

Kelly Oliver (edited by Alison Suen)

Response Ethics

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Reviewed by Sergia Hay, 2019

Sergia Hay is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington, where she teaches courses in applied ethics and the history of philosophy. Her area of scholarly specialization is Søren Kierkegaard, in particular his ethics, philosophy of religion, and the influence on him by Johann Hamann. She is also a founding member of the Tacoma Philosophy Group (<https://www.meetup.com/South-Puget-Sound-Chapter-of-SOPHIA/>), a public philosophy chapter of SOPHIA. She is currently working on a book about the positive role of silence in Kierkegaard's ethics.

Quote: "In bearing witness 'to what cannot be seen,' or what lies beyond recognition, we are responsible for our responses, others' responses, and for what lies in the realm of the unconscious."

Response Ethics, by Kelly Oliver, W. Alton Jones Professor of Philosophy at Vanderbilt University, is a collection of essays presenting a new ethical theory and application of it to contemporary issues such as capital punishment, rape culture, and war reporting. This theory differs from the four most commonly known normative theories (namely, deontology, utilitarianism, virtue ethics, and care ethics) in its account of the origin of ethically obligated subjects and its conception of the scope of the moral community. The book begins with a short introductory essay answering the question "What Is Response Ethics?" and then provides the theoretical grounding of response ethics in its first chapters. Oliver offers a new formulation of subjectivity in which subjects emerge through response to others and their environment, an ontology that corresponds to the basis of ethical responsibility, or response-ability, to respond to others and the environment. The essays in the second half of the book seek to expand the moral domain to include the nonhuman and also address specific cases that reveal some ways technology can thwart our capacity to respond.

Oliver writes, "Throughout my work, I've tried to articulate life-giving rather than death-bearing philosophy" (107). In the essays of this book, tracing a wide range of philosophical topics and influences spanning over more than the last two decades of Oliver's work, she shows how this effort has developed from her early employment of the maternal model to complicate notions of discrete selfhood assumed by other ethical frameworks, to her later work on witnessing and Earth ethics. Her strong emphasis on ontology has an overarching political aim; in order to conceive of different possibilities of relating, we need to have a revised conception of who we are. As she writes, "if we could articulate a compelling counternarrative, a counter-ontology, then more loving, cooperative, compassionate, and, hence, more ethical relations would follow" (103). Oliver builds on Kristeva's concept of subjects-in-process to show how the maternal body

reveals how "identity and difference flow across subjectivities that are continually constituted and reconstituted in relationships" (23).

Oliver also upends prior theories of subjectivity that rely on a conception of vision that assumes fracture, distance, and shame. These theories, according to her, maintain oppressive power structures and cannot account for the full range of human interaction. She shifts away from the alienating eye articulated in the philosophies of Sartre, Hegel, Freud, and Lacan to the loving eye by using Merleau-Ponty's notion of vision as touch because "space is filled with the flesh of the world" (30); if space is full of air rather than void, then vision can be reimagined as a point of contact between selves, rather than as an act that separates them as distinct, isolated entities. The interdependence of subjects in their very creation becomes the source of ethical obligation. We emerge through the activities of address and response, and this creates "an ethical obligation to this founding possibility, which is a responsibility to enable the ability to respond" (40). This responsibility is twofold: we are to continually respond and to open the possibilities of response by others.

The essays in part I, "Interrelational Subjects and Social Sublimation," concern the ontology of subjects and the starting point of their ethical obligation, and the essays in part II, "Responsible Subjects and Witnessing," show the development of Oliver's concept of witnessing after the publication of her influential book *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (2001). Through the concept of witnessing, Oliver maintains the tension between ethics and politics while also linking them. If the political is concerned with universal laws and policies and the ethical is concerned with the unique singularity of people, then an ethical politics or a political ethics will have to account for both the universal and singular. Oliver attempts this through what she takes to be a dual meaning of witnessing as "eyewitness and bearing witness to what cannot be seen" (75). These two meanings parallel the "tension between finite historical contexts that determines subject position on the one hand and the structure of infinite addressability and response-ability of subjectivity on the other" (76). According to Oliver, we need to attend to the historical and cultural contexts of people otherwise risking denial of the realities of oppression like racism and sexism. But, she adds, if we consider only the politics of difference, we lose "the possibility of finding some means for communication across differences" (xxxii).

In bearing witness "to what cannot be seen," or what lies beyond recognition, we are responsible for our responses, others' responses, and for what lies in the realm of the unconscious. This ethical obligation is impossibly steep. Oliver means for response ethics to be "hyperbolic ethics" (81), a term borrowed from Derrida, meaning an ethics that honestly and humbly acknowledges that we always have blind spots about others and ourselves, to include our own unconscious drives and fears. There is always more beyond what I can see and know. Therefore, this requires a constant, ongoing critical reflection of asking myself what I am missing and checking for these blind spots. Although there are many ways in which response ethics differs from virtue theory, the "hyperbolic ethics" she proposes requires virtuous qualities necessary for ethical action such as humility, generosity, compassion, persistence, and the ability to embrace ambiguity.

Part III, "Response Ethics and the Non-Humans," contains three essays that develop toward an Earth ethics based in *terraphilia*, or love for the Earth, which recognizes the interdependence on our planet and all of its creatures including nonhuman animals. The second essay in this part,

"Service Dogs: Between Animal Studies and Disability Studies," presents an important reply to the debate on the ethical priority of intelligent animals or cognitively disabled humans. Oliver argues convincingly that questionable assumptions about hierarchy, independence, and value based on functionality underlie this debate. She extends the idea from care ethics that there is a tight relation of dependence between humans by showing through the example of service dogs that there are also tight relations of interspecies dependence. The question of the animal is significant not just in extending the domain of moral concern, but also for investigating the oppressive impulse. Oliver writes, "until we address the denigration of animals in Western thought, on the conceptual level, if not also on the material, economic level, we continue to merely scratch the surface of the denigration and exploitation of various groups of people . . ." (118).

Part IV, "Witnessing in the Age of Spectacle," contains three essays that show how response ethics may be applied to capital punishment, creepshot (or the documenting of sexual assault on unconscious victims), and war reporting, including embedded journalism. In all three of these issues, technology, whether in the form of drugs, cameras, or social media, pose barriers to our response-ability. Lethal-injection drugs that paralyze also thereby make it impossible for the condemned to testify to their suffering and contribute to what Oliver calls the "fantasy of the 'good' death" (169). In the case of creepshot, we are presented with the unsettling situation that "the 'testimony' of unconscious girls [in the form of photos or video] is more believable than that of conscious ones" (190); in our culture, photographic evidence may be more compelling in court than one's own account of trauma. In the final essay of this collection, Oliver considers the ways in which war reporting has turned violence into entertaining spectacle and how the speed at which it is delivered and the shallowness of its presentation undercut viewers' ability to critically examine the images they receive, to recognize and interpret what cannot be seen, in other words, what lies "beyond our recognition" (215).

Response Ethics employs vocabulary and concepts from poststructuralism, phenomenology, psychology, and psychoanalytic theory. Oliver draws heavily on the work of Levinas and Derrida, and responds to a wide range of other thinkers including Butler, Freud, Heidegger, hooks, Kant, Kittay, Kristeva, Lacan, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre. Those who have interests in these philosophical methods, concepts, and thinkers, as well as those with interests in ethical theory, applied ethics, the unconscious, and subjectivity would benefit from this book. Ethics professors in particular should read this book, if only to present their students with a living philosopher active in the monumental task of working out a new ethical theory designed to address thorny current issues involving violence, identity politics, and technology.