exitium*"), *Loa O'troa* looked out over the horizon, and "shuddered and sharpened their gaze to confirm what they had seen."¹⁷

After hurriedly returning to the bottom of the ship, *Loa O'troa* scrawled some "incomprehensible signs" in a notebook and showed them to the others, who looked at each other, back at the notebook, and to each other again, "speaking a very ancient language."¹⁸

Finally, "after a little while like that, exchanging gazes and words, they began to work feverishly. The End."¹⁹

"THE END?"

Frustrating, right?! "What do you mean 'the end'? What did they see from the lookout? What did they draw in the notebook? What did they talk about? Then what happened?" The Cat-Dog just meowed barking, "We don't know yet."²⁰

I wonder: What lessons could such frustration hold for we aspiring anti-individualists and anti-purists? Which of our expectations and needs does the story's narrator avoid meeting, or neglect to meet? Where are we met with a provocation in the place of hoped-for consolation?

What might our own experiences of frustration have to teach us about what we have come to expect of ethical theory, and how we understand the relationship between

theory and the "feverish work" of organizing? What stories are we telling ourselves and others about our own cognitive needs—about their origins, energies, and sources of satisfaction? From, with, and to whom do we find ourselves looking, and for what? Who all has a hand in creating *this* "place from which to see" (8)? "Who is it that is doing the seeing?" (5, original emphasis).

One final thought from the EZLN, this time from a chapter called "More Seedbeds":

We say that it doesn't matter that we are tired, at least we have been focused on the storm that is coming. We may be tired of searching and of working, and we may very well be woken up by the blows that are coming, but at least in that case we will know what to do. *But only those who are organized will know what to do.*²¹

NOTES

1. Michael D. Doan, "Climate Change and Complacency"; Michael D. Doan, "Responsibility for Collective Inaction and the Knowledge Condition"; Michael D. Doan and Susan Sherwin, "Relational Solidarity and Climate Change."
2. Chandra Prescod-Weinstein, "Purity in a Trumped-Up World: A Conversation with Alexis Shotwell."
3. Edwin Hutchins, *Cognition in the Wild*.
4. Tracy Isaacs, *Moral Responsibility in Collective Contexts*, 140.
5. *Ibid.*, 152.
6. Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), 190.
7. *Ibid.*, 190–91.
8. *Ibid.*, 191.
9. *Ibid.*, 194; emphasis in original.
10. *Ibid.*, 191.
11. *Ibid.*, 192.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, 195.
14. *Ibid.*, 193.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*, 195.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*, 196.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*, 310.

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Response to Critics

Alexis Shotwell

CARLETON UNIVERSITY

Participating in an author-meets-critics (AMC) panel is peculiar—there is an artifact, a book, which can't be changed. And then there is rich and generative conversation, which illuminates the vitality and ongoing changefulness of why one thinks about things and writes books about them. Still, perhaps still images of moving objects are all we ever have, in trying to understand the world. In the AMC at the Central APA, where these folks first shared their responses to *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times*, this texture felt especially heightened, in part because of the quality of the responses and in part because the conversation in the room from participants beyond the panel was enormously rich and interesting. Several of us commented afterwards on how nourishing it felt to have a wide-ranging, feminist, politically complex conversation that refused to confine itself to disciplinary habits within philosophy. I am grateful to the hard work that went into putting on the Central APA, to the North American Society for Social Philosophy for hosting this book panel, to Ami for organizing it, and to Mike, Kate, and Mark for their generous and provoking responses. I am still thinking through their engagements, and the reflection below is only a beginning.

I am struck by a shared curiosity among all three responses about the relationship between individuals and social relations, between people and our world, especially around the question of how we transform this unjust world that has shaped us. I share this curiosity—in *Against Purity* I am especially interested in what we gain from beginning from the orientation that we are implicated in the world in all its mess, rather than attempting to stand apart from it. I've been thinking through what it means to take up an attitude that might intertwine epistemic humility with a will to keep trying to transform the world even after we have made tremendous mistakes or if we are beneficiaries of oppressions we oppose. Epistemic humility asks of us (among other things) that we not imagine we can be completely correct about things, and a will to keep trying demands that we find ways to be of use without being perfect. Underlying this attitude is a belief in the possibility of transforming the extant world while refusing to sacrifice anyone in service of the envisioned world-to-come—as Mark discusses, this is an anarchist understanding of prefigurative politics. I am compelled by his account of prefiguration as a useable pivot point from recognizing impurity towards shaping strategy. And, indeed, thinking clearly about prefiguration invites us to consider the

question of how capacity building in our social relations might be in tension with efficiency. I've learned so much from social movement theorist-practitioners who take up an essentially pedagogical approach to working on and with the world. Many of the movements Mark mentions have helped me think, too, about one of the key points in his response—the question of dialectics of struggle. Many of us feel a pull in thinking about prefiguration to idealize or stabilize a vision of the world we want—and I believe in having explicit and explicated normative commitments in engaging political work. If we want to change anything, we should be able to say what we want, and why, and we should have some ways to evaluate whether we're winning the fights we take on—this is part of my own commitment to prefigurative political practice. I am still working through what it means theoretically to understand something that activists understand in practice: The victories we win become the conditions of our future struggles. In this sense, social transformation is never accomplished. In the session, I shared an example of this from an oral history project on the history of AIDS activism that I have been doing over the last five years. In 1990, there was a widespread move in Canada towards legislation that would allow Public Health to quarantine people living with HIV and AIDS; in some provinces this was defeated (in BC such legislation passed but was not enacted). At the time, activists argued that if people were transmitting HIV to others on purpose, it would be appropriate for this to be a matter for the legal system rather than a matter of health policy. At the time, this was a strategic move that allowed people to effectively mobilize against forced quarantine; now, Canada is, shamefully, one of the world leaders in imprisoning people simply for being HIV positive. The victories of the past become the conditions of struggle in the present, and if we regard that as only a problem we might become immobilized. Instead, a prefigurative approach encourages us to take a grounded, emergent attitude toward our work. How can we create ways forward even when what we win is incomplete or reveals problems we had not considered?

Prefiguration involves, complexly, the concerns about voluntarism that Kate raises. As Kate notes, in *Against Purity* I discuss fellow feminists' work on questions of gender transformation and voluntarism, rather than turning to trans-hating thinkers. This is in part because as a matter of method I prefer to attend to people who I think are doing good and interesting work in the world, rather than people who are both intellectually vacuous and politically vile (and I have spent some fair amount of time considering the views of trans-hating writers in trying to suss out what their opposition to gender transformation tells us about their understanding of gender¹). But it is the case that the main source of charges of gender voluntarism come from anti-trans writers who consider themselves to be in opposition to it. So as a conceptual term, it is strange to define "gender voluntarism," since it's something that is almost entirely used in a derogatory sense. Thus, in trying to evaluate whether transforming gender is voluntarist in the relevant sense, I certainly gloss, and perhaps oversimplify, a view that holds, as I put it in the book, "individuals can change themselves and their political circumstances through their own force of will."²