

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Katharine Dow, *Making a Good Life: An Ethnography of Nature, Ethics, and Reproduction*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016. ISBN: 9781400881062 (ebook); ISBN: 9780691171753 (paper); ISBN: 9780691167480 (cloth)

Making a Good Life: An Ethnography of Nature, Ethics, and Reproduction is Katharine Dow's often poetic rendering of participant observation carried out in a wildlife centre in north-east Scotland between 2005 and 2008—research that was updated through returns to the “field” in subsequent years but which initially earned Dow a PhD at the LSE in 2010. As its capacious subtitle suggests, the book emulates the ambitions of pioneering kinship anthropologist Marilyn Strathern; notably her “merographic” method advanced in *After Nature* (1992), which involves seeking shared contexts and “partial connections” between disparate domains (nature, ethics, reproduction).¹

Making a Good Life explores how people who have had no direct personal involvement with surrogacy arrangements think about the practice. Its point of departure is the premise that “we are all implicated in ART [assisted reproductive technologies]” (p.10). So, the problem for Dow was: “how do you study reproduction and ART in the context of people's everyday lives?” (p.156). It is a provocative and innovative question, particularly in a context where most studies have dealt only with intending parents, surrogates, donors and patients. Reproduction has historically undergone relentless privatisation, yet we nevertheless still are, or at least, we all *should* be, implicated.

In this first-person narrative, Dow inhabits a tiny “community” devoted to cetacean conservation at the mouth of the River Spey; a family “made” rather than “given” (p.35). Dow's introduction—the longest chapter—gives a highly readable overview of Marxist-feminist literatures on reproductive labour struggles, “clinical labour”, and the limits of

¹ Dow is now affiliated with the [Reproductive Sociology Research Group](#) at the University of Cambridge, a prestigious initiative led by another giant of kinship anthropology besides Strathern, Sarah Franklin—who co-supervised Dow's thesis with Fenella Cannell.

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bioethics, focusing on Melinda Cooper and Catherine Waldby's (2014) work. The writing here is luminous, its points worth savouring in full because they unfortunately belie the conservatism dressed up as pragmatism embedded later in the remainder of the book. Dow also separately delineates a history of British environmentalism in this chapter; the heart and soul of her study clearly come from this liberal environmentalist tradition, much as she is attracted to the case for politicising biocapital along Marxist-feminist lines. She lovingly introduces us to the buildings that make up the hybrid village hub and tourist destination; its secluded feel and wind-swept topography; the key people at the centre, and the kin-like bonds between them: a picture postcard from a very special oasis. "Living in a naturally beautiful place is a responsibility" (p.23), she solemnly proclaims.

Chapter 1 ("Ethical Labour") bears out this hypothesis as Dow elaborates the not very critical concept of "ethical labour" (the making of a good life) with reference to commitments to ethical living cultivated by those around her. The problem of privilege and cost—hence, of potential class and racial exclusions inherent to the concept—are noted in passing (p.42) but firmly laid aside.

Chapter 2 ("Future Generations") continues to introduce us to the people Dow met through volunteering as a middle-class "ethical labourer", recording conversations with them about their hopes for the future, reproductive rights, infertility, and assistive technology. All in all we get a favourable depiction of the ability of Spey Bay—as a kind of neocolony—to avoid the wounded kind of nostalgia Jeanette Edwards (2000) found (unsurprisingly?) in her ethnography of reproduction-related beliefs among residents of impoverished post-industrial Bacup, Lancashire (p.88).

Chapter 3 ("Origin Stories") discusses "maternal bonding", both in general and in specific reference to two women's experiences of becoming mothers ("Jenny" and "Erin") via their respective struggles to reconcile a desire for autonomy and naturalness with the specifics of medical intervention as transpired in each pregnancy. No full-throated analysis

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emerges here about all pregnancy—indeed, all bonding—being technologically assisted (as I would claim). Dow gives the individual testimonies a wide and ultra-respectful berth, only remarking unspecifically at the last minute that “in seeking to protect ‘nature’ and ‘natural’ reproduction, people can end up protecting and reproducing established norms of gender and sexuality” (p.127).

Following on from this, Chapter 4 (“Ties That Bind”) turns around and explores the non-giveness of maternal bonding by deconstructing respondents’ often self-contradictory conceptualisations of maternal *surrogacy*. Dow brilliantly weaves into this—*entre autres*—Lee Drummond’s (1978) work on “the transatlantic nanny” and Charis Thompson’s (2005) elucidation of the “strategic naturalizing” typically facilitated in infertility clinics (p.142-143). Despite the fact that British courts do not recognise surrogacy contracts (retaining the frankly wrong principle *mater semper certa est* [“the mother is always certain”]), “within English society”, as Dow writes, quoting Drummond, “the mother concept is, and historically has been, ‘internally inconsistent’” (p. 142).

Chapter 5 (“Money Talks”) stands out, providing a rich discussion of recent critical work on money and commodification that seems to point to mothering being always already, in part, a form of alienated labour (though Dow does not say this). “Much of the anticommercial surrogacy polemic of the late 20th century is based on a model in which humans are properly ‘above’ the market sphere”, Dow trenchantly notes—but “[a]nthropologists have identified this model as itself an artefact of capitalist society” (p.168). Memorable such perspectives include: “The commodification of people is not a new phenomenon” (p.170) (see Zelizer 1997); and “commodification is a process of becoming rather than being” (p.171) (see Kopytoff 1988). But if the conclusion, Chapter 6 (“A Stable Environment”), is supposed to hint at what to do with all this *politically*, the only message I gleaned was “keep calm and carry on”—the last lines being, “The river flows towards the sea; the sea swells and falls on the shore” (p.199).

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I desperately wanted to like this book but I found its overall purport moral, and politically staid. This impression was oddly heightened by the seductively earnest quality of Dow's writing. Dow believes in "striving" (p.181), "striving for stability" (p.196) and "striving for the good" (p.199); hence why she is confident that Spey Bay will make the good life without the need for any kind of historic rupture. She believes in "balance" (p.66, 80, 127, 117, 144, 178, passim) that can implicitly be achieved without dramatic upheaval. She believes unironically in "biological drives and natural dispositions" (p.80), hard work and productivity (p.206), "caring for the environment" (p.39, 43, 45, 47, 74, 102, 181), and so on. In the context of current trends, being confronted with this raft of unreconstructed values is actually strangely refreshing. Still, for me, the "so what?" factor is missing throughout. The contradictory mechanisms of ideology are systematically described rather than analysed. Her loving proximity to her informants makes for an insufficiently avowed and thus unsatisfactory disjuncture between the political imperatives theorised and the analysis that is then supposed to flesh it out. For instance, while a damning quote from Nina Power (2009) dangles over Chapter 3—"Alternative living these days is more likely to refer to the fact that you've bolted a solar panel to your roof rather than undertaken any practical critique of the nuclear family"—the chapter itself comes across oblivious of its epigraph, fully supportive of conventional nuclear familiarity and, in fact, over-enthusiastic about solar panels as a mode of social action. Nowhere, however, do we find an explicit rejection of Power's revolutionary pessimism.

The book is also threaded through with what I read as an only partly self-aware or semi-intentional kind of comedy, produced by the friction between Dow's earnestness and her surroundings. Six of these brief entertaining topical interludes separate the chapters. The Glenfiddich Distillery is deemed a "corporate wet dream" (p.105) by a visiting friend, to her anxious dismay since she has managed to conceive of whisky-making as a quasi-environmentalist "future-oriented" (p.104) craft on the basis of its manufacturers' "romantic

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and generative rhetoric” (p.106). Donald Trump successfully commissioned what he (of course) touted as the “greatest [golf resort] in the world” (p.184) on the Aberdeenshire coast, defying extensive popular opposition and Dow’s palpable, glowering hostility. Trump is included, one supposes, on account of his *not* making a good life, which is difficult to dispute. Yet the narrowly defeated prospect of Scottish independence in 2014 seems to have been positioned by Dow as an almost equivalent undesirable. Her friend, the folk poet John Mackie, is quoted, mocking the SNP for their nationalism (p.38). As such it is tempting to suspect that a little wishfulness or, if not, relief underlies the statement: “I do not think many people I knew in Moray voted for the SNP in the 2007 election” (p.37). British nationalism, for its part, is not identified as a problem. Scottish *anti-Englishness* is mentioned in the same breath as racism (p.36).

Dow ably does exactly what Nigel Rapport recommends in the “The Ethics of Participant Observation” (2010) (discussed on p.132): “express a sense of the emergence of its data through particular personal relations”. Yet the particular personal relations in question in this case are disappointingly limited, and while Dow says explicitly that this is the ethnography’s “strength” (p.31), I am not convinced. In the prologue, Dow brings us face to face with a stranded sperm whale, dead from malnutrition and mysteriously missing its jaw. The jaw had been sawn-off and “stolen” by a local family whom the “wildlife crime officer” described as acting “as if they are the local lairds” (p.162). Especially because of Dow’s admission that her own “dolphin people” were overwhelmingly non-Scottish, I was a little disappointed that there does not seem to have been an opportunity to talk to or think about these bandits, as I felt hungry for more insight into “the family from Burghead, a village close to Roseisle”, whose “grisly theft” Dow surmises “was not simply for financial gain” (p.3-4) without saying more. Here was a human “family”, acting rather bloodily across species lines to garner materials perhaps needed for its own (social, spiritual...) reproduction, yet—throughout—the author stays entirely focused on the loosely family-like collection of non-

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Scottish childless environmentalists at the wildlife centre, asking only what *they* think reproductive assistance consists of.

I also wondered: does anyone outside think the “dolphin people” act as if *they* are the local lairds? Dow brushes against the possibility of anti-environmentalist feeling locally on p.40 (imagining derision aimed at superficial stuff like hippie clothing, rather than a class critique), but without much soul-searching. Indeed, the book’s early engagement with environmentalism’s historical evolution serves only to contextualise an oddly *impressed* and almost comically overblown picture of the shopping and recycling ethics she sees as defining “Life in a Nature Reserve” (the title of the introduction). For instance, the fact that meals are shared and adapted to different needs and diets, being derived from “mixed sources including supermarkets, organic veg-boxes, the local butcher, and people’s own gardens”, is incomprehensibly referred to not only as a “complicated choreography of sourcing” (rather than an entirely unremarkable characteristic of contemporary bourgeois consumption), but also an example of “living in a consumer society whilst also attempting to resist some of those values” (p.29). As Greg Sharzer helpfully laid out in *No Local* (2012), there is nothing remotely “resistant” about ethical consumption. Dow knows this in the context of “bioethics” (p.13), but for some reason cannot blend her deep appreciation of communal meals, which I well understand, with scepticism about the claims about all this advanced by “ethical living” fans among the dinner guests.

As we’ve seen, Spey Bay believes “living in a naturally beautiful place is a responsibility”. But whereas responsibility, for Donna Haraway (2016), means response-ability—the ability firstly to *respond* and then to “stay with the trouble” unleashed by that response—for Dow, it means a custodial work ethic maintaining homeostatic “balance”, interpreted as not rocking the boat. It defines itself against a straw-man anticapitalist:

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People in Spey Bay have not explicitly rejected capitalist modes of work by going “back to the land” or living “off grid”, and they reject more extreme or utopian models of community building in favour of a more pragmatic and balanced approach to living a good life. They are “canny” ... [they] do not think of money as inherently corrupting ... (p.166-167)

Dow doesn't say precisely what movements *do* think of money that way. Against this nebulous floating signifier of extremism, she affirms proudly in Chapter 5 that her subjects “are not moral purists” (p.182) (this is surprising given that she mentioned that some of them induce vomiting if they think they've consumed something non-vegan [p.44]). “They are cannily living out the balancing act of making a good life” (p.183), she repeats. They “do not ... balk at commodifying their story for marketing purposes ... [and] their work ... is highly productive. Like ethical shopping, it produces a sense of shared responsibility” (p.182). That word again—“responsibility”! In contrast with Dow's certitude about the good, the ensemble of techniques described at Spey Bay strike me, actually, as *bad*; or, at least, as a distinctly underdeveloped horizon of collective response-ability vis-à-vis contradictions thrown up by “nature” and “beauty” being, in themselves, accumulation strategies for capital.

Having sketched out my general discomfiture with confused politics in *Making a Good Life*, I will now isolate three more specific points: namely, the absent presences of transgender “nature”; nonhumans (strangely!); and environmental racism. The first two could be thought of as recalcitrant inhabitants of what Dow ambiguously calls “the natural world”. The latter is the unspoken subject of all discourses about procreative ethics that do not link the good life to the politics of migration, climate justice, and open borders.

First, gender. In a move all too familiar to us social scientists, Dow flashes a protective amulet against any charges of unsophisticated naturalism: “I use [the phrase ‘the natural world’] in this ethnography as an emic category, whilst also bearing in mind its

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uncanny ability to seep back into analysis” (p.51). Well, it certainly does seep back—in the form of a binarist gender-normative imaginary—and she needs to be responsible for it. Dow more than once describes her informants’ concerns about endocrine-disrupting chemicals: pollution that might feminise humans and create “gender-bending fish [sic]” (p.193). She does dispel the bad science in question, but her attempt at humorous phrasing here sounds a dud note especially since there is no gender-nonconforming or queer human subjectivity in the book whatsoever—only the left-field claim that Spey Bay eco-activists relate to each other like gay people in San Francisco (p.34) (how?), and one brief reference to the gay friends of a friend who was considering serving as a surrogate. The overwhelmingly heterosexual lifestyle of informants is made explicit, yet across 200 pages, men and women in Moray are also all assumed to be cis-sexual individuals.

Unsurprisingly, Dow’s definition of nature is startlingly unreconstructed: “*that which all species depend upon to survive and reproduce*” (p.44, emphasis added). “That” does not include the technology upon which queer and trans people depend in order to survive and reproduce. Despite the amenability of the definition to a radically expanded concept of what’s needed for survival and reproduction (as one finds sometimes under the rubric “social reproduction”), “gender-bending” technologies and so-called infertility assistance are not mentioned as part of Dow’s “natural world”. While explicitly queerphobic discourses never arose, a constant stream of allusively heteronormative comments was elicited from Spey Bay-ers, expressing their eugenic worry (shared by homophobic preachers worldwide) that artificially “bypassing” natural infertility might interfere with natural selection and endanger humanity. In defending the environmentalists, Dow should realise that she is defending this millenarian, ableist, anti-cyborg anxiety:

it is not surprising that people in Spey Bay should cleave to nature for guidance in assessing reproductive ethics. Perhaps also a wider sense of being separated from

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nature, or that reproduction is becoming denaturalised, is one of the reasons why increasing numbers of people in the Western world are turning to ART to create children “of their own” rather than adopting, co-parenting, or embracing childlessness. (p.160)

If combating reproduction’s “denaturalisation” are Dow’s encrypted stakes, I want no political “guidance” from her version of nature. Why not *affirmatively* denature gender?

True, one or two compelling gestures question the naturalness of “the maternal bond”. The sanctity of “care” itself is questioned—which I think is vital—and its potential for abuse noted. But since no challenge is built from this against the bioessentialist maternal imaginary’s centrality to environmentalist thought, it actually serves to recuperate and entrench those values. Having undergone mild criticism, wherein Dow points out that, even if “natural”, it requires nurturance and work, “the maternal bond” is allowed to remain a straightforwardly and supremely positive quantity. The feminized logic of charitable service, volunteering and other “caring” work geared towards maintaining “a stable environment” is glossed in the abstract, but descriptions of “feminisation of labour” analyses are not really coupled to concrete, specific analysis of the data at hand that could point to a transformative impulse. (Might a higher concentration of “gender-bending” chemicals in the water help?) Overly sympathetic to individuals whose “striving” is all sorted out (and thus, oddly, doesn’t really *strive*), the treatise ends up disavowing the need for an end to capitalism and gender oppression entirely. Dow never even explicitly wishes for a communised generalisation of mothering work.

So, nature seeps back, uncannily, into analysis. Yet, at the same time, one could say that this “world” hasn’t been allowed to seep into Dow’s thinking *enough*, in the sense that the sea and its nonhuman denizens remain muses, rather than collaborators, in her text. Upon first holding the elegant blue-grey book in my hands, I felt tremendous anticipatory

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excitement as I envisioned a critical reframing of the normative force of “motherhood”, the naturalness of “reproduction”, and the political meanings of “assistance” via intimate portraits of techno-natural kinship construction among nonhumans as well as humans. Interpreting the blurb, jacket-art, and prologue, I had overestimated the importance to Dow of the question: what importance do *nonhuman* natures hold for the proposition “we are all implicated in ART”? The cover art—an image of a whale’s tail fin [towering over the ocean](#)—turns out to be a stock photo from iStock, portraying a scene quite different from the reality of distant glimpses Dow describes as occasionally punctuating the grey vistas of the North Sea.

Given that “endangerment and extinction” (p.5) are foregrounded as concerns, one anticipates that the question of reproductive technology will be thought through in relation to the *whales* at least as much as humans. In fact, cetacean reproduction *per se* remains firmly in the distance in *Making a Good Life*, even though references to cetaceans turn up on most of its pages, for example in accounts of dealing with beached or trapped whales, donning a dolphin costume for fundraising purposes, absorbing whale history and ancient myth, rationalising about the inhumanity of “wild animals” (p.79), or running adopt-a-dolphin schemes complete with cuddly toys (p.178). Dow did not acquire an appetite for tracking, following, and responding to dolphins and whales in Spey Bay: they are not subjects so much as contexts for weaving together liberal environmentalism and mothering practices as straightforwardly human natures. An (at best) “speculative consciousness [is attributed] to the wildlife of Spey Bay, by applying a fish-eye lens” (p.53), or so Dow says.

But where is the treatment of this consciousness? The prologue’s level of detail about the sperm-whale is nowhere thereafter reproduced, nor is its tacit suggestion that the “maternal bond” as is—even collectively maintained—may often be quite damaging for both parties, and even lethal. “I often heard staff in the wildlife centre describing cetacean pods as if they were communities of extended nuclear families” (p.109), she says. Does this mean

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human extended nuclear families—does it mean something “good”? This is one of few places where Dow puts the word “natural” in quotation-marks, but the moment is lost when she does not follow up with any counter-reality about cetacean pods, not even a “speculative” one. The focus once again is the human reference of staff’s ideas about reproduction; not the possibility of slippage, the pursuit of different understandings of the pods, or indeed different pod-staff relationships.

Early in the book, someone’s off-hand question evokes what I expected to learn from it. An unidentified “wildlife centre employee” is quoted as saying to Dow: “Oh, did you know, dolphins do surrogacy?” (p.59). Presumably, she did not. But we do not know what Dow said in reply, and it seems from the chapter as though only humans do “ethical labour”. How could such an interesting thing be passed by? To me, at least, the employee’s proposition seemed like an opportunity to invite consideration of the character of companion species’ regenerative “technologies” and their role in illuminating what we think of as our own. But by the end of the book, this tantalising provocation remains quite literally unremarked-upon. Dow movingly describes the miraculous feeling of spotting a minke whale for the first time (p.130), but is otherwise not interested in either familiarising or defamiliarising the changing sociobiology of their lives.

“Biology”, incidentally, is the word she quotes being invoked apotropaically by John Mackie as a guarantee against the “New Age ... sacred stuff” (p.54) he deployed in his whale poems. “Biology” stands in here, with Dow’s approval, for “four males gang banging a female [whale]” (p.54) or the “blood sport”, beloved of dolphins, of throwing and catching porpoises (p.79). To brandish these discomfiting scenes as realist foils against romantic, comforting, and pretty ideas about “charismatic megafauna” under the aegis of being pragmatic about nature betrays quite a bit of ignorance about what the discipline of biology can be. In Haraway’s hands, for instance, biology doesn’t have to be either/or. Nature does not have to be understood as either beautiful or, conversely, brutish; in fact, that self-

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regarding lens is a major part of what prevents Marxists and poststructuralists alike from encountering and responding to companion species. Speaking of the diminished role of biology, what was perhaps most startling is that neither pregnancies (surrogate or otherwise) nor *children* appear very much in the book as actual characters or events. Chapter 3 recounts births and parenting experiences as recalled by the mothers, but we never meet someone young growing up in Spey Bay, nor stare directly in the face what Cindi Katz (2001) termed the “messy, fleshy” reality of parturition, abortion, lactation, weaning, or indeed everyday parenting. This makes it difficult to see how *Making a Good Life* avoided being part of the “reproductive failure” Dow laments.

I would not have minded a relatively parent-free experience of fieldwork myself, but since Spey Bay was clearly a paradise for Katharine Dow (*objectively* a paradise, she implies) I feel compelled to register the possibility that many readers might consider it a smug, maddeningly insular place—never mind its dolphins, herb garden, “inexpensive Fairtrade wine” (p.105), and poetry nights. I probably share some of Dow’s tastes, and my reading experience as such was highly dissonant. I consistently found myself full of agreement with the theoretical glosses on emerging literatures about emotional labour (Hochschild 2012), sex-work (Day 2007), anticipatory nostalgia (Choy 2011), and biocapital (Cooper and Waldby 2014)—but then full of confusion and disagreement faced with the puny conclusions being drawn from her primary data, which consisted of interviews with her largely quite morally reactionary, bourgeois, and repro-normative informants (“Willow”, “Lauren”, “Joanna”, etc.). As much a problem of form as a problem of content: Dow found it impossible to critique her friends.

Like them, Dow is not overly concerned with environmental(ist) racism, and takes seriously the spectre of human reproductive “endangerment” (Chapter 2). The latter is a threat apparently posed by something she calls “overreliance on technology” (p.47, 115, 197), even though Dow’s opening quotes in full a beautiful passage by Raymond Williams (2004)

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on technological determinism and the danger of its reverse (“a determined technology”; p.11), which should by rights have made that phrase nonsensical. The reproductive endangerment of whales cannot, after all, be attributed to whales’ overreliance on technology (or can it?). We’re going to need a messier, historical-materialist biology armed with a non-binary concept of technology if we are to find out.

The (ironic) marginalisation of whales and dolphins as beings within the narrative is actually not unrelated to what was the perennial concern for me—and the final concern I will outline—the absence of antiracism and anticolonialism in Dow’s engagement with this intimate yet universal matter of peopling the planet. While white environmentalists have stood rightly accused of valuing certain nonhuman populations more than black and brown human ones, it is in fact decolonial, indigenous and women-of-colour politics that stand to improve the lot of nonhumans in the struggle against systems for “making killable” operating across species lines. As Dow surely knows, one must tread very carefully when mixing a conservationist environmentalism and procreation: Anglo-environmentalism has a shameful, class-erasing, and structurally imperial record of turning the qualitative struggle for reproductive justice into a quantitative, misanthropic Malthusian “population matter”. Bluntly put, Dow did not do enough to reassure me she was on the right side of this issue.

Not enough was done to critically distance the book from the sentiments in favour of reproductive austerity voiced by its subjects. And ethnography readily allows for positioning sentiments in informants’ mouths with which one partially or fully agrees, without the need to be explicit about this and defend one’s agreement. For example in Chapter 2, where the bulk of moralising tropes appeared about keeping Moray “beautiful” (i.e. sparsely populated) (p.89), using contraceptives as environmental “responsibility” (p.102), seeing parenting as “maturity” requiring “stability” (p.85), and avoidance of “playing god” or defying “natural limits” by “messing with nature” (p.95), my suspicions were not allayed. This despite Dow’s distancing comments on “population control” (p.86). The UK may take a bioethical stand

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against the commercialisation of biological reproductive services, she points out, but the recent tripling in compensation rates for egg donors “belie[s] this apparent moral purism” (p.173). It is less clear if Dow sees a related strain of moral purism in her respondents advocating resigning oneself to infertility: “... if you can’t have children you can’t, that’s just nature” (p.146).

Whenever Dow’s praise for “a stable environment” was voiced, my mind darted to all the *destabilising* things that might have to happen if environmental stability is going to be achieved for all. Much as I would enjoy Spey Bay, I would prefer revolutionary instability; so I suppose this book and I were never going to get along. It is unprecedented, weird, and unpleasant for me to write such a critical review on the work of a writer whose sheer talent for silken thought and prose I admire so much. If it helps, I fully believe her next book will be superlative. There just isn’t sufficient clarity or imagination in *Making a Good Life* to animate what is at stake if everybody’s implication in reproduction is collectively going to be actualised, or to gesture towards how—other than through altruistic surrogacy or adoption, neither of which it actually goes so far as to recommend—the individualised and privatised character of procreative “ethical living” could be remediated.

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