Philosophical conversations in environmental ethics often centre, whether solely or primarily, around the written work of other professional philosophers and environmental scientists. However, there is a thread – that is, a particular way of framing – environmental discourse, which integrates and incorporates the insights cultivated in and by on-the-ground, grassroots movements, the arts, Traditional Ecological Knowledge-bearers and philosophical pluralists. In Living with Animals: Rights, Responsibilities, and Respect, Erin McKenna traces and contributes to this interdisciplinary project through an applied analysis of pragmatist, eco-feminist and eco-womanist literature – including, for example, the work of Robin Wall Kimmerer, Val Plumwood, Alain Locke and Alice Walker. Together, these theorists have woven an intricate and rich tapestry, in which the import of storytelling is conceived of as an effective way to diagnose, shape and guide human relationships with the more-than-human world.

McKenna contributes to this pluralistic tradition in a refreshing and distinctive way. By drawing on popular works of written and visual fiction – from Moby Dick, Babe, Julie of the Wild, White Fang and others – she robustly analyses pre-existing cultural norms in the Global North which inform human relationships with more-than-human, animal-kind. Beginning with a series of negative analyses, McKenna first identifies the ethically problematic (and, indeed, often horrific) trends that obtain in both literary and actual-world contexts. For example, by drawing parallels between Ahab’s obsessive quest to eradicate the eponymous sperm whale in Melville’s Moby Dick and the threatened extirpation of cetaceans (more generally) due to over-hunting, McKenna traces the fraught history between human- and whale-kind. She then follows up each of her negative analyses with a series of positive proposals. These recommendations are distinctively ameliorative, ecofeminist, pluralist and pragmatist (in the spirit of, for example, John Dewey).

Structurally, Living with Animals proceeds in a piecemeal fashion; more specifically, each chapter is dedicated to one species, genus or grouping of animals, which are ubiquitous in and contribute substantively to the flourishing of human life. In Chapter 1, ‘Living with Animals’, McKenna broadly analyses the empirical literature that articulates how (global Northern) communities do in fact treat and co-exist with apes, wolves, cetaceans, pigs, poultry and horses, etc. Each descriptive analysis is then followed by a set of prescriptive recommendations, which – as mentioned – are distinctly pluralistic, ecofeminist and pragmatic. Rather than defending one dogmatic set of proposals, McKenna elucidates a constellation of ideas – which, in addition to the aforementioned
thinkers, integrates the insights of Jane Addams, James Spiegel and Alain L. Locke. Like her philosophical forebears, she conceives of her approach as at odds with absolutism (i.e., dogmatism). Indeed, McKenna claims that the inherent complexity of relationships generally, and ecorelationships more particularly, requires a high degree of contextual sensitivity, epistemic humility, practical flexibility, and creative nuance. Additionally, McKenna draws upon and centres the work of Indigenous philosophical and traditional ecological thought (e.g., Vine Deloris Jr.), noting the plurality of cases wherein European colonisation and industrialisation have inflicted deep and enduring wounds upon indigenous food sovereignty (to use Whyte’s 2018 term), collective resilience, and relationships (e.g. in and between local communities and the various species whom they consider ecological kin).

In addition to articulating these positive proposals, McKenna analyses and rejects a series of philosophical views (often absolutist) that are at odds with – or offer an alternative explanatory framework to – the aforementioned picture. More specifically, McKenna critiques and rejects a rights-based approach to animal ethics. To elucidate her reasons, she focuses on the case of human relationships with apes and chimpanzees. More specifically, and in alignment with the work of Val Plumwood (1993), McKenna claims in Chapter 2 (‘Chimpanzees and Other Primates’) that ‘the rights-based approach reinforces human exceptionalism’ (p. 19). So, rather than extending rights to chimpanzees and apes, she claims, we ought to cultivate respect for them through a process of decentring the human organism. This, McKenna argues, enables a form of solidarity between human and more-than-human worlds to arise, which is both inherently motivating and epistemically viable. Unfortunately, ‘[the current cultural] lack of solidarity can be seen with regard to chimpanzees, bonobos and gorillas, as the mining, logging and bushmeat trades continue to threaten their existence’ (p. 33). To understand why this lack of solidarity obtains, McKenna utilises Plumwood’s ‘Logic of Domination’ as a framework, arguing that legal protections to more-than-human animals ought to be afforded on the basis of (at least partially) our ontological and, by extension, ethical continuity. (It is, after all, worth noting that Homo sapiens are – like our biotic cousins – apes; and like humans, other apes grieve, form social groups, utilise tools, and are linguistically sophisticated.) In other words, no sharp dualism (i.e. distinction) obtains between the human and more-than-human worlds (Plumwood 1993). A commitment to a rights-based approach, McKenna posits, tends to reinforce this illusory separation, and thus reinforces an epistemic and ontological picture that is inherently false. Furthermore, rights are not sensitive to deeply-rooted variations in context. By contrast, an eco-feminist or eco-womanist framework allows for far more ontological and contextual flexibility; for example, the prescription to eat a vegan diet is, in some cases, supplanted by other cultural or environmental considerations (e.g. seal hunting is permissible amongst Inuit people).
In her distinctive style, this empirical and philosophical analysis is then grounded in a critical reading of the popular children’s book, *Curious George*. According to McKenna, *Curious George* (like other works of popular literature) traces and sculpts cultural conceptions of and relationships with respect to more-than-homo *Hominidae* – sometimes for better, and often for the worse. This methodological device – more precisely, an ongoing analysis of the environmental, ethical implications embedded in literary works – is ubiquitous throughout *Living with Animals* (in Chapter 3, ‘Horses and Cattle’, Chapter 4, ‘Pigs and Poultry’, Chapter 5, ‘Whales and Fishes’, Chapter 6, ‘Pests’, Chapter 7, ‘Cats and Canines’). However (and for the sake of brevity), I will not review all of these chapters in depth here.

Given my own pluralistic preferences, I found the arc of and arguments contained within *Living with Animals* methodologically intriguing and philosophically compelling. Nevertheless, a few, lingering considerations stuck with me throughout the piece. First, insofar as our literary narratives mould our ecological thinking, to what extent should philosophers encourage the cultivation of tales that do in fact reflect the eco-womanist, pragmatist and Traditional Ecological values that McKenna is proponent of? Presumably, the flexibility of her proposed system will allow for a variety of tales to (permissibly) emerge; and these tales may in fact illustrate (and thereby recommend) differing prescriptions with respect to how we ought to behave. How then do we distinguish between tales that *get-it-right*, and those that only *nearly-get-it-right*? Second, and in an applied context, which constraints and standards will serve as a metric by which the successful (on-the-ground) implementation of these values will be measured? Are respect and solidarity necessary and sufficient for healthy human–human and human–more-than-human relationships? Are there other values or states that we ought to emphasise (e.g. including the Aristotelian *telos* of flourishing)? How should we mediate between world-views when community priorities differ or come into conflict? Having said this, these considerations are important for any proponent of value pluralism to bear in mind (myself included). Thus, the burden of philosophical proof is by no means McKenna’s alone to bear.

All things considered, *Thinking with Animals* will be of interest to environmental ethicists who aim to gain a deeper understanding of the theoretical and practical contours endemic to ecopragmatic world-views in applied contexts. Additionally, it is a solid, if broad, overview of the pluralistic environmental literature. Ultimately, the book’s strengths lie in McKenna’s keen ability to highlight, illustrate and interweave a holistic tapestry: between kindred, philosophical theories, literature and actual-world scenarios. Her ability to investigate clearly the injustices that permeate contemporary (often industrial) human relationships with the more-than-human, animal world is, finally, balanced by a set of optimistic (and practical) proposals, which centre context-sensitive and localised solutions to global, environmental problems.
FORTHCOMING IN ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES

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REVIEWS

References


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