1-31-2017

Review of "Entangled Empathy: An Alternative Ethic For Our Relationships with Animals"

Kathie Jenni
University of Redlands, kljenni@verizon.net

Follow this and additional works at: https://commons.pacificu.edu/eip

Recommended Citation
Book Review

Entangled Empathy: An Alternative Ethic For Our Relationships with Animals

Kathie Jenni
University of Redlands

Entangled Empathy: An Alternative Ethic for our Relationships with Animals
In the Foreword to this powerful little book, Marc Bekoff notes that Gruen provides “a powerful new way of thinking about our ethical responsibility to protect animals” (vii). Bekoff sets the stage by highlighting the indispensability of empathy for grasping animal behavior: empathy is “a necessary perspective for scientific understanding” (viii). For humans as well as other social animals, “[e]mpathy allows individuals to form and maintain social bonds and to understand and negotiate their social relationships” (ix). Thus we could better address moral problems if were to “deepen our empathetic engagement with each other,” and Entangled Empathy “guides us in doing just that” (ix).

Gruen's volume contributes to an explosion of recent work on empathy and its role in moral life. Some of the most important work appears in Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives, edited by Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie (Oxford Univ. Press, 2011) and Empathy and Morality, edited by Heidi L. Maibom (Oxford Univ. Press, 2014). (The latter includes a piece co-authored by Gruen and Kristin Andrews.)

While Gruen acknowledges her debt to Peter Singer's Animal Liberation and other extensionist approaches to animal ethics, her work in the animal liberation movement brought two realizations. First, “the idea of 'animal suffering' was much too general and broad,” failing to convey “the depth of experiences particular chickens, chimpanzees, cows, cats, and others had” in all their specificity (1). Secondly, “[it] was hard to get other people to see what was wrong with causing animals to suffer just by telling them that animals suffer” (1). To make a difference, people need to recognize “that we are already in relationships with other animals”—and, for the most part, not good ones (2). Inspired by Marti Kheel, Gruen began writing about sympathy and related ideas twenty-five years ago. This book draws on her work over that timespan, including revisions and original ideas (2).

Chapter 1 lays out a critique of traditional animal ethics and situates Gruen's approach in an alternative ethics of care. Chapter 2 discusses what empathy is and explores misconceptions about it, including the charges of “empathy skeptics.” Chapter 3 explores the possibilities and limits of entangled empathy, responding to environmental ethicists who urge us to extend empathy beyond sentient beings. Chapter 4 addresses empathetic errors and how we can correct them. One of the pleasures of the book is that Gruen weaves personal experiences of friendship and empathy with other animals into her narrative, illustrating that the philosophical is personal. One of its weaknesses is that Gruen leaves some ideas insufficiently defended. Yet at other times she makes exactly the right point, concisely and effectively.
In light of the multiple meanings of “empathy” within and across disciplines, Gruen provides her definition early on. Entangled empathy is a type of caring perception focused on attending to another’s experience of wellbeing. An experiential process involving a blend of emotion and cognition in which we recognize we are in relationships with others and are called upon to be responsive and responsible in these relationships by attending to another’s needs, interests, desires, vulnerabilities, hopes, and sensitivities (3).

This is a densely packed conception that goes far beyond what most people—specialists and laypersons alike—understand by empathy. Including recognition of relationships and responsibilities makes Gruen’s definition idiosyncratic. That need not be a problem, so long as we can understand and make good use of her conception, but it will dilute its power for audiences who find the complex experience Gruen describes unfamiliar. Many understand by empathy the capacity to share an affective state with another because one has attended to and imagined being in the other’s position—roughly the first half of Gruen’s definition—and these elements are the most widely shared among differing conceptions. But the recognition of relationship and corresponding responsibilities are (for many) dimensions of moral thinking that go beyond empathic experience and are in fact separable from it. Thus Gruen’s discussion is at times misleading, suggesting that empathy (as more commonly understood) has more power than in fact it carries.

Gruen opens Chapter 1 with a trenchant attack on traditional practical ethics. “Ethical theory should help guide our actions toward making the world better” (7), she observes; it should “both motivate us and point us in the direction of what to do. Unfortunately, it rarely does either” (8). Academic ethics has become “a rarefied business, with little relevance” to ordinary people’s lives (8). Approaches in the vein of Singer’s famine relief argument “flatten or erase the complexity of actual moral problems” (11). Appeals to abstract reasoning and universal principles can seem “detached and mechanical” (11). Worse, such reasoning “stereotypes the individuals suffering as objects to be aided. They are nameless and interchangeable. . . . We don’t attend to the particularities of their lives. . . .” (11). Standard arguments, moreover, ignore larger questions of context: “social and political structures and ideologies,” as well as relationships and “other things that make life worth living” (13). Thus they limit our moral imagination, blind us to our own roles in problems and moral solutions, are thoroughly alienating, and leave many unmoved (13).

Gruen notes that much of animal ethics exemplifies these flaws. “The standard arguments . . . follow traditional approaches in relying on abstract individualism, where individual
interests and experiences are put into categories of similarity, generalized over, and become interchangeable” (25). Tom Regan’s and Peter Singer’s divergent theories both focus on “sameness”: the idea that “there is no morally relevant distinction between human and nonhuman animals that can justify” humans’ exploitation of animals (15). They focus on the fact that “other animals share many of the qualities that we admire in ourselves and to which we attach moral significance” (17), and conclude that we ought to value those qualities in whatever beings they arise. Gruen worries about “arrogant anthropocentrism,” which elevates the human perspective above all others; she thinks the focus on similarities risks “unwittingly projecting our human preoccupations onto other animals” (24).

In these approaches, what matters is “the harm or interest setback, the suffering or disrespect, understood abstractly” (25). While these things do indeed matter, what traditionalists overlook is that

the harm or interest setback matters . . . in the context of a particular life. The abstract perspective allows us to overlook unique capacities that other animals possess, and risks substituting our judgments of what is beneficial for other animals for what actually does promote their wellbeing (25).

In contrast, Gruen situates her work within an ethics of care, with its focus on “the particularity of caring relationships, informed by context. . . .” (32) and attention to the “economic, political, . . . and cultural underpinnings of systems of animal exploitation, commodification, and cruelty” (36). Gruen references her contributions to this approach in volumes such as The Feminist Care Tradition in Animal Ethics, edited by Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2007) and rehearses the differences in emphasis between traditional theories and an ethics of care: abstraction vs. context, individualism vs. relationality, impartiality vs. connection, conflict vs. responsiveness (33-4).

Traditional ethics is indeed alienating to many—and strangely incapable of changing people’s conduct—and we need to understand why. Gruen helps explain why many people who confront the unassailable reasoning of Singer’s famine relief argument and equally sound attacks on factory farming (by Rachels, DeGrazia, Engel, and others) fail to act in light of their conclusions. She is, right, too, to say that ignoring economic and cultural contexts is a mistake: attention to such things is clearly needed if we are to bring an end to massive industries that harm animals.

Yet some of Gruen’s criticisms miss the mark. While Singer’s and Regan’s approaches indeed ignore the complexities of particular situations, their focus on “abstractions,”
or general truths, is needed to get us to recognize and put a stop to the worst harms visited on animals: torture, suffering, and death on factory farms. To understand the immorality of animal industries, there's no need to know the personality, life-story, or cognitive abilities of any particular cow, pig, or chicken: it is enough to note that brutal abuse is taking place. From the perspective of eliminating the worst abuses first, traditionalists focus on precisely the most important features of the situation: current practices cause severe suffering to sentient beings without good reason. To focus on that salient fact is not to “sterotype” animals as interchangeable objects to be aided; it is simply to note the immediate moral emergency: billions of animals urgently need our help. This is certainly compatible with empathy for individual animals, and the particularist approach comes into play when we seek to enhance the welfare of individual animals who have been rescued and whom we encounter in everyday life.

There's no “anthropocentric arrogance,” moreover, in focusing on experiential capabilities that humans share with other animals. It isn't the fact that other animals are like us that give these traits moral relevance for the extensionists, and focusing on them has nothing to do with “admiring” our own experiential traits. Sentience and being the subject of a life are morally relevant because they entail that what happens to a being matters to that being; it affects her experiential welfare. There's nothing anthropocentric in focusing on this salient fact.

In Chapter 2 Gruen clarifies her conception of empathy, distinguishing it from many other definitions out there, and distinguishes sympathy from empathy. This distinction, too, is understood in different ways; but Gruen's way of marking it is plausible and helpful. She designates as sympathy a response to something bad happening to someone else in which the sympathizer retains “her attitudes, beliefs, feelings, etc.” and “does not try to understand or feel what the child, or the cat, or the elderly person feels from their point of view” (44). The sympathizer identifies the unfortunate event, but it “is felt from the outside, the third-person perspective” (44). One can feel sympathy for another’s plight but remain “rather removed” from that plight. Sympathy also carries “the potential for being condescending” and mistaken, since in light of one's own attitudes, one may perceive a situation as unpleasant for another even though the other might be enjoying or indifferent to it. In contrast, empathy “recognizes connection with and understanding of the circumstances of the other” (45). Empathy is more intentional and purposive than sympathy: “the goal is to try to take in as much about another’s situation and perspective as possible” (45). Moreover, empathy “packs a greater motivational punch” than sympathy (45).

Gruen observes that while many refer to compassion, sympathy, and empathy as
“moral emotions,” they are more appropriately thought of as different forms of attention” (37). This seems exactly right. Rather than being an emotion like fear, grief, or joy, empathy is parasitic and dependent on others’ feelings; it resonates or echoes or “simulates” others’ emotions in light of focused attention to them. Gruen characterizes empathy as “a kind of moral perception” (39). She powerfully invokes Iris Murdoch’s classic criticism of moral theory’s exclusive attention to outward behavior and neglect of “the inner life of the agent” (27). Murdoch suggests that a more accurate account of moral experience would include “the process and work of attending to a problem” (27). A full account of moral agency must focus on attentiveness and the development of moral perception.

For Gruen, empathetic moral perception requires “responsiveness to a wide array of information” and an exercise of judgment “to determine what information is available, what additional information might be required, and whether the information that one acquires is relevant” (42). This kind of judgment is different from and prior to ordinary judgments about what one ought to do; moral perception “helps a person to see what is morally relevant . . . in a particular context,” helps shape our judgments, and “allow[s] us to do the right thing in light of what we perceive” (42).

Among the disparate phenomena referred to as empathy, Gruen’s focus is our capacity for “cognitive empathy,” in which we “purposely and thoughtfully take the perspective of another being” in “a reflective act of imagination” (48). In its most developed form, it involves not just “feeling with” the other, but also “a fairly complex set of cognitive skills and emotional attunement” (50). Thus empathy is “the ability to blend emotion and cognition to understand the situation of the other and try to help them overcome a problem. . . .” (51).

Gruen responds to empathy skeptics such as Jesse Prinz and Paul Bloom, who question empathy’s role in moral judgment and moral motivation (53). She is especially strong in addressing charges that empathy is prone to “in-group biases” and “proximity effects” (54). Such claims are often based on laboratory studies in which empathetic responses are measured in response to people being shown pictures of faces. Not all studies show the biases in question, however; and Gruen concurs with Simon Baron-Cohen, a leading empathy researcher who (wonderfully) “is not convinced any lab studies correspond to real-world behavior” (55). Moreover, Gruen points out, we’ve all “witnessed people showing great empathy for others who are quite different from ourselves, including nonhuman animals” (55).

Gruen notes that empathy skeptics “direct their criticism at a type of empathy that
is akin to an initial reaction, one that isn’t subject to critical reflection” (56). Empathy that is biased toward those like us or close to us is “an unreflective empathy.” Entangled empathy, in contrast, “directs our attention to the things that need moral response, can help provide context and understanding [about the right response], and . . . can provide us with a more accurate picture of . . . what our responsibilities to others might be” (56). If we work to improve our empathy in this rich sense of the term, we can surmount the problems skeptics point to. Here, though, it matters that Gruen’s conception of empathy goes beyond what most people—and certainly empathy skeptics—understand by the term. Empathy skeptics could respond that it isn’t empathy understood in the ordinary sense—i.e., putting oneself imaginatively in the other’s place and feeling what the other feels—that provides these insights, but rather attention to a problem, knowledge-gathering, and ordinary moral reflection.

Gruen provides a better response when she shows how empathy with another “can, and often does, fundamentally alter one’s perception” (75). She describes her friendship with a young chimp called Emma and reports that she was “radically transformed by it” (77). The encounter changed Gruen’s thinking not only about her relationship with Emma, but also about her relationships with other chimpanzees, “some of whom I know, and some of whom I don’t” (77). Gruen noticed “how the relationships we had with immediate others who were different could help us expand our perception to even more different others” (77). In her case it led to her becoming an advocate for chimps all over the world. Once we are attuned to one individual animal, we recognize that we are in relationships with many animals we will never have the opportunity to meet or directly encounter, and we come to see our responsibilities to those others differently.

Gruen is right: empathizing with a single animal can alter one’s perspective in a radical way, bringing home awareness of what animals are like, the harms done to them, and one’s own part in systems of exploitation—an awareness that was absent or merely abstract before. Any teacher who has brought students to a Farm Sanctuary to interact with farmed animals can bear witness to the transformative power of embodied, empathic interactions with individual animals. Empathizing with a single animal, far from biasing one toward (only) animals who are present or nearby, can enlarge one’s moral perception to include others, and energize one to take action to help distant animal others.

Gruen notes pitfalls for empathy that are pertinent to animal-protection work: it can devolve into a “narcissistic projection” of our own interests and desires onto others (56). We can unwittingly project what we would feel or want in a parallel situation
onto another animal and be mistaken; Gruen’s example of wanting to cuddle a sick hen when in fact “the sick hen might be better off left alone” (57) perfectly captures the point. In other cases ideology—e.g., a commitment to noninterference or (I would add) determination to eradicate “invasive species”—can blind one to suffering in animals and lead one to neglect appropriate action. To avoid these errors, we need to focus carefully on the specific context of the other, “their idiosyncratic desires and personalities” and relevant facts about their developmental and evolutionary histories. To empathize adequately requires openness to gathering information and learning, commitment to critical reflection, and (often) consultation with experts intimately familiar with the “life-worlds” of specific animals: ethologists, ecologists, and caregivers.

In one of the strongest discussions of the book, Chapter 3 responds to suggestions by some environmentalists that we extend empathy beyond sentient beings to natural objects such as mountains and rivers. Gruen observes that while “[b]eing aware of our life in a web of life matters” (69), empathy is not “the appropriate ethical response to the non-sentient world” (68). Relationships we may have to “the meadow or the wetland or the insects that inhabit them” (70) are profoundly different from the relationships we can be in with sentient beings, and are not susceptible to empathy (assuming insects are not sentient) in any but a metaphorical sense.

That entangled empathy stops at the boundaries of sentience “does not mean there aren’t other forms of care and attention that could and should be directed at the rest of nature” (74). In other words, entangled empathy is not the only “ethical tool” (74). Gruen’s clarity about empathy’s appropriate targets, and how empathy differs from other kinds of caring, illuminates the peculiar and damaging tone-deafness of many environmentalists to animal suffering. Too often, environmentalists fail to discriminate between natural objects we value (including animal species) and individual animals who suffer. Happily, Marc Bekoff’s “compassionate conservation” movement seeks to remedy this fault.

Chapter 4 discusses empathetic errors and how we can address them. Gruen addresses two kinds of mistakes: epistemic inaccuracies and ethical inaccuracies.

Epistemic empathic mistakes involve over- or underestimating the nature or weight of others’ mental states (83). These errors are particularly worrisome in the case of other animals, who cannot easily correct them. It may seem odd that Gruen would worry about overestimating others’ suffering. It’s true that we may exaggerate the distress of someone accustomed to bigoted slights or injuries (her example) and thus respond
inappropriately, but it’s unlikely that such responses will be harmful; they are more likely to be annoying and perhaps condescending.

Still, the potential for error is there. Some of us have found ourselves hoping we were making such an error when we’ve empathized with an animal companion we have brought to the vet; we hope that some instinct or physiological reaction makes their distress and fear less intense than we assume it to be. (In response to a non-fatal lion attack on a man who reported experiencing little pain during the mauling, Albert Schweitzer expressed his fervent hope that shock lessens the suffering of animals being taken down by predators, so that they suffer less than we generally suppose.)

More often, of course, and more importantly, we underestimate the suffering of others: “. . . white people in a culture of anti-black racism cannot understand the full weight of years that burden those who experience racism, as well as . . . feelings of invisibility, rejection, and disrespect . . .” (87). In the case of other animals, it may seem impossible to imagine “what a dairy cow or a lab rat or a captive chimpanzee” might be thinking and feeling; as Thomas Nagel puts it, we are “always limited by the resources of our own minds” (87). However, we should not be complacent about this difficulty: to some degree “[i]ncomplete empathy can be corrected” (88). The empathizer can seek out more details of the particulars of a situation and of the nature of the animal involved; we can try to fill in gaps in our knowledge to get closer to adequate empathy, by learning more about the animal’s physiology, ethology, behavioral instincts, and so on.

Other errors are more difficult to remedy. Gruen discusses two kinds of ethical empathetic mistakes: “affected ignorance” and “empathetic overload.” In the latter, the empathizer (usually an activist) fails to modulate her empathy in order to care for herself. Witnessing “so much cruelty, suffering, death, and human indifference” can drive a person to withdraw and shut down, burn out or break down. Like a triage doctor in the field, the activist may have good reasons to temper empathy in order to remain emotionally healthy and continue to function. “Disengaging is an important tool for coping in the face of so much horror” (91).

Gruen is right, but she might have attended to the paradox and potential tragedy in this: in order to address the evils of animal abuse and exploitation, one may need to alter one’s character by quashing one’s own empathy. This should be recognized as a sacrifice and sorrowful necessity, for it is not clear than one can switch empathy on and off at will; perhaps the activist must permanently blunt her empathy to preserve her wellbeing and continue her work. If so, this is an unfortunate and tragic consequence of tempering empathy for self-protection.
Gruen notes that “too many people choose to ignore suffering and disengage their empathetic responses to that suffering because it ‘feels’ like overload” (92), when in fact that decision is not warranted. This excellent point is directed at people we have all encountered, who carefully shield themselves from distressing footage of animal abuse, judging (much too soon and without really trying) that they “cannot take it.” If those people are engaged in abusive relationships with animals (e.g., if they still eat meat or eggs or cheese), avoiding painful empathy is in fact shirking their responsibility to recognize and remedy their relationships with animals, in the interest of avoiding (their own) distress.

A more disturbing and intractable error is what Michele M. Moody-Adams calls “affected ignorance.” Gruen’s prime example is the attitude of animal experimenters who do not empathize with their subjects as they cause them terrible suffering. The experimenters’ error is not epistemic: they know that (e.g.) cats feel pain and know that they are causing them pain. Rather, the animal experimenter is “making an ethical mistake in failing to empathize” (90). Gruen notes that “[s]ome social institutions require that [participants] make this mistake for their very existence and thus they have an interest in promoting and naturalizing the failure” (90). This failure, built in to the institution of laboratory animal research, Gruen characterizes as “willful or affected ignorance . . . choosing not to know what one can and should know” (91). The experimenter chooses to accept misinformation about animal subjects and “does not allow her empathy to be engaged by their suffering” (91).

But Gruen has misdiagnosed the problem in this critically important case. Experimenters need not be misinformed about animal subjects to refuse to engage their empathy. In fact, animal experimenters would likely respond to the accusation of “affected ignorance” that they are in fact modulating their empathy in order to complete the important work of biomedical research for the benefit of future humans. They would liken their blunting of empathy to the triage doctor’s tempering of empathy in the interest of saving lives. Gruen remarks that if the experimenter is “committed to perceiving things accurately,” she will no longer ignore relevant information (about animal suffering) and will seek out information about how she is affecting the wellbeing of her animal subjects. But the experimenter may reply that this would render her incapable of continuing with important research that will prevent the suffering of future humans.

This is precisely where theoretical approaches such as Singer’s and Regan’s are needed. Animal researchers assume that human suffering is more important than the suffering of other animals: most are deeply speciesist. Hence the power of the argument from marginal cases, focusing on similarities between mentally handicapped humans (whom
we no longer find it acceptable to use in biomedical research) and the nonhuman animals suffering in laboratories: both feel pain and suffer, both have lives and experiences that matter to themselves regardless of any use they have to others. Without putting a chink in the armor of speciesism \textit{via} “abstract” arguments that focus on similarities between vulnerable humans and other animals—the kind of argument Gruen attacks in Chapter 1—appeals to animal researchers to engage their empathy will get us nowhere.

Tom Regan’s point about the need for “many hands on many oars” in the animal protection movement is illustrated nicely here. To bring down the practice of invasive animal research, we need a well-informed and empathetic public who have witnessed exactly what befalls laboratory animals—but we also need the fall of speciesism: the weighting of human suffering more heavily than other animals’ suffering on the basis of species alone. Focusing on similarities between past wrongful research using human subjects and current research using animal subjects can—and often does—get open-minded inquirers to see the wrongness of animal research. The experimenters themselves may be too steeped in ideology and self-interest to be capable of breaking through their bias; but if sufficient proportions of the public can do so, empathy \textit{in conjunction with} moral arguments exposing speciesist bias may be enough to bring the institution down.

Nevertheless, Gruen makes essential and terrific points. Correcting empathetic failures and developing skills for better empathy are important both for those in need of care and for the empathizer herself. “Entangled empathy helps us to deepen the disposition to attend in appropriate and meaningful ways to the effects of our actions within complex networks of power and privilege” (94). Improving our empathetic skills will make us “more sensitive and more attuned perceivers,” allowing us to understand better “the relationships we are in and to make them better” (94).

To achieve better empathy, we must engage in “critical attention, practice, and correction. . . . In other words, entangled empathy requires work” (94). That work carries essential rewards, though: improving our relationships with others “through more meaningful and mindful choices and actions” will enhance our moral agency (94).

In her pithy Afterword, pattrice jones notes the power of entangled empathy as a “useful rhetorical shift”: helping people to see “that they are \textit{already in relationships} with animals” and asking questions about them can elicit less resistance from those who are hostile to animal rights than standard arguments do. Entangled empathy can short-circuit dishonest evasions, for the question becomes: “What are you going to do about the relationships you have with nonhuman animals?” (100). Jones notes that recover-
ing “our animal capacity for empathy” will enhance our lives by bringing us back to “a felt awareness of the web of relationships in which we live” (103). This is “the beautiful bonus of this way of being in the world” (103-4).

Entangled Empathy reminds us that if we are willing to work at it, we have the power to enhance our empathy, our relationships with animals, and our moral agency—and thus to change the world.