

North American Spinoza Society

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On the Specter of Speciesism in Spinoza

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North American Spinoza Society (NASS)

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On the Specter of Speciesism in Spinoza

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Abstract: How would Benedict Spinoza (1632-1677) respond to the question “Should I eat meat?” and what should we think about this response? Many students familiar with the monistic and pantheistic views expressed in the *Ethics* believe that Spinoza would reject speciesism and the slaughter of animals, and yet this is surprisingly not the case. In this article, I deal with the puzzle involved in answering these questions by carefully considering the marginal comments on animals found in the *Ethics* as well as reactions to these comments that are both historical (e.g., Schopenhauer) and contemporary (e.g., Naess). An evaluation of the speciesism present in the *Ethics* shows the inadequacy of this view to be due less to Spinoza’s metaphysical position than to the ethics of love and nobility found in his text. It is also this ethical position that offers a promise for moving beyond speciesism.

Introduction

In my introduction to philosophy course, students are frequently required to read Spinoza’s *Ethics* in its entirety. This is challenging no doubt, and in commenting on my particular reading choice, a representative of Oxford University Press has said to me in my office, “You’re a real bastard, aren’t you?” Perhaps, although that’s not normally how I like to think of myself, but then again students frequently have been disturbed in the same class by my inviting a passionate and controversial guest lecturer to speak on animals rights. While reflecting on our reading of Spinoza’s

Ethics and the content of the guest lecture, I posed the following questions to my students (for extra credit — see I’m not such a bastard): “How would Spinoza answer the question, ‘Should I eat meat?’” and “Do you agree with his response?” What is interesting is that a significant majority of students (about 70%) reason that Spinoza would answer the question negatively and that this, as we shall see, is the wrong answer. How we should think about his answer is another matter. This paper is my own attempt to deal with these questions and the puzzle involved in answering them.

So let us begin. The ethical individual, the fortitudinous person, Spinoza tells us, is one who endeavors “to act well and rejoice” (E4p50s; E4p73s).¹ Naturally, such an endeavor will involve eating well, and Spinoza has noted that a wise person will enjoy “moderate food and drink” (E4p45c2s). In our gluttonous culture,² however, how one responds to the interrelated ethical questions “How does one eat well?” and “Should one eat meat?” has consequences for nonhuman animals and the environment that Spinoza and other philosophical minds in the age of reason could not possibly have envisioned. What, then, does Spinoza, the modern philosopher most devoted to developing and clarifying an edifying practical ethics, have to add to this discussion of eating well? Is his thinking on what for him was a peripheral issue consistent with his overall vision, that of a monistic metaphysics or one more powerfully conceived as an ethics of love and joy?

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1. “*bene agere et letari.*” References to Spinoza’s *Ethics* will be given parenthetically throughout this paper and will follow the standard pattern where “E” stands for the Part of *Ethics*, “p” for proposition, “s” for scholium, “def” for definition, “app” for appendix, and “c” for corollary.
 2. In a discussion of the possibility of virtue ethics for animal ethics and Stephen Clark’s position, Celia E. Deane-Drummond raises the point that all “those who are not vegetarian [are] committing the vice of gluttony” (66). Clark’s bold position is that “flesh-eating in our present circumstances is as empty a gluttony as any of these things. Those who still eat flesh when they could do otherwise have no claim to be serious moralists” (183).

These are the questions to which this paper is devoted. What is more, it is always interesting to speculate how a classical philosopher would respond to contemporary questions, but more often than not, the result is little more than idle speculation. Regarding Spinoza, however, the case is different. His ideas, although quite distant in time, appear more than most other philosophers from the modern period to be relevant today. Of the continental rationalists, it seems to me, his ideas are the most relevant and wisest. Descartes gave us a philosophy we continually strive to overcome; Leibniz, whose thought was haunted by Spinozism, usually provides a good laugh;³ but Spinoza is continually taken seriously with reference to important contemporary questions, e.g., in cognitive sciences regarding the question of the relation of mind and body,⁴ in environmental philosophy regarding the relation of human beings to nature,⁵ and in political

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3. This is meant to be taken more as a historical comment than a cheap shot at Leibniz. For example, Kant not only challenged Leibniz' metaphysics but also poked fun at it in joking about the "monads — potential human lives — he might be swallowing with his morning coffee" (2:327). See also Wilson. Also, Benson Mates notes that Leibniz may have "regarded his philosophy as a kind of a joke, amusing but not serious" (40). Then, of course, there is always *Candide*.

Leibniz' Spinozism is nicely shown in Matthew Stewart's recent *The Courtier and the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza, and the Fate of God in the Modern World*. As evidence of "the haunting," Stewart cites early 18th century thinkers who accused "Leibniz of plagiarizing Spinoza" and asserted that "the entire system of the pre-established harmony was nothing but the Spinozan philosophy under a new name." Gotthold Lessing feared that Leibniz "was himself a Spinozist at heart," and Bertrand Russell quips in *The Philosophy of Leibniz* that "Leibniz fell into Spinozism whenever he allowed himself to be logical."

Leibniz himself remarks that Spinoza "would be right [regarding his monistic metaphysics] if there were no monads." Stewart insightfully explains: "as [Leibniz] now makes explicit, if the infinite, sizeless, windowless, mutually harmonized substances of which he writes do not exist, then Spinoza is correct. Not: that both he and Spinoza might be wrong; but: that if he is wrong, Spinoza is right. At the very least, this represents a spectacular promotion for the philosopher of The Hague" (277-8).

4. For a fine example, see Damasio, who argues that Spinoza thought "about mind and body in ways that were not only profoundly opposed to the thinking of most of his contemporaries, but remarkably current three hundred and some years later" (15-6).

philosophy regarding tolerance and democracy.⁶ Admittedly, there are many paths of entrance and perspectives for reading Spinoza, but the one that I find justifiable to privilege is the surprisingly sometimes overlooked perspective that Spinoza's thinking is centered on *ethics* and that its main goal is to develop a practical ethical philosophy. At the heart of this philosophy, as we shall see, one finds an ethical vision of the unity of nature and a call to enact works of love and nobility.

What is also surprising to many readers is that Spinoza's ethical thinking does not prevent him from accepting the slaughter of nonhuman animals, as well as the destruction of other natural things, for human purposes. Thus an examination of the speciesism⁷ present in the *Ethics* is needed in order to understand, if possible, how Spinoza could accept the slaughter and destruction of different species given his powerful ethical vision. This is significant for readers to have a more adequate appreciation of the complex philosopher from

5. The Norwegian philosopher and ecosopher Arne Naess is an excellent example here. According to Naess "no great philosopher has as much to offer concerning clarifying and expressing fundamental ecological attitudes as Baruch Spinoza" (qtd. in Fredriksson, 198, my translation).

See also Naess' *Det Frie Menneske: En Innføring i Spinozas filosofi*. Here Naess more fully makes the case for reading Spinoza as an "inspirer" for thinkers today. In particular, see the chapter, "Spinoza og vern av naturen" ("Spinoza and the Protection of Nature"), where Naess writes: "My conclusion is thus that the panpsychism [previously defined as the view that all living beings have a soul (40)] of Spinoza is one of the features of his philosophy which is guided to inspire ecosophers, people who from philosophical foundations attempt to protect those parts of nature that have not yet been clearly influenced or dominated by human activity" (134, my translation).

In English, Naess has previously published "Environmental Ethics and Spinoza's Ethics," where he presents a fair-minded position with which I concur; namely, while Spinoza's speciesism and the complexity of his philosophy make it wrong-headed to consider him as a kind of father-figure for environmental ethics, his philosophical system may nevertheless be "an inexhaustible source of inspiration" for ecologists (and, I would add, animal ethics activists) as it is compatible "with respect for all things as 'expressions of the power of God or Nature'."

6. In the first chapter of *Subversive Spinoza: (Un)contemporary Variations*, Antonio Negri offers "five reasons for [Spinoza's] contemporaneity" (1-8). In this work, Negri suggests that Spinoza's political position is "anti-modern" and influential for helping "to create a new matrix for communism and radical democracy" (ix).

The Hague. More practically, however, its importance may lie in (1) helping readers to understand better the inadequacy⁸ of this speciesism and (2) transforming the passive emotions into active ones in order to act well and benefit all living animal species.

Spinoza's View of Animals in the *Ethics*

While Spinoza was not alone in arguing against a human-centered view of the universe, his work was relatively unique in the 17th century for explaining how humans should be understood, like all things, as a part of nature subject to the same natural laws as everything else. Spinoza explicitly rejects the theological view derived from the holy scriptures upholding a special relation between humans alone and God, considering it “an asylum of ignorance” to think that the world of nature was willfully created by a supernatural God to benefit human beings (E1app). In this regard, Spinoza is both anti-anthropocentric and anti-anthropomorphic. All of nature (or God) is one unified whole, subject to essential laws. Humans are not an “empire within an empire” transcending the natural realm, as Spinoza explains in the Preface to Part Three of the *Ethics*:

Most of those who have written about emotions
and about men's way of living seem not to

7. The term “speciesism” was explained by Richard Ryder in a privately printed leaflet (Oxford, 1970). It may be defined as “the view that any and all human animals, but *no nonhuman* animals, should get fundamental moral protections.” See Waldau (70).

Lisa Kemmerer defines the term as “the human tendency to make a distinction with regard to how individuals ought to be treated based *solely on species*, regardless of morally relevant similarities and distinctions” (38). She goes on to explain, as Peter Singer and other philosophers have also done, how racism, sexism, and speciesism are analogous forms of discrimination.

8. It should be obvious that “inadequacy” is intended here in its technical, Spinozistic sense, as being based on mutilated or confused (i.e., inadequate) ideas. An “adequate” idea, Spinoza writes in E2def4 “has all the properties, or, the intrinsic denominations, of a true idea.”

discuss natural things, which follow the common laws of Nature; rather they seem to discuss things that are outside Nature. Indeed, they seem to conceive the place of man in Nature as being like an empire within an empire. For they believe that man disturbs the order of Nature rather than that he follows it, that he has an absolute power over his actions, and that he is determined by himself alone.

Notwithstanding this enlightened perspective, Spinoza's practical philosophy of life is obviously focused on human beings and their interactions. Given this perspective, for which Spinoza can hardly be faulted, it is not too surprising that a consideration of humans' relationship to nonhuman animals and the natural world is marginal in Spinoza's ethical vision. Thus, although his metaphysics is not anthropocentric, his ethics is (Lloyd 158-9). As Genevieve Lloyd states, "Spinoza's ethics is human-centered," but she goes on to show how Spinoza's anthropocentrism differs significantly from Descartes' and comments that Spinoza's "approach takes seriously the sentience and the thriving of other species," which will be questioned below. Spinoza's few remarks in the *Ethics* on nonhuman animals are peripheral, and notably, all three are found in scholia. Let us consider two of these remarks in detail.

The second reference to nonhuman animals in the *Ethics*⁹ occurs at the end of Spinoza's exposition of the human passions or passive emotions. He writes:

9. Parkinson's edition of Spinoza's *Ethics* in the Oxford Philosophical Texts series includes only two references to animals in the index, both of which are discussed in this paper. The first reference at E3p2s, however, is not included in the index. Here Spinoza explains that there are "many things that are observed in the lower animals which far exceed human sagacity." This is significant insofar as it suggests a humbler attitude towards nonhuman animals based on our lack of understanding.

the emotions of what are called the “irrational” animals (for we can in no way doubt that the beasts feel [*sentire*],¹⁰ now that we have got to know the origin of the mind) differ from the emotions of men only in so far as their nature differs from human nature [E3p57s].

Note, first, that the scare-quotes around “irrational” indicate that there is some doubt about using this adjective in regards to nonhuman animals.¹¹ Second, there is no doubt in Spinoza’s mind that nonhuman animals experience emotions, which follows from an understanding of nonhuman animals possessing minds, famously understood as “ideas of the body.” Contrary to the predominant Cartesian view, animals — both human and nonhuman — have minds as well as bodies and experience the emotions of pleasure, pain, and desire. The differences that arise, however, are not differences in the kinds of emotions had by human and nonhuman animals but rather differences in the way these emotions are experienced. For example, butterflies, horses, and humans are all “led by the lust of procreation,” but butterflies desire butterflies, horses desire horses, and humans desire humans (E3p57s).

The proposition that Spinoza is commenting on states that “any emotion of each individual differs from the emotion of another only in so far as the essence of one differs from the essence of the other” (E3p57), and one may gather from the scholium that what he is most intent on claiming is that there is an essential difference between “the delight with which the drunkard is led and the delight which the philosopher possesses” (E3p57s). But what is the essential difference between the desire and subsequent delight of a drunk and a

10. The Latin *sentire* means “to think” or “to feel.” See Wienpahl (123).

11. As far as I can tell, however, this only occurs in Parkinson’s translation and thus is not Spinoza’s doing. Nevertheless, the fact that Parkinson would include the scare-quotes presents the questionability of the adjective.

philosopher — think about that and also about a drunken philosopher — that is considered analogous to the difference between a horse or ass and a human?¹² Is it not the case that the desires of the drunk and the philosopher become directed, for any number of reasons, towards different objects, which would only account for a relative difference while the structure of their unique conatus remains the same? And is it not also clear that each individual thing — but here our focus is on nonhuman animals and human animals — shares in the common “endeavor to persist in its own being” (E3p7)? Such questions involve metaphysical speculation, of course, but this is after all part of Spinoza’s desire to realize a monistic vision as he makes clear in Part One of the *Ethics* that all individual things are modes of one eternal substance.

Here it is not difficult to see the validity of an ethics based on Spinoza’s concept of conatus, the essence of desire, and the dynamics of pleasure and pain as explained in detail in Part Three of the *Ethics*. Based on an adequate understanding of one’s own emotions, in particular the aversion to pain, one could develop an ethics affirming the first Buddhist precept that “one should not cause suffering to another living being.”¹³ Thus, it is not surprising that in her far-reaching new study, *In Search of Consistency: Ethics and Animals*, Lisa Kemmerer uses Spinoza as a starting point for the chapter devoted to the “Minimize Harm Maxim.” The foundation for extending this maxim to cover all creatures is to be found in Spinoza’s concept of conatus, which makes possible the premise that “all living entities have moral standing” (391). Thus the “conatus theory” appears to offer a feasible starting point for realizing a comprehensive ethics of nature, but as Spinoza’s thinking suggests, it may not be sufficient for avoiding speciesism. For if all living things require other living things to persevere, it is not then clear where to draw the

12. While one may be considered active and the other passive, Spinoza notes “above all that it is one and the same appetite through which a man is said both to act and to be acted on” (E5p4s).

line. Here is where the understanding of animals as emotional beings provides a significant distinction, which together with the no harm maxim should, one might think, be enough to avoid speciesism. Spinoza, however, does not take this path. This is nowhere more evident than when he expresses his view of “the law against slaughtering animals,” which he rejects rather than embraces. In the first scholium to a most central ethical proposition, which we shall have to return to below, Spinoza’s speciesism becomes evident:

the law against slaughtering animals is based more on empty superstition and effeminate pity than on sound reason. The principle of seeking

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13. While there has been some significant discussion on Spinoza and Buddhism, at times it appears to be vague and far-fetched. Fredriksson, in Chapter 9 of his *Spinoza*, addresses the relevance of Spinoza’s work to both Buddhism and ecosophy. Fredriksson begins by correctly stating that nothing in Spinoza’s works point to a direct influence of eastern religions, and he cites the Norwegian philosopher, Spinozist, and environmental activist, Arne Naess, in his discussion of the juxtaposition of Buddhism and Spinozism. The text reads: “Naess, who began as an analytic philosopher, notes that ‘the extent of fuzzy, chatty spirituality is astounding.’ Naess rejects interpretations that make Spinoza’s theories unworldly. Spinoza’s ‘strategy of freedom’ is for him not a suddenly experienced vision, but rather a normal development of knowledge and experience. Spinoza is ‘a social and in other ways active person [...] activity for Spinoza requires integration and concentration, not peace and quiet.’ According to Naess, the knowledge that [Spinoza] prescribes for our freedom gradually to increase is a continual process in which passive affects are changed to active ones, and such adequate knowledge takes time.

“The free person is active in many aspects, even in social questions, and success is reached often after years of work. ‘The levels of freedom in Spinoza’s view involve multiple relations in life. However it may be with the intensity of a momentary experience, our genuine understanding only changes gradually.’

“Spinoza didn’t strive for an introverted peace when he dealt with political questions. Strong opinions and feelings are not incompatible with a Spinozist life-view, rather insights, knowledge, solidarity and balanced judgment is required.

“Naess draws the following conclusion regarding Spinoza and Buddhism: ‘That which I reject is the concept of an absolute, sudden freedom, which is said to be higher than the freedom of the wise person who is to the highest degree active through a development that can not be reached without painful work and danger.’

“In Hinduism not only meditation but even action can be seen as a way to wisdom, and there are those who compare Spinoza’s doctrine with Gandhi’s political struggle and ideas on love, truth, and non-violence” (187-9, my translation).

what is useful to us teaches us the necessity of uniting with men, but not with the beasts, or with things whose nature is different from human nature; we have the same right over them that they have over us. Indeed, since the right of each thing is defined by the virtue, i.e. the power, of each thing, we have much more right over the beasts than they have over men. I do not deny that beasts have feelings, but I do deny that it is impermissible, on this account, for us to consult our own advantage, and to use them as we wish and to treat them in such a way as is more convenient for us. This is because they do not agree with us in nature, and their emotions are different in nature from human emotions [E4p37s1].

Doubts have already been raised regarding whether nonhuman animals and human animals have no point of agreement in nature, so let us turn initially to the secondary literature about how we should interpret this marginal and thus frequently neglected passage.

Not surprisingly, there is some division regarding how to interpret Spinoza's note on slaughtering animals. In *Within Reason: A Life of Spinoza*, Margaret Gullan-Whur focuses on the "effeminate" or "womanly" reaction to "this law" and reads it primarily as an example of Spinoza's view that women are mentally weak (184). For support, she offers Alexandre Matheron's assumption that Spinoza means that "women actually are squeamish" and thus "unfit to rule" (Gullan-Whur 184). The logic implied is that if women are squeamish about killing animals for dinner, then they will be unable to kill people in war. Gullan-Whur, however, succeeds in providing counter evidence to show that women actually like killing living things! But this discussion is beside the point and comes about through Gullan-Whur's explicit concern to

expose Spinoza's misogyny. Regarding his choice of adjective, which seems to be what is most troublesome to Gullen-Whur, could it not instead simply be the case that Spinoza, despite his progressive view that marriage agrees with reason when the love of "both the man and the woman is caused [...] by the freedom of the mind" (E4app20), takes women generally to be the more compassionate sex?

Gullen-Whur also seems to miss the point in claiming that Spinoza "was probably referring to the Jewish law which decrees that animals must be killed only for food, and then with humane ritual and prayer" (184), for that law is not *against* the slaughter of animals but rather provides for it. Alternatively, in a note to his translation of the *Ethics*, Parkinson admits that "it is not clear what Spinoza means by 'the law' (*lex illa*) against slaughtering animals," but he suggests that perhaps Spinoza "had some knowledge of Indian religion" (342, note 30). This, I think, is a more probable understanding of "the law." It also seems to fit with the implications of Arthur Schopenhauer's apoplectic remark that it is because of Spinoza's Jewishness that he opposes this law and is therefore contemptuous of nonhuman animals. Such an interpretation implies that "the law" is non-Jewish. Schopenhauer writes:

Spinoza's contempt for animals, as mere things for our use, and declared by him to be without rights, is thoroughly Jewish, and in conjunction with pantheism is at the same time abominable and absurd [qtd. in Clark, 19].

Schopenhauer's view is interesting for a couple of reasons: first, because of the interpretation of Judaism provided as the guiding influence for Spinoza's position, Schopenhauer's view of Judaism is superficial (not to mention anti-Semitic),¹⁴ however, because it fails to acknowledge "the fact that the Hebrew Bible contains several different ways of thinking

about the earth's other animals in relation to the human community" (Waldau 74). Nevertheless, at least one strain of the Jewish tradition does include a more contemptuous view of animals, so there is certainly something to the view that Spinoza's speciesism is a product of his environment and tradition. Yet it remains arguable whether this belongs to the origin and essence of the Judeo-Christian tradition.¹⁵ Second, Schopenhauer's remark is important for the implicit claim that Spinoza's view of animals is inconsistent with his metaphysics. This agrees with what was said above, for whether one focuses on the pantheism, monism, or conatus theory found in Spinoza's philosophy, it is highly questionable that one will be able to show a consistency with speciesism. In fact, it would seem that a consistent Spinozism will share Schopenhauer's valuation of the nonhuman world based on the "continuity of all life."¹⁶ Such is the view offered by Arne Naess, the popular Norwegian philosopher and ecosopher, who finds that Spinoza's philosophical system is compatible

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14. Elsewhere Schopenhauer writes regarding this passage that Spinoza "speaks in accordance with the first and ninth chapters of Genesis, just as a Jew knows how to, so that we others, who are accustomed to purer and worthier doctrines are here overcome by the *foeter judaicus* [stench of Judaism]" (*Parerga and Paralipomena*, 73). This passage is cited by Steven B. Smith as he quips, "apparently [Schopenhauer] thought that anti-Semitism was acceptable, but not 'speciesism'" (213).
 15. Although a full defense of this position cannot be pursued here, Waldau's text is instructive. He writes: "The Jewish tradition, particularly by virtue of the body of traditional Jewish law that concerns itself with the suffering of other animals and animal welfare in general (known as *tsa'ar ba'alei chayim*, literally, sympathy for life), can claim that, like the best of the Hindu and Buddhist traditions, it clearly recognized the ethical aspects of defending nonhuman animals' interests, and that such care is mandated by the core values and insights of the tradition. So even when humans are conceived in the Jewish tradition as separate from the rest of life, there remains an important recognition of a sense of connection. The human-centeredness remains, of course, and subjects the tradition to criticisms along the line of speciesism, but the breadth of positive generalizations about living beings and the number of specific animals mentioned suggest that the early Hebrews noticed and appreciated the extraordinary diversity and interconnectedness of human and nonhumans beings" (75).
 16. My thanks to Ronnie Hawkins for sharing her unpublished manuscript, "A Schopenhauerian Framework for Valuing the Nonhuman World."

“with respect for all things as ‘expressions of the power of God or Nature’.”

Thus Naess continually turns to Spinoza for inspiration, and in his recent work on Spinoza, he presents the following perspective:

Something that rings in an ecosopher’s ears is that Spinoza characterizes it as sentimental and “womanly” to condemn the slaughter of animals. Already in Spinoza’s time there was an ecologically valuable vegetarian movement that was partly based on [the idea that it is] terrible to slaughter animals. It would have been nice if Spinoza had joined the extremely small minority regarding this issue, but he did not. He probably would not have joined the movement supporting the recognition of the equality between women and men, or accepted reactions against expressions of the type “womanly” (2p37). [...] I suppose that the person Baruch Spinoza had many views that were characteristic for his time, and that he generally was not concerned with “nature” in the way that we use the word “nature” in Norway. [... Spinoza] seems to have been completely urbanized. In any case there is no testimony, as there is regarding Gandhi in his upbringing, that he was eager to come out “in the free” [*i det fri*, i.e., in nature uncorrupted by human beings] [*Det Frie Menneske*, 134-5, my translation].

Here Naess appears to offer a reasonable position for Spinoza’s speciesism. His explanation is sociological; namely, although Spinoza opposed many views characteristic of his age, he accepted others — such as the prejudice against

nonhuman species — without question. When we consider that no individual can be freed entirely from the inadequate prejudices of one's age, we can understand Spinoza's position and continue to read him with benefit and pleasure, thus reducing the "ringing in our ears." Such is how Naess views the matter, and as previously mentioned, he continues to find Spinoza's philosophy to be a highly valuable source for an ecological ethics dedicated to improving the conditions of all living things. There is a worry, however, with this otherwise generally reasonable position, and that is how Spinoza could have been so unreflective in following certain norms of his times, when he so clearly opposed other more prominent ones. After all, pantheism, determinism, and a rejection of the doctrine of final causes were much more dangerous positions to take than a non-speciesist vegetarianism, and of course, Spinoza found this out first hand in his expulsion from the Jewish community. It is not clear to me how to explain fully this lack on Spinoza's part. Naess' comment that "Spinoza appears to have been completely urbanized" provides a clue, and perhaps Schopenhauer is right that Spinoza "appears not to have known dogs at all" (*Parerga and Paralipomena*, 73).¹⁷ Whatever the case, as we shall see, a consideration of Spinoza's ethics of love may provide the strongest reason for rejecting the speciesism in Spinoza's thought.

It may also be the case that in this passage dealing with the slaughter of nonhuman animals Spinoza's main concern lies in arguing *against* human sentimentality rather than in considering what *actually* happens to nonhuman animals. From this perspective, I would argue that Spinoza is right in claiming that "the law against slaughtering animals" should not be based "on empty superstition and effeminate pity" — although we can do without the sexist adjective, and "empty" is redundant — and this is a point that many animal rights activists have yet to learn. Pity, as Spinoza insightfully

17. An anonymous reviewer of this paper notes that Sephardic Jews did not own dogs.

explains, is a negative (passive) emotion rather than a positive (active) one. While viewing slaughterhouse videos may lead viewers to pity animals and have the desired effect of reducing violence towards and the suffering of animals, this is often only temporary (usually until the after-effects of the video images wear off). What Spinoza's reasoning suggests is that, if we are to oppose the slaughter of nonhuman animals, then we should do so from a position of strength, not weakness. If we are persuaded that in order to preserve ourselves it is not biologically necessary for human animals to kill and consume nonhuman ones — to which let me offer the relevant support of another saintly Jewish heretic working in the continental tradition of philosophy, as Jacques Derrida puts it in a dialogue entitled *For What Tomorrow*:

the consumption of meat has never been a biological necessity. One eats meat not simply because one needs protein — and protein can be found elsewhere. In the consumption of meat, just as in the death penalty, in fact, there is a sacrificial structure, and therefore a “cultural” phenomenon linked to archaic structures that persist and that must be analyzed¹⁸

— if one is so persuaded, then the slaughter of animals should be opposed out of a position of power and mercy, not because of the effects of pity (and compassion¹⁹ as well). A position of power arises from the rational understanding and the positive

18. Derrida and Roudinesco 71. This quotation is taken from a chapter entitled “Violence against Animals.” Nevertheless, to my knowledge Derrida was not a vegetarian, although he takes issue with the amount of meat eaten today and the violence needed to produce this meat. I suspect that if Spinoza were living today he would, at worst, eat very little meat, and at best, be rationally and emotionally persuaded to pursue a vegetarian diet.

19. Spinoza defines both “pity” and “compassion” very similarly as “pain at another’s harm.” See E3 Definition of Emotions 18 and 24.

emotion of fortitude. Let us now turn to Spinoza's powerful expression of an ethics of love or nobility.

Generositas sive Amor²⁰

“Love,” as we all know, is a vague and ambiguous word. Even Spinoza, a philosopher who strives for conceptual clarity perhaps like no other through his essential definitions and geometrical demonstrations, cannot shake this ambiguity. On my reading, Spinoza's *Ethics* contains three clearly distinguishable types of love, which I have designated elsewhere in Kierkegaardian fashion as “the aesthetic, ethical, and religious conceptions of love.”²¹ Here I shall briefly argue that Spinoza's ethical conception of love is not to be found in the supposedly essential definition that he initially offers in his *Ethics* but rather through a consideration of the concept of nobility. Further, I wish to suggest that understanding this concept leads to an ethics of love that will clinch the inadequacy of Spinoza's speciesism while also providing for a way to get beyond it. In order to show this, we must begin by briefly considering the multiple meanings of love found in Spinoza's major work and the textual evidence for interpreting love and nobility as expressions of the same active emotion.

Someone looking for Spinoza's most straightforward understanding of love will find the emotion defined in “On the Origin and Nature of the Emotions,” Part Three of the *Ethics*, as “pleasure accompanied by the idea of an external cause” (E3p13s). Keeping in mind the earlier definition of emotion that allows for emotions to be either passive or active,²² love is to be understood as a *passion* because of the relation to an external cause, and thus the free individual, who strives to be active as far as possible, would endeavor to avoid this emotion. This definition is consistent with the first mention of “love” in

20. The ideas in this section have been published previously in my “Panegyric,” 111-3, and “Ethics of Love,” 440-1.

21. See preceding note.

Part One, where Spinoza explains parenthetically that love is to “be related to passive and not to active Nature” (E1p31). In an important scholium at the end of Part Two, however, Spinoza uses “love” in a manner that is clearly not consistent with this passive, aesthetic conception. Here he explains that the knowledge of God,²³ in which our supreme happiness or blessedness lies, leads us “to do only those things which love and piety advise” (E2p49s). A love that advises is apparently not an emotion of “pleasure accompanied by an external cause” but rather a conception that points to the endeavor to act in ways that will lead to one’s blessedness. Such a love is of an active nature, and it is precisely such an active love that is called for to diminish the forces brought about through the passive emotions, such as love in the aesthetic sense, hatred, anger, etc. It is this ethical conception of love that resounds in the powerful proposition: “Hatred is increased by reciprocal hatred, and conversely can be destroyed by love” (E3p43).

A love that can destroy hatred is not a passive emotion, and it is highly unlikely that Spinoza intended it as such. Another term that Spinoza uses to express an active, ethical love is to be found near the end of Part Three. Here, after 57 propositions that categorize 46 passions, there appear two propositions explaining active emotions, all of which are said to be related to “fortitude,” which includes the categories of “courage,” a way of being for oneself, and “nobility,” a way of being for others. Spinoza writes:

22. “By emotion I understand the affections of the body by which the body’s power of acting is increased or diminished, helped or hindered, and at the same time the ideas of these affections.

“If, therefore, we can be the adequate cause of one of these affections, then I understand by the emotion an action; otherwise, I understand it to be a passion” (E3def3).

23. I would argue that this phrase, “the knowledge of God,” is also ambiguous in Spinoza’s philosophy because of his understanding of the three kinds of knowledge. The highest conception would be of the intuitive knowledge of God, which lacks propositional content and points to love’s mysterious source.

For by “courage” I understand “the desire by which each person endeavors to preserve his being in accordance with the dictate of reason alone,” and by “nobility” I understand “the desire by which each person, in accordance with the dictate of reason alone, endeavors to help other men and join them to him in friendship” [E3p59s].

Consequently, on Spinoza’s account, striving to better others belongs to the essence of an ethical person.

In this consideration of the active emotions, where does the conception of “love” fit? How can we make the interpretation of Spinoza’s *Ethics* as an ethics of love stick? In Part Four, Spinoza writes a significant proposition that brings together both his understanding of love in E3p43 cited above and his notion of nobility:

Someone who lives in accordance with the guidance of reason endeavors, as far as he can, to repay the hatred, anger, contempt, etc. that another has for him with *love, i.e. with nobility* [E4p46, my italics].

By equating love with nobility here, it becomes clear that we can no longer understand “love” as simply a passion leading to pleasure through the accompaniment of an external cause or object. Spinoza’s “noble love” — his ethical conception of love — must now be conceived actively with its cause lying internally within the free self. A final piece of textual evidence from the closing scholium of Part Four will solidify this interpretation:

These and similar things that I have demonstrated about the true freedom of man are related to fortitude, that is to courage and

nobility. I do not think it worthwhile to demonstrate here, one by one, that a free man hates no one, is angry with no one, envies no one, is indignant with no one, despises no one, and is far from being proud. For these, and all the things that relate to true life and religion, are easily demonstrated from Props. 37 and 46 of this Part: namely, that hatred is to be conquered by love, and that each person who is led by reason desires that the good that he seeks for himself should also exist for others [E4p73s].

This is evidence that Spinoza's *Ethics* is justifiably interpreted as an ethics of love calling humans to eliminate the passive emotions through acts of love that strengthen both themselves and others. Thus, any apparent egoism in Spinoza's philosophy is dissolved into a genuine altruism as "virtue's foundation is interest in self because interest in self is interest in others" (Wienpahl 133). Consistent with this is Spinoza's view that one "is more free in a commonwealth [...] than in solitude" (E4p73). Thus, we have unveiled the substance of Spinoza's ethical vision. We must now evaluate Spinoza's speciesism in light of his ethics of love.

Evaluating Spinoza's Speciesism: Love or Utility?

Having seen the inconsistent use of the word "love" in Spinoza's *Ethics*, we should not be surprised to find other inconsistencies. The inconsistency of speciesism with an ethics of love is not, however, due to the nature of words.²⁴

24. Spinoza's own warning may help us understand the nature of this inconsistency depending on the nature of words: "Since words belong to the vague area of knowledge, which is to say that we form many concepts according to confused collocation of words in memory [...] there is no doubt that words can, like the vague knowledge, cause many serious mistakes, if we are not strictly on the lookout" [qtd. in Fredriksson 203].

Instead, it is due to the nature of the guiding ethical intuitions that Spinoza was attempting to express such as “every mode of being is divine” and the ethical individual “loves its fellow beings” (Wienpahl 156).²⁵

As we have seen, the emotion of fortitude is central to Spinoza’s *Ethics*, and this emotion includes both courage and nobility, which is, again, the rational desire to help others preserve their own beings and join them in friendship (E3p59s). It is significant to note that in the conception of friendship found in this definition cannot be the common notion based on personal preferences. This is because it is dictated by reason alone. Thus, a “friend” for Spinoza is akin to what Kierkegaard calls the “neighbor” and what philosophers such as Derrida refer to generally as the “other.”²⁶ The thinking of Derrida is helpful in developing the notion of the “other,” for he recognizes that

the task of rethinking human subjectivity devolves upon the task of thinking the boundary between the human and the nonhuman “other.” This task takes us “back to the animal.” [...] Derrida calls for a “deconstruction” of the notion of subjectivity that will open up a sense of primordial “responsibility toward the living in general.” [...] The primordial call of responsibility ultimately “is not ‘human’.”²⁷

25. Although there are some valuable insights in this text, a contradiction is glaringly evident when Wienpahl writes: “The moral commandments are seen as truths when they are understood [...]. It is to live without killing one’s fellow beings [...]. In positive terms it is to be an Individual who loves its fellow beings. The prejudice about killing animals is sentimental. Awakened we realize that being includes eating” (156).

How absurd! As if “eating” necessarily means eating the corpses of divine beings!

26. It is interesting to note that in Leviticus 19:18 — where we read that “you should love your neighbor as yourself” — the Hebrew word frequently translated into English as “neighbor” is more literally translated as “friend.” My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this observation.

Spinoza does not, however, reflect on the question “Who is the other?” He does not even use the term in its technical sense. For all practical purposes, the other is for Spinoza, like Descartes and the vast majority of thinkers at the time, an adult male human animal. Therefore he does not raise the question, “Why should we not desire the good for nonhuman animals?” and he does not hold that the greater the knowledge of God or Nature, the greater the desire for the good of all living things. Although the conception of nobility is central to Spinoza’s ethics of love, it seems that he could have gone further in realizing the others to whom this action applies. Is it not nobler to desire and to strive towards preserving the well-being of as many others as possible and not only those others who are similar to oneself by virtue of a common species? Is this not an adequate idea that shows itself as intuitively sound?

In considering the secondary literature above, we found reasons to explain Spinoza’s speciesism and also noted what was right about his view. Let us now consider more closely where he goes wrong. What leads him regarding the slaughter and eating of nonhuman animals into surprising agreement with the influential Descartes, whom Spinoza had strenuously disagreed with at numerous decisive points throughout his work? Descartes was arguably a “brute to the brutes,” for his commonly stated position is that nonhuman animals are clock-like automata, devoid of language, thought, and reason. While it is not entirely true that Descartes thought of nonhuman animals as knocked-out zombies lacking any sensation, his understanding of their feelings and emotions is fuzzy and inadequate, and this may be attributed to the strict metaphysical dualism that he held.²⁸ Spinoza, of course, strongly rejects Cartesian dualism, and thus he attributes the

27. See Steiner (218-20). Citations from Derrida are from his “‘Eating Well’” (100, 110. Steiner points out that Derrida’s thinking on the nonhuman “merits further exploration,” but he admits that Derrida does not go far enough in creating a space for animals in the ethical sphere” (221-2).

28. See Cottingham for a fair-handed account.

doubt that beasts feel to a lack of understanding about the nature and origin of the mind. For Spinoza, then, it is not his metaphysics which get him into trouble here, for his monistic vision, as already pointed out, lends itself quite readily to an appreciation of the unity of all nature and a consequent respect and care for it.

Where, then, does Spinoza go wrong? Is it because he implicitly conceives of species like the thinkers of his day — who actually followed medieval thinkers, who followed Aristotle — and regards species as constituting essential differences of kinds? Unfortunately, there is no direct discussion of what constitutes a species in Spinoza's writings. Should he thus be defended by noting that Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* would not appear until 182 years after his death? Such a defense is unnecessary, however, for it is well-known that when conceiving individual essences, Spinoza develops a position that supersedes Aristotle's essences of species. Moreover, Antonio Damasio explains:

by refusing to recognize a purposeful design in nature, and by conceiving of bodies and minds as made up of components that could be combined in varied patterns across different species, Spinoza was compatible with Charles Darwin's evolutionary thinking [13].

Spinoza's thinking is arguably also compatible with advances in our thinking brought about through the discovery of DNA, so it does not appear to be a faulty conception of species that explains Spinoza's speciesism. So, again, where does Spinoza go wrong?²⁹

It seems to me that the source of the problem lies in Spinoza's apparent desire to affirm both an ethics of love and an ethics of

29. I am indebted to the anonymous reviewers of this paper for some of the ideas expressed in this paragraph.

utility. In other words, an explanation for Spinoza's position can be found in the slippage from an intuitive, rational understanding of the good that he is striving towards to an inadequate, relative view of the good as what is useful, in which case Spinoza's view is uncharacteristically anthropocentric and speciesist. This tension may also explain why those commentators who fail to see the ethics of love in Spinoza's philosophy interpret him as offering an essentially indifferent, egoistic ethics, whereas others read it as expressing a fundamentally altruistic ethics.³⁰ As an example of the former, Merold Westphal writes that "nothing in Spinoza's therapeutic ethics requires that I concern myself with the happiness of others, forbids me to be indifferent to the widow, the orphan, and the stranger" (65). Such a view is mistaken, however, for it fails to acknowledge the ethics of love in Spinoza and that the "self" that is strengthened in Spinoza's thought is not the ego but rather the true self which is common to all and essentially God. Nevertheless, some justification for Spinoza's anthropocentric egoism can be found in the appendix to Part Four of *Ethics*. In the course of his summary, Spinoza adds the following troublesome points:

26. Apart from men, we know of no particular thing in Nature, in whose mind we can delight, and which we can join with us in friendship or in some kind of association. So a consideration of our advantage does not require us to conserve any thing that exists in Nature apart from human beings; rather, it teaches us to preserve, destroy, or adapt it in any way to our advantage, in accordance with its various uses.

27. The chief advantage that we derive from

30. This view has been suggested by several others, for example, Harris (221) and Wienpahl cited above. Consider also this enthusiastic remark by Goethe, for whom Spinoza was a "pure Christian": "what especially drew me to him was the boundless altruism that shone from every proposition" (qtd. in Fredriksson 149).

things that are outside us [...] is the preservation of the body. For this reason, those things are useful above all that are able to feed and nourish the body in such a way that all its parts can perform their functions correctly. [...] so to feed the body as is required, it is necessary to use many foods of different natures.

This passage, more than any other in the *Ethics* it seems, can be cited as evidence against the use of Spinoza's philosophy as a foundation for a "green" ethics that respects both the environment and nonhuman animals. Thus Genevieve Lloyd writes that "Spinoza holds that morality is completely limited to human beings; that it is connected to humanity's self-preservation; [and] that other beings can ruthlessly be used for human purposes" (qtd. in Fredriksson 201). This clearly reflects Spinoza's words above and also makes it arguable that Spinoza, who certainly opposed anthropocentrism in religion, nevertheless develops an ethics with critical anthropocentric biases.³¹

Conclusion

Although Spinoza's remark on the slaughtering of nonhuman animals is marginal, reflecting on it has rather far-reaching consequences, not the least of which is that Spinoza's thinking

31. Such a bias is also readily evident in the incredible scholium to the proposition: "Hatred can never be good" (E4p45). Although this proposition contains the absolute "never," this does not prevent Spinoza from noting that by "hatred" he means "only hatred towards human beings" (E4p45s). Is this a sign of a mental lapse, for does Spinoza not see that this scholium contradicts the proposition directly, for it implies that there is another kind of hatred — i.e., hatred towards nonhuman beings — that is apparently not bad? Perhaps Spinoza could have explained that the destruction of nonhuman animals is not hatred insofar as it is based on the love of their flesh, which would be "love" in the passive sense, but this does not remove the fact that one must destroy the animal, the *anima* or living soul, in order to produce the corpse. Isn't such destruction a result of a kind of hatred, and "hatred can never be good"? It is hard to see how any explanation would remove this troubling inconsistency. Therefore, this "scholium of straw," one of the shortest in the *Ethics*, should be given no weight and would find no place in an adequate Spinozism.

on this issue is inconsistent with his ethics of love and joy. The cause of this inconsistency appears to lie in the tension between the absolute rationalist-intuitive position that Spinoza endeavors to express and a relative utility-based one. Only by considering the anthropocentric philosophy of utility alone can a critic interpret Spinoza as an ethical egoist, a position compatible with speciesism. Such an interpretation is short-sighted, however, for it fails to account for the whole impression made by the *Ethics*, one that includes an active ethics of love.

Part of the confusion undoubtedly lies in the ambiguous meanings of “good” and “bad” to be found in Spinoza’s work. Much of the force of the *Ethics* is that it is decidedly “beyond good and evil,” i.e., it is an attempt to get beyond relative notions of value based on utility, tradition, or convenience. Spinoza is clearly aware that humans operate on relative notions of the good based on what is useful, but is he not trying to get us to see beyond these notions to an understanding of the good that transcends individuals and cultures, one that on Spinoza’s account is intuitively certain?

In the Preface to the fourth part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza proposes to demonstrate “what goodness or badness the emotions have.” He then remarks that “good and bad [...] indicate nothing positive in things considered in themselves, and are simply ways of thinking.” He is not thereby proposing that we give up the terms — for it is doubtful that we ever could — but rather suggesting that for the most part when we speak of good and bad we are operating on the level of imagination or inadequate knowledge. Spinoza’s goal, however, is to reach the level of adequate knowledge and certain intuition. Thus we shall “form an idea of man, as an exemplar of human nature,” and in doing so we “shall understand by ‘good’ that which we know with certainty to be a means by which we may approach more and more closely that exemplar of human nature which we set before ourselves.” “Bad” will mean the opposite.³²

>From Spinoza's comments on the slaughter of nonhuman animals, we can infer that he did not view eating meat as bad, but is this based on a dictate of reason based on certainty? In the scholium where Spinoza presents his view on the law of slaughtering animals, he does not state it as such but instead as one based on "consult[ing] our own advantage," and he notes in the following scholium, which develops themes from the first, that "each person judges what is good and bad [...] in accordance with his own way of thinking what is useful to him" (E4p37s1&s2). Here Spinoza appears to have slipped in his thinking, for it seems clear that this is the usage of good and bad that he earlier wished to get beyond. Such thinking belongs to imagination, the first kind of knowledge according to Spinoza, and it is only this kind of "knowledge" that yields inadequate ideas and falsity. Thus Spinoza, perhaps uncharacteristically, here follows his own way of thinking and not the kind of reason and intuition that he calls for elsewhere.

While it is certainly true that we lack perfect knowledge, we must nevertheless continually question wherein "our" *true* advantage lies, taking into account both "our health as a whole" and our future well-being (E4p60s). In our gluttonous culture where both obesity and heart disease are on the rise, it seems hardly feasible that it lies in the destruction of nonhuman animals and the consumption of their flesh. Is it not more reasonable to see ethical vegetarianism as an expression of virtue and power?

We began by noting that for Spinoza the good person should "act well and rejoice," so let us conclude by reflecting on how one should act well with respect to animals. Is killing them acting well? Is turning one's head to their slaughter and eating their flesh acting well? Do such acts exemplify the active

32. Nature, we know from early on in the *Ethics*, may be considered as active or passive, but it should be clear here that in referring to an exemplar of human nature, Spinoza is thinking of free and active human nature, which he would remark is difficult to obtain and rare to behold. Exemplars of passive human nature — humans lacking power and constancy — are all too easy to find.

emotion *generositas* — that is, love, nobility, or highmindedness? Is it not as easy to see the answer to these questions as it is to see the common property of proportionals in the case of very simple numbers (E2p40s2)?

When Spinoza provided the demonstration for E4p37, he reasoned as follows:

the more the essence of the mind involves a greater knowledge of God, the greater also will be the desire by which he who follows virtue desires for another a good which he seeks for himself.³³

He then comments in the scholium that an ideally wise person “is not led by impulse, but acts humanely and benevolently, and is self-consistent in the highest degree.” Furthermore, he explains later how it is a feature of such a person to enjoy “moderate and pleasant food and drink [...] without harming anyone else” (E4p45c2s). Thus, it would have been entirely fitting for Spinoza to add in these scholia or elsewhere a note such as this: “We can now see as clearly as the noonday sun how one should act towards the beasts; one should treat them with love, not hatred and cruelty, and insofar as one is able work for their benefit as one does one’s own.”

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33. He also offers an alternative proof; however, this confuses matters since it is based on a passive understanding of love, whereas the desire to do good for others is based on an active understanding.

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