

Erin McKenna

Livestock: Food, Fiber, and Friends

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Livestock animals often live in abhorrent conditions, and the livestock industry often creates devastating environmental impacts; understanding this much is now commonplace. It is a matter of pressing importance to make significant improvements in contemporary practices, but the way to move forward in changing them is often unclear. Many lament the conditions they hear about in large-scale farming operations, yet consumer demand for certain kinds of animal products and byproducts continues to increase. While a good deal of literature presents and analyses problems related to livestock animals, many accounts fall into rigid and idealistic thinking about potential solutions and leave little room to move the discourse forward.

Erin McKenna's newest book, *Livestock: Food, Fiber, and Friends*, contributes a pragmatist and ecofeminist perspective on livestock to animal and environmental ethics literature, challenging readers at every turn to avoid the kinds of absolutist thinking characteristic of our public discourse about the lives of animals often seen merely or primarily as food or fibre for humans. There is no doubt that livestock are often the subjects of profoundly unethical treatment, but there is no option, McKenna insists, to simply 'stop being in relation with one another' (p. 19). Instead, she makes a case throughout the book that 'the focus should be on how to improve the relationships we have with other animal beings' (p. 19). This book sets forth to show the deep interconnection humans and livestock animals have by examining their natural and social evolution over thousands of years in relationship and to offer possibilities for how to improve those relationships.

Livestock complements McKenna's 2013 work *Pets, People, and Pragmatism* in which she examined the lives of companion animals and worked to reconcile tensions among different opposing perspectives about pets, some holding that relationships between humans and pets are to be avoided and others that they are benign. In that work, McKenna uses pragmatist philosophy to examine pet–people relations and work toward better understanding and more respectful relationships. Turning her attention in this current work to livestock animals, McKenna develops the pragmatist perspective further and incorporates in more depth an ecofeminist philosophy. Together, these perspectives offer resources with which to better understand the complexity of the transactive relationships people have with livestock animals, and which may help us work toward more respectful relationships and more ethical treatment of those beings, without moving toward extreme positions that are untenable in our contemporary context. This book offers a middle-ground approach which recognises the inextricable nature of the relationships we have with livestock animals – relationships which have developed over thousands of years and which are mutually transformative. The pragmatist ecofeminist perspective McKenna presents here challenges fundamental assumptions about how we tend to think about those animal beings commonly considered livestock and offers suggestions for how to improve the conditions in which they live. Doing so demands changes not only from farmers but also from consumers. Few could read this book without being compelled to examine their own habits and practices related to living with and consuming animals; even vegans and vegetarians are provoked to consider their entanglement with animal beings' lives.

Deeply researched, expansive and cross-disciplinary, *Livestock* fluently bridges conversations in philosophy, environmental studies and animal studies. McKenna begins by developing a Deweyan framework which focuses on six dimensions of pragmatism: naturalism, pluralism, developmentalism, experimentalism, fallibilism and amelioration. Each dimension helps to

clarify how we ought to understand the lives of animal beings and how we can work to change behaviours that impact their treatment. Ecofeminism augments the pragmatist account. She employs the work of Val Plumwood, Karen Warren and Carol Adams, among others, in order to show that theory and praxis are inseparable and to highlight how theory impacts ethical and political behaviour. McKenna writes: 'I take up the pragmatist and ecofeminist insight that no one person has a take on the whole; we each offer only partial and situated understandings of particular situations. For that reason, we need a community engaged in discussion if we hope to make any particular situation better' (p. 14).

McKenna's demonstration of that deep community engagement, characteristic of both ecofeminism and pragmatism, is the most notable feature of this book. The book is organised into ten chapters, each of which takes the reader into actual farming operations, large- and small-scale. McKenna and her student engage with farmers working with fish, cattle, sheep, goats, chickens and pigs, as well as examining dairies and slaughterhouses. These visits and interviews reveal the variety and breadth of farming practices and of farmers' relationships with their animals. Unlike many other treatments of livestock industries, McKenna not only shows the cruelty that exists in some farming practices, but also offers examples of farmers whose relationships with animals and land are characterised by tenderness, care and respect. None of these relationships are problem-free, but neither are abolitionist or non-interference ideologies, she argues. In sharing narrative accounts of different farmers and through describing observations of and interactions with the animals themselves, McKenna's writing embodies the pragmatist ecofeminist perspective she espouses. The experiences of the animals, the farmers, the consumers and the land all must be taken seriously in our evaluation of contemporary practices – and McKenna skilfully explains how all are intertwined.

Pragmatism and ecofeminism serve as the frame through which to offer critiques of several popular approaches that deal with livestock and food concerns, such as local and slow food movements and hobby farming. Wendell Berry and Barbara Kingsolver in particular receive rich philosophical treatment. McKenna highlights the valuable contributions their popular approaches make in raising awareness about the growing industrial food industry and offering alternative ways of living, but she also reveals how they romanticise farming and rural living and fail to recognise the accompanying effects of their ideals – namely, that women often carry a disproportionate burden to do this work: 'The call to add gardening, canning and cooking from scratch often has the effect of further increasing [their] workload and adding a dollop of guilt for those who don't manage to do it' (p. 133). What McKenna shows throughout the book is that no one solution to challenges related to livestock will adequately address the growing problems of their treatment and impact, and that rather than settle for context-free, idealistic thinking – which falls short in practice – we must 'make room for nuance and situational factors' (p. 111).

This book makes a valuable and distinctive contribution to existing philosophical literature for those concerned with animal rights and environmental ethics. I imagine that there are those who would like to see more rigorous or direct engagement with some of the central figures McKenna draws on to establish her perspective, such as John Dewey and Aldo Leopold, or with those whom she critiques, such as Arne Naess. But although some of her engagements are brief, they serve her purpose well. She is able to develop a rich, philosophically-grounded position here without adding unnecessary technicality. Non-academic audiences are as likely to find this work accessible, compelling and important as academic audiences. This is one of the things I appreciate the most about this work. The extent of the audience to whom it speaks is, arguably, everyone who eats anything at all.

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