

Corine Pelluchon, *Nourishment: A Philosophy of the Political Body*, trans. by Justin E.H. Smith, London & New York, Bloomsbury, 2019, 401 p.

Abstract:

“In the beginning there was hunger (1).” This opening quote from Levinas sets the stage for Pelluchon’s ethico-political project that revamps classical phenomenology’s intentionality of the ego by focusing on the sensing and enjoyment of the “gourmet cogito” who “lives from” and finds nourishment in a world that cannot be reduced to a noeme. She critiques Heidegger’s existential analytic and focuses on an ontology where our love of life precedes our being-towards-death, before boldly mapping out a new social pact, founded on the structures of existence (existentials) that her phenomenology of nourishment reveals.

This book, translated from the French *Les nourritures: philosophies du corps politiques* by Justin E.H. Smith, and revised with the help of François Cambien, is a continuation of Pelluchon’s previous works that respond to a crisis in liberalism caused by the environmental crisis, the emergence of biomedical technologies, and a failure to respond to the animal question. Influenced by the Enlightenment thinkers, Pelluchon’s corpus draws from the humanist tradition, yet calls for a reconfiguration of the notion of autonomy. The political subject of *Nourishment* is not defined in reference to abstract notions of freedom but in terms of corporeality and existentials, such as hunger. For Pelluchon, nourishment is the original site of ethics, for when I eat, I exist in an ecological space where I am always in relation to other living beings past, present, and future, even when I dine alone. *Nourishment: A Philosophy of the Political Body* is an extension of Levinas’s phenomenology who thought of “living from” and who viewed the body as a site of responsibility (to the Other), but its originality lies in, not only analyzing the political consequences of “living from” but in sketching out a new social contract that responds to the current crisis.

This work is divided into two parts, “Part One: A Phenomenology of Nourishment” and “Part Two: To Institute a Common World”. The first part, focused on ontology, reflects on the material existence of the human subject and analyzes the manner in which human beings nourish themselves from a milieu that is at once natural and cultural. According to Pelluchon, our original relationship to the world is not characterized by negativity (i.e. death for Heidegger) but by enjoyment. Placing emphasis on sensation, rather than perception, she highlights the “radiant orality” of the tasting subject that lies behind the thinking subject, what she calls the “gourmet cogito”. We do not stand out in an “ek-static” relationship to the world that sets boundaries between the constituting ego and the constituted world, for the act of eating is paradigmatic of an incorporation that resists such perimeters (39). The privileging of vision and touch, at the expense of taste, is why we perceive the world as a separation of subject and object, as an ensemble of tools, rather than an ensemble of nourishments. Tasting is about sensing the world and taking pleasure in the mere fact of living.

Yet, she is not calling for us to partake in *gourmand* behavior whilst ignoring famine and malnutrition; she not only acknowledges the reality of these atrocities, but also analyzes and responds to them as problems of justice rather than of shortages, which can partly be explained by our inability to treat food as other than a market commodity. In eating, we confront the political consequences of our lifestyles and habits (45). Pelluchon’s ontology is never disconnected from the political repercussions of how we “live from”, rather an ontology is necessary for a philosophy of corporeality to arise, and

this body is the site of ethical obligation to the Other and to their hunger. Rather than being concerned with “existence”, Pelluchon’s ontology focuses on the “existent” as a responsible body.

We should not just be concerned with whether our bodies get *enough* food, but with whether we *enjoy* the act of eating, for living well is reflected in eating well (47). Pelluchon points to a crisis of taste where eating has been reduced to an intake of food, and “we no longer have confidence in sensation, but rather think our head is the point of departure for existence (49).” Cultivating a sense of taste is not only about pleasure but also about respecting those who are implicated in the preparation of my food, and this respect is conducive to an ethics of justice. Again, this ethics begins with the body. Drawing from Ricoeur’s analysis of birth, Pelluchon highlights an intersubjectivity and intergenerational link that lives in my flesh (66). As an engendered cogito, I always exist with others before me and have a responsibility for those who are not yet born. Additionally, I am not just born with others, but exist in a space, in a certain *milieu*.

To highlight the spatial (*topos*) and existential (*chôra*) character of humanity’s relation to terrestrial extension, Pelluchon draws from Augustin Berque’s notion of the “ecumene” (71-74). This eco-techno-symbolic reality is further elaborated by Watsuji Tetsurô, who in critiquing Heidegger, employs the term “being-towards-life” to highlight how our medial body, that part of us tied to our environment, doesn’t die with our animal body. Emphasizing the sensational quality of how we interact with our environment, Pelluchon states, “It is not Dasein that, in existing or in manners of being, understands (*versteht*) being; we discover ourselves within the milieu (*jiko hokkensei*), contracting our bodies when we are cold and putting on warm clothes or opening an umbrella (81).” These spatial encounters lead to a consideration of habitation. Yet, inhabiting a place is not just a manner of taking shelter from the elements, it is also building a world “in which we have a place to be and in which we cohabit, in which the outside and the inside, private and public, interior and exterior come into harmony (87).” Pelluchon asserts we must think more deeply about habitation and the aberrations of an industrialized agricultural society with its soilless system of feeding and raising animals. She imagines a “convivial” city where humans and other living beings have a right to be somewhere.

Our political community is also a zoopolitical community, and as such, humans and animals alike, have the right to be protected from treatment that violates their basic interests. Influenced by Donaldson and Kymlicka’s theory of relational justice, Pelluchon notes that an affirmation of inviolability derives from the recognition of subjectivity, not from one’s capacity for language or one’s ability to engage in complex reasoning (125). This subjectivity comes from being a vulnerable self who is the subject of one’s own life. Drawing from Husserl, Pelluchon demonstrates that a community of communication is connected to a community of empathy (106). Though animals are not able to speak, they are able to communicate their interests. Thus, based on a dependent-agent model, Pelluchon asserts that humans have an obligation to represent the needs of animals (domestic, wild, and liminal).

The environmental challenges and phenomenology of nourishment sketched out in Part One compel us to evolve our social pact, taking into consideration the interests of future generations, other species, and human beings who live far from us. It is important to note that while Pelluchon revises contractualist theories in pursuit of the common good beyond nationalist borders, she does not assume an a priori unity of the people, and she highlights how the idea of a global community

founded on shared values and imaginaries is a dangerous fiction. Though the existentials that her phenomenology of nourishment uncovers (hunger, taste, enjoyment, love of life) are universal, and though we all “live from” a milieu that is at once natural and artificial, the how of this “living from” varies from culture to culture. Although she develops a theory of justice as a sharing of nourishment (via contractualism), she notes construction of a common world is based on a “negative solidarity” that derives, as Arendt said, from the risk of the self-destruction of humanity (313).”

Beginning with an analysis of Hobbes’s artificialism, Pelluchon asserts, “Artificialism keeps us from the illusions and lies of this false universalism, without prohibiting us from resorting to a nucleus of truths uncovered by a philosophy of “living from” that takes the corporeality of the subject, their spatiality, and the fact that they eat and cohabit with other species seriously (208).” Such “truths” arise when we no longer consider the subject in abstract terms of freedom, but in reference to their materiality, as a being that is hungry and linked to other human beings, species, and nations. Though people *say* they need to change their habits and modes of consumption, without a contract and government body to enforce it, words remain ineffectual. However, Pelluchon rejects Hobbes’s absolutism and follows Locke in envisioning a social pact founded on the consent of all individuals, thus promoting autonomy and social responsibility. She does not wish to do away with liberalism, but rather sees a need to complement this system with an organized and instituted “conviviality”. Drawing from Locke’s liberalism that permits individuals to enrich themselves within the “limits of moderation”, she contends that human rights are not absolute when they threaten the survival of humanity and result in waste (217). While she critiques Locke for his anthropocentrism, she lauds his attention to nature and the importance he places on habitation (natural right to property). Locke’s political subject is incarnate, unlike Hobbes and Rawls who are concerned with distributive justice.

One of the main issues for Pelluchon is how to unify people, based on the materiality of existence, rather than on a false assumption of shared moral values that run counter to democratic pluralism. It is for this reason that she moves from an ontology to politics, after revealing the structures of existence that emerge with a bracketing of socio-cultural determinations. For Pelluchon, the problematic is best posed by Rousseau: how do we reconcile individual freedoms and common interests, and what is the source of mutual obligation for instituting the common good? She passes through an analysis of Rawls’ original position before responding more concretely in Chapter five “Reconstructing Democracy”.

She critiques Rawls for only thinking of justice in terms of income or resources, stating “instead of achieving an alliance between utility and justice, the new social contract associates happiness with the definition of the public good (234).” While Rawls attempts to define justice from an unbiased position, under his “veil of ignorance”, we are still assumed to be part of the privileged human species, neglecting the concerns of other animals. She calls for a new subject of the original position, one that is not only bare but incarnate, one that enjoys life and doesn’t just survive it (241). Drawing from the capabilities approach of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, she emphasizes how those who determine principles of justice need not have equal power nor be deliberative moral agents, thus including persons with disabilities and animals. To accompany this political theory, we need an ethical theory (virtue ethics), if we want individuals to change their lifestyles and adhere to the following principles of a phenomenology of nourishment (254-262): (1) Separation of morality and

law (refusal of paternalism), (2) consensus via public deliberation, (3) refrain from using techniques that cause irreversible damage, (4) respect for future generations, (5) access to food and drink where food is not just nutritive but enjoyable, (6) right to home and privacy, no colonization or expropriation, (7) respect for other cultures, (8) organization of work and economic activity where justice is implemented on the basis of the exploited entity, and (9) duties to animals.

This ethico-political balance is achieved through a reconstitution of democracy that focuses on the institutional component, the deliberative component, and the cultural component of the state (presumably the state of France). Pelluchon suggests complementing the current representative system with a non-representation system such as the third chamber envisaged by Pierre Rosanvallon and Dominique Bourg (Assembly of Nature and Living Beings). This chamber would not pass laws but would intervene in the legislative process, vetoing bills that do not promote the principles of justice as the sharing of nourishment (271). She also suggests a “College of the Future” comprised of specialists in ecology, bioethics, animal issues, and ethology, as well as mediators who are capable of relaying important scientific findings in relatable terms to the public (275). An informed public is essential to a deliberative democracy. Inspired by Rawls’s notion of public reason and Habermas’s notion of the public sphere, Pelluchon contends that citizens must be able to engage in discussion and debate leading to a consideration of the pros and cons aimed at the common good. However, participation is not enough; We must consider the role of intellectuals and the media and how they contribute to the quality of deliberation.

A renewal of democracy requires certain moral traits that are related to cultural representations. Rather than promote exchanges that confront differing points of view centered on improving knowledge, current intellectuals adhere to what Diego Gambetta calls a “discursive machism” where discourse is instrumentalized to crush others and enhance one’s reputation (293). Intellectuals must recognize their role as mediators and focus on the common good. Likewise, journalists must verify sources, instead of writing for the “scoop”, and schools must teach knowledge of the environment, ethology, technology, nutrition, and rhetoric (important for deliberation).

While the setting up of state institutions will vary among different nations, we cannot ignore the intimate link between internal and external politics. Pelluchon explains that since the nuclear threat, international relations can no longer be conceived as the relations between sovereign states, and consideration of the cosmos can no longer be limited in scope to affairs of the “human world” (305). In Chapter six “Beyond National Boundaries”, she rethinks the subject of cosmopolitanism, conceptualized in its relation to the Other. Though we are confronted with an environmental crisis that cannot be solved by only taking into account the interest of our nation, cosmopolitanism does not neglect the importance of a national identity and perspective. Pelluchon asserts, “It is at the heart of a particular community that we become conscious of humanity, and that we acquire the *cultura animi*, the attitude that consists in knowing how to take care of things of the world and to admire them (316).” In reflecting on the basis of a juridical co-existence between human beings where their relations are ruled by something other than violence and domination, she turns to Kant’s cosmopolitical rights and his practical regulations of no war and freedom of movement around the globe (right to hospitality). The major aspect of Kant’s cosmopolitanism is its projection into the future, the setting up of an end which is the idea of progress towards peace (324). Even if peace is a utopian ideal, a regulatory principle that orients our efforts is necessary.

Utopias allow us to imagine other possibilities, not motivated by production and consumption. Pelluchon would like to institute a common world with transnational associations, but the feeling of global unity must not precede such engagements. Movements arise at the local, national, regional, and global level, when different parties unite to fight a common cause, such as climate change or animal rights (327). As Pelluchon highlights, “what is significant in the most important social changes is not related to spectacular events, but to the depth and almost irreversible character of phenomenon that are lived in several places in the world by several people. These phenomena arise from a realization or, more precisely, from a change at the level of the imaginary, of what gives meaning and orients the choices that we make in accordance with certain ends (336).”

Pelluchon’s book is ambitious in that it not only provides the theoretical tools for reimagining the ethics of justice as the sharing of nourishment, but also proposes practical solutions for reconfiguring current democratic institutions. Much like the narrator of Gide’s *The Fruits of the Earth*, Pelluchon is persuasive in her philosophical arguments, as demonstrated by her concluding statement, a quote from the aforementioned literary text, “Nathanial, I will teach you fervor (356).”

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