

Book review – *Being Salmon, Being Human: Encountering the wild in us and us in the wild*

Being *Salmon, Being Human* is a fantastic narrative-with-moral-message. The title says it all – author Martin Lee Mueller’s ambitious task is to take his readers on the journey of somehow becoming salmon. This means that he interweaves a factual account of the ecology of salmon with stories wherein the reader is led to ‘think’ and ‘feel’ like salmon might. Mueller’s tool is narrative, the timeless form of being human. He links a series of stories about salmon and nature, philosophy and science, society, and life to help us become, at least for a moment, non-human. The narrative is also a very learned critique of our becoming too-human, with an impassioned call for us becoming less so in order to reverse the harm we are doing to the biosphere.

Martin Lee Mueller has a PhD in philosophy from the University of Oslo, and he writes that *Being Salmon, Being Human* grew out of his PhD dissertation. He acknowledges as his mentors an impressive list of philosophers, and credits many humans and non-humans in many places as inspiration for his work. I mention this here because it is Mueller’s diverse formal knowledge and life experiences that allow him to successfully weave his narrative of ecology and philosophy. This is a unique book with an important challenge. As we will see, Mueller wishes to bridge Descartes’ mind–body split; yet it is narratives of both mind (*res cogitans*) and body (*res extensa*) that help him succeed.

Being Salmon, Being Human begins with the story of stories themselves, or narratives, our uniquely human way of being. Mueller emphasizes, à la Thomas Berry, that we are storytelling animals. A *Hucho hucho*, or Danube salmon, swims in the icy river near the town of Ulm, Germany, where René Descartes sleeps,

dreaming of reforming all knowledge. This is the birth of the famous (or, more to Mueller’s point, infamous) phrase: “I think, therefore I am.” Here Mueller follows his mentor Arne Johan Vetlesen in ascribing our current social-ecological crisis in large part to Cartesian dualism – the objectification of all that exists outside of the human mind (*i.e. res extensa*). The second story is Mueller’s own experience of hearing a Norwegian salmon-farming industry leader discuss how it might be time to allow wild salmon to go extinct, in favor of their more profitable farmed cousins. Mueller uses the story of salmon farming as a parable for modern society’s way of being (*i.e. the production of animal flesh as an objective commodity, with little true regard for what it means to be salmon*). Salmon (and nature) as *res extensa*.

It is the story of being salmon – farmed or wild – that makes up the main narrative of the book, but it is interwoven with tales from here and there, human and non-human. There is some detail about salmon farming, but, as Mueller writes, this is not a book about the industry. There is the story of wild salmon, and dam removal on the Elwha River, where wild salmon are being restored in favour of their hatchery counterparts. As a salmon ecologist and conservation biologist I am quite familiar with Mueller’s subject matter, which he treats with knowledge and experience. *Being Salmon, Being Human* joins a list of books that advocate wild salmon, a topic that has been a special interest of mine. As Mueller rightly notes, salmon inspire people; salmon ecology and conservation has been a growing movement for decades, and the salmon story is a very good one for examining who we are and why we ought to protect biodiversity (Piccolo, 2011; 2017; Piccolo *et al.*, 2017).

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About the book

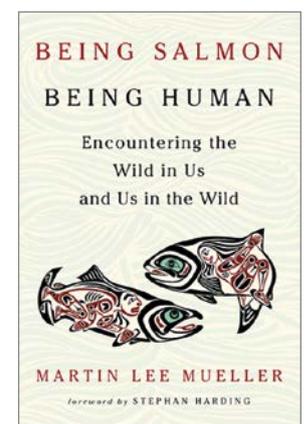
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“*Being Salmon, Being Human* is a unique contribution to the philosophical and ecological literature, in tying together knowledge and experience in a way that educates and inspires.”

Far beyond salmon, however, this is a book about how our “human-centered story is causing the ecological web to come undone at a magnitude of disintegration that is difficult to comprehend.” Mueller ranges broadly and with considerable knowledge of the science and philosophy of our environmental crisis, but always with a sense of feeling and being. There are more than 300 pages filled with an incredible array of scientific findings about Earth and the history of philosophical thought, but poetry and prose is the impression that we retain. Here Mueller succeeds in a unique way – I know of no other such learned text that unfolds in such a voice, allowing the reader to experience the storyteller’s intent. *Being Salmon, Being Human* is a unique contribution to the philosophical and ecological literature, in tying together knowledge and experience in a way that educates and inspires.

In the introduction to his 2014 book *The Denial of Nature*, Arne Johan Vetlesen bemoaned the lack of any coherent school of ecophilosophical thought existing in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Oslo, home of Arne Naess. With Vetlesen’s, and now Mueller’s, book I sense the beginning of a new school of thought *and feeling* well worthy of Naess’s legacy. This Vetlesen–Mueller school focuses on experience and phenomenology in addition to philosophy, and it is poised to play a critical role in the new ecocentrism that I see as the express mission of *The Ecological Citizen*. Both *The Denial of Nature* and *Being Salmon, Being Human* should be required reading for ecophilosophers and ecocentrics. In the interest of furthering this dialogue, I offer the following observations on Mueller’s book.

Mueller’s narrative raises the vital question of how we as humans are to alter the trajectory of ecological destruction that we are on. Paradoxically, it is our ability to gain and synthesize knowledge that at once has allowed us first to become a dominant force in the biosphere and now to recognize our effects. It is the same science and technology that has

allowed us to destroy life at such a pace that has now allowed us to catalogue this destruction (Wilson, 2016). Mueller focuses on the ‘humanity-as-separation’ story as it has unfolded since the Cartesian split because this is primarily a narrative with philosophical roots, and he counts Descartes among the first modern philosophers. In addressing so unfathomable a concept as the biosphere and our influence upon it, however, I don’t think (or feel) that we can lay such blame solely at poor René’s door. We as humans unleashed our terrible intellect upon each other and upon our non-human kin long before we began to use it to wonder who we and they are (Diamond, 2013; Harari and Perkins, 2014: 443). It now seems certain that modern *Homo sapiens* have been playing a leading role in causing non-human extinctions worldwide for tens of thousands of years, in addition to the rather unkind way in which humans have been treating each other. As critical as it may be to examine the ‘humanity-as-separation’ story as told after Descartes, we will need also to look far deeper into the narrative of whence we came.

If we as humans are to become more in-this-world, as Mueller wishes, we will need to recognize (re-think), then accept, who we are in the much broader evolutionary sense. There has been much written about this, for example, by leading ecologists Jared Diamond and EO Wilson and founding ecophilosophers Holmes Rolston III and J Baird Callicott. The common thread that ties these narratives together is of course the Darwinian eco-evolutionary worldview. As Darwin explicitly noted in *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, he was the first to explore our moral sense (note, Darwin did not term this moral *thoughts*) through the evolutionary lens – how our remarkable ability to care for others grew from our non-human origins. Ironically, it was Darwin, working in the Baconian–Newtonian tradition of objectivity, who first retold for the West the narrative of how the Cartesian split is fallacy. The modern biological sciences have, at every

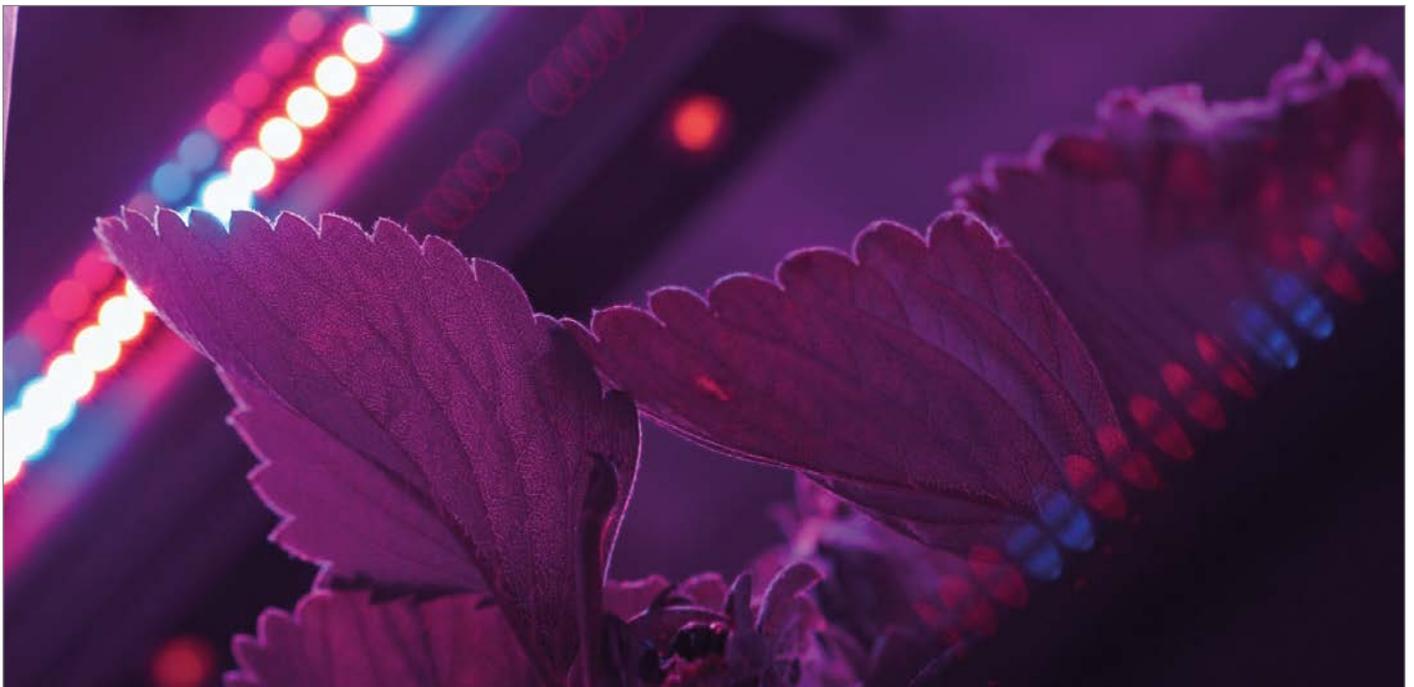
organizational level from genomics and evolutionary psychology to ecosystems, exposed the fallacy of ‘humanity-as-separation’, in some ways retelling the human narrative as it was before the split. It is important to remember that our moral sense, however, evolved alongside so many other traits, many of which have led us to mistreat others human and non-human alike since long before Descartes.

Like Mueller’s salmon, we bear in us Darwin’s ‘indelible stamp’ of ‘lowly origin’. Mueller observes that salmon were *both* cooperating and competing, living and dying, for millions of years before *Homo sapiens* took centre stage. By becoming salmon, the hope is that we might learn a little more about being human before it is too late. Mueller’s is a very timely and absolutely unique contribution to our planet’s fight for survival. ■

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Photos

by **Squirrel Nation**

About the artists: Squirrel Nation are a collective.

Higher-resolution versions: <https://is.gd/ecoartwork>

This page: Image from *Nature’s Switch* (2015), a film commissioned by the Wellcome Collection that showed plants responding to different kinds of light.

Following two pages: Photos of turkey tail fungus (2018) taken for a work in progress on ecology and creative infrastructure.