

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

Review of *Interspecies Ethics*

Cynthia Willett
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Cynthia Willett's book *Interspecies Ethics* provides an innovative framework from which to explore the possibility of a non-anthropocentric cross-species ethic. However, readers should be wary of expecting to find a fully-fledged moral system detailing how this would work. Willett's aim is rather to outline the beginnings of *biosocial eros ethics* – an ethical outline that sketches the possibility of a cross-species cosmopolitan ideal of compassion (*agape*), derived through acknowledging and emphasizing the existence of spontaneous, playful interaction between social animals. Through entwining research from a range of disciplines (Continental philosophy, animal behavioral studies, and co-evolutionary theory to name but a few), Willett asks: what could a cross-species flourishing (*eudaimonia*) look like?

Much of Willett's argument is devoted to finding an egalitarian cross-species form of communication without "assuming the presence of human language and conceptual thought or even what we modern, adult humans would likely call a self" (14). The purpose of doing so is to show how a cross-species form of compassion can emerge without reference to anthropocentric forms of communication. Willett's fullest delineation of showcasing a communicative agency that transcends species boundaries is the possibility of play and laughter. Various case studies are discussed of social carnivores demonstrating the ability for an egalitarian attitude through suspension of predatory-prey relations to engage in play. For instance, "wolves may offer a glimpse into a radical origin of ethics as they suspend normal social hierarchies and competitive predatory and mating behaviours [...] to cultivate friendly bonds in joyful play" (62). Through recognizing other social animals at play, perhaps humans could find cues that we "have too often missed – cues that allow us to avoid repeating histories of

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rogue warfare and rejoin with other species in an unexpected, life-affirming solidarity” (48). Willett recognizes that suspension of predatory-play relationships is not the norm; yet it is during this suspension where animals assert their agency of compassion through play: “codes of play have built-in rites and rules about self-handicapping that do more than ignore social hierarchies. These codes protect the vulnerable by enforcing the requirement that the powerful set aside their power” (75). Willett thus identifies the ethically sublime as manifesting in this unexpected “compassion (*agape*) toward strangers” (142).

Spontaneous compassion to others, regardless of predatory-prey relations and species-membership, lays the bedrock for ethical biosociality. Willett understands ethical biosociality in the following way. The successful flourishing of cross-species’ social interaction and co-habitation is to be properly interpreted overtime, regarding whether various “affects” have impacted the crystallization or spoilage of a social group over several generations. These “affects” are emotional contagions, like laughter or play, anger or panic, which spread through a community (what Willett calls “biosocial fields”). Laughter, for instance, is often contagious, and can reinforce social interaction – one can laugh merely by hearing another laugh, a phenomenon found in species other than humans. Our “attunement” (emotional awareness) to these affects are therefore not constrained by species boundaries, and gives access to a cross-species form of ethicality that desires to maintain and reinforce peaceful co-habitation (115). An unethical biosociality tears the social fabric of cross-species’ interaction. Willett’s oft-given example of this is a group of adolescent elephants in Uganda, who devastate local villages due to a rupture in the social dynamic of their group after poachers killed their elders (4).

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The proper ontology for Willett's biosocial ethic thus transcends focus on moral behaviour of individuals. Instead, we ought to interpret our functioning "like nodes in multispecies networks and selves-in-multispecies-communities" (66). Willett imagines this ontology through an extension of Karen Barad's philosophical anthropology: to interpret creatures like the physical characteristics of light, as both particles and waves. While we can perceive ourselves as individual "particles" with a recognizable boundary, our interactions and interconnections with others create "waves" of affect that spread throughout a biosocial field.

These explorations into the relationship between affect attunement and biosocial fields lead Willett to derive a four-layered non-anthropocentric ethic. The first three layers are horizontal, indicating egalitarian interconnections across species. The first layer is subjective sociality, which emphasizes how ethicality can take shape without need for a "subject" in the usual, anthropocentric "self-awareness" sense of the term. Instead, the "self" can be understood as one's own communication to others (even as basic as an infant crying for help), as well as one's own response to this communication (ultimately, a form of call-and-response). The second layer is affect attunement – the phenomenon that allows for social cooperation to be sustained through laughter, play, and so on. The third layer is the need for biosocial fields to fulfill belonging and a sense of home to reinforce social community. The fourth and final layer of Willett's biosocial ethic is a vertical continuum of the ethically sublime; at the very bottom lies disgust, while the top represents a state where species perform rare moments of compassion. Movements up this vertical continuum might be seen through the case of Kuni the bonobo trying to free a trapped bird – in essence, helping a stranger (128).

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Despite Willett's ethical model, there remains a surprising lack of justification found in this biosocial ethic – especially determining which activities associated at the top of the vertical fourth layer ought to be considered ethically sublime. It is not enough for Willett to assume performing acts of compassion generally is morally valuable; many biosocial fields might find one apparent act of compassion from another species disgusting. (Willett writes that the sexual politics of bonobos could not work as a transspecies flourishing (102), for example.) The danger here is that our intuitive agreement with Willett on the moral worthiness of compassion to strangers (regardless of species-membership) and disgust at the idea of generalizing the sexual politics of bonobos could inadvertently reinforce an anthropomorphic morality that Willett endeavours to move away from. It is the case that these intuitions still need to be normatively justified from a cross-species perspective.

Despite this problem, *Interspecies* remains a fascinating text that advances imagination for how a truly non-anthropocentric cross-species ethic could manifest.