Review Essay

Creaturely Becoming: Whitehead and Jainism

Brianne Donaldson


Brianne Donaldson’s Creaturally Cosmologies: Why Metaphysics Matters for Animal and Planetary Liberation is certainly, as the title suggests, a book about abstractions. As thought forms that are by definition above and beyond the physical, it is difficult for metaphysics to be anything else. But the book, itself, is anything but abstract. It is instead a philosophically serious and deeply compassionate text about life as it plays out in mortal and creaturely bodies. Creaturally Cosmologies is an invitation to think metaphysics into animal liberation, but it’s also an invitation to act on behalf of creatures. It argues, ultimately, that action and contemplation feed into one another. Although I am often more inclined to believe that the chicken (political commitments and actions) tends to precede the egg (metaphysics), Donaldson’s book left me questioning this. She argues that better metaphysics are also good for animals, and she makes a strong case.

Donaldson’s book begins with an apologetic for metaphysics, as she is aware that this habit of thought has often been critiqued by those interested in animals and animal studies for its problematic associations with “oppressive universals, patriarchy, rationalism, idealism, human senses, language-centrism, consciousness, disembodied abstraction, and transcendence” (p. xxi). Metaphysics, as the story often goes, is on the side of a rationally conceived and disembodied human subject. But Donaldson argues that this is a reduction of metaphysics—one that forecloses on metaphysical options often written out of western philosophical perspectives striving for disembodied universality. Donaldson is making a plea for metaphysics because she believes that better
metaphysics than the ones that have dominated in the west can show us how
the world yet *might* be, for creatures. The conceptual tissues of metaphysics,
she suggests, can show us patterns of entangled relationships between crea-
tures that we might not otherwise contemplate.

The metaphysical systems that Donaldson lifts up as exemplary are the
20th century British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead’s process-relational
thought, and the ancient metaphysical heritage of the Jain tradition. Con-
nections between these systems of thought are not obvious, and Donaldson
spends the bulk of the book fortifying the bonds between them, for the reader.
Both are associated—on at least some level—with religion. Whitehead’s phi-
losophy has given rise, in the late 20th century, to the tradition of process the-
ology (a school of thought whose strongest intellectual base is the Claremont
School of Theology, where Donaldson earned her PhD). And the Jain ethic of
nonharm (which advocates not only for a plant-based diet, but one that avoids
the violence of uprooting rooted plants as well) is an ethic notoriously related
to commitments to this religious tradition.

What makes these systems resonate most for Donaldson, however, is that
they each present us with “creaturely cosmologies” that “do not begin their
theoretical analysis with human experience and then extrapolate outward.
Rather, they attempt to begin their project with the most basic and general
phenomena, common to all experience” (p. xiv). Each of these cosmologies
offers a kind of starting point for metaphysical reflection with a most basic
unit of existence. For Whitehead, this is the “actual occasion”—what he some-
times called “the creature.” This is “the most fundamental process of creative
self-determination common to all entities” (p. xiv). Jainism begins with *jīva*—
“a core vital force central to all life-forms that initiates and responds to causal
influences” (p. xiv).

Donaldson suggests that these fundamental concepts might actually be
more of a “microphysics” than a metaphysics, as they get us looking toward
the processes that undergird the smallest aspects of our existence, and gener-
ate our thinking in *immanent* rather than *transcendent* directions. They offer
those who want to animalize thought itself, what Donaldson calls “deep empirical
perception,” a view of life that sees entities as both subjects and objects
(rather than dividing all entities into two classes of being), a way of thinking
that is dynamic rather than static, and a “meeting place” for what have been
conceived of as oppositions in western thought (science/religion, mind/body,
human/animal) (pp. xv-xvii).

It should be noted, however, that Donaldson does not find, in these reli-
giously oriented (or at least religiously interpretable) metaphysics, a source
of moral authority. Indeed, she makes a point of mentioning that neither of