

Book Review

Deane-Drummon, Celia. *The Wisdom of the Liminal: Evolution and Other Animals in Human Becoming*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014.

As a plant physiologist and a systematic theologian, Celia Deane-Drummond is profoundly aware of the liminal zones that exist between academic disciplines, and between different modes of inquiry. In *The Wisdom of the Liminal: Evolution and Other Animals in Human Becoming*, she seeks to draw creatively on the wisdom of some of these liminal spaces and boundaries, to formulate a theology for contemporary society that takes into account both mystical and existential experience, and biology and evolutionary science.

The resulting theological anthropology is broadly interdisciplinary enough to explore the relationships between science and religion, and more specifically, the fluidity of the boundaries between humans and other animals. *The Wisdom of the Liminal* adds to the growing body of literature on religion and other-than-human beings. Among other things, this book is an expansive literature review. Dense and heavy with footnotes, it engages with a wide range of classic volumes as well as recent journal articles. The 22-page bibliography shows the enormous breadth of source material from which Deane-Drummond has drawn, including biology, animal studies, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, and theology: from St. Augustine to Pascal Boyer, and from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin to Donna Haraway.

According to Deane-Drummond, “once the evolutionary biological literature and the anthropological literature start to be mixed up in a way that both speak to each other, this will begin to break down the established dualisms between nature and culture” (Deane-Drummond, 42). This might be a lofty goal—some might say an impossible one—but it is certainly interesting to see these disciplines speaking to one another. *The Wisdom of the Liminal* contains a discussion with Tim Ingold about the boundaries between human and other-than-human beings, and with Aristotle on animals’ experience, memory, and ability to reason; it includes a brief talk with Derrida regarding his ubiquitous essay “The Animal that Therefore I Am”; and the author also mediates a conversation between philosopher Hans Jonas and theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar about free will and agency in humans and other species.

The majority of the book, however, is comprised of Deane-Drummond’s lengthy and detailed engagement with the scholastic philosopher St. Thomas Aquinas, and particularly his *Summa Theologiae*, on the subjects of cognition, morality, and image-bearing in other-than-human beings. “Aquinas realized ahead of his time that human beings could only really be understood by making sympathetic comparisons with other creatures” (Deane-Drummond, 277). The author draws upon Aquinas to support the porousness of the boundaries between human and

other animals. In response to the heavy emphasis on language as evidence of human exceptionality, for example, Deane-Drummond points out that for Aquinas, language included outward physical gestures: an approach that might well be inclusive of other species.

Chapter 5, “Human Language and Animal Communication” poses interesting questions about language evolution and acquisition, topics that always seem to engender “highly charged debates in the scientific literature” (Deane-Drummond, 154). This chapter includes a review of that literature, and contemporary theories on the evolution of speech and language; it also makes an argument for the place of theology in the language evolution debate. In addition to language, *The Wisdom of the Liminal* also explores the possibility—or argues for the existence of—emotions (64), free agency (97), morality (122), forgiveness (139), mind (157), symbol-making (181-183), conscience (223), the social contract (241), justice (247), dignity (250), altruism (280), compassion and tool use (286), and empathy (292) in other-than-human beings.

As mentioned, a major theme of this work is the porous nature of the human-animal divide. Deane-Drummond argues that interspecies kinship provides a good starting point for this discussion, but this alone is insufficient for a theological interpretation of how humans connect with other animals. Because human becoming, including human morality, has not happened in isolation from other species, but in co-evolutionary contexts, she claims that human nature should be seen not as a sharp marker separating us from other species, but as a particular way of being a social animal: one that is “remarkably different from but also has [been] learned in association with other animal kinds.” According to Deane-Drummond, these associations have gone back “as far as paleontology into the nether reaches of prehistory and beyond” (137). Engaging with a variety of thinkers and theories along the way, she makes a point of addressing numerous key controversies and important theories.

In one such discussion, on the evolution of altruism, she points out the limits of Richard Dawkins’ “selfish gene” theory, as well as E.O. Wilson’s concept of “sociobiology.” This puts Deane-Drummond in league with Mary Midgely, whose critiques of and debates with Dawkins are well documented, as well as with Wendell Berry (whose 2001 book *Life is a Miracle* elegantly refutes Wilson’s theory). Following pioneering primatologist Frans de Waal, and referencing his observations of chimpanzees and bonobos, Deane-Drummond suggests that perhaps cooperation is the baseline we should be considering, and selfishness is the exception: “rather than understanding cooperation and altruism as added subsequently as a ‘veneer’ to a basically selfish nature, we should understand cooperation as *basic* to biological nature as such, even in the simplest of organisms. In other words, instead of the ‘selfishness’ rhetoric, we need a ‘cooperation’ rhetoric” (285). Popular readings of Darwin make the entire complex concept of evolution into little more than genetic, individualistic, and group selfishness—survival of the fittest as a metaphorical fight, or a race—but if this is the case, Deane-Drummond asks, then

how is it that caring for others has ever arisen in evolutionary history? Cooperation, she argues, is “a trait selected for throughout evolutionary history” and indeed it has been “the principle architect of 4 billion years of evolution” (222).

Another notable, if less publicized, debate that Deane-Drummond hosts is between Pat Shipman and Tim Ingold. Shipman, in *The Animal Connection* (2011) suggests that other species were regarded as natural resources very early in human history: “Those humans who observed more keenly, learned more quickly how to quiet a frightened or anxious animal, and figured out how to keep it alive and docile were rewarded with a new kind of tool: an animal that would do the bidding of humans” (Shipman, 225, cited in Deane-Drummond, 290). However, as opposed to Shipman, who sees animals as an extension of early human tool use, Ingold argues that for hunter-gatherers there is an “economy of trust and of mutual sharing where other life-giving agencies nurture human life.” This may seem alien to the modern Western mind, which often views hunting as an exertion of power and dominance; but according to Ingold this is not the case with hunter-gatherers. It was only after domestication took place that human relationships with other animals changed, and it became founded not on a principle of trust or relatedness, but of domination. Ingold (along with others, such as Paul Shepard) claims that it was only with the onset of industrialized agriculture, many centuries later, that other animals came to be regarded as “objects for human use and abuse” (Deane-Drummond, 291).

However fascinating and informative these conversations might be, on occasion readers might find themselves getting lost, and bogged down, as they read. At times there are simply too many theories, too many voices, being brought to bear on one point. Thomas Aquinas is the connecting theme, or thread, which runs throughout *The Wisdom of the Liminal*, and so perhaps an Aquinas scholar (or at least, someone more familiar with his work) would be better able to follow along. Then again, a *Summa Theologiae* expert might just as easily be confused by all the biological references, and likewise an ecologist might not fully grasp the cultural anthropology or the cognitive psychology. With such an interdisciplinary project, and with so large a scope, these issues might simply be unavoidable. Deane-Drummond’s book is also not quite an encyclopedia as it is unfortunately not thoroughly or clearly organized enough to be an actual reference book. It is a thesis; and however meticulously researched and well-argued it may be, the fact remains that interdisciplinarity (to paraphrase Val Napoleon, a former Native Studies professor at the University of Alberta) is not for the faint of heart.

Nonetheless, *The Wisdom of the Liminal* joins a growing body of literature that explores the intriguing and vital liminal zones between ecology and theology—and between human and animal— and that includes publications such as Ursula Goodenough’s *The Sacred Depths of*

Nature and Anne Primavesi's *Making God Laugh: Human Arrogance and Ecological Humility*. More broadly speaking, it also belongs with the literature that considers the religious roles and responsibilities of humans in the natural world, such as John Hart's *Sacramental Commons: Christian Environmental Ethics*, Kaleeg Hainsworth's *An Altar in the Wilderness*, and even *Laudato Si*, the encyclical released this year by Pope Francis. Unlike some of these titles, however, *The Wisdom of the Liminal* is not intended for a popular audience; it is more of an academic text. There is definitely wisdom to be found in the liminal spaces between disciplines, and for the student or researcher willing to take the time and work for it, there is also gold.

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