

## *Review Section*



### *Being Animal*

**Peterson, Anna L.**

*Being Animal: Beasts and Boundaries in Nature Ethics*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2013. 404 pp.

Anna Peterson's *Being Animal: Beasts and Boundaries in Nature Ethics* is a lucid and eloquent exploration of the ethics of non-human animals and nature, or "nature ethics" in the words of Marti Kheel (2008). Perhaps the most important book on the subject since Mary Midgley's *Animals and Why They Matter* (1984), *Being Animal* is recommended reading in any program of animal or environmental studies, and required for those studying animal or environmental ethics.

With remarkable depth and clarity, Peterson makes abundantly clear that environmental and animal ethics are predominantly divided into two camps.

Environmental ethics is primarily presented in either anthropocentric or ecocentric terms. Either the environment has only extrinsic (instrumental) value for human beings, or if it does have intrinsic value, that value lies in ecological wholes such as species and ecosystems (holism). Animals (meaning non-human animals) are biological machines, resources for human use, or functional units of ecosystems.

In animal studies, a binary opposition is equally on display. This primarily takes the form of biocentric theories (e.g., animal rights, animal liberation, and versions of care ethics) where individual animals are the locus of moral value and ecological communities are ignored, or when they are not, they are reduced to instrumental habitats for individual creatures.

Thus ecocentric holism thinks of wolves, orcas, and bonobos in terms of populations or species, and dismisses or marginalizes the ethical significance of their individuals, families, or social groups. The opposite happens in

biocentric individualism, where individual animals like this wolf or that pod of orcas are prized as centers of moral value, but the larger ecological matrix in which they exist is ignored or instrumentalized into mere habitat.

What Peterson offers instead is a set of interpretations that transcend the dualisms above, drawing liberally from the feminist, Marxist, and theological traditions. All this is done with an eye to providing alternative framings of how we understand the relationship between humans, animals, and the natural world.

Peterson begins by asking what her own field of study, environmental ethics, has to say or to learn from theories of animal ethics. Her experience with non-human animals is important as well, particularly with dogs and especially Tozi, her brindle pit bull. Tozi remains a touchstone throughout the book, and is a delightful being with whom to think about the ethical silos that artificially separate people, animals and nature.

Subsequent chapters take up animals in environmental ethics, dominant trends in animal ethics, and the ethical complexities swirling around wild and domestic animals. Deconstructing the invidious dualisms of humans versus nature, animals versus nature, wild versus domestic, and their various permutations is the focus of her critique. The method here is heavily reliant on radical ecological critiques of conceptual dualisms and value hierarchies. Peterson's deconstruction of these dualisms shows how they diminish the intrinsic value, personhood, and moral standing of both wild and domestic animals. The sum of these chapters is a powerful, logical, and well-evidenced argument against the dominant ethical discourses in animal and environmental studies alike.

Grounding prior theoretical work in real-world practices, Peterson moves in later chapters to look at the tensions that arise between animal and environmental advocates. She follows this up by examining several efforts to bridge the gap between animal and environmental ethics.

In her final chapter, Peterson makes the case for a Marxian materialism that she believes will help bridge the dualisms she has exposed. Whether we are Marxist or not, she asks us to appreciate the insights Marxism brings to the table through concepts like species being, alienation, immiseration, and commodification. Such concepts not only help us develop a deeper understanding of the internal relations between people, animals, and nature, but also inspire the transformation of exploitative institutions of human dominion over animals. She sees materialism as grounding ethical theory so that it is not simply theorizing about the world but also seeking to change it for the better.

There will be those who object to Peterson's argument outright. Human exceptionalists of all stripes—philosophical pragmatists, theological dominionists, vested self-interests—will find virtually every part of this book objectionable. Yet fellow travelers will also find much on which to engage Peterson. I say this not in correction but with an eye to fusing horizons of understanding in future dialogues.

For instance, her interpretation of Arne Naess's stance on animals and nature has more to do with the identity politics in American brands of deep ecology and ecofeminism than with Naess's ecosophy. Likewise, her interpretation of Aldo Leopold may be too dependent on ecocentric historians and philosophers who dismiss Leopold's emergent regard for animal as individuals. Others will no doubt raise questions about various interpretations of feminist, Marxist, and theological ethics.

Peterson's focus on canines may also generate energetic discussion over how other animals bridge humans and nature, the wild and domestic. To be sure, *Canis lupus* and *Homo sapiens* coevolved to such an extent that our very neurobiology has been altered by the arrangement. It is likely that our ability to empathize and cooperate across species boundaries is wrapped up in this partnership. Curiously, our other closest companions—cats—receive short shrift. House cats (*Felis catus* or *Felis familiaris*) are arguably more liminal creatures than dogs (with dingos [*Canis lupus dingo*] being the great exception). Cats are more mutualistic than domestic, and thus closer to their wild cousins. Their co-evolution with people has been almost entirely of their own volition, and outside the development of more affectionate and communicative conduct, they retain a full measure of their wild capacities. Indeed, it was my own feral feline, Delilah, who first caused me to think about such questions. How I wish I had been able to read *Being Animal* at the time!

Yet I think the point of greatest friction will come with Peterson's commitment to Marxism. There are undoubtedly important insights to be gleaned from Marx on materialism and capitalism. And to her credit, Peterson does not shrink from calling out Marx's vulgar anthropocentrism and speciesism. However, after reading the entire book, I believe many will be unconvinced that Marxism can provide an important alternative for nature ethics. The instrumentalist orientation to the material world as the "inorganic body of mankind" is simply too strong.

All this being said, *Being Animal* is a marvelous and insightful book. Peterson makes an incisive case for reinterpreting the received wisdom of animal and environmental ethics, while developing a more engaged and practical

approach to nature ethics. In fields like animal or environmental studies, ethical sensibilities and motivations loom large, whether explicitly or implicitly. *Being Animal* helps make manifest the moral presuppositions and commitments we have as advocates, scholars, students, and citizens.

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### References

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