

EDUARDO KOHN, *HOW FORESTS THINK: TOWARD AN ANTHROPOLOGY BEYOND THE HUMAN*. UC PRESS, 2013

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An Assistant Professor of Anthropology at McGill University, Kohn explores the sense in which non-human life forms think and how this construal of the term *thinking*, which certainly does not presuppose that thinking takes place only in a brain nor that it takes place only at a conscious level, is constitutive of all life. An appeal to anthropologists to question fundamental assumptions concerning the scope of anthropology, being a study of the human, the book also contributes to a re-examination of the definition of *life* in the social sciences and which aspects of life can be studied empirically.

To understand human life more completely, according to Kohn, anthropology must look at the context surrounding and connected to human life. Aspects of the human environment and experience other than human life per se, such as animal lives or human death, are not merely legitimate but essential topics for a more developed anthropology capable of giving a more accurate picture of the human. Exploring the context of human life--and how it relates to what is external yet integral to it--necessarily involves examination of human thinking, concepts, and language, Kohn believes. An expanded and improved approach to anthropology will consider how nonhumans see, represent, or perhaps think about humans. A major concern of the book is with semiotics, signs and meaning, and which entities can be said to think. Convincing his readers that not only humans think is an important part of Kohn's project, and early in the book he defines sign processes as encompassing more than just symbolic, human thought. If one unique, defining aspect of human life, namely meaning and representation, turns out not to be exclusive to humans, then anthropologists must alter the scope of their study and we humans must refine our understanding of ourselves.

Kohn does not use the phrase *ontological pluralism*, nor does he refer to its major proponents, so it is not clear (to this reviewer) how closely he agrees with that approach. Although John Searle's work is not referred to in *How Forests Think*, there are strong parallels regarding the scientificity of ontological subjectivity. There is only passing mention of Thomas Nagel, though some of Kohn's assumptions seem sympathetic to Nagel's philosophical rationalism. Without explicitly stating any opinion on materialism, Kohn certainly does criticize Cartesian dualism. With this book he hopes to reshape anthropology's approach without the field aligning with either a mechanistic or an exclusively human-meaning-dependent view. He does see dualism as inherent in human thinking, contrasting our mode with the sense in which

a forest, as a network of interdependent beings, can be said to think: that is, holistically.

Throughout the book there are frequent references to Charles Peirce, especially early on in the explanation of the importance of semiotics to this vision of a new anthropology. Given Kohn's insistence that his approach is empirical, his emphasis on the work of Peirce, which is over a hundred years old now, and absence of empirical data from sciences such as biology or neurology, give an anemic cast to his hypotheses. It makes sense to include the context of human existence as a legitimate aspect of anthropology, though what Kohn concludes from this will be difficult for most readers to accept. He may not encounter resistance insisting that the way in which forest-dwelling animals see humans is worth examining when studying a subset of humanity living in the Amazon forests, and his study of such a group provides all of the examples in *How Forests Think*. It is a much bigger conceptual hurdle, however, to even understand how a forest ecosystem, taken as a whole, might be said to think, much less to agree that it does. Kohn has a precise and technical definition of the word *think*, which does not mean that animals, much less an ecosystem, can do what we mean by the everyday sense of *think*, which would be a far more impressive claim. Other claims that many readers will find problematic include the reality and existence of souls, spirit masters and forms. Again, even though Kohn has a specific definition of what constitutes reality and delineates carefully what he means by *form*, utilizing words with so many broader and powerful connotations does not make it easier to follow or agree with his arguments.

Kohn makes no claim that his book should be considered a work, primarily, of philosophy, but his aspirations for anthropology concern the fundamental philosophical approach of the discipline. Some of his views and arguments parallel issues in philosophy of mind and of language, and his work could benefit greatly from examining how similar issues have already been debated extensively by philosophers. It would be enlightening to read more on Kohn's response to Nagel's *What Is It like to Be a Bat* and his reference to the thought experiment seems inexplicably brief, considering how closely Nagel's ideas and Kohn's argument pertain to one another.

An improved anthropology will concern itself with how humans—uniquely—relate to nonhuman beings. In the introduction to his book, Kohn sets out his framework, and the abstract nature of his investigation is demanding conceptual work. There he previews the conclusions he hopes readers will eventually make, and in doing so he will inadvertently deter less open-minded readers. *How Forests Think* is sure to be challenging for anthropologists as much as it is for readers from other fields also concerned with the study of being human. A deeper, richer understanding of human lives will emerge from the intersection of Kohn's new anthropology with experts including philosophers of language, philosophers of mind, cognitive scientists, and primatologists. The book will also be of interest to philosophers of the social sciences and those concerned with ontology. The fundamental integration of thinking with

life--as presented in *How Forests Think*--will surely appeal to and stimulate readers interested in the Gaia Hypothesis, Searle's biological naturalism, or biosemiotics, and anyone else who ponders the characteristics of the world humans inhabit and what, essentially, it is to be human.