

Book Review: *Nature Ethics: An Ecofeminist Perspective*, Kheel, Marti (Rowman Littlefield 2008)

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“There are plenty more where that came from.” So I was told when, as a trainee biologist, I became upset at the death of a lab rat. So too said the Division of Wildlife to a woman concerned to find orphaned fox kits in Colorado - the example with which Kheel begins this book. It is a widespread assumption that as long as there are enough animals to make up a robust population of the species, then the loss of one or two simply does not matter. And there is another message: that emotional responses, such as my grief for the rat or the unknown woman’s empathy for baby foxes, do not matter. What is important, it would seem, is survival of species or ecosystems.

There is undoubtedly a tension between such a stance in writing about environmental ethics, and the concerns of animal liberation. For the latter, individual suffering and death matters a great deal, and there cannot be a justification for killing animals in the name of any greater good. In *Nature Ethics*, feminist activist and writer Marti Kheel explores ideas about nature in the work of environmentalist thinkers: but, significantly, she seeks to do so through challenging the assumption that individuals are not important. Her task is to find an ethics which pays attention to both nature in general and simultaneously to individual animals and their suffering.

Kheel’s odyssey began with concern about how humans treat other animals (whom she calls “other-than-humans”), but she found neither environmental nor animal liberation philosophy to be helpful. Both, she felt, were too rooted in highly abstract ideas, such as rationality - as foregrounded in the work of writers such as Singer and Regan. Both these key writers in animal rights, she suggests, tend to discount feelings of empathy as unimportant to ethical thought. Yet it is empathy towards other-than-humans which motivates most people involved in any kind of animal advocacy.

Turning to ecofeminist writers did not help Kheel’s despair, either, as here too animals were often absent. “I was beginning to suspect,” she says, “that the neglect of other-than-humans was not an incidental aspect of the Western nature philosophies, but rather central to it” (p. 20). Thus began her exploration of how prominent environmental writers have represented nature, to the detriment of concern for individual animals. She focuses specifically on four writers whom she considers to be representative of holist philosophies in the evolution of thinking about the environment - Theodore Roosevelt, Aldo Leopold, Holmes Rolston III, and Warwick Fox.

The story of the conservation movement in North America is inevitably tied up with the history of colonization. To begin with, Kheel notes, pastoralism was seen as preferable to hunting (associated with the practices of indigenous populations). But in the nineteenth century, the practices of hunting were reshaped into an ethical discourse, to create the concept of sport hunting. Sport (in the form of killing living beings with rifle or bow) and adventure became increasingly seen as ways of “experiencing nature.” As these ideas took root, so followed the notion that nature should not always be controlled, but conserved - for if there is no “wild” nature, then there is nothing for humans to experience.

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These developments were deeply imbued with masculine values. Starting from feminist debates about the psychology of attachment/detachment and masculine identity, Kheel explores how modern ideas of masculinity are linked to a separation from (and sometimes violence towards) nature. Sport hunting became an expression of how “real men” could experience the wilderness, and conservation ensured that there was something left for their sons (not daughters).

As hunting became cast as ethical, as an expression of man’s “love” for nature, so the slaughter had to be justified. We are familiar enough with the arguments: as in debates about the use of sentient animals in laboratories, suffering and death are given noble cause. Kheel points out how “Whether framed within a moral, political or scientific discourse, the logic of the hunting adventure always subordinated the killing of the animal to a larger moral framework” (p.89).

For Roosevelt and Leopold, particularly, hunting was pivotal to their arguments for conservation. Roosevelt, influenced by reading Darwin as well as his pursuit of big game hunting, engaged in debates about the merits of popular children’s stories about animals. Some of these stories, Roosevelt felt, sentimentalised other-than-humans and did not give accurate facts about natural history, while painting hunters in rather a bad light. Hunting was, to Roosevelt, the pinnacle of masculine heroic achievement, a “playful re-enactment of the lives of the earlier pioneers, whose sweat and blood had forged the greatness of the white race”, comments Kheel (p. 92).

Aldo Leopold - often called the “father” of modern conservation movements - placed similar emphasis on “playing at being pioneers.” His writing undoubtedly emphasised the importance of a love for nature, and he urged readers to learn to “think like a mountain,” to understand better how mountains and all living organisms who live on them are profoundly intertwined. He came to this insight, however, after killing a wolf, described in an oft-quoted passage, where he talks of watching the “fierce green fire” slowly die in her eyes. Somewhat shocked by this, he came to the realisation that both the wolf and the mountain had different perspectives from those of the man who wants to maintain high populations of deer.

Perhaps that horrifying experience did make him think that, indeed, predators too had a point of view. But it didn’t stop him hunting, which he continued throughout his life. It is significant that Leopold continues to be lauded in environmentalist writing for his insistence on conservation: it is also significant that his cavalier disregard for the individual lives lost through his murderous guns is seldom commented upon.

The opportunity to hunt not only gave young men chances for adventure and heroism, it could also imbue them with a sense of wonderment at nature, he believed. In this context, Kheel argues, the prevalent view that Leopold broke with earlier instrumental views of nature should be challenged. He may have identified with the land to the extent of thinking like a mountain, but his philosophy continued to subordinate individual beings to that “greater good.”

Kheel next turns to Holmes Rolston III, believed by many to be a founder of modern nature ethics and a prolific writer; in particular, he has emphasised the existence of values *in* nature, rather than simply accorded value through human use. As such, his approach has been useful to environmentalists, as it provides an intellectual defence against aggressive despoliation. His writing comes in for especial criticism from Kheel, however, for not only does he too

advocate culling in order to “save” species, but his writing implies that nature is somehow incomplete without “fertilisation” brought by human consciousness. Human superiority over others is thus maintained.

Finally, Kheel considers the work of Warwick Fox, drawing on transpersonal psychology, and emphasising deep identification with the natural world around us. We are all, in Fox’s writing, part of nature’s unfolding reality and we must find ways of joining that unfolding. This “Self-realization” is central to the ideas of deep ecology, leading, in supporters’ eyes, to a greater compassion for other living beings through a sense of shared connection and identity. Desirable though that might be, it still bears traces, Kheel suggests, of the masculine heroic struggle, and also does little to address how we relate to individuals.

These four writers obviously have differing approaches. But there is an underlying metaphor of the hunt, which runs throughout. It is fairly explicit in Roosevelt, but it is there, argues Kheel, also in the search for forms of consciousness espoused by Fox. Most writers on nature and ethics do not address the crucial question of psychology - most notably the psychology of masculine identity. No matter that these four writers employ different metaphors - such as the land, or heightened consciousness - there remains, she suggests, a narrative of separation and transcendence, of masculine heroism, in which “nature philosophy is conceived of as a sport ...nature philosophers adjudicate the competing values of the natural world, declaring winners and losers” (p. 215).

The sporting metaphor does not allow us to learn to live with nature non-exploitatively: someone, as Kheel notes, will always be the loser. In many of the narratives she describes, it is the individual other-than-humans (or other humans, for that matter), who are the losers; including those whose lives are every day entwined with our own. It does not help our understanding of nature when nature theorists deride the needs and suffering of each and every cow or pig sent to slaughter. Nor (to turn the point around) does it help when animal rights spokespeople fail to address other issues, such as feminism or the needs of larger populations, as sometimes happens. All oppressions are interconnected - as Kheel quite rightly emphasises.

Embracing Ecofeminism

Given that she finds fault with the forms of abstract holism espoused by much nature writing, it is not surprising that Kheel turns elsewhere for inspiration - notably to ecofeminism. While ecofeminist writing has also tended to play down individual suffering, there are possibilities here to integrate individual and ecosystem needs. Ecofeminist writers have long been critical of the conservation movement, especially deep ecology, for its masculinist stance and its reliance on problematic notions of “rights.” While there are, inevitably, different forms of ecofeminism, it tends to adopt a holist philosophy, but one which - particularly in the arguments Kheel puts forward here - can move away from an ethics based on rationality.

One particular strength of ecofeminist writing is its insistence on understanding the complex intersections of different forms of domination - not only of nature, but also of various “others,” including women (e.g. Adams, 1999). Those interlocking systems of domination, in turn, are supported in part by unconscious processes, drawing on emotions. “One inference,” Kheel concludes, “is that logical argumentation with the perpetrators of abuse against nature may be of limited use. If hunting, animal experimentation, and other forms of

nature abuse stem from men's feelings of alienation and their unconscious attempt to (violently) forge connections, then these processes must be identified and challenge if violence is to be stopped" (p.211).

That recognition, that emotion is as important as reason, and that psychology matters alongside argument, is central. Feminists in general are well aware of the limitations of "rights" rhetoric, whether applied to people or other-than-humans. An important insight of feminist approaches is that we can begin to understand how aggressive practices toward nature (and others) have arisen, so that we might develop measures for protection. Here, Kheel draws on feminist work which emphasises developing an ethic of *care* and *relationality*. Care for others is emotional work - work which often falls to women in Western culture - and requires that we learn attentiveness to the needs of the other.

There are, of course, problems in developing an ethics based on care/relationality: it can sometimes seem to be essentialist, and it can overlook the fact that abuse can occur in apparently caring relationships. Kheel notes the need to move beyond any dyadic conception of care (A cares for B) and toward a more contextualised idea of caring, which permits us to talk about caring both for nature and for individual animals. When nature ethicists write about caring for nature, we should ask, she urges, just who is the recipient of care? Is it the generic wolf? Or do individual wolves matter too?

It is that concern to find ways of thinking that embrace both nature in general and specific beings in nature - individual animals - that I think is one of the strengths of this book. Kheel is insistent that we not forget the specific lives and experiences in the wild, but also the specific lives of those animals closer to us. Domestic animals are clearly disparaged in the writings of the four authors she discusses: to Rolston, for instance, cattle are only partly natural, "bred to be eaten" - as though that somehow justifies their maltreatment and moves them outside of an ethics of nature. Nature, Kheel reminds us, is not only "out there" - it is also in our homes, in the labs, in factory farms.

Nature is also us. Kheel's analysis of nature theorists makes plain their ambivalence. On the one hand, their writing recognises processes of evolution, which place humans into nature. On the other, the writers she discusses tend to place nature "out there," to be "experienced." While that schism is characteristic of writing about nature throughout the Western world, it is also exacerbated by a particular stance which eulogises "the wilderness." This belief in an abstraction called "wilderness," somehow pristine, is much stronger in North American environmentalism than in European. Here in Western Europe we don't have much "wilderness" left, having wrecked it centuries ago. But that means there will be a different "take" on nature writing in different parts of the Western world, which I would like to have seen addressed more explicitly.

Relatedly, hunting takes somewhat different forms here. In general, the ethos of hunting allows humans to move through and over lands, irrespective of who lives there already. As far as I can see from reading about American hunting, it tends to be a largely individual experience, epitomised by images of men stalking deer through woods or over the western plains. Here in England, the enclosure of fields after the Middle Ages meant barriers being erected - hedges and fences. But no problem - people simply bred horses capable of jumping them. This contributed to the practice of hunting with hounds, on horseback, which is the predominant way that "hunting" is understood here. Hunting in Britain has long been associated with particular rural ways of life, as well as having strong links to social class (see

Latimer and Birke, in press). It is undoubtedly gendered, but does not have the same heroic masculinity that “hunting” does in North America. Perhaps we could pursue these regional differences in our relationship to nature in more detail, and look at how masculinity plays out in different contexts. But Kheel’s central point, that we must find ways to foster care for both nature in general and individual beings in particular, cuts across any geographical boundaries. Wherever we are, we need to learn better ways to care for and about the earth and all its beings.

Personal Politics: Attending To How We Live

“The personal is political” was a mantra of the women’s liberation movement. It is also a strength of Kheel’s position that she writes not only about the abstraction called nature but also about the personal practices that a caring ethic might entail. Occasionally, it seemed to me to be wishful thinking - I am less sanguine about the possibility of effecting change by discouraging young boys from competitive sports, unless we completely isolate our children from the rest of our consumerist culture.

On the other hand, Kheel is clear about dietary choices. She does not seek to argue for veganism as such, nor that persuading people into eating plant food will change the world overnight. But she does emphasise that it is more consistent with the kind of caring ethic we must try to develop to begin to reverse the exploitation we have inherited. In this way, she examines the moral position implied by meat-eating (not surprisingly endorsed, implicitly or explicitly, by pro-hunting conservationists). Meat involves murder on an unimaginable scale; it involves enormous suffering of sentient animals. But it is rarely, if ever, addressed in the rhetoric of nature ethicists. Perhaps they should do so urgently, in the name of the environment they seek to protect: a recent report in the U.K. suggests that to avoid climate change people will “have to be rationed to four modest portions of meat a week” (Jowit, 2008). Even that, of course, is way too much from the point of view of the cattle/pigs/sheep and other beings whose bodies are thus “rationed” out.

Important though personal choices may be as part of developing care, we must also avoid going down the same path as the nature theorists she describes. We do not, Kheel emphasises, want merely to substitute yet another grand drama. One of the strengths of feminist critiques has been the disavowal of unitary narratives, in favour of looking at what has been called “situated knowledges” - the specificities of different beings in time, place and culture (Haraway, 1991; also see Haraway, 2007). Thus, Kheel draws on a metaphor of quilt-making: traditional quilts are a combination of many, eclectic, pieces, brought together in a whole. With regard to nature, she comments:

Whereas the holists in this study situate humans within grand scientific and evolutionary dramas, an ecofeminist holist philosophy seeks to piece together the truncated narratives that exist within patriarchal society and weave them into a tapestry of stories situated within particular social and historical contexts. And just as holistic healing seeks to facilitate the body’s natural ability to heal, so too I argue that ecofeminism can attempt to identify the conditions that facilitate the development and flourishing of appropriate care. (p.14)

There are many, individual, stories in those truncated narratives, and, she urges, we must listen - attentively - to those stories. We must learn to weave them together to create many-

coloured tapestries. Every mouse, every spider, every earthworm, has a story to tell. We should care enough to listen.

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