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Chandler D. Rogers. 2021. "Being Consistently Biocentric: On the (Im)Possibility of Spinozist Animal Ethics." *Journal for Critical Animal Studies* 18:1, 52-72.

## **Being Consistently Biocentric: On the (Im)Possibility of Spinozist Animal Ethics**

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**Abstract:** Spinoza's attitude toward nonhuman animals is uncharacteristically cruel. This essay elaborates upon this ostensible idiosyncrasy in reference to Hasana Sharp's commendable desire to revitalize a basis for animal ethics from within the bounds of his system. Despite our favoring an ethics beginning from animal affect, this essay argues that an animal ethic adequate to the demands of our historical moment cannot be developed from within the confines of strict adherence to Spinoza's system—and this is not yet to speak of a more robust animal ethics which would advocate actual care and compassion for the animals themselves. We argue that on the assumption of Spinoza's ontological biocentrism, in the presence of Spinozist determinism and the absence of an axiological biocentrism, an anthropocentric axiology necessarily follows. Any Spinozist animal ethic must fall back, therefore, upon appeals to the maximization of human pleasure and power; hence Spinoza's ruthless injunction to "use (the animals) at our pleasure." These are the very ontological and ethical assumptions which have incited human self-exaltation in the modern period, in pursuit of power and pleasure even despite the destructive long-term consequences for all the living. We suggest that an adequate animal ethic would require either an abandonment of Spinoza's ontological biocentrism or the adoption of an axiological biocentrism.

**Keywords:** Spinoza; biocentrism; anthropocentrism; posthumanism; animal affect

Spinoza's *Ethics* presents a vision of reality that has inspired environmental thinkers for the past four decades and beyond. Reasons for this are clear: the ontological biocentrism laid out in this work would appear to undermine human arrogance and give grounds for reconceptualizing the human as one humbled part of a larger whole, a conception by all appearances conducive to fostering respect or concern for nature. When it comes to Spinoza's own understanding of his system's implications regarding human relations to the rest of nature, however, we find aversion to some of the ethical conclusions environmentalists might expect. Far from encouraging care or concern for animals of other species, for example, whether of the holist or individualist variety, he doubles down on the human right to dominion—even writing of the pleasure he obtains in forcing spiders to fight one another to the death, and of attaching flies to spiderwebs in order to watch them struggle for their lives.

Spinoza clutches to hold onto the traditional distinction between human and animal by appealing to a specifically human "essence" or "nature," despite the fact that by his own definitions these terms fail to designate anything specific about the human animal. In the Scholium to IIP57 he

writes, “Hence it follows that the emotions of animals that are called irrational...differ from the emotions of men as much as their nature differs from human nature.” But later in the same note he indicates that the difference in nature between a drunkard and a philosopher might just be greater than the difference in nature between a lusty horse and a lusty human. The insinuation is clearly that when human beings fail to live up to their capacity to reason, they make themselves lower than the animals. At one point in the *Ethics* Spinoza goes so far as to interpret the biblical story of the Fall as an allegory for the first man’s imitation of animal affects, the very source of human “evil,” to be avoided at all costs.

Just as deep ecologists of previous generations, notably George Sessions and Bill Devall, following Arne Naess, looked to Spinoza’s *Ethics* for an ontological vision to ground a new environmental ethic, so too posthumanists of more recent years have pushed to extend Spinoza’s biocentric outlook into the realm of animal ethics. Hasana Sharp is one such advocate, an impressive Spinoza scholar and an exponent of posthumanist ethics and politics, to be extended to humans and nonhumans alike (Sharp 2009 and 2011; Sharp and Willett 2016). While acknowledging that Spinoza himself exhibits not just passive indifference, but indeed promotes active cruelty to nonhuman animals, Sharp joins Arthur Schopenhauer and others in suggesting that this lapse in character breaks with the tenor of his system, or with what it would seem to demand (cf. e.g. Berman, 1982, p. 203). Accepting Spinoza’s premises, she argues on behalf of an animal ethic that appeals to pleasure or joy received from an exchange of animal affects, across species. Such is assumed to be more consistent with Spinoza’s ontology, and Sharp suggests that posthumanist thinkers like Gilles Deleuze and Donna Haraway have already made great strides in this direction (Sharp, 2011, p. 64).

Under the conditions assumed, we maintain, such an animal “ethic” could not be properly called *ethical*. In the field of environmental ethics, this was essentially Attfield’s response, albeit brief, to Spitler (Attfield, 1987, pp. 48-49; Spitler, 1982). Our thesis is that an adequate animal ethic would require either breaking with, or at least substantially modifying Spinoza’s biocentric ontology, in order to undermine the axiological anthropocentrism it entails; or adopting a biocentric axiology and thereby attributing intrinsic value to nonhuman animals, along with the many other modes of Being.

Having mentioned Spinoza’s “biocentric outlook,” we must clarify our uses of the term biocentric. First, we note that Devall and Sessions went beyond Spinoza in their attribution of intrinsic value to all life. On its own terms Spinoza’s philosophical system implies only that humans and other modes of being are to be afforded equal *ontological* status—not equal *axiological* status. Far from attributing intrinsic value, as anecdotes concerning animal cruelty would indicate, Spinoza assumes that merely instrumental value accrues to creatures not of our species. This is the axiological position typically identified as anthropocentric. We begin, therefore, by distinguishing between what we’ll label *ontological biocentrism* and *axiological biocentrism*. Ontological biocentrism would be the position which holds that all modes of being stand on equal ontological footing, as expressions or modifications of Being. By contrast, axiological biocentrism would be the value-positing standpoint which attributes inherent worth to all living beings. The Spinozist viewpoint we address affirms Spinoza’s ontological biocentrism while joining him in the rejection of axiological biocentrism. Hence the title of this paper: “Being Consistently Biocentric.”

Section one, “Spinozist Determinism,” foregrounds Sharp’s argument that Spinoza’s causal determinism accords with the modern scientific understanding of our species being just as causally determined as any other species. We maintain that Spinoza’s promotion of animal cruelty stems not from an unwitting reversion to pre-modern ontological anthropocentrism, as Sharp and others, like Schopenhauer, have suggested, but rather from the converse. Ontological biocentrism without an axiological biocentrism necessitates the axiological anthropocentrism characteristic of Spinoza’s system. The human animal has just as much a right to actualize the powers of its nature as do animals of other species, including the power to kill or be killed. And it is just as susceptible to affective contagion—a point Deleuze and Guattari drive home with their notion of *becoming animal*—as are animals of other species. Unlike Deleuze and Guattari, however, Spinoza’s real fear is that affective contact with animals of other species will lead to societal discord and deter us from what promotes the human advantage; reason-overriding affects like hatred or envy are prone to cause discord and strife in and amongst members of our own societies.

The second section, “Anthropocentrism: A Modern Paradox,” highlights the modern paradox lurking behind the assumptions of both Sharp and Spinoza: if the human is merely one species among many (ontological biocentrism), and just as causally determined (Spinozist determinism), we are therefore liberated to pursue what is to the increase of our power and our pleasure, no matter the cost to the rest of earth’s inhabitants (axiological anthropocentrism). This is why ontological paradigms as distinct as those of Descartes and Spinoza can both beget the same kind of animal cruelty, stemming from the assumption of an axiological anthropocentrism. And this is why Spinoza, whose ontological paradigm would seem to call for a check upon Cartesian cruelty, no longer conceiving of nonhumans as mere animal-machines, could be consistently crueler than Descartes.

Finally, section three, “Axiological Anthropocentrism,” addresses the question as to whether an animal “ethic” which appeals to the maximization of human pleasure and power, following Spinozist premises, is sufficient to meet the demands of our present moment. We argue that the stakes for our species and our planet are simply too high to endorse such an animal ethic, when the maximization of human pleasure and power stands behind so many abuses which combine to hasten the demise of all the living.

### **Spinozist Determinism**

Sharp begins her analysis of Spinoza’s comments about animals by contrasting the consistency of her own Spinozist, thoroughgoing determinism with the view she believes the majority of contemporary philosophers hold, “the Kantian compatibilist view of human freedom.” These thinkers affirm, on the one hand, that “our bodies and behaviors are determined by an entirely predictable chain of cause and effect” and additionally, on the other hand, that “morality requires that we attribute to rational beings a free agency that can nowhere be observed except by the inward looking eye of reason” (Sharp, 2011, p. 49). Such misguided optimism indicates either self-deception or an inability to fully part with human hubris. Moral sentimentalism aside, she maintains, we actually know that the compatibilist position cannot be true. Modern science has proven as much.

Sharp indicates that Spinoza’s ontology is fully consistent with the determinist conclusions of modern natural science, providing a vision of reality much truer to our scientific understanding of

the world as a closed causal nexus in which all effects are determined by their causes. When Spinoza postulates Definitions 3-6 in Part I of the *Ethics*, successively defining Substance as “that which is in itself and is conceived through itself” (ID3) and God as “absolutely infinite being, that is, substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence” (ID6), he is already well on his way to having limited the number of substances to only one possible, God (IP5, IP6, IP14), which necessarily exists (IP7, IP11). God, of course, is another name for Nature: *Deus sive Natura*.

In Spinoza’s ontology these originary determinations concerning Substance demote all other beings to the status of modes, or “the affections of substance, that is, that which is in something else and is conceived through something else” (ID5). While modes are perceived according to the infinite attributes of Substance (ID4, IP15), our limitations restrict us to recognizing only two of these infinite attributes, thought and extension.

Substance alone is a “free,” or efficient cause. Since only one substance can exist, “It follows, secondly, that God alone is a free cause” (IP17Cor2; cf. also IP25). God causes in accordance with his infinite nature, as a necessary cause, but is not capable of *willing* (IP32Cor2; IP17s). Thus, things could not be otherwise than the way in which God has produced them, in the order in which they have come into existence (IP33). Modes are determined by God to act in particular ways, which cannot be changed: “A thing that has been determined by God cannot determine itself to act” (IP26), and can never “render itself undetermined” (IP27). No individual mode can exist or act unless another finite cause determines its action (IP28), such that “Nothing in nature is contingent, but all things are from the necessity of the divine nature determined to act in a definite way” (IP29). According to Spinoza’s biocentric ontology, in which all finite things retain equal status as modes of one infinite Substance, there would be no possibility of quasi-claims to moral agency: “In the mind there is no absolute, or free, will. The mind is determined to this or that volition by a cause, which is likewise determined by another cause, and this again by another, and so ad infinitum” (IIP48).

Compatibilism attempts to retain “a vestige of the wishful thinking that aims to maintain that humans are, concomitantly, natural beings and absolutely distinct in kind from natural things” (Sharp, 2011, p. 49). But in the same manner, Sharp argues, *Spinoza’s* attempts to salvage an essential distinction in species—asserted a century prior to Kant and in the wake of the original Copernican revolution—are symptomatic of recalcitrant human hubris: “This antinomian logic – this view of ourselves as A(nimal) and not- A(nimal) – is visible even in Spinoza, whose system denies any absolute differences between finite existents” (ibid.). Even despite the clear consequence that humans and nonhumans are mere modes among modes, Spinoza appears to assume a human claim to ontological supremacy. And unlike Kant, he exhibits such human hubris despite the fact that he can rightfully be deemed, as Yitzhak Melamed puts it, “the most radical *anti-humanist* among modern philosophers” (Melamed, 2011, p. 148).

If so great an anti-humanist as Spinoza could fail to rid himself of anthropocentric tendencies, Sharp ventures, this fact must attest to a profound anxiety lurking at the core of each of us, rooted in the recognition that we are not really essentially different from animals of other species. She writes, “In what follows, I will bring out Spinoza’s contradictory and ambivalent remarks pertaining to the specific differences between humans and animals. It is my suspicion that this

ambivalence continues to plague us today” (Sharp, 2011, p. 50). For fear of what giving up pride of place might entail, Spinoza refuses to give animals of other species the ethical consideration they deserve. The bold among us, she insinuates, must push past Spinoza and stare headlong into the abyss.

But perhaps the problem is that Spinoza *has* stared into the abyss. In other words, it’s not the case that he looks away from the consequences of his biocentric ontology in fear, reverting to an exceptionalism characteristic of his tradition. It’s not the case that Spinoza holds himself back from assenting to conclusions he *should* but cannot bring himself to draw. Far from hatred of nonhuman animals, *love of humanity* is what keeps him from “humane” consideration of other animals, remaining perfectly consistent with species-favoring considerations of animals from other species—wolves hunt sheep or other animals and not each other, for instance, and so too with humans who hunt animals of other species. Love of kind drives him to affirm our right to kill or be killed, absolutely barring contact with nonhumans for fear of affective contagion.

Sharp’s no-nonsense attitude in expressing the consequences of Spinozist determinism embodies and attests to what we can call Spinoza’s *brute realism*, not to be understood in a metaphysical sense, but rather after the everyday idiom that designates a characteristically modern commitment to assess actions and behaviors as they are, not as they ought to be. A. O. Hirschman explains further in his now-classic economic work *The Passions and the Interests*, noting that while Hobbes bases his political analyses upon the assessments of human nature which span the first ten chapters of *Leviathan*,

...it was Spinoza who reiterated, with particular sharpness and vehemence, Machiavelli’s charges against the utopian thinkers of the past, this time in relation to individual human behavior. In the opening paragraph of the *Tractatus politicus* he attacks the philosophers who “conceive men not as they are but as they would like them to be.” And this distinction between positive and normative thinking appears again in the *Ethics*, where Spinoza opposes to those who “prefer to detest and scoff at human affects and actions” his own famous project to “consider human actions and appetites just as if I were considering lines, planes, or bodies” (Hirschman, 2013, p. 14).

Spinoza the brute realist, in diagnosing the human predicament, recognizes dangerous possibilities brought into play when human behavior sinks below the level of rationality. He refuses a moral sentimentalism that would describe the human animal as it ought to be, not as it is, and that would attempt to force relinquishment of what it can rightfully lay claim to by virtue of its power.

It’s not the case, therefore, that Spinoza’s view of humanity is too high, or too anthropocentric. He does not give the human unique pride of place or set him above and apart from other species. Rather, the human animal is just as prone to the same sorts of affects as are other animals. By analogy, as I’ve often heard it said, the true feminist does not dumb down arguments for female students, or grade their exams more leniently. To do so would be to exercise a lack of respect for women, to belie an assumed superiority that directly contradicts claims to respect. Just as the true feminist actually maintains a high degree of consistency in such matters, so too the true ontological biocentrist is necessarily an ethical “anthropocentrist,” in the sense that she affirms that humanity

is merely one species among many, boasting an *equal* right to act in accordance with the powers of its nature.

For Spinoza the actions and behaviors of the human animal are just as causally determined as those of any other animal, save for the possibility of a rational assent that can transform passive and even painful affectations into active pleasures of contemplation. But the more we enter into affective contact with animals of other species, the more we are diverted from goods integral to the powers of our own natures. Thus, Spinoza writes, “Nothing can be more in harmony with the nature of anything than individuals of the same species, and so there is nothing more advantageous to man for preserving his own being and enjoying a rational life than a man who is guided by reason” (IVapp9). The danger of affective communion with “beasts” is that human individuals are just as susceptible to diversion from what best promotes their own advantage as are animals of other species. And insofar as painful, passive affects like pity stand in total tension with reason as active and pleasurable, suffering the former tends toward the destruction of the human’s nature, whereas cultivating the latter tends toward its perfection.

The truth of the matter is, “men are changeable (few there are who live under the direction of reason) and yet for the most part envious, and more inclined to revenge than to compassion. So it needs an unusually powerful spirit to bear with each according to his disposition and to restrain oneself from imitating their emotions” (IVapp13). Due to high vulnerability to affects like anger, envy, and hatred, and considering the socially detrimental effects these passive affects are prone to cause, it is extremely difficult for one human to reason with and dissuade another human who is under the sway of such affects, preventing the destructive acts that usually follow. It’s much more likely that the one attempting to dissuade will fall under the same affective spell, becoming complicit in the other’s socially destructive acts.

Note that here in the appendix to part IV of the *Ethics* (IVapp13), summarizing the proofs scattered throughout the main text, Spinoza repeats verbatim a phrase used in the Scholium to Proposition 68, regarding the fall of the first man from a state of originary perfection. Of Adam he writes, “But when he came to believe that the beasts were like himself, he straightway began to imitate their emotions and to lose his freedom...” (IVP68s). Human “freedom” is possible only according to a correct use of reason, on the basis of adequate ideas generated by active states of mind. By contrast, inadequate ideas are generated on the basis of passive states of mind (IIIP1, IIIP3). And by IIIP27, “From the fact that we imagine a thing like ourselves, toward which we have felt no emotion, to be affected by an emotion, we are thereby affected by a similar emotion.” Far from passive affectation, especially of pain leading to pity, human perfection consists in active reasoning, which brings pleasure and so perfects our nature (IIIP53, IIIP54, IVP52, VP15). Affinity for beasts, leading toward imitation of their affects, is the very source of human “evil” (IVP68s) and must therefore be avoided at all costs.

In the absence of a biocentric axiology, Spinoza’s axiologically anthropocentric “ethical” conclusions concerning animal affect are thus perfectly consistent with his ontological biocentrism. The human animal is to avoid affective contact with animals of other species, and especially the painful emotion of pity. Such a view precludes the possibility of human care for nonhuman animals, and of embracing any seemingly “beneficial” affects in which we might be tempted to trust.

### **Anthropocentrism: A Modern Paradox**

Having argued that the axiologically anthropocentric directives concerning nonhuman animals found in Spinoza's *Ethics* are consistent with his thoroughgoing ontological biocentrism, we move beyond Spinoza to argue that in the absence of a biocentric axiology and the presence of an ontological biocentrism, any animal ethic will prove axiomatically anthropocentric. In this case other modes of being are reduced to having merely instrumental value, and are "morally" considerable only in terms of increasing or decreasing human pleasure. With Tim Hayward, following up with Sharp's arguments about Spinoza's causal determinism and its coincidence with the modern scientific understanding of human being's place in nature, we highlight a uniquely modern paradox. If "man" is simply one species among many (ontological biocentrism) and just as casually determined (Spinozist determinism), he is thereby "liberated" to pursue pleasure and avoid pain without ethical restraint (axiological anthropocentrism), no matter the cost to earth's other animate inhabitants.

Hayward parses two senses in which the term *anthropocentrism* is used, and in doing so he draws out a paradox resulting from the modern scientific understanding of humanity. Typically the term is used in a manner that sets our modern understanding of ourselves and our place in nature in contrast with older, ontologically anthropocentric views of the universe. As he writes, "This cognitive displacement of human beings from centre stage in the greater scheme of things has been made possible, above all, by developments in modern science" (Hayward, 1997, p. 50). Concurring with Sharp's denunciation of compatibilist views of human ethical freedom, in this sense "anthropocentrism" is typically employed as a byword for an "old-fashioned" or "obsolete" human hubris that would seek to exempt our species from causal laws observed to be at work in the rest of the natural world.

This modern, ontologically humbled understanding of our species as one among many brings about the paradox: "This detached view of humans has been made possible by just that kind of objectivating knowledge which more recently has been held to lie at the root of an attitude toward the natural world to be condemned as anthropocentric" (Hayward, 1997, p. 50). Ontological dethronement brings liberation from the ethical restraints of pre-modern ontological anthropocentrism, for example from the demands of piety that led the Church to resist Copernicus and to condemn Galileo, and from the subsequent constraints of fear that prevented Descartes from publishing *The World* and compelled Spinoza to publish anonymously. The ontological flattening that comes in consort with modern scientific discovery frees the human to pursue the goals and aims of modern natural science without having to fear deterrents which had plagued previous generations.

But if ours is merely one species among others, ontological considerations will no longer restrict "man" from exerting power in pursuit of pleasure, and in flight from pain, in whichever ways he so desires. This new ontological understanding invigorates a uniquely modern axiological anthropocentrism, part and parcel of the Enlightenment quest to conquer nature: the position Charles Taylor refers to as "exclusive humanism" (Taylor 2007). It is on this basis that thinkers with ontological paradigms as seemingly distinct as Descartes and Spinoza—one of whom relies upon a real distinction between thinking substance and extended substance, and so relegates nonhumans to the status of animal-machines, and the other of whom would appear to obliterate grounds for any such distinction between humans and animals of other species—can hold the same

axiological position in reference to nonhuman animals. Both Descartes and Spinoza glory in the modern supposition that we are absolutely unrestrained with(out) respect to animals of other species, paradoxically ‘free’ to enact whichever cruelties we so desire upon them, whether for business or for pleasure. ‘Free,’ in other words, in “making use of them as we please” (IVP37s1).

Spinoza’s anthropocentric axiology is perfectly consonant with his biocentric ontology, such that there’s no need to try and twist his practical “ethic” to make it fit more consistently with the rest of his thought. Richard Watson, assuming the absence of an axiological biocentrism, argued this point in response to an earlier generation of deep ecologists: “A fully egalitarian biocentric ethic would place no more restrictions on the behavior of human beings than on the behavior of any other animals” (Watson, 1983, p. 245). Insofar as we employ the term *ethics* to indicate governance of human behavior in the direction of goodness, or at least, with Spinoza, in the direction of increased pleasure, anything less would fall outside the ethical realm. In this sense a Spinozistic, “biocentric ethics”—by which we mean: a guide to human action operating on the assumption of ontological biocentrism, in accordance with Spinoza’s determinist thesis, and so in the absence of axiological biocentrism—would not be properly “ethical” at all. Its imperative would have to be something like this: “act in such a way that whatever you’re doing is what you’d normally do without further consideration, being just as bound by deterministic constraints as any other mode of being.” Under these conditions “Spinozist animal ethics” becomes an oxymoron. Being consistently biocentric would entail something like what Annie Dillard suggests in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, channeling her anxiety at the impossibility of escaping our uniquely human capacity for moral reflection: “We are freaks, the world is fine, and let us all go have lobotomies to restore us to a natural state. We can leave the library then, go back to the creek lobotomized, and live on its banks as untroubled as any muskrat or reed” (Dillard, 1974, p. 180). And, of course, her next line is telling: “You first.”

As a result of his own more consistent ontological biocentrism, in the absence of a biocentric axiology, Watson argues in response to the deep ecologists that perhaps “nature” as a whole, the same nature that includes humans, is better off undergoing another mass extinction event, to be promulgated this time by the self-interested actions of animals that happen to belong to the human species. “Human beings do alter things. They cause the extinction of many species, and they change the Earth’s ecology. This is what humans do. This is their destiny. If they destroy many other species and themselves in the process, they do no more than has been done by many other species.” Thus again the consistent ontological biocentrist is forced to admit, “The human species should be allowed—if any species is said to have a right—to live out its evolutionary potential, to its own destruction if that is the end result. It is nature’s way” (Watson, 1983, p. 253).

As David Wood points out, any call to action is first and foremost human-focused; critiquing *any* ethic as “anthropocentric” would be misguided (Wood, 2011, p. 32). This has not been our line of approach. The fact of the matter is that when we endorse ontological biocentrism and reject axiological biocentrism, and especially when we accept Spinoza’s determinist thesis, a genuine care or compassion for animals outside of our species can be salvaged only if at all by an appealing to the maximization of *human* pleasure and power. Consider Watson’s claim: “But civilized man wreaks such havoc on the environment. We disrupt the ecology of the planet, cause the extinction of myriad other species of living things, and even alter the climate of the Earth. Should we not attempt to curb our behavior to avoid these results? Indeed we should as a matter of prudence if



we want to preserve *our* habitat and preserve the survival of *our* species” (Watson, 1983, p. 252; my emphasis). He concludes: “But this is anthropocentric thinking.” In accepting Spinoza’s premises, therefore, one is committed to an axiological anthropocentrism.

### **Axiological Anthropocentrism**

Spinoza argues that pity for nonhuman animals is more harmful than beneficial, due to the human animal’s vulnerability to passive affects that hinder its power, rather than promoting it. Sharp attempts to draw the contrary conclusion from the same premises. Having established that Spinoza’s axiological anthropocentrism is perfectly consistent with his biocentric ontology, and that such would have to be the case in the absence of axiological biocentrism, it remains to evaluate on ethical grounds Sharp’s proposal concerning animal affects, in the context of concerns that will, or at least should matter deeply to the animal activist. Her view provides a case by which to test our thesis that if axiological biocentrism is rejected, a biocentric ontology cannot support the normative claims a robust animal ethics—and the demands of the present moment—would require.

We begin by acknowledging that Sharp’s examples of affective contact between humans and animals of other species, instances in which nonhuman animals appear to assist humans in achieving Spinozist, human-centered ends, are indeed *prima facie* persuasive. She cites a few examples and then posits an attempt at further justification:

Alzheimer’s patients, for example, show improved memory upon friendly interaction with cats or dogs. Likewise, research reveals a ‘cardiovascular benefit’ for males with dogs (...). Children who have difficulty reading can be helped significantly by a canine audience, and mere pet presence improves arithmetic calculations, something Spinoza would surely appreciate. Although Spinoza does not offer reasons to proscribe human interest in favor of animal flourishing (...), his conception of agency as an effect of our involvement with ambient powers should furnish an appreciation of the many enabling aspects of the involuntary affective community between humans and animals (Sharp, 2011, p. 65).

We note firstly that Sharp earlier eliminated the possibility of “agency” when disallowing the possibility of Kantian compatibilism, writing, “morality requires that we attribute to rational beings a free agency that can nowhere be observed...” (Sharp, 2011, p. 49). Perhaps her reference to Spinoza’s “conception of agency as an effect of our involvement with ambient powers” is meant to refer to determination by the affects of those within one’s general proximity, and her use of the term “agency” here is simply equivocal, harboring an implied reference to notions of nonhuman agency as found in the works of the new materialists. Nonetheless, as we have understood, Spinoza staunchly opposes “involuntary affective community between humans and animals” as the very source of human evil.

Perhaps Sharp’s defense of the “useful” effects of contact with nonhuman animals could be accommodated on the basis of a qualified statement Spinoza makes concerning good and evil in the appendix to Part IV of the *Ethics*. He begins, “Whatsoever in nature we deem evil, that is, capable of hindering us from being able to exist and to enjoy a rational life, it is permissible for us to remove in whatever seems the safer way” (IVapp8). What if, contra-Spinoza and in support of Sharp’s position, we refused to deem contact with nonhuman animals to be evil in the way Spinoza maintains? In this case we would seem to have no reason to “remove” nonhumans from among us.

Purporting to locate Spinoza's anxiety when faced with collapsing species boundaries, Sharp argues in favor of this type of circumnavigation. In making this proposal she claims to be reading Spinoza against himself.

Spinoza continues, "On the other hand, whatever we deem good, that is, advantageous for preserving our being and for enjoying a rational life, it is permissible for us to *take for our use and to use it as we please*. And as an absolute rule, it is permissible by the highest natural right for everyone to do what he judges to be to his own advantage" (IVapp8, emphasis mine). His phrasing here in the appendix reproduces the exact phrasing from the body of part IV, where he encourages the same "usage" with(out) respect in particular to nonhuman animals, namely our right of "making use of them as we please" (IVP37s1). Sharp does not deny his claim about an absolute human right to usage, but instead seeks to satisfy its criterion by affirming that affective contact can be conceived as one example of increasing human pleasure and intensifying human power.

But we must be careful to recognize what would be conceded if we were to agree to these premises, in the context of pressing environmental problems that stem from abuses against animals. Spinoza's stipulation, his license to kill in whatever manner and to whichever scale we deem appropriate, would not only condone killing for nourishment, or for recreation. It would also justify much less licit practices like large-scale slaughter, as in factory farming, or even malicious animal testing—so long as torture is carried out for the sake of increasing human pleasure or power and decreasing human pain or impotency. Sharp admits as much when introducing her examples of contact, which aim to promote human benefit: "We are rendered powerful *not just by instrumentalizing them as food or test subjects for pharmaceuticals*, but by simple attentive co-presence, or companionship" (Sharp, 2011, p. 64, emphasis mine). Even if we allow that one-on-one contact with nonhuman animals might serve to increase human pleasure or power, still we have to ask: what ethical basis is there, on Spinoza's view, for combatting large-scale injustices like factory farming? Or even for restraining oneself from buying products that support this and other heinously inhumane practices toward nonhuman animals, let alone our shared environments? Is there a basis for abstinence from unnecessary consumption of meat, consumed for the purpose of an unnecessary increase of human pleasure, despite the heedless increase of animal suffering?

A consistent ontological biocentrism, in the absence of axiological biocentrism and the presence of Spinozist determinism, must allow that humans *simply do* whatever we do best. We've become highly skilled in effecting many types of human-to-nonhuman domination, instrumentalization, and, it appears, world-destruction. Such a reduction of "ethics" to the maximization of human power and pleasure comes at an extremely high price, especially at a cultural moment when the stakes have grown so high.

One such example of heightened stakes is taking place in the Amazon, where large swaths of rainforest are clear-cut daily to make room for land upon which to graze cattle (see for example Lovejoy & Nobre, 2018). Such practices simultaneously deplete a primary source of oxygen, eliminate one of earth's most essential carbon sinks, and increase emissions of carbon and methane by adding an increase of cattle where foliage, once part of a flourishing local ecosystem, previously stood. And all this not for the sake of feeding starving human populations (a laudable goal for which a more sustainable, vegetable-based diet would be necessary), but for the sake of economic gain, to increase the power and pleasure of human consumers.

At one point Sharp contrasts Hobbes's view of the human animal with Spinoza's, arguing that Spinoza's view is unquestionably more optimistic about the possibility of human goodness with respect to intra-species relations. She writes, "Spinoza invokes the adage 'man is a God to man' to rebut Hobbes's suggestion that humans have an irreducible lupine tendency that political organization must suppress, precariously and constantly. For Hobbes, one must not forget that 'man is a wolf to man,' even if the sword can maintain godly relations among citizens" (Sharp, 2011, p. 63). On the basis of this comparison she suggests that Hobbes's "image of man as beast" motivates self-negation, or bald-faced denial of *what* we are, for fear of becoming animal.

She then argues that Spinoza likely has Hobbes in mind, writing, "the perpetual fear of our fellow man as predator bars the discovery of those who might be standing beside us, in perfect agreement with our natures" (Sharp, 2011, p. 63). In other words, fear or anxiety in the face of our own animality—fear or anxiety which, she seeks to establish, is principal cause of Spinoza's wrongheaded, anti-animal, human-centered ethics—may be holding us back from "discovering" affective contact with the nonhumans already dwelling beside us. And such contact may turn out to be more than simply predatorial, she suggests. It might also, possibly, be beneficial for us.

Whereas Sharp sets Hobbes's dictum "man is a wolf to man" against Spinoza's "man is a God to man," we recognize that the two statements are not incompatible. Sharp argues in response to Hobbes that wolves don't fight wolves, instead sticking together in a pack. Yet it should be clear that Hobbes's maxim, drawn from Plautus, isn't intended to evoke an image of wolves fighting wolves, as Sharp maintains. Rather, it evokes the image of wolves together preying upon *sheep*, a flock of weaker animals among whom they stalk, unnoticed. Weaker men are like sheep subjugated to the perverse power of the strong; such disharmony would pit individuals of *the same species* against one another and so set their "natures," and what follows to the advantage of each, in insurmountable opposition. Spinoza simply maintains that Hobbesian "wolves" succumb to the affects of beasts when neglecting to seek their *true* advantage, in accordance with reason.

These wolves sink below human "natures" in pursuit of lesser ends, which would presumably provide satisfaction only to beasts, or lesser animals. Such are, Spinoza implies, the pleasure and power that accrue through acts of domination. Man's *becoming wolf* to man, preying upon the weak, would be to seek his own advantage over and against the advantage of others of the same species. And Spinoza strongly objects to such a conception. But he also objects to a Hobbesian conception of the state that would coerce man to be a god to man through fear (cf. IVapp16). Instead and in response he posits that "man is a God to man" by right use of reason.

An originary "fall" from a state of perfection was induced when the first man subverted the demands of his rational nature and began to imitate the affects of beasts (IVP68s). One key proposition that helps us understand the danger involved in such imitation is Proposition 27 of Part III of the *Ethics*: "From the fact that we imagine a thing like ourselves, toward which we have felt no emotion, to be affected by an emotion, we are thereby affected by a similar emotion" (IIIP27). Note the phraseology used after the proof, when he explicates in the Scholium, "This imitation of emotions, when it is related to pain, is called Pity, but when it is related to desire it is called Emulation, which is therefore 'nothing else but the desire of some thing which has been engendered in us from the belief that others similar to ourselves have this same desire'" (IIIP27s).

Pity is a passive emotion of pain (IVP50) that destroys rather than perfecting our nature (IIIP11s). And for Spinoza *pity* is the sole emotion that would lead us to consider extending care or concern to animals of other species. This is precisely what he condemns when chiding “womanish compassion” for animals (IVP37s1; cf. also IIIP22s).

Spinoza has no conception of nature promulgating evil. This is a direct consequence of his thoroughgoing ontological biocentrism, coupled with his determinist thesis. Nature *is*—and, in fact, is perfect (IP33s2)—and so who are we to challenge its preeminence? What right have mere modes to challenge their maker? He claims explicitly that if God has decreed that it be so, reason will not challenge it. In the Scholium to IVP50 he writes, “He who rightly knows that all things follow from the necessity of the divine nature and happen in accordance with the eternal laws and rules of Nature will surely find nothing deserving of hatred, derision, or contempt [and] nor will he pity anyone” (IVP50s, cf. IP33). This note follows the Corollary: “Hence it follows that the man who lives by the dictates of reason endeavors, as far as he can, *not to be touched by pity*” (IVP50cor, my emphasis). Pity, or passive affectation of pain on behalf of another in pain, directly contrasts with our highest good, namely active reasoning in accordance with our nature.

Sean McGrath has recently responded to the posthumanist tendencies of environmentalists inspired by Spinoza, especially through the work of Deleuze and Guattari, “Naturalism without humanism produces a flattened ontology in which nothing is particularly good or evil.” He continues,

We ought to recall that Spinoza’s argument for why we should treat others well is that it is better to be surrounded by friends rather than enemies—i.e., the utilitarian calculus. When we recall that utilitarian thinking is the very core of ecological degradation—everything reduced to exchange-value (in Marx’s language)—the conundrum facing political ecology becomes clear: naturalism without humanism leaves us with nothing but the ethics of capitalism (McGrath, 2018, p. 102).

Especially in light of pressing *practical* consequences, considering the contemporary effects of the modern quest to conquer nature and to put its resources to work “for our pleasure,” the question as to whether Spinoza’s ontology is sufficient to ground care and compassion for animals, and more generally environmental concern, is paramount now more than ever. Even if she operates on the basis of laudable desires to temper Spinoza’s antipathy toward nonhuman animals, and to incorporate animal affects in a more positive light, Sharp’s proposal does not go far enough to challenge Spinoza’s suppositions.

### Conclusion

Sharp’s “ethical” proposal is not properly ethical at all, at least not in any substantive sense. It is perhaps more aptly characterized as an animal *aesthetics*. And this conception is perfectly in line, as far as we can tell, with Deleuze and Guattari’s Spinoza-inspired conception of *becoming animal*, which others have taken up in similar attempts to encourage ethical responsibility toward nonhuman animals from within a generally Spinozist framework. But by now it has become clear that Spinoza’s precise point in condemning interactions with animals is to warn us against just such a notion, on the basis that the majority of humans are indeed likely to “become animals” based on affective contact—and with consequences that extend not just to those outside the species, in line with Spinoza’s fear. This is precisely what Hobbes’s dictum suggests, and what

Spinoza tries to prevent by promoting the right use of reason. For Spinoza, imitating the affects of beasts leads to every manner of “evil.” Recalling Watson’s arguments about what a consistently biocentric ethics—in the presence of Spinozist determinism, and absence of a biocentric axiology—would entail, it appears that endorsing Spinoza’s biocentric ontology opens irrevocably a Pandora’s box of evils.

Axiological anthropocentrism versus axiological biocentrism: why should we care? With Katie McShane we can now affirm that the question is relevant because our ethical attitudes are relevant (McShane, 2007). Mounting consumptive desires for products that expend finite resources excessively, that end valuable lives prematurely, and that tend toward the destruction of all the living, are relevant. We should care because the problems we have pinpointed produce a lack of care for those nonhumans whose suffering is compounded by an anthropocentric axiology. In light of mass injustices promulgated by our species against earth’s nonhuman inhabitants, in consort with the assumption of a modern, paradoxically anthropocentric axiology, such attempts to salvage a weak semblance of sympathy for animals from within a Spinozist framework prove inadequate to address environmental crises fueled in part by, and in consort with abuses in animal ethics, for example in modern industrial animal agriculture. We must care, because in ignoring the question we’re left with the “business-as-usual” scenario, with nonhuman animals still conceived as mere material to be manipulated for human ends. Even despite Spinoza’s ontological rejoinder to Descartes, the animals continue to be practically conceived as mere instruments to be “used for our pleasure.” And business cannot continue as usual.

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