

## Eating in Theory

by Annemarie Mol (2021) Durham and London, Duke University Press, pp. 199.

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Readers eagerly waiting for some unheard of cooking tricks or thoughtful advices for Pantagruelian banquets will be bitterly disappointed. Speculative researchers of the role of food across the ages or of the symbolic dimension of eating in practices of social distinction will also find Annemarie Mol's study quite bland. Then *Eating in Theory* does not propose a *theory about* eating, but, more pointedly, it “takes its cues *from* eating” (p. 5) as an inquiry into what (and not least: *how*) academic reflections might gain while starting *with* and developing *along* eating situations. At stake is nothing less but the immense – though intimidating – demand to “enrich exiting philosophical repertoires” (p. 1) broadly used in the social sciences and the humanities. In other words, *Eating in Theory* is a book of tensions within and *departures* from *our own* philosophical equipment to address reality: it “shakes things up and creates openings” (p. 6). However, what becomes different (and *how*) should we be prepared to start from eating in dealing with some of the most serious themes of the Western thought as “being” (Chapter n. 2), “knowing” (Chapter n. 3), “doing” (Chapter n. 4), “relating” (Chapter n. 5), and politics (Chapter n. 6)?

The first chapter on “Empirical Philosophy” offers in a nutshell the complex framework of the entire book and reads as a reconstruction of a threefold *tension* embedded in the philosophical tradition. *First*, Mol argues against understanding theory as a description of the world (p. 5), or as she puts it, as “a grand scheme that holds smaller elements together” (p. 25). While philosophical theories take up a *transcendental* stance that secures both their distance from *immanent* realities and their critical capacities directed towards them (p. 15), Mol advocates instead the “ostensible oxymoron” (p. 15) of an “empirical philosophy” that opens towards historical, cultural, and material contingencies. Framed as an “exercise in empirical philosophy” (pp. 1, 15, 20f.) – a trademark of Mol's approach (Mol 2002, 4ff.; 2008, 9ff.) – *Eating in Theory* avoids the pit of a *paramount* (theoretical) explanation as well as that of an (empirical) *plurality* of “views” on reality. It provides a perspective in which “different knowledge practices interfere with reality in contrasting ways” thus rendering not a fragmented but a *multiple* reality, i.e., “different ways of ordering, different versions of reality, all equally immanent” (p. 23). Accordingly, Mol unveils therein a *second* tension between *norms* and *facts*, i.e., between the philosophical longing for *normativity* and the desire of the empirical research to “represent reality *as it is*” (p. 14). Without keeping apart “the *is* of empirical studies and the *ought* at stake in philosophy” (p. 15),

Mol looks at how “normativities and realities tend to be *done* together” (p. 154, footnote 35). Not least through “ontonorms” – a concept Mol has coined, but now barely uses (p. 154) – “normativity comes down to earth” (p. 23), being enacted in the “specificity and situatedness” (p. 25) of empirical settings. Finally, Mol identifies a *third* tension pertaining to philosophical analyses: an insistence on “the human” as an “especially deserving kind of creature” (p. 2) against other entities. Historically justified throughout perpetual intellectual quests for human dignity (pp. 7-11), this “human exceptionalism” (p. 2) enables fruitful elaborations on central values as liberty or freedom, but it also marks the way how “agency” or “subjectivity” are themselves conceptualised when applied, for instance, to non-humans as these terms “have been thoroughly informed by a particular understanding of ‘the human’” (p. 2). Therefore, the symmetric treatment of both human and non-human entities risks being eventually vitiated: while “robbing ‘the human’ of his exceptionalism by spreading out his particular traits over the rest of the world” (p. 3) it genuinely reproduces a hierarchical understanding of “the human” (p. 3). In hierarchically praising the “thinking mind” and overall “thinking” against basic processes as, e.g., eating or breathing (p. 3), the philosophical anthropology has perpetuated an ultimate – simultaneously *transcendental* and *normative* – reference for our current understanding of *being*, *knowing*, *doing*, and *relating*. However, *Eating in Theory* resets this view along the exigencies of an “empirical philosophy” bearing in mind, as Mol argues in line with Wittgenstein (p. 16f.) and Foucault (p. 17f.), that “diverse socio-material formations and ways of using words make different ‘realities’ possible” (p. 22). Against this background, especially *this* particular hierarchical understanding of “the human” ceases to claim for itself definitive characteristics and takes instead its distinct place in the more analytically refined framework of multiple *models* of reality.

Taken *eating* as reference, each chapter reads as a story, often deliciously garnished with impressive empirical vignettes, of a *departure from* the “intellectual apparatus of the humanist philosophical tradition” (p. 3) – epitomised by the works of Hannah Arendt, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Hans Jonas, or Emmanuel Levinas – *towards* “eating-inflected intellectual terms and tools” (p. 6). Chapter n. 2 on “Being” departures, for instance, from Merleau-Ponty and his understanding of “the being of an embodied human in the center of a three dimensional world filled with varied entities” (p. 29). Consequently, it is the “walker”, an icon of the “neuromuscular version of the body” (p. 48), gradually discovering the world as he passes it through, and not the “eater” with whom the philosophical reflection on being begins. Nevertheless, as Mol observes, this difference has a huge analytical impact: “while, as a walker, I move through the world, when I eat, it is the world that moves through me” (p. 49). Hence, the “model of being” (pp. 39, 43) offered by eating is one of a limitless (and constant) exchange between “me” and the world: I “am” at the same time “inside” and “outside” of my body (p. 33f.), being both “local” and “dispersed” (p. 44f.), i.e., “not sharply bounded” (p. 92) as I cook, ingest, digest, and excorporate food.

In some respects, the “walker” resembles the “knower” learning from a distance about the surrounding world. Though “not always and not everywhere” (p. 53), *thinking* operates along the classical epistemological difference between a “(knowing) subject” and an “(known) object”. Opposing this divide, in Chapter n. 3, Mol argues that the “model of knowing” emerging from eating is neither objective nor subjective but “transformative” (p. 55). It transforms both the food and the eater as the encounter with an “object” (food) changes the “subject” as well (p. 66): we come to know ourselves, our likes or dislikes, as well as our food

deeper and (more than often) differently as “the taste of foods is bound to affect the taste of those who eat them” (p. 67). In other words, eating points at a “model of knowing that is not about passively apprehending the world but, rather, about actively engaging with it” (p. 73).

Chapter n. 4 formulates “a model of *doing* that does not just elude centralized control but also defines individualism” (p. 77) as opposed to the idea of a “voluntary action”. Eating, as Mol puts it, is not confined to an embodied (human) “doer”, but it is “always already technically and socially mediated” (p. 96) and consequently “a part of a diverse socio-material practices” (p. 100) in which several others are already actively involved. Then “my eating” is neither solely “my’ *doing*” (p. 77) nor can it be traced back to a hidden place inside my body. Even digestion takes place “out of our bowels” (p. 91), as Mol shows, as it already starts as an “extracorporeal” process (p. 92) at which farmers, cooks, kitchens, or even cook-books equally participate in innumerable forms of growing, delivering, and preparing food. In this vein, the “actor taking on the task of eating” (p. 100) is actually immersed in a “historically dispersed collective” (pp. 93) of human and nonhuman entities.

According to the idea of a “human exceptionalism”, “relating” is primarily considered in terms of “family trees” (pp. 125, 143) and (human) “kinship” (p. 103f.), a form of togetherness that might be extended to embrace *both* human and nonhumans. However, the “model of relating” (p. 124) discussed in Chapter n. 5 brackets this standpoint (p. 122) and embraces “my *relating* to nonhuman creatures” (p. 103), whether these constitute my food or are depending on it, without the appeal to some “degrees of similarity” (p. 120). Mol understands “relating” as “individual as well as collective relations of agreement” (p. 118), an agreement with other entities to which I differently react while ingesting them, but also whose growth or extinction I enhance or hinder through individual or collective consumption. Though eating is a genuine “asymmetrical relation” (p. 120), feeding and eating, giving and taking are thus neither good nor bad *per se*, but the normative profile of a “particular feeding/eating relation” (p. 115) is constantly a matter depending on the specificity of the situation in which it occurs.

If the previous chapters questioned the relevance of a hierarchical view of the “the human” for understanding *being*, *thinking*, *doing*, and *relating*, in Chapter n. 6 on “Intellectual ingredients”, the *politics* becomes central. What if we put aside the *normative* (and *transcendental*) orientation of politics (modelled along Hannah Arendt’s image of the “zoom politikon”; p. 127) and consider instead a “politics of labor” (p. 129f.), of doings, tinkering, and care, in which facts and material life, and not only theory are equally taken into account? Mol’s answer – echoing her former thoughts on the “politics of what” (Mol 2002, 172f.) – points at the importance of the “*alterity* (...) between different ways of organizing socio-material realities” (p. 132), i.e., at the *multiple* ways in which *multiple* representations of “what is good” (p. 134) are enacted in “ongoing negotiations: among humans, with other creatures, converting materials – obdurate or fragile things – and the earth we share” (p. 137). As in Mol’s treatment of the “logic of care”, the “good” is not given “before the act” (Mol 2008, 86) and it is not just a matter of “(discursive) *action*” (p. 137). Instead, it shapes a new meaning of politics that is better prepared to deal with human and nonhuman entities in the face of contemporary environmental problems.

While every peak of Mol’s arguments is introduced in the book as “a lesson for theory”, *Eating in Theory* contains itself “lessons” from one of the major scholars that is – luckily for her readers! – still concerned with theoretical questions in STS. On the one hand, it calls

for a reflection on our methodological presuppositions on ontology, epistemology, agency, interaction, and politics in which a hierarchical understanding of “the human” went “into hiding” (p. 25). From this perspective, *Eating in Theory* does not simply break with a “long overdue” (p. 140) classical view of philosophical anthropology, but it sharply reconstructs its explanatory efforts and develops alternative research instruments. For the STS-community this sounds as a plea for more openness towards the intellectual resources nurturing its work *and* for a more critical view of its own concepts and arguments.

Besides, within the framework of “multiple versions of reality”, Mol sets forth *and* enlarges her *own* contribution to the long-lasting debate on the “ontological turn” in STS (Woolgar and Lezaun 2013). The congruent ideas (Bischur and Nicolae 2014) of multiple enacted realities *and* normativity that Mol has developed along the vocabulary of “politics” (Mol 2002), of “logics” (Mol 2008), and of “ontonorms” (Mol 2013) now reach a more encompassing profile. Then the multiple “eating-inspired models” (of *being*, *knowing*, *doing*, and *relating*) aim *both* at retrieving the multiplicity of the socio-material settings of eating situations *and* at how these might be approached. Put differently, *Eating in Theory* calls for a *reflexive* “empirical philosophy”, i.e., an inquiry focused on STS approaches, on “our words”, and “the worlds they carry with them” (p. 141) – a situation in which these approaches themselves are treated as models of enacting reality. In this view, Mol’s book also touches upon some of the most pressing problems facing the STS scholarship: what model of reality are we set to formulate and how well equipped are Science and Technology Studies for facing the challenges of environmental catastrophes? How do multiple models of reality relate with each other and how are we prepared to discuss theoretical and methodological differences?

Years ago, Annemarie Mol funnily stated that she took a term (“logic”) from philosophy and “ran away with it” (Mol 2008, 9). And her “run” was impressive. Now she kindly invites us to do the same with her *own* terms: “if you happen to find them inspiring”, she writes, “run with them, and put one or two of them to work in your own writing” (pp. 25, 143). Hence, it is up to us, in STS and beyond, to become more attentive to the gems embedded in her work. And eventually start running with them!

## References

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