

Mol, Annemarie. 2021. *Eating in Theory*. Durham, London: Duke University Press. 208. pp. Pb.: \$24.95. ISBN: 9781478011415.

Book review by

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New concerns deserve redefined terms. Annemarie Mol is a modern philosopher concerned with urgent ecological problems around metabolism and the environment. In *Eating in Theory*, the author's objective is not to offer an alternative theory but to recall conventional theoretical terms of being, knowing, doing, and relating, which will tackle sustainability problems more effectively today. As a student of Foucault, Mol challenges established norms, invites the reader to "experiment with alternatives," and upgrades *eating* to the level of *thinking*. Not taking metabolism for granted (p. 33), she is interested not in "*the* human, who is able to think," but in "*this* or *that* human who is eating" (p. 102). Hence, her tools are "exemplary situations" of eating, her methods are various ethnographic fieldworks, and her questions are set not around human exceptionalism but around "human metabolic engagements *with* the world" (p. 3). Engaging with the nonuniform active reality of eating, the author elegantly awards each to be redefined terms its own chapter between an introductory part on "Empirical Philosophy" and a last chapter on "Intellectual Ingredients."

Following a brief book overview, "Empirical Philosophy" continues by outlining "a hierarchical model of *the human*" (p. 5) and its archaic, often even negligent, modern implications. In addressing today's ecological sustainability concerns, Mol opposes using a historical hierarchical idealization of *the human* that graciously puts *eating* as a precondition to *thinking*. The author draws on the work of Hannah Arendt and shows how *labor*, *work*, and *action* were preemptorily embedded in anthropological and philosophical Western thinking. Now and later, Mol puts this hierarchy in its rightful historical domain. In addition, Mol spends time defining multiple realities through the intricacies of "empirical philosophy," as this reality is substantiated in the everyday ordinary. "Empir-

ical Philosophy” is more than just a chapter to ground *being, knowing, doing, and relating*. Mol virtuously puts various historical, philosophical, and anthropological accounts into conversation, which can be read independently as a catalyst for changing perspectives.

Throughout the book, Mol shows that eating and its senses are not just natural processes; they deserve their own cosmology. In “Being,” Mol presents a different kind of *being*, the one in which the “inside depends on the outside” (p. 49). If walkers only cognitively “move their bodies through the surroundings” (p. 4), eaters “move their surroundings through their bodies” (p. 4). This transformative nature of being makes the eater and what is being eaten active elements of eating. *Knowing* is also transformative and active. It is a model where “the known objects [...] become incorporated into the knowing subjects” (p. 4), and hence, these objects acquire the well-defined, almost instrumental, eating application. For Mol, food and body interact and influence each other through perceptive valuing, where the outward perception of an eating object is meshed up with the inward senses, producing *knowing* that “is not about passively apprehending the world, but rather, about actively engaging with it” (p. 73).

Mol does not call for an ideal world or “moral rightness,” and her concerns are not apocalyptic or cynical. Still, they are constantly brought to attention by showing how *eating* is situated not within bodies but with the environment, widening the “scope beyond the individual” (p. 110). “[M]y eating [...] involves agriculture, distribution networks, skills, equipment, shops, and money” (p. 96), and “with my food I do not just have kinship relations, but agri/cultural relations as well” (p. 110). This transformative and even sometimes uncomfortable framework underpins eating actions and their ecological consequences. In “Doing,” Mol shows just that: the *doing* of digestion is stretched over space and time, involving “helpful organisms, kitchen implements, [and] farmers” (p. 92). This makes for a very different *doing*, where digestion “cannot be similarly trained” (p. 4), and eating becomes not a choice but a task. Then, *relating* shifts perspective even further to “those from whom I eat” (p. 103). It is no longer the equality of humans but “an asymmetrical relation” (p. 4) of eating. As one eats, the relatedness between taking (eating) and giving (feeding) blurs and distorts bad and good, which are assigned to these terms. “For while my eating destroys the single apple being eaten, it contributes to the survival of its kind” (p. 125). Mol invites self-imposed reflection and a relationship not only with our immediate foods but also with “those who do not get to eat what I eat” (p. 125). This complex and, at the same time, transparent eating web portrays that human eating involves many more agents than just an apple. To thrive or

simply not be “left alone” (p. 124), humans need to start asking “how to avoid the erasure of what is different” (p. 4).

As the book promised no “coherent whole” (p. 4), the closing chapter is far from a definitive closure. Instead, it summarizes the model with which to think and, inspired by Chinese or Eastern philosophy, advocates for enlarging the scope of *politics*, including far from straightforward and often even non-verbal *politics of labor*, as “a matter of ongoing, practical, simultaneously social and material negotiations” (p. 128). Again, Mol shrugs off the importance of human thinking and appeals to expand “the constituency of the polity to include nonhumans” (p. 135). Despite that, Annemarie Mol is not holding on to one formula; she encourages readers to adopt what they have read to “own cases and [...] own concerns” (p. 143). The author’s eloquent way of theoretical storytelling is compelling to follow, even though, at first, philosophical discourses might intimidate an unaccustomed reader. *Eating in Theory* is far from a solution book, but it is an essential, thought-provoking read for those engaged in sustainability, modern philosophy, and anthropology of the body.