
Re-inscribing nature into ethics is a perennial problem for environmental ethics. Nancie Erhard turns the problem on its head with an original framework that re-conceives ethics, or ethos, as a co-creation of habitat. Erhard’s argument starts from the modest assumption “that a geographic location, with its topography and forms of life, could make a difference to ethics” (p. 1). Working toward her conclusions “that moral agency is widely distributed in the biotic community,” and that ethical norms arise from within that community,” and “that what is deemed cultural is itself coproduced by humans and the rest of the biotic community” (pp. 2, 14), Erhard critiques prevailing Western theories of moral agency and engages several non-mainstream natural-cultural contexts for contrast. Her goals are “to see how other-than-human capacity to know and act is conceived, whether other-than-human behavior is understood to have moral content, how human moral imagination has been shaped by other-than-humankind, and where these intersect” (p. 10). Erhard is careful to avoid language that would depict other-than-human nature as wholly determining human culture; otherkind participate in human culture.

Erhard employs a broad definition of moral agency: the capacity to know the good and act on it (p. 10). Prevailing views of moral agency, she writes (following Clifford Geertz), depend on distortive Western conceptions of the person as a bounded center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action set contrastively against both other such persons and against the social and natural background (p. 72). Conceptions of autonomous “free and rational” human agents are false because “they abstract individuals from moral habitats that are embodied, emotional, imaginative, and more-than-human, habitats in which we are formed/malformed and perform as moral agents” (p. 79). They also make it extremely difficult to think in terms of collective responsibility, an idea better founded on a relationally constituted self (p. 77), and they critically fail to account for how we actually live as moral beings, as evidenced in the striking contradiction between the fact of global environmental ruin and the lack of intention to create such ruin (p. 78).

Historical and etymological approaches ground Erhard’s argument. Pre-Aristotelian formulations of ethos conceived it as “the homes or accustomed
places of animals” and human homes, customs, disposition, and character (p. 12). From this kernel emerges the notion of moral habitat, which brings together humans, otherkind, place, landscape, and the networks of norms that guide and give definition and meaning to action. Contesting human exceptionalism and human “discontinuity with the rest of the biosphere” is key here. One of Erhard’s means for doing so is to consider indigenous Americans’ expanded ideas of personhood, which “belongs to a wide variety of beings, seen and unseen,” who “are considered to have societies that parallel and interact with human society in a complex web of mutual responsibility and obligation” (p. 39). The agency of otherkind joins that of humans to mold humanity; humans are continuous with the natural world and both shape and are shaped by it (p. 20).

Non-mainstream “natural-cultural contexts” are presented not as models to emulate but rather as sources of contrast to prevailing Eurocentric ethical assumptions. Mi’kmaq and other Algonquin people inhabit a world of highly structured relations among humans and other-than-human persons, in which courtesy, caution, mutuality, reciprocity, deference, and diplomacy are prescribed (p. 43). Womanist ideas join indigenous American ideas to counter mainstream moral agency theory with concepts of distributed responsibility, the collective, and particularity in relation (p. 89); Moral agency is activated by and in community. In the Hebrew Bible, Erhard locates agency in several non-human spheres: the waters, which participate according to God’s command in separating and revealing dry land; the Tree, which confers knowledge of good and evil; the ground, which bears consequences of transgression; and the animals, birds, and other creatures, who, along with Noah, have the capacity to enter into a covenant with God and suffer the judgment of the Flood (p. 55). Post-Cartesian science contradicts modern notions of human exceptionalism by acknowledging non-human consciousness, emphasizing interactions and similarities with animals, and making it more difficult to conceptually separate humans from other animals and the living from the non-living parts of the biosphere (pp. 60-64). Erhard prescribes a plethora of changes for modern life (though she asserts she has no grand plan): a direct, sensuous, transforming relationship with all of creation; intergenerational responsibility; clear distinction between the instrumental and the non-instrumental and between what is sustaining of life and what is not; an intimacy with the non-human world achieved through the hard work of