

Life in others – a review of *Frog Pond Philosophy: Essays on the relationship between humans and nature*

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About the book

Author: **Donnelley S**

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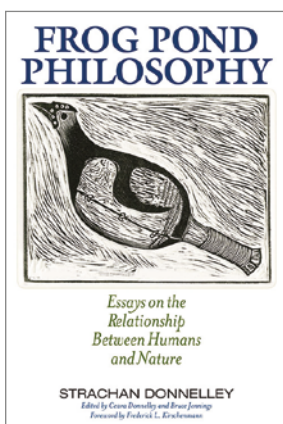
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Strachan Donnelley (1942–2008) believed that nature is alive and that one of the great purposes of life is to foster aliveness. The essays in this collection are infused with his own vivacity as a thinker who embraced the wildness, beauty and goodness of the natural world.

In an early essay, Donnelley recalls the moment he became a “frog pond philosopher,” sitting by a pond at the end of a day of trout fishing in northern Wisconsin, USA. A frog croaked and suddenly “a philosophic lightning bolt shuddered through my body” (p 33). What had been ordinary, vague background noise was transformed into the crystal clear sound of “so much value ongoingly bursting forth into being” (p 34). It was a fierce green fire moment, reinforcing Donnelley’s belief that nature is alive with individual organisms, each with its own value and importance and every one dependent on the other. Human divas to the contrary, there are no solo performers – only one orchestra that is “the locus of ultimate moral and civic responsibilities” (p 52).

Donnelley admits to being drawn to “Louisville Slugger ideas.” Ideas matter, he insists, and big ideas – cosmological ones – matter a lot, orienting us in the world, shaping our values and driving our decision-making. Wrong ideas result in wrong behaviour and the fact that humans have become the great destroyers of nature is a sure sign that we don’t yet have the right philosophical “rack” of ideas.

Identifying himself as a “marginalist,” Donnelley turns to a roster of thinkers, many of whom have been side-lined for their repudiation of physical monism and the Cartesian tradition of dead matter: philosophers Hans Jonas, Alfred North

Whitehead, and Spinoza; biologists Darwin and Ernst Mayr; conservationist Aldo Leopold; and writer Boris Pasternak. All share the philosophical convictions that life and value pervade the natural world, that entities are constituted by relations, and that life is a dynamic affair. With them, Donnelley maintains that we humans are “interactively involved with the world up to our ears” (p 27), and it is this context that gives rise to ethical responsibility. Rejecting both the amorality of a Darwinian Blind Tinkerer and the imposed morality of a Cosmic Designer, Donnelley proposes that “life in others” – and the corresponding idea of life-in-support-of-life – is the basis of a moral ecology. Our ethical responsibility to the “ongoing, mutual, interdependent, and vulnerable goodness of conative individuality and worldly community sets the fundamental terms of the moral landscape” (p 125).

As previous president of the Hastings Center, and founder and president (until his death) of the bioethics think tank Center for Humans and Nature (www.humansandnature.org), Donnelley’s search for a conservation ethics that could put human–nature relations on new philosophical ground was anything but theoretical. Wary of totalizing systems, he promotes a set of principles to preserve and celebrate the value and dynamism of nature. Does the action preserve the integrity, wholeness and “intactness” of individuals and their worldly communities, or does it lead to the “impoverishment” of nature’s creativity? Donnelley is pluralistic in his sources and practical in his aims. “Sometimes it will be Mayr’s naturalist’s vision of *becoming* that will better help us to see our duties and moral failures. Sometimes it will be Jonas’s ethics of

natural and moral *being* that may better move us into doing what we know, however imperfectly, is right. We need all the help we can get, from whatever quarter” (p 128).

Nonetheless, Donnelley enjoins us to lean less on “bookish” thinking and more on direct experience – in particular, on our human experiences of purpose and value. This is not simply a methodological suggestion. With Jonas and Whitehead, he believes that any philosophical theory that attempts to explain away our experiences of purpose and value – either by way of physicalism or epiphenomenalism – is both “a scandal from the perspective of primary experience” (p 191) and an obstacle to the development of an ecological ethics. Instead, Donnelley makes the important argument – and the only one that takes seriously both evolutionary theory and human experience – that these dimensions of human experience point to the presence of purpose and value in the structure of life. From such a perspective, nature thus becomes the site of “ought,” and human “ought-to-do” an *objective* response to nature’s demands.

Donnelley has a remarkable capacity to explicate the central insights of complex philosophical systems. His summary of Jonas’s thought is particularly lucid. His

overview of much of Whitehead is likewise clear, except for his oversight of the important distinction Whitehead draws between compound individuals (or regnant societies) and aggregate societies (Whitehead, 1968: 27–8; 157). This error leads him to make too much of the difference between Whitehead and Jonas when, in fact, their philosophies are very much aligned on the issues he addresses.

There is much to admire and emulate in the way Donnelley works as a philosopher: his insistence that philosophy ought to help us to live principled lives in coordination with the lives of others; his zest for the adventure of ideas and the generative conversations he kindles; his humility as a thinker and writer; and, above all, his reverence for life in all its forms. The editors of this volume, Ceara Donnelley and Bruce Jennings, have contributed an eloquent testimony to his life and work. Though included as an editors’ afterword, it is well worth reading early on, both as a guide to Donnelley’s philosophy and as an evocative introduction to his personal vitality and joy in being a member of the orchestra of life. ■

References

Whitehead AN (1968) *Modes of Thought*. Free Press, New York, NY, USA.

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