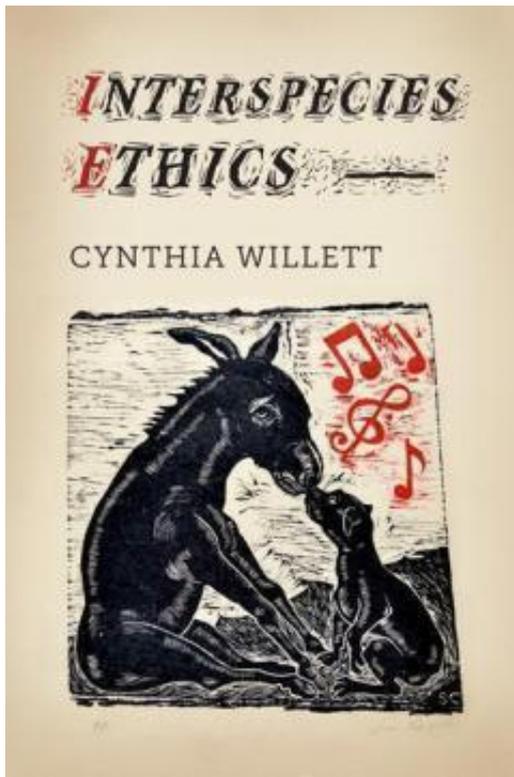


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Cynthia Willett's Interspecies Ethics

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By Eva Giraud



[Interspecies Ethics](#)

by [Cynthia Willett](#)

2014, Columbia University Press, 220 pages

In *Interspecies Ethics* Willett confronts a thorny issue head-on: what would a non-anthropocentric ethics look like in practice? This question has been grappled with by thinkers from a range of conceptual perspectives, from posthumanism (e.g. Cary Wolfe, Rosi Braidotti) and feminist science studies (Donna Haraway, Isabelle Stengers, Vinciane Despret), to neo-vitalism (Jane Bennett) and more-than-human geographies (Sarah Whatmore, Emma Roe, Jamie Lorimer). Whilst these non-anthropocentric perspectives have productively de-centred the human as the locus for ethics, there have been concerns about what could provide a replacement ethical grounding. Posthumanism in particular has faced criticism for contesting humanism without offering an alternative ethico-political

framework for combatting exploitation (at least not one that seems practicable). It is this task of developing a work-able alternative, which is at the core of *Interspecies Ethics*.

Broad Themes

Before going into depth about the specific ethical arguments Willett makes, it is helpful to first explain how her overarching approach navigates two key difficulties that have faced authors attempting to reconcile non-anthropocentric theories with animal ethics.

The first difficulty relates to the way these theories have explicitly attempted to distance themselves from a social justice agenda, often characterized as being both anthropocentric (due to liberal-humanist notions of subjective autonomy still functioning as the base-unit for ethics) and anthropomorphic (by inferring that non-humans are only worthy of ethical consideration if they are treated as ‘humans in fur suits’ (Haraway, 2008: 67)). In their totalizing desire to condemn certain relations between humans and non-humans as ‘exploitative’, moreover, animal ethics perspectives are seen as undercutting their own aims, by appealing to human exceptionalism and establishing humans as ‘protectors’ of untouched nature, whilst ignoring the vibrant forms of sociality that exist between species.

Willett attempts to circumvent such criticisms by drawing on already-existing examples of ethical negotiation that occur within mixed species communities (from, often destructive, human-elephant social networks to symbiotic micro-ecologies between squirrels, trees and fungi). These examples of how inter-species living is negotiated in practice are then used to generate insights to inform future ethical negotiations; like Haraway, therefore, Willett begins from a bottom-up perspective, learning from practice, rather than formulating a set of abstract ethical rules from a bird’s-eye view. In Willett’s own words, her approach derives its ethical values from an exploration of ‘the affect laden communicative exchange that forms the motivating and intelligent ground for mutual response and responsibility’, and is decisively not an attempt to craft a ‘systematic moral theory’ (140). Where she departs from Haraway (perhaps due to differences that Willett herself does not acknowledge, about their contrasting perspectives on what constitutes ‘exploitation’), is in using these examples to inform a series of guidelines to actively challenge what she describes as ‘the sharply vertical biosocial gradients’ – or hierarchical social relations that occur between species – in contexts such as ‘factory farms and animal research labs’ (141). Not all inter-species relations, in other words, are to be celebrated and some form of ethics is still needed to interrogate relations that are potentially oppressive.

The second, related, difficulty facing animal ethicists pertains to the epistemological ‘flattening’ that occurs within certain non-anthropocentric theories (particularly neo-vitalist and speculative realist approaches), which erode qualitative distinctions between actors; the political concerns of inanimate objects, plants, animals and humans, for instance, are placed on a level playing field. Whilst this ‘flattening’ undermines human exceptionalism, and the notion that other actors are resources for the benefit of humans, it also threatens to take the heart out of ethics by claiming parity between – to give an infamous example – ‘the udon noodle and the nuclear warhead’ (Bogost, 2012: 30). Willett makes the decision to avoid this problem by focusing on: ‘a political ethics centred on communicative sociality’ (66), and pragmatically bracketing to one side debates about ethical engagement with non-animal actors.

Chapters: Willett’s Ethical Layers

Varied forms of ‘communicative sociality’ are explored throughout the text, in order to provide insight into a practical ethics. Willett’s analysis culminates in the penultimate, reflective, chapter of the book, which offers a series of ‘layers’ that, she argues, can ground a non-anthropocentric ethics:

Layer 1: Subjectless Sociality

Layer 2: Intersubjective Attunement

Layer 3: The Biosocial Network as a Liveable Place or Home

Layer 4: Animal Spirituality and Compassion

(2014: 135)

Each chapter provides a series of specific insights about how to develop an ethics that traverses species, taking inspiration from existing forms of inter-species sociality.

The first ethical ‘layer’ is outlined in chapter 1, ‘Can the Animal Subaltern Laugh?’, which calls for less of a focus on animal ‘suffering’ and ‘vulnerability’ and more of an emphasis on ‘community life and biosocial networks that exceed individual agency’ (37). In making this argument, Willett joins the large chorus of voices who have claimed that the possessive individual is the wrong unit for grounding an ethics, both politically speaking (due to the problematic humanist lineage of this form of subject) and ontologically speaking (because the individual is never truly autonomous but constituted by broader social networks). To illustrate this subjective, and – more to the point – trans-species inter-dependency,

Willett draws on historical examples of mixed human-animal communities whose participants are co-dependent on one another, as well as contemporary ethological examples of co-evolution. This argument opens up space for non-humans to enter the ethical community as co-workers; work, however, is not main the vector that Willett uses to explore how trans-species solidarity could occur, and instead she focuses on instances of play.

The shared affinities between species, which Willett delineates through discussing how different species play together, are consolidated in her second chapter (or layer), 'Palaeolithic Ethics', where she draws analogies between anarchist movements (with a focus on Occupy) and ecological communities. This comparison is a little underdeveloped (Willett's understanding of '*autre-mondialisation*' would benefit from unpacking, for instance) and analogies between animals and anarchists occasionally verge on an essentialism that simplifies autonomist praxis. The exploration of how non-hierarchical, collaborative, forms of political organisation can occur outside of a liberal-humanist framework, however, does open up some valuable questions. To develop insight into this process Willett focuses on ecologies that are co-constituted by multiple species, which she argues provide a concrete instance of the ethics of flourishing that has been hinted at in a range of animal studies texts (from early ecofeminist work to Haraway's *When Species Meet* (2008)). Flourishing has been a notoriously difficult concept to pin down; as Cary Wolfe notes in *Before the Law* (2013), debates about flourishing often result in an epistemological rabbit-hole because some forms of flourishing undermine others (what about predators? Or parasites? Or deadly viruses?). Willett, however, argues that these debates often resolve themselves in practice: 'not in abstract laws constructed by intellectuals or political elites but in the social intelligence of animal societies' (69). It is through these practices, she argues, that we can derive a practical sense of ethics, and learn how to flourish within our wider ecological communities.

The third chapter, 'Affect Attunement' extends this argument, by contributing to the – rapidly expanding – body of work that explores the potential for tacit, embodied interactions to support trans-species communication at a non-linguistic level. Many of these arguments share parallels with work within feminist science studies, notably Vinciane Despret (2013), though Willett, unfortunately, does not substantively explore this literature, drawing on key concepts without fully situating them in their disciplinary context (more on this below). Her distinct contribution, however, is to focus on 'affect waves' that spread through communities, rather than affective relations that occur at the micro-sociological level. This chapter, therefore, contains perhaps the most concerted attempt to understand how affective relations between species can extend the

concept of agency beyond the liberal individual and – in doing so – create space for animals to be part of the ethical community.

Thus far, Willett's three ethical 'levels' are focused on what she terms 'horizontal' levels of engagement between species, by they through work, play, co-evolution, ecological co-dependency or affective relations. In the final chapter, though, she focuses on a 'vertical' axis of communication, exploring relations that occur when species strive for some sort of 'higher purpose' that goes beyond satisfying their immediate needs. Instances of empathy and compassion between species are used to illustrate this dimension of ethics, although Willett also hints that some form of striving towards the sacred could form a further point of affinity.

Potentials for an Interspecies Ethics

Although Willett's ethical layers do contain some interesting insights, they simultaneously crystallise her text's ambition and its weakness. On the one hand it is refreshing to see a text that makes a concerted attempt to craft a complex and – more importantly – concrete framework for translating non-anthropocentric theories into ethical action (especially in light of concerns that this body of work makes concrete action difficult). On the other hand this ambition has led to Willett drawing on an incredibly wide range of disciplines to bolster her arguments, which include neuroscience, child-development studies, epigenetics, evolutionary theory, phenomenology, psychoanalysis and posthumanism. The problem is that there is little acknowledgment of the paradigmatic differences between these perspectives, differences that urgently need to be worked through if this ethics is to be conceptually coherent.

Early on in the text, for instance, Willett is critical of research with bonobos that was designed to delineate differences between human and animal learning; resonating with Haraway and Despret's, respective, analyses of early primatology, she argues that 'many of the actual experiments in the film in fact suggest surprising parallels between humans and other primates, not metaphysical differences' (46). This pertinent point is then slightly undermined on the next page, where she argues: 'experiment after experiment establishes that other animals are more like us than we ever imagined' (47). Her treatment of experimental science, therefore, gives the unfortunate impression that the text criticises research that reinforces human exceptionalism, whilst embracing work that is sympathetic to its political project. This issue also affects the way Willett engages with insights from different disciplinary contexts; potentially irreconcilable differences between neuroscience and psychoanalysis, for instance, are not addressed, because the text focuses purely on elements from both disciplines that erode human exceptionalism. To strengthen the

book's arguments, it would have been helpful to see some further acknowledgement – if not some form of working through – of these epistemological differences.

What is also lacking from the book, which could have strengthened both Willett's analysis of experimental science and engagement with contemporary non-anthropocentric theories, is a more sustained engagement with science studies itself. A more in-depth engagement with science studies would have helped maintain greater critical parity between the varied scientific examples drawn on throughout the text. A more rigorous engagement with the science studies literature that is drawn on would also be welcome, because – at present – thinkers such as Karen Barad and Isabelle Stengers, as well as Haraway herself, are not situated in their context, which means their arguments are sometimes misrepresented.

Willett's use of Haraway, for instance, focuses on her playful use of 'indigestion' as a metaphor for the moral quandary posed by meat consumption, but in doing so Willett misinterprets Haraway's – often critical – stance towards animal ethics agendas. In drawing on Haraway to bolster her own criticisms of the agricultural-industrial complex, Willett suggests that a 'visceral register might serve well to prompt carnivores to question whether their dietary habits can ever be unambiguously right and morally "clean"' (114). This quote, however, is divorced from a context in which Haraway argues that no form of eating is morally 'clean' or devoid of killing of some form. For Haraway indigestion does not signify the immoral nature of meat consumption, but evokes the necessity of 'staying with the trouble' and navigating complex ethical issues on a case-by-case basis rather than casting totalizing moral judgements. This quote is actually part of a broader argument *against* veganism, which argues that criticisms of meat consumption shut down forms of relating (indeed, this argument is one reason why Haraway has been so criticized by thinkers from critical animal studies; see Pedersen, 2011).

The decontextualized use of certain theories is sometimes compounded by the text's playful use of language, which occasionally undermines its theoretical precision and clarity. Stengers' cosmopolitics is frequently used, for instance, to describe the trans-species cosmopolitanism or 'polite encounters' between species that occur in Willett's examples (73). Stengers makes clear, however, that interpreting her cosmopolitical proposal as 'inferring that politics should aim at allowing a "cosmos" a "good common world" to exist' is a 'misunderstanding' (2005: 995). Cosmopolitics is instead about making difficult, context-specific, decisions 'in the presence' of those who might be the most affected by them (Stengers's own example being researcher-laboratory animal relations), and trying to create space for these actors to shape the production of

knowledge. The difficulty is in actually creating these conditions and much of the productive work in animal studies has been in exploring ways of doing this, including a burgeoning body of work about animal affect that could be brought into productive dialogue with Willett's arguments (for an excellent overview see Latimer and Miele, 2013).

Despite these issues *Interspecies Ethics* is an interesting and often insightful text. Regardless of where one stands politically in relation to animal ethics (and, for the purpose of openness, I should state that I am sympathetic with Willett's politics), it is refreshing to see an animal studies text that maintains such a firm – and explicit – ethical commitment. This commitment is especially welcome in a field that is often cautious about adopting a firm political stance, due to fear of appearing dogmatic, totalizing or essentialist. The text's ambition, however, is also its weakness, and the book would be enhanced by a more in-depth engagement with both the epistemologies and the theoretical insights of feminist science studies scholars in particular. Such an engagement would enable the text to more fully meet its aims of realising a work-able non-anthropocentric ethics, whilst doing justice to the range of materials it draws upon.

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