

Non-ideal Theory and Gender Voluntarism in *Against Purity*

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Alexis Shotwell's *Against Purity* is an unusual and absorbing collection of ideas. It is a pleasure to delve into the related chapters, but hard to know where to start with a response. It was helpful, therefore, when panel organizer Ami Harbin suggested that rather than be mere critics, we readers of *Against Purity* provide a focus on our ways of using and developing its themes in our own research. I come to this text as one interested in non-ideal theory, and specifically what I call *non-ideal ethical theory* (NET). (For readers who don't embrace the term, I'll briefly characterize it below.) Shotwell takes up a multiplicity of tasks with respect to what I think of as the non-ideal. In what follows, I trace the relationship of her work to that of non-ideal theorists whose work influences mine. Then, more critically, I probe her analysis of gender voluntarism in Chapter 5, "Practicing Freedom: Disability and Gender Transformation," partly to better understand what she takes it to be, and partly to advance a cautious defense of some of the moral functions of gender voluntarism that non-ideal theory leads me to value. Perhaps my interest in retaining a non-pejorative account of gender voluntarism is due to my tendency to take non-ideal theory as a recommendation for some pessimism, whereas Shotwell's similar commitments turn out to inform her more optimistic philosophy.

First, I should clarify why non-ideal commitments lend me to pessimism. In a recent article (2016), I offered a vision of non-ideal ethical theory (hereafter NET) construed from elements of non-ideal theories as articulated in political philosophy by writers including Laura Valentini (2012) and Charles Mills (2005), and in moral theory by writers including Lisa Tessman (2010, 2015) and Claudia Card (2002). I combine insights like Mills' that political philosophers should reject Rawlsian idealizations that "obfuscate realities" (177), with the work of moral theorists like Tessman, who argues for avoiding idealizations in morality, saying, "theory must begin with an empirically informed, descriptive account of what the actual world is like" (2010, 807) and we "should forego the idealizing assumption that moral redemption is possible, because it obscures the way that moral dilemmas affect the moral agent" (811). NET offers reminders to theorists of institutional and systemic change that material contexts involve ongoing oppressions, and that individuals are inconsistent and biased, bear emotional and moral remainders, and are often outmatched by the seriousness of the problems we face. Because NET prioritizes attention to the imperfect realities of human nature, I am pessimistic that (inevitably temporary) progress in institutional arrangements will lead to better-behaved persons. Institutions can be orderly, but their orderliness does not thereby yield compliant individuals, because to believe individuals will be compliant with orderly institutions *is* to idealize moral agents, as primarily rational, unencumbered by moral remainders, free from histories of violence or oppressive occupation, and so on. Therefore, ethics should not aim for absolutism, and justice should not aim for wiping the record clean, because embodied individuals in the material world will continue on all-too-human paths in a way which forestalls possibilities for purity; instead, moral and political efforts should engage in a necessary struggle that will remain a perpetual struggle. I suggested that NET is methodologically committed to (1) attention to oppression, (2) de-idealized moral agents, (3) recognition of moral remainders, and (4) recognition that some wrongs are not reparable.

How does Shotwell's work in *Against Purity* measure up to these injunctions of mine? I find her work urgently relevant to all four of the above commitments. In the first chapter, Shotwell refers to "currently extremely oppressive social relations" (2016, 25) including colonialism. Her book holds up for scrutiny oppressions including healthism, anthropocentrism, trans-exclusion and hostility to LGBTQ+ people. So (1) attention to oppression is certainly satisfied! One might infer that Shotwell's concern for oppressed groups motivates the book itself.

Next, (2) de-idealized moral agents, as Tessman (2010) describes us, are moral agents who are subject to moral failure: "To see the moral agent as someone who will likely face complicated moral conflicts and emerge from them bearing moral remainders is an important way to de-idealize the moral agent" (811), she says. Tessman criticizes theory that has been unduly focused on *action-guiding* (803), idealizing the moral agent as one with options that can be exercised toward a right choice, which does not promote "understanding moral life under oppression" (808). I add that a de-idealized moral agent, especially in American political contexts, is a *relational* agent rather than the self-sufficient and independent individual valued by oppressors who long to ignore our shared states. Again, Shotwell exemplifies this attention to our compromised lives; her very subtitle (*Living Ethically in Compromised Times*) heralds her attention to the impurity of choices. Shotwell's attentive criticism even to fellow vegans is instructive here; she describes the attitudes some take toward veganism as mistaken when they fancy themselves as "opting out" of systems of agriculture, migrant labor, environmental degradation, illness and death – as if veganism were an action-guide in a world with right choices that lead to a pure self (2016, 117). Shotwell's attention to the relational nature of oppressions and systems of production enables her to clarify that rightly intended actions are still enacted in thick contexts from which no opting out is possible. "It is striking," Shotwell says, "that so many thinkers answer the question 'how should I eat' with an answer that centers on individual food choices" (118), as if one's body were "one's horizon of ethical practices of freedom" (120). Shotwell keeps front and center a relational account of what it means to be a body (interdependently) and what it means to be a less than ideal moral agent.

Shotwell's arguments against purity easily satisfy my (3) and (4) above, to an extent, as her account of pollution and what it means to be a part of a damaged ecosystem make us *feel* the importance of the tenet that (4) some wrongs are not slates that we can later wipe clean, and that (3) we carry the moral remainders of our compromised choices. Of course, in the case of pollution, we carry literal remainders that are not washed away by using Brita filters for our water. Claudia Card attended importantly, however, to one type of moral remainder in particular: emotions as moral remainders (2002, 169), and as insoluble as results of what Card called "the challenges of extreme moral stress" (234). It is the consideration of the challenges of moral stress that moves me to probe Shotwell's account of gender voluntarism in Chapter 5.

I continue to read and learn the literature on gender voluntarism, and readers like me who may need more explication of the term will perhaps have some questions after reading Shotwell's account of it. This is certainly a project that is complicated in part by the extant literature, in which there does not seem to be a clear consensus as to what gender voluntarism means. Understanding voluntarism is also complicated in part by an uncharacteristic change in Shotwell's writing voice in Chapter 5. Much of the book is written first-personally, and invitationally, including moments when Shotwell leans in and clearly indicates to us that she is offering her own view ("I am identifying this as naturalism" (2016, 99), she says of skills of attention to details of the natural world). However, in Chapter 5 she momentarily

disappears, when she says, “I examine charges that certain trans theorists are relying on voluntarist conceptions of natural change. ‘Voluntarist’ here refers to political projects that assume individuals can change themselves and their political circumstances through their own force of will, without regard for current realities or history” (140). The source of the “charges” is unclear in the book; it became clear in discussion at our author-meets-critics panel that she refers to charges on the part of writers including trans-exclusionary feminists whom Shotwell was aiming to avoid citing, which is a worthy ideal.

Absent that explanatory context, the latter sentence, with the “here refers to” phrase, threw me; is this *Shotwell’s* characterization of the voluntarist, I wondered? It’s not flagged as such the way naturalism was, even though it seemed to me that this depiction of voluntarism is more distinctively her own than was the depiction of naturalism. Why would she provide an account that seems like no one would hold it --- who assumes that individuals can change themselves “without regard for current realities or history”? The most individualistic voluntarist must have *some* regard for current realities or they wouldn’t want their own forms of change. What is the history of this term, and what is its function in this chapter, and does Shotwell intend it to have a pejorative meaning? Is gender voluntarism bad by definition or is it the effects of the associated attitude that are lamentable? One might think that learning some trans-exclusionary feminists are at least one source of the sense of “gender voluntarist” at work here would remove my questions, but as the chapter proceeds, it becomes clear that Shotwell is not merely tilting at people who use the term accusatorily and unethically. She is also working out arguments against gender voluntarism, itself, in which case, she must have a conception of the meaning of the term that exceeds the more cartoonish form ascribed to the sources of the “charges.” She does not merely take up the term “gender voluntarism” as the construct of trans-exclusionary authors. She also takes it up as a site of her own normative concerns. So the full meaning of the term is worth working out.

At first, I took gender voluntarism to be almost equivalent in meaning to individualism, as she indicated an interest in “nonindividualistic, nonvoluntarist approaches” (140). However, I then reached her comment that the description of the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (SRLP), at first glance, “looks like a kind of voluntarism, or at least individualism” (note: she concludes it is may look like voluntarism, but is not) (149). But if individualism is a thinner concept than voluntarism (and not as bad?), then voluntarism is a subset of individualistic attitudes. I double back, I check again: “SRLP’s response points to the dangers of individualist allegiance to voluntarist gender norms *as these norms are enacted by the state,*” Shotwells says (140, emphasis mine). Ah-hah! Is it the state’s enactment of the norms of voluntarism that are the problem, rather than gender voluntarism itself?

This was an attractive possibility to me, but I realized quickly that a criticism of the state’s norming of voluntarism would not cover all of Shotwell’s objections. For example, she also resists over-attention to the individual’s performance of gender. Shotwell says that “discussions about what’s happening when someone changes their gender expression often presuppose that gender enactment (or performance) is something people *do*: we *will* to be perceived in one way or another, and dress or move accordingly. For many theorists, part of the making of gender, or its performance, is the uptake we receive or are refused from others” (141, emphasis hers); to my surprise, Shotwell cites Judith Butler here. Is this Butler’s view, and is Butler now implicitly saddled with a lack of “regard for current realities or history”? I was sure I was on the wrong track. I could almost hear the author shaking her head, that she did not mean that at all; she meant merely to shift everyone’s attention to the performance of gender in a thick context which is, as Cressida Heyes says, relationally informed (2007, 39-40).

But then voluntarism is not an attitude of *disregard* for realities, after all. Instead, perhaps it is an emphasis, an attitude with respect to what has priority for our attention: that which the individual wills, or the “role of individual transformations within collective change” as Shotwell says --- collective change which “we instantiate precisely through our agential subjectivities” (141), and collective change which we ought to so instantiate.

Rhetorically, perhaps those of us in intellectual feminist communities or in popular press accounts have over-attended to individualist aspects of gender formation when we should have attended more to collective change. Shotwell offers arguments for how we should think about “shifting the grounds of intelligibility and sociality,” and focuses on “the question of whether transforming social norms is voluntarist in the sense offered here,” where voluntarism refers to “a political position that places emphasis on individual choice and liberty, implicitly assuming *that individuals are the locus of change*” (145). Shotwell calls “the supposition that we make change as individuals” a “danger of voluntarism for engaging with oppressive norms” (146).

I pause, resistant, at the idea that voluntarism is always a danger to collective change. I recall again Shotwell’s criticism of some attitudes that veganism opts one out of anything: one’s body is not “one’s horizon of ethical practices of freedom” (120). But a locus is not a horizon. There is more than one sense in which one can be a locus, more than one sort of change, more than one reason to act. The same act or performance can have multiple moral functions. I share Shotwell’s commitment to appreciating the extent to which “the situation in which we live [is one] which we have not chosen and cannot completely control” (145), but I do not know if I equally share her commitment to *collective change as a norm*. I agree with Shotwell that relational beings are constantly engaged in collective norm-shifting in deliberate and less deliberate ways, but a norm of engagement seems another way to idealize the moral agent, and in non-ideal contexts, gender voluntarism may be the better choice at times.

Gender voluntarism may be, as just one possibility, manifest at those times when one feels morally isolated, when the performance that one wills is to be a voice that shouts “no” despite the likelihood that one will not be heard, or will be heard only as unwell, or criminal, or displeasing. Gender voluntarism may also be manifest at times when one’s expression or performance is idiosyncratic, even as, at the same time, one persists in hoping to change norms. But what if one abandons that hope, or feels they need to carry on in its absence? What if collective change, itself, is in danger of becoming a form of a disciplinary norm, on this analysis, *that for the sake of which we ought to act*? If we have not chosen, and cannot completely control, the situation in which we live, then collective change is not always normatively available. I said above that I am a pessimist, and my commitments to representing de-idealized realities include recognizing the imperfect possibilities for collective change. Oppressive contexts provide an abundance of opportunities for moral failure, that is, for situations permitting multiple responses from an agent, none of which resolve the moral demands presented.

Perhaps voluntarism is available to us at times when transforming social norms is not available. More, voluntarism sounds so successful, and I find myself thinking of times when gender-voluntaristic choices are not received as socially successful, when success is not the point. At times, instances of gender voluntarism may be forms of resistance, a foray in a fight that may have no end, perhaps even a moral remainder, the act of an agent presented, again and again, with a hostile, dangerous, and determinedly unreceptive world. The individual body may not always be the locus of collective norm

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transformation, but individual acts of resistance in the form of willed gender presentations may serve to shift the agent's world in ways that provide her self-respect, strength, or as Rachel McKinnon (2015) says, epistemic assets, shifts in one's view of oneself, as a locus of many changes, and as a source of future efforts.

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