

## BOOK REVIEW

ERIN MCKENNA: *PETS, PEOPLE, AND PRAGMATISM*  
(New York: Fordham University Press, 2013)

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Imagine the following photograph: a boy and a dog are running in your direction across a meadow. The background is blurry, but you can tell that the space opening behind them is wide and filled with greenery. They are very close. You can clearly see the dog's whiskers and the boy's pale face, tense from the effort, but smiling. They seem to be having fun. Both look at a piece of wood that the boy is holding in his left hand, and which his companion is trying to catch. The dog's ears flap, the boy's ginger curls wave freely, and so does his baggy, checkered shirt, as well as the leash he is holding the dog on. You can almost hear the thumping of their feet against the soil and their quickened breathing. You feel like moving aside to let them pass. If you were really standing there, a few steps away, they wouldn't even notice you. So absorbed in their game. A boy and a dog.

Now, whatever your own reaction to such a picture might be, forget about it for a moment and imagine the following one:

What we have here is a perfect example of the ideology of domination of nature masquerading as a harmonious relationship between a pet and its owner. In fact, the very signifier "owner," with which those who claim to love their "animal companions" describe themselves so gladly, clearly indicates the nature of the relationship that is instantiated here: pets are mere commodities used for their owners' pleasure. Of course, the dog in the picture may seem to be enjoying him- or herself, too, but you can surely experience moments of joy even if you are a slave, which, however, does not change your overall oppressed condition. And that dog is a slave indeed. Forget the free-like-the wind imagery of the photo and remember that the dog is on a leash. And

what about the things that are omitted in this all-too bucolic picture? Such as that the dog probably came from a puppy mill, one of those disturbing places where puppies are kept in horrendous conditions, suffering separation anxiety and all sorts of infections, parasites, and injuries. Or that when the boy finally gets bored with his animal "friend," the latter will be abandoned just as millions of other dogs are every year. That it may end up killed in a shelter, or sold to a lab where it will be submitted to cruel tests, or left alone in a forest, tied to a tree by its leg. A sorry end for a sorry creature who is, like every other "domesticated" animal, "a monster of the order invented by Frankenstein ... engineered to conform to our wishes."<sup>1</sup> Pet-keeping is inherently oppressive and must stop, but such propagandist pictures as this one only make it more firmly entrenched in our societies.

The reason for the above exercise in imagination is that the picture just described happens to be on the cover of Erin McKenna's *Pets, People, and Pragmatism*, and that one of the principal aims of the book is to prove that those who deem pet-keeping inherently wrong are themselves wrong. That this is an aim of the book, however, does not mean that McKenna is unaware of the horrors of puppy mills and various other abuses that pets face, or that, being aware of such problems, she would like to "explain [them] away."<sup>2</sup> She does see the abuses. She condemns them too. But at the same time she argues that they can be eliminated without necessarily prohibiting the institution of pet-keeping per se,<sup>3</sup> and that the institution should in fact be preserved because it offers various advantages to humans and non-humans alike. In a word, she is trying to "develop a middle ground" on the issue (17).

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Shephard, *The Others: How Animals Made Us Human* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1996), p. 151

<sup>2</sup> Erin McKenna, *Pets, People, and Pragmatism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), p. 17. Further references will be given parenthetically in the text.

<sup>3</sup> Note that for her purposes in the book, "'pet' applies to those animal beings with whom human beings have especially intimate relationships that are not particularly focused on use value, but are heavily focused on companionship" (11).

Such an approach puts McKenna among other pragmatists who have pursued the third way strategy in politics and ethics, which is also known as meliorism or reformism.<sup>4</sup> Her predecessors on this path are many, but as a recent example one might name Richard Rorty, a thinker who fiercely criticized the atrocities of capitalism and urged for a return to “class politics,”<sup>5</sup> while at the same time arguing that a total revolution was not the answer, and that one should rather tinker with the system itself to steer it in a more hopeful direction. The results are well-known. Rorty’s arguments convinced neither the neoliberals nor radical leftists, and he was attacked by both. It remains to be seen whether McKenna will meet analogous reactions from the radical critics of pet-keeping and the defenders of the status quo. In the meantime, let us take a look at the contours of the “middle ground” she occupies.

Although she admits her indebtedness to ecofeminism, McKenna makes it clear from the very beginning of the book, that she draws mainly on the theoretical resources of American pragmatism. This philosophical tradition is of course rich and varied, so it might be helpful to explain here that what she adopts from pragmatism are its, as she calls them, “five basic dimensions” (104), that is fallibilism, experimentalism, pluralism, naturalism, and developmentalism. According to McKenna, when applied to the question of our relationships with other animal beings, these translate into the following approach:

we need to understand the evolutionary (naturalism) history of the various animal beings and we need to examine the ways we have influenced and transformed each other. We

need to be open to seeing the world from the perspectives of all the animal beings (pluralism) with whom we live if we want to develop mutually satisfactory relationships. We need to recognize that these relationships are always in process (developmentalism) as is the nature of both the human and other animal beings. We need to experiment (experimentalism) with new and different ways to sustain and to improve the relationships, and we need to be willing to admit when we make mistakes (fallibilism) in understanding ourselves, other animal beings, and our relationships with each other (104; cf. 36-42).

It is from this five-dimensional perspective that McKenna wants to achieve the main aims of her book, that is (a) to undermine what she sees as “extreme positions” on the institution of pet-keeping, including those that postulate to eliminate it altogether, and which she associates in particular with PETA, Tom Regan, and Gary L. Francione; and (b) to show how pragmatism could be used to have the institution improved (or “ameliorated,” if you are as fond of Deweyese as McKenna is).

As regards (a), McKenna argues that the extreme views in question are often underlain by “human exceptionalism,” that is a belief in there being a fundamental ontological difference between humans and the rest of the animal world – something which becomes rather ironic in the case of otherwise diametrically opposed views (2; cf. 24, 39). For instance, there are those, she says, who relying on “a sense of nature that puts humans outside of nature,” believe that “all human relationships with other animal beings must end – because they violate the interests of the other animal beings and they fail to respect any intrinsic value of the other animals beings” (17). Then there are those who believe, relying on the same understanding of nature, that humans can use other animals “in any way they see fit” (2) – because only our species can have any interests whatsoever. For McKenna, both views are untenable, because so is their common exceptionalist tenet. According to her developmentalist and naturalist perspective, our species not only had emerged from the

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Richard Shusterman’s *Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 62, for remarks on pragmatism as a “middle road.”

<sup>5</sup> That is, “a politics that centres on the struggle to prevent the rich from ripping off the rest of the country” and aims at “the goal that matters most: the classless society.” Rorty, *Achieving Our Contry: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 260-261.

so-called natural environment, but as soon as this happened, it began to “engage in transactive” (that is “mutually transformative”) relationships with that environment and its other inhabitants, which continue until this day (117, cf. 42). It would be quite appropriate to say, then, that human and non-human animals “co-constitute each other” (8). Given that, drawing a strict ontological boundary between the two groups is absurd, and so is – a fortiori – deriving any ethical conclusions from it.

But frequent attachment to human exceptionalism is not the only problem McKenna sees in extreme positions adopted in the debate on the keeping of pets. According to her, many such positions are characterized by insufficient attention to the complexities of the question; the complexities of domestication’s history and of the current condition of pets, as well as the complexity of consequences that radical responses to pet abuse may bring. Take those animal advocates who would like the practice of pet-keeping to end entirely. Some of them see domestication narrowly as an intervention “in nature,” “a feat of engineering that is deliberate and planned,” and based on “domination” (27). But that picture, argues McKenna, is problematized by the available historical evidence which encourages us to see domestication “as a naturally arising symbiotic relationship, rather than an extraordinary discovery”<sup>6</sup>; to see it as something “unintentional and not conscious,”<sup>7</sup> something which, given “the habits of other animal beings”, may “seem almost inevitable” (29). Note that McKenna does not want to deny that domestication has involved domination, control, and engineering, but

rather to stress that this cannot be the whole story about it.

Similarly, McKenna’s point goes, the abuse which millions of pets suffer every day is not the whole story about the current state of human-pet relationships, even if “many” animal advocates behave as this was actually the case. Consider animal shows and horse racing. “If some exhibitors engage in cruel practices in the pursuit of competitive titles with other animal beings, many jump to the position that showing and competition with animals is always wrong” (7). But, as McKenna assures us, not all exhibitors do such things, just as not all people involved in horse racing are guilty of using of “banned training practices such as spiking ..., tendon firing or injecting irritants into horses legs [sic] ..., deadening tails ..., breaking tails ..., the artificial weighting of their feet ..., and the use of banned drugs” (51). From McKenna’s perspective, to condemn animal shows or horse racing only on the basis of such abuses, would be wrong, plain and simple. And banning those forms of human-animal relationships on such grounds would be even worse because it would “actually show a lack of respect” for the animals involved. What McKenna means by this is that, when “done well” shows and races “fit the nature and developmental histories of specific” animals and “provide an important outlet for expressing their physical abilities and mental capacities” (83). To her mind, taking away this outlet altogether because shows and races sometimes involve abuse, would be an example of “over-correction in response to problematic situations” (84).

It should be noted here, that McKenna has major doubts about “all or nothing kinds of changes” in general, arguing that “they often do as much harm as good” – a harm which is sometimes entirely unexpected by those who are the keenest to introduce such changes. One of the examples she gives concerns pit bulls, who, because of their frequent use in dog fights, have been entirely banned by “many cities” in the US. However good the

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<sup>6</sup> Richard Bulliet, *Hunters, Herders, and Hamburgers: The Past and Future of Human-Animal Relationships* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 90; quoted after McKenna (29).

<sup>7</sup> As regards dogs, for instance, “they and humans may have been in a relationship ... that have started from fourteen thousand to fifteen thousand years ago – long before humans could have completely controlled the relationship” (134).

intentions behind the ban might have been, its outcome is that these are “mostly the dogs themselves who suffer.” They are “often being euthanized,” and if that is not the case, they are “kept hidden and so are more easily subject to abuse” (170).

Let’s not forget, however, that the task McKenna set for herself in the book is not only to criticize positions adopted by others, but also to propose a concrete, positive alternative herself. What animates her proposal, to which we hereby turn, is the conviction that in order to develop “more respectful” forms of pet-keeping we first need to “get acquainted” with “the activities we want to evaluate and possibly change,” including all beings involved in them (147). It therefore should come as no surprise that McKenna focuses on pets she herself is most acquainted with – that is, dogs, cats, and horses. She devotes one separate chapter to each of these species, and all the three chapters have an analogous structure, consisting of parts addressing “Abuse and neglect,” “Use In Research and Biomedical Contexts,” “Use In Entertainment,” “Use in Competition,” and finally, and not unfittingly, “Death.” McKenna relies here not only on what she knows from her first-hand experience, but also on empirical material gathered by ethologists, anthropologists, historians, journalists, animal trainers, and others, putting forward so many proposals that it would be impossible to summarize them all in a review like this one. However, the following two should serve well as an illustration of her approach.

For instance, in Chapter 1, McKenna addresses the question of “natural horsemanship” that is “the philosophy of working with horses by appealing to their instincts and herd mentality” (56). While not denying that the particular “training methods” advocated by natural horsemen such as Pat Parelli work just fine in the case of some “horse beings,” she observes that they are hardly applicable to all horses in all circumstances. Unfortunately, “many people” treat those techniques as if they were “absolute,” universal solutions, something

which “can lead to problems and put both the human being and the horse being in a dangerous position” (56-57). Now, McKenna suggests that what might prevent such errors is adopting a pragmatist perspective indeed, which is because “[b]eing pluralistic Pragmatism recognizes that there is no one-size fits all solution or approach” (58, cf. 145). This is of course but one of the “dimensions” of pragmatism that McKenna would like to put to work in the service of improving human-pet relationship. Our next, and final, example shows all five dimensions applied to one particular problem (i.e. the use of horses in entertainment), demonstrating, too, McKenna’s frequent strategy of supporting her arguments with an autobiographical narrative:

Using the Pragmatist perspective one realizes that, given the *natural* and *developmental* history of domesticated horses, there are horse beings who want to perform, who want to run, who want to pull, who want to jump, who want to cut cattle, who want to run barrels, who want to model, who want to demonstrate the power and precision of dressage. Experiments, and the willingness to learn (*fallibilism*), have taught humans a great deal over the five thousand to six thousand year relationship with horses. As long as one has appropriately matched the activity with the physical and psychological abilities of the horse and is able to work with the particular personality and interests of the individual horse (respect the *plurality* of horses), there is nothing inherently wrong these activities from the Pragmatist point of view.

For example, Donald is the horse with whom I had the longest relationship. We met when he was one and he has recently died at age thirty-two. Needless to say, we knew each other pretty well. When Donald was young we showed in the Morgan shows in English pleasure and pleasure driving. He always made it clear he preferred driving to riding. He pranced around once he saw the harness and he couldn’t wait to get going once he was hooked to the cart – even in his thirties. At the age of twenty-seven, he went to a local Morgan show as company of Hank, the younger horse in my life. I put him in a driving class just for the fun of it. I wasn’t sure he could sustain the trot as long as the judges might ask. By then the ligaments in his hind legs were stretched out due to age and he didn’t have much strength in his hindquarters. So, I figured we’d just do what he wanted – this was just for fun. True to form he barely stood to be hooked.

He was quiet in the warm up ring, but was willing to go. But then we entered the show arena. He started really to come alive and move out. When people started clapping he moved out more. Then a horse passed him. He hit a trot I hadn't seen since his early teens! The crowd went crazy and Donald just turned it on. He got second place and left the arena in full stride. Then he started to walk. The walk back to the barn was a slow one, but he was alert and very animated. Once there, he started to whinny – not something he regularly does. It seemed he was telling Hank what he had done. He did the same when he returned our home barn the next day (76-77).

As I have already said, it is impossible to summarize here all of McKenna's proposals on how to improve our relationships with dogs, horses, and cats. It is also not possible for me to refer to all the major points she makes in the book, nor to assess the validity of the points that I referred to above, not to mention putting them in the context of the relevant literature. I do hope, however, that the task of assessing, discussing, and contextualizing her book will be undertaken by the community of pragmatist scholars, which, importantly, has thus far shown little interest in animal studies and its main debates. Surprisingly little, I might add, given pragmatism's roots in Darwin. With *Pets, People, and Pragmatism* and her other publications,<sup>8</sup> McKenna has been trying to increase that interest, and for this she should definitely be thanked.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Including the collection *Animal Pragmatism: Rethinking Human-Nonhuman Relations*, which she co-edited with Andrew Light (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> I am grateful to David Wall, who read an earlier draft of this review and offered useful comments.