Alexis Shotwell

Knowing Otherwise: Race Gender, and Implicit Understanding

UNIVERSITY PARK: PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2011

Reviewed by Jeremy C Bradley

Narrated by Miranda Pilipchuk

Audio Player

00:00
13:54

978-0271037646

There is a tradition in the behavioral sciences and in certain strands of philosophy to model human behavior in distinctive and clashing ways (Gintis 2007). Recent theoretical and empirical work has focused on making coherent and unified these various models. Feminist philosophers in particular have been leaders in challenging the view that no agent can become a "true self" unless he separates himself from others. The use of the masculine pronoun here is important, for as Rosemarie Tong points out, Western ideology has painted the picture of the "rational" person as an autonomous, rugged man "geared toward maximizing his self-interest effectively, efficiently, and expediently" (Tong 1997, 154). Such an agent is consistently on the lookout for an "ominous *other*" that might disrupt his standard way of thinking or who may interfere with his "life projects."

Not surprisingly, many feminists theorize that such a self-in-opposition-to-others mentality has found its way into social, legal, and political philosophy. However, the underlying view of the disembodied, egoistic self and its corresponding social ontology have now largely been debunked thanks to the work of scholars in a number of sub-disciplines including ethics (Baier 1985; Nussbaum 1997), feminist jurisprudence (Tong 1997; West 2011), critical race theory (Massaro 1989; Carbado and Gulati 2001), and epistemology (Thomas 2003; Lockhart 2007). Such feminists contend that an ontology of connectedness more adequately reflects life than does an ontology characterized by individualism. Moreover, the intersubjectivity inherent in such an ontological theory suggests an epistemology that values particular, subjective, and emotional ends of knowledge as much as purportedly objective or "rational" ends. Instead of single-mindedly pursuing universal similarities between human agents, feminists within this mode are concerned instead for the particularities that can help an agent in identifying and knowing others *as* individuals.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2753906700003788 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Alexis Shotwell's *Knowing Otherwise* continues this tradition by intersecting epistemology with the sociopolitical and ethical. Her goal is to present a sustained consideration of how implicit understanding often leads to the oppression of those falling outside the mythical norm (Lorde 1984)[1]. Shotwell meticulously advocates for a model of nonpropositional knowledge, the complex inner workings of the mind that are largely or completely outside awareness. Shotwell notes that categories such as race and ethnicity might be labeled as "not subject to reason" and yet still be rooted in hegemony. Implicit, nonpropositional knowledge thereby forms crucial parts of gender and racial formation--broadly conceived to include ethnicity, sexual orientation, and class. An account of this implicit framework is necessary, on Shotwell's view, to understanding how race and gender are used as systems of oppression, for "if propositionality is the only option deemed worthy of consideration . . . significant aspects of people's experiences, potentially liberatory spaces, and key parts of gender and racial formation are passed over in silence" (46).

In the introduction and first chapter of the book, Shotwell clarifies four types of implicit understanding: (1) practical or skill-based knowledge such as riding a bicycle; (2) somatic knowledge, embodied in conceptions of what it means "to be" *x*; (3) so-called "common sense" knowledge, which takes biases or assumptions as truth without questioning them; and (4) a rather unclear notion that "affect and feeling can be understood as a kind of implicit understanding, not fully or generally propositional or considered a kind of knowledge" (xii). Chapter 2 focuses primarily on racialized common sense and the epistemology of ignorance. This chapter is arguably the most gripping and persuasive as Shotwell draws on a range of theorists to demonstrate "the unconscious and subconscious reflexes [that] shape race" (33). In chapter 4 Shotwell draws on critical race theory to suggest that white people's antiracist agendas may continue to be foregrounded in equality and color-blind principles. She attempts to show how differentiating between shame and guilt can rectify this issue.

Shotwell is quite right to argue that racialization and genderization are systemically institutionalized and in that regard this book is an excellent foray into the legal and political systems that too often privilege the privileged. In what remains of this review, however, I wish to focus on a specific tenet of Shotwell's argument, outlined in chapters 5 and 6. She advocates solidarity over empathy by arguing that empathy enacts change primarily or only at the level of propositional knowledge. Although she raises a number of interesting points, which I will explicate herein, her overall thrust against empathy is ill-placed and undermines the credibility of the broader argument made in the book.

Shotwell opens chapter 5 by recounting June Jordan's reflections on that matter (100). June is an African-American woman on holiday in the Bahamas, where Olive is the maid cleaning her hotel room (at the Sheraton). Olive is also a woman of color. Seeing Olive's card atop the bureau, June thinks (and later writes):

My rights and my freedom and my desire and a slew of other New World values; what would they sound like to this Black woman described on the card atop my hotel bureau as Olive the Maid? Olive is older than I am and I may smoke a cigarette while she changes the sheets on my bed. Whose rights? Whose freedom? Whose desire? And why would she give a shit about mine unless I do something, for real, about hers? (Jordan 1985, 41)

Shotwell goes on to interpret this as meaning that June and Olive can potentially join into a sort of ideological solidarity, each caring about the other's position and rights in obviously nuanced ways. According to Shotwell, Jordan is trying to account for the intersections of race, class, and gender without assuming that any shared oppression automatically creates solidarity. She implies that solidarity must rest on something more than a common fight (102). I take no exception to Shotwell's remarks here, but I do think she is ignoring some crucial factors in the Olive and June narrative that might help explicate the need for the empathy she so readily pushes aside in favor of solidarity, as if the two cannot coexist or give rise to each other.

First, it strikes me as a bit misguided that June and Olive might even consider solidarity as an option available to them. Olive and June may certainly share a sense of solidarity in the sense of both being

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2753906700003788 Published online by Cambridge University Press

oppressed, broadly conceived, by being doubly damned as both women and of color. But what of the class implications and the differences in social strata? Can those be overcome? Would Olive "see" June as an ally or as another form of propagation of colonialism?

It seems that Shotwell may be creating meaning where meaning might not otherwise exist. Whereas June has obviously thought through the implications of being a black woman being served by another black woman, it is not clear that Olive would have had the reverse thought. Noticeably, June as a person from a developed country on holiday in the Bahamas is of a different social class than Olive. Moreover, there is a cultural difference. There is often an assumption, partly grounded in a sad reality, that maids at luxury hotels will be women of color. June's need to feel solidarity with Olive may stem more from June's own implicit biases about what Olive's life as a maid is like than from Olive's perceived insecurities. Olive might be quite happy with her job, she may be doing it to put her child through school, to supplement the family's income, or for a number of other nonculpable reasons. The assumption on June's part (and Shotwell's) that Olive feels "lesser than" reveals a deep sense of guilt or shame on the former's part. Shotwell acknowledges this to some extent in chapter 4 where she distinguishes between shame and guilt and argues that white guilt can be used to fuel antiracism. This, on its own, is a potentially harmful position, giving way to perhaps less than ideal antiracist situations. Guilt is rarely an ethically good motivator, and moreover it can morph into toleration.

Clearly, to be tolerated is preferable to being persecuted or ridiculed. However, a failure of empathy linked to toleration often leaves the one being tolerated feeling less-than the one doing the tolerating. Toleration, as Leslie Green points out, is a form of restraint--it is the act of stopping oneself from doing, saying, or being in some way outwardly discriminatory or prejudiced toward another whose actions, "lifestyle," or characteristics she may not fully agree or comply with (Green 2008). Notably though, toleration is not *complete* restraint. It is, simply put, paradoxical--one intentionally keeps herself from intervening in something she finds to be morally objectionable. There is a distinct cognitive element in this paradox accomplished through a shift "from the impersonal judgment of actions to the personally-based judgment" of the tolerator (Heyd 2008, 185). As Tamar Gendler rightly notes, "what we believe is determined by (what we think) the actual world is like" (Gendler 2011). Belief, as a cognitive function, conforms to structure, even when that structure is rooted in bias. This is an aspect of nonpropositional knowledge that Shotwell has overlooked.

Moreover, there is an implicit notion in Shotwell's defense of solidarity that solidarity brings with it the power to overcome innate bias. Although this may sometimes be the case, June would find it hard to overcome her class distinction without empathizing with Olive in some way, especially if Olive is the disadvantaged maid she is presumed to be. I am reminded of a friend who worked briefly as a nanny while she was in graduate school. A middle-class white woman, my friend worked for a wealthy white family on the East Coast of the United States. The mother of the family was normally cordial and friendly, but there was an obvious distinction between "the help" and the employers, even if unspoken. The mother would, for instance, ask my friend for opinions on politics or world events, but there was typically a feeling that the mother was attempting to gather information on so-called middle-class values rather than displaying a genuine interest in my friend's thoughts. Although June can be applauded in some respects for caring about what Olive might think--"why would she give a shit"--the only way to level the playing field would be for June to stop romanticizing the situation. My choice of the word "romanticizing" here may appear curious; after all, June assumes Olive is "more oppressed" than she is because of her class distinction. Although this *prima facie* may be true, June's own sense of shame about the situation appears to be shading her wish for solidarity.

Clearly, the narrative embroiling June and Olive is a complex one that cannot be easily analyzed given the limited amount of information Shotwell provides the reader. This is precisely the point. Shotwell's book is built upon causal arguments that would seek to place solidarity and her framework for understanding nonpropositional knowledge over empathy and its alleged connections with explicit knowledge. Among these is the claim that shame and/or guilt can be used as a tool for social and political good. But what of the white, middle-class man who feels no "white guilt"? How can he be in solidarity with Olive?

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2753906700003788 Published online by Cambridge University Press

My argument in defense of empathy is thus primarily concerned that emotions and the effects of those emotions are made as much a part of the discourse on antiracism and gender as are the "implicit" rules and principles outlined by Shotwell. A complex, intersectional account of knowledge is needed, one that does not sacrifice empathy in favor of solidarity. Empathy has been time and again demonstrated to be of efficacy in a range of disciplines, a fact that Shotwell herself notes (104). Thinking of empathy as a tool to explicate the womb of domination works well with the idea that power relations give birth to diverse modes and experiences of oppression, dependent on location and configuration within a structural or institutional whole. Empathy is an epistemic skill *and* an aesthetic sensitivity that can be developed (Hoffman 2000; Stueber 2008). It can work with a sense of solidarity and it can deliver related emotions such as compassion and understanding. It is entirely possible to recognize one's biases and to understand and interpret another's values (Hoffman 2011; Chin 2012). In order to develop empathy, however, human agents need to do more than simply follow prosaic abstractions of rules and rights; we also need to develop an ethics that stresses relationships and responsibilities.

---

[1] Somewhere, on the edge of consciousness, there is what I call a mythical norm . . . this norm is defined as white, thin, male; young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure. It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within this society" (Lorde 1984, 116).

References

Baier, Annette. 1985. Cartesian persons. In *Postures of the mind: Essays on mind and morals*, ed. Annette Baier. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Carbado, Devon W., and Mitu Gulati. 2001. The fifth black woman. *Journal of Contemporary Legal Issues* 11 (1): 701–29.

Chin, Denny. 2012. Sentencing: A role for empathy. *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 160 (6) 1562–84.

Gendler, Tamar. 2011. Imagination. In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta. http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2011/entries/imagination/ (accessed April 1, 2013).

Gintis, Herbert. 2007. A framework for the unification of the behavioral sciences. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 30 (1): 1–61.

Green, Leslie. 2008. On being tolerated. In *The legacy of H. L. A. Hart*, ed. Matthew H. Kramer, Claire Grant, Ben Colburn, and Antony Hatzistavrou. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Heyd, David. 2008. Is toleration a political virtue? In *Toleration and its limits*, ed. Melissa Williams and Jeremy Waldron. New York: New York University Press.

Hoffman, Martin. 2000. *Empathy and moral development: Implications for caring and justice*. Cambridge,UK: Cambridge University Press.

------. 2011. Empathy, justice, and the law. In *Empathy: Philosophical and psychological perspectives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jordan, June. 1985. *On call: Political essays.* London: Pluto Press.

Lockhart, Tara. 2007. Writing the self: Gloria Anzaldúa, textual form, and feminist epistemology. *Michigan Feminist Studies* 20 (1). http://alturl.com/iyjjz (accessed May 5, 2013).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2753906700003788 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Lorde, Audre. 1984. *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches*. Freedom, Calif.: The Crossing Press.

Massaro, Toni. 1989. Empathy, legal storytelling, and the rule of law: New words, old wounds. *Michigan Law Review* 87 (8): 2099–2127.

Nussbaum, Martha. 1997. *Poetic justice: The literary imagination and public life*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Stueber, Karsten R. 2008. Reasons, generalizations, empathy, and narratives: The epistemic structure of action explanation. *History and Theory* 47 (1): 31–43.

Thomas, Nigel. 2003. Imaging minds. Bradshaw Seminar, The Claremont Colleges. http://www.imprint.co.uk/pdf/Claremont.pdf (accessed April 15, 2013).

Tong, Rosemarie. 1997. Feminist perspectives on empathy as an epistemic skill and caring as a moral virtue. *Journal of Medical Humanities* 18 (3): 153–68.

West, Robin. 2011. The anti-empathic turn. *Nomos* (forthcoming).

Acknowledgments:
I wish to thank Erin O'Hara-Schmid and Marvee Marr for their thoughts and insights.

Jeremy C Bradley is a legal philosopher appointed to lectureships at the London School of Business and Finance and at the Glion Institute, Switzerland. jeremycbradley@jeremycbradley.com

---

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2753906700003788 Published online by Cambridge University Press