

Animal Affects: Spinoza and the Frontiers of the Human

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Introduction

Seventeenth-century philosophers are frequently reviled for their views of nonhuman animals. It is typical for literature on animal rights to locate the historical origin of our ghastly treatment of animals in the Cartesian worldview (e.g., Regan 1983).² Descartes and his followers receive dubious recognition for disenchanting the natural world and tearing humanity from the fabric of a more integrated relationship to the cosmic order.³ With early modernity, the gods were pulled from the heavens only to be allowed to tyrannize the earth under the banner of natural science and human progress. The familiar narrative maintains that the scientific worldview of the seventeenth century, with its mechanistic portrait of nature as a series of predictable but aimless causes and effects, gave birth to the now dominant commonsense that imagines nature as a spiritless field of resources to be exploited. It is a commonsense in which human creativity and authority are the final word and other beings exist only to serve our ends. As for nonhuman animals, we need not consult their own purposes and pleasures, for, as Descartes's student Malebranche remarks: "They eat without pleasure, cry without pain, grow without knowing it; they desire nothing, fear nothing, know nothing" (Malebranche, quoted in Harrison 1992: 219).

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2 See the Wikipedia entry on "animal rights," which discusses Descartes at length. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Animal_rights> (accessed 3 February, 2011).

3 For a challenge to the view of Descartes as the father of moral indifference toward animals, see Cottingham (1978).

The celebrated voice of the “radical enlightenment” (Israel 2001), Benedict de Spinoza, although not the *locus classicus* of modern anti-animal sentiment, is likewise identified as an enemy of the four-footed kind. According to one commentator, Spinoza is much more hostile to nonhuman animals than Descartes (Wolloch, 2006: 43). Although he was less influential than Descartes, Spinoza stands accused of continuing and even amplifying the justification for the instrumental use of animals by humans. On a biographical note, in contrast to Descartes who was known to have lavished affection upon his canine companion (Vrooman, 1970: 194), Spinoza indulged in the “sadistic” pleasure of encouraging spiders to fight for his twisted amusement (Berman, 1982). In this paper, I argue that Spinoza exhibits ambivalence and anxiety about the human-animal boundary, and this is so precisely because it is within the context of the early modern paradigm shifts that such a boundary becomes all the more permeable. Thus, in contrast to the narrative that claims that the loss of spiritual continuity between animal and human life makes possible the early modern view of beasts as unfeeling machines, Spinoza’s case, we will see, suggests that the increasingly naturalistic worldview threatens to erode the distinction between human and nonhuman animal. It is precisely this erosion that puts philosophers on alert, as it were, and prompts them to assert artificial boundaries in order to preserve (or, fabricate, depending on your perspective) human dignity and distinctiveness.

Indeed, the more a naturalistic and evolutionary worldview took hold, to culminate in Darwinism, the more baroque philosophers’ accounts of human exceptionalism had to become. Such a tendency continues to operate today. Most contemporary philosophers share the Kantian compatibilist view of human freedom that maintains that, although our bodies and behaviors are determined by an entirely predictable chain of cause and effect, morality requires that we attribute to rational beings a free agency that can nowhere be observed except by the inward looking eye of reason (Kant 1999 [1781], A 448/ B 476 – A 452/ B 480). The mysterious moral imperative to attribute a “special cause” to human action, even when human behavior is entirely predictable and can be accounted for the same way as any other natural thing, is a vestige of the wishful thinking that aims to maintain that humans are, concomitantly, natural beings and absolutely distinct in kind from natural things. 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.

In Spinoza's philosophy, God ceases to be a remote and benevolent ruler, analogous to a magistrate, and becomes an immanent principle, infusing each and every being from the "lowest" to the "highest." Thus, Albert Einstein (1929) thought that Spinoza's God might be none other than the lawfulness of the universe, the infinite energetic power that connects each being to every other in a stable and regular fashion. In contrast to the mainstream Enlightenment tradition, Spinoza did not bring God to earth only to relocate divinity in reason. Rather, with his famous formula *Deus sive Natura*, God disappears into nature and dissolves the elect status of humanity (Montag, 1989). Even though his metaphysical system demands it, Spinoza himself does not seem altogether comfortable with the consequences of his metaphysics for human distinctiveness. Thus, while the inevitable consequence of emerging natural science is that humans are a distinctive kind of animal, one of the most rigorously naturalist philosophers aims to insert a rigid boundary between humanity and what he calls "beasts." The importance of the distance between human and animal in the seventeenth century, as I suggested above, arises because it is precisely what can no longer be metaphysically sustained. That is, Spinoza exhibits profound anxiety about human and animal intimacy as he strives to establish the view that we obey a natural rather than a spiritual order. Perhaps the amplified "cruelty" some detect in Spinoza follows from his thoroughgoing naturalism, which tore down the wall between mind and body that Descartes erected, which distinguishes minded beings from the rest of nature.

Like any broad narrative about the history of ideas, this one involves a number of simplifications. My hope is that by taking a closer look Spinoza's notorious remarks on animals, we can understand better why it becomes especially urgent in this period – as well as our own – for philosophers to emphasize a distinction between human and nonhuman animals. In diagnosing the concerns that give rise to the desire to dismiss the independent purposes of animals, we may come to focus on a new aspect of what needs to change about contemporary thinking on species divisions. 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. Like Spinoza, we want to say that humans are like and unlike animals. As a simply descriptive claim, it may be true and

innocuous. Yet, the way we affirm our proximity and distance from nonhuman animals requires careful attention. Spinoza viewed this proximity as a source of danger. We might do well to emphasize, with thinkers such as Donna Haraway (2003), how our proximity and difference are also sources of pleasure and power, both to be able to enjoy the affectionate bond that can often develop between humans and our animal companions but also to quell the anxiety that might encourage us to exploit and abuse them.

Animal Natures

Commentators are right to recognize that Spinoza exhibits no sympathy for nonhuman animals. He asserts our right to kill them, use them as suits our purposes, and expresses contempt for that “womanly” compassion that seeks to protect beasts from the excesses of man. He claims that animals have different “affects” and thus different “natures” from humans, and therefore we may use them as we see fit (E IVp37s1).⁴ Thus, in his remarks on animals he seems to insert a meaningful difference between both humans and nonhuman animals and between men and women. Women, according to Spinoza, tend to be overly compassionate toward animals, to feel with them, as the word implies, and thus fail to appreciate the difference in animal and human natures. Such feeling together of human and beast is inappropriate according to Spinoza, since it is not a fruitful exercise of right, which he identifies with power, understood as capacity (TTP 16.1). Spinoza maintains that it is to the detriment of our power, to our capacities as the kinds of beings that we are, to identify with the plight of animals and to consider their requirements to be on par with our own (cf. Montag, 2009). How does he support the claim that animals have different natures from humans? In this section, I will address this crucial question in effort to understand

⁴ All references to the *Ethics* are to *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. I. ed. and trans. E.M. Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). I adopt the following abbreviations for the *Ethics*: Roman numerals refer to parts; ‘p’ denotes proposition; ‘c’ denotes corollary; ‘def’ denotes definition; ‘d’ denotes demonstration; ‘s’ denotes scholium (e.g., ‘E IIp38c’ refers to *Ethics*, part II, proposition 38, corollary). All quotations from the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* [TTP] are taken from Jonathan Israel and Michael Silverthorne’s translation (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2007). All references to the *Tractatus Politicus* [TP] are to Shirley’s translation (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000). Citations of the TP and TTP refer to the chapters.sections (e.g., ‘11.4’ refers to chapter 11, section 4). All Latin passages refer to Spinoza Opera, ed. Carl Gebhardt, 4 vols. (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1925).

why he thinks their powers are incompatible with our own. In the following section, I will consider an unusual passage from Spinoza's masterwork, *Ethics*, which calls into question the rigid boundary he identifies between humans and animals. Moreover, in this same passage, he avoids suggesting that woman is destructively compassionate and thus inferior to man. So, while we will examine his claims for specific difference, we will see that he does not maintain them consistently. Such a finding implies that he glimpses the potential of his metaphysics to subvert the human-animal distinction, and yet shrinks from it whenever he sees fit to make an assertion about how we ought to regard our beastly cousins.

Although in contrast to Descartes, Spinoza does not deny that animals have sensations and feelings, he does justify preferring human interest as a general rule because "they do not agree in nature with us, and their affects are different in nature from human affects" (E IVp37s). Nevertheless, in his account of the fall from grace in the garden of Eden, he attributes Adam's loss of freedom to the fact that the first man began to imitate the affects of beasts rather than those of his partner, Eve (E IVp68s). We thus see that animal affects, whatever they are like for Spinoza, are not so different that we cannot be profoundly and perhaps irreversibly changed by them. While I will discuss Spinoza's peculiar version of the Fall in the next section, this point highlights the need to explain the character of human nature according to Spinoza.

Genevieve Lloyd has remarked that Spinoza's account of different "natures" belonging to humans and animals is "too imprecise" and does not help us to understand Spinoza's assertion of our rights over animals (Lloyd, 1980: 302). On a casual reading, he seems to claim that human nature is simply different in kind from bestial nature and thus we do not regard ourselves to be bound to them. Our affects, natures, and vital interests differ, and thus we have no moral or prudential reasons to preserve and enhance the lives of animals. Unlike Descartes and the idealist tradition that he inaugurates, however, this lack of imperative to care for animals does not follow from an absolute division between humans and animals. For Spinoza, there is no unbridgeable chasm between the conscious animal and the unconscious thing. Descartes, Kant, and Hegel frequently appeal to the infinite difference between humans and "things," a category that includes nonhuman animals, by virtue of an exclusive mental power to think, will, and represent our sensations. Yet, for Spinoza,

there are only differences of degree between humans, animals, machines, and rocks. Whereas Descartes maintains that beings have rational minds or they do not think at all, Spinoza asserts that all beings are, albeit to different degrees, animate (E IIp13s). We can see that Descartes's insistence on the universal rationality of humans was embraced by women and facilitated the dawn of humanism,⁵ in which each and every one is owed the respect of being called a "person." The flipside, of course, of claiming that mentality is all or nothing, is that it installs a stark opposition between minded and non-minded beings, and arouses debates that continue today about those putatively borderline figures – the cognitively disabled, the insane, the child, and the great ape – who clearly communicate but do not exhibit the acknowledged signs of reason and freedom of will. With the humanist tradition and its view of universal and equal dignity proper to all rational beings, it is absolutely wrong to use another person as a means to one's ends (Kant, 1997 [1788]). Nonhumans, however, ceased to belong to a spectrum of animate existence and became "things," the rightful means to the ends of persons. Arguments for a universal rational capacity proper to all humans and absent in all nonhumans, of course, coincided with the expansion of the slave trade and the millions of people who were used as tools were argued to belong to the category of things. The logic of humanism is Manichean: each being is or is not a person.

For Spinoza, in contrast, there is no ontological chasm between what has a mind and what does not. The foundations of reason exist as much in rocks, salamanders, and computers as they do in those beings we call "human" (cf. Melamed, 2011). Moreover, with the exception of the infinite mind of God, rationality is a matter of degree, and there is no one whose rationality is not "infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes" (E IVp3). Humanity, or personhood is not an absolute category and rationality is necessarily fragile and precarious in everyone (E IVappVII).

Rationality, for Spinoza, emerges out of the properties that bodies have in common. When bodies encounter one another, Spinoza claims that the mind cannot but perceive what they have in common, which results in certain ideas being adequate in "all men"

⁵ Harth (1992).

(E IIp38c). It is unclear why Spinoza only mentions that human minds perceive these common properties, but part II of his *Ethics* is expressly dedicated to explaining the nature and origin of the human mind. Without getting into the obscurity of his account of the “foundations of our reasoning” (called “common notions”), we can observe that reason depends upon our having sustained contact with those similar beings with whom we can, according to Spinoza, “agree in nature.” Nevertheless, Spinoza does not claim that humans automatically share a nature. There is no universal, overarching human essence that might tie all of us together. On his view, each being in nature – organic or inorganic – has a singular essence (or nature), a unique ratio of motion and rest and a distinctive striving to persevere in being (*conatus*) (E IIIp6). Desire is “the very essence of [a] man” (IIIp9s) and “the desire of each individual differs from the desire of another as much as the nature, or essence, of the one differs from the other” (IIIp57d). Spinoza notes the differences in nature between a human and a horse, but also between a drunk and a philosopher (let us not speak of the drunk philosopher, however!). When distinct desires come into contact with one another, they will “agree” more or less with one another, and thus be more or less productive of ideas that enable us to think and act more powerfully. Each being – a squirrel, a table, or an astronaut – aims to produce effects that enhance and preserve its nature, such that those with overlapping requirements tend to amplify each other’s power (Cf. Matheron, 2009). “Things which are said to agree in nature are understood to agree in power” (IVp32d). Adequate shelter and heat in Montréal during the winter, for example, preserves my being, along with that of my child, cats, electronics, and books. What maintains our being concurs to various extents. When Spinoza claims that “only insofar as men live according to the guidance of reason, must they always agree in nature,” he is making two claims: first, humans, by virtue of our humanity, do not always agree in nature; and, second, when we do those things that most preserve and enhance our being, we will also amplify the powers of those who share our needs.

When Spinoza claims that “the law against killing animals is based more on empty superstition and womanly compassion than sound reason” and urges us to “establish a bond with men, but not with brutes” (E IVp37s1; translation modified), he worries that feeling with and for nonhuman animals undermines the human bond that enables us to think and act in a way that best preserves and amplifies the distinctive powers of our bodies and minds. He insists that “they do not agree in nature with us, and their

affects are different in nature from human affects,” because he thinks that joining with brutes encourages irrational and “subhuman” behavior. In fact, as I discuss at much greater length elsewhere (Sharp, 2011: Ch. 6), every time Spinoza mentions humans and animals, it is in the context of decrying the desire among some to reject human community in favor of a wild freedom in association with animals. He despairs at the “satirists” and “melancholics” who “disdain men and admire the brutes” rather than helping their fellow man and “joining forces” against “the dangers which threaten on all sides” (E IVp35s). Although Spinoza claims that animal affects are simply different in nature from human affects, he urgently exhorts his readers toward human compassion and away from the animal compassion that he fears will lead us astray from “helping one another.” Thus, it is not that humans cannot feel with the animals, or that animals do not have feelings, but rather that humans and animals seem to Spinoza to be too close to one another, too similar, and too attractive to one another. As I argue elsewhere (Sharp, 2011: Ch. 6), he worries that human incivility, greatly in evidence in war-torn seventeenth-century Europe, will render “a life that is uncultivated and wild” increasingly appealing, and prompt “many, from too great an impatience of mind...[to prefer] to live among the brutes rather than among men” (E IVappXIII). However justified Spinoza’s paranoid fantasies were of a massive retreat from the labors of building a thriving human community, it is clear that he is concerned to erect a boundary between “man” and “beast” in order to promote a human solidarity that is in no way guaranteed by the objectively shared interests of “human nature.”

In particular, the profound fragility of rationality prompts Spinoza to erect a pragmatic, ethical boundary between humans and animals. Without “mutual help,” we can neither build an effective human society nor cultivate the powers of our minds and bodies, which are different in character but not in kind from those of other natural beings. It is the lack of a stable and given human power that makes it especially important to come together and produce those commonalities that might protect us from “the dangers which threaten on all sides” (E IVp35s). The irony, of course, is that those dangers are, first of all, one another. If man appeared to Hobbes, in Spinoza’s day, to be a wolf to man, it is due first and foremost to the spiritually inspired wars over the right to represent and honor God’s commands. For Spinoza, the absence of an invulnerable reservoir of rationality or an infinite power of volition as a

universal feature of human being causes him to differentiate between those who, like women, seem unable to command themselves sufficiently to rule or participate in the political process (TP 11.4), and to warn men against identifying with beasts, lest they become them.

Although, from a Spinozan point of view, humanists are wrong to ground ethics and politics on the absolute difference between “persons” and “things” (cf. Poole, 1996), the permeability of humanity is precisely what authorizes the domination and exploitation of nonhuman animals. Spinoza’s example shows that belief in the mutability of humanity and the permeability of the species frontier does not necessarily foster a pro-animal philosophy, and may even inflame anxiety about human affection for “beasts.” Nevertheless, I will suggest in my conclusion, from within a Spinozan framework, that the proximity of humanity and beastliness can be a source of power and pleasure. Still, we ought not presume that either the porosity of species boundaries or the resemblance between humans and many nonhuman animals suffices to engender an appreciation of nonhuman life. Spinoza is but one instance of a thinker for whom this intimacy is first and foremost a cause for concern. In the following section, I proceed to examine Spinoza’s account of affective contagion between beasts and the first man. I conclude with a brief discussion of how this principle of contagion and communication might be affirmed rather than feared, *pace* Spinoza.

Animal affects (and) the first man⁶

A parable for the human condition, the story of the expulsion from the garden of Eden is, of course, one of the most discussed stories in the Jewish and Christian traditions. It gives voice to a notion of human self-consciousness as that paradoxical grasp of ourselves as perfect and close to God, but also weak and alienated from the natural world. What dualism attributes to the difference between our spiritual and our corporeal natures, the Fall portrays in temporal terms. Our sense of immortality, infinite intelligence, and uniqueness is a primordial memory, which, by virtue of an

⁶ This section and some of the conclusion borrow from the analysis in my book (Sharp, 2011: Ch. 6).

original sin, was lost and through which we were condemned to be, in the words of Augustine, “mortal, ignorant, and enslaved to the flesh” (1993 [387-389], 105). To scan the history of philosophy and theology for interpretations of the story is to find innumerable accounts of what human perfection consists in, and what precipitates its loss. For Maimonides, an example surely well-known to Spinoza, Adam’s original perfection was his flawless intellectual grasp of truth and falsity, which, by virtue of an appetitive eruption, devolved into the lesser, practical knowledge of good and evil (1995 [12th century], Bk. I, Ch. 2). In contrast, as Nancy Levene points out, for Augustine prelapsarian perfection consists in a perfect will, which is imperfectly exercised by the first man (2006, 9). Original sin is then the paradoxical necessity of the entirely uncoerced will, which, in its total indetermination, can choose evil as easily as good.

Spinoza invokes the above story a number of times to illustrate aspects of the human condition (E IVp68s, TTP, 2.14, 4.9-11, TP, 2,14). Spinoza thereby participates in the tradition of treating Adam as an archetype of human existence, and puts his characteristic naturalist spin on the well-known tale. Adam serves, especially, as an example of our limitations, with which we must come to terms if we are to optimize our natural powers. Spinoza retells a rather peculiar version of the story in the *Ethics*, in which Adam’s imitation of the affects of beasts precipitates the Fall. In contrast to other philosophical glosses on the story, Spinoza’s Adam is not originally perfect in either intellect or will. He is, in mind and body, “like us...subject to affects” (TP 2.6). Although she barely appears in this retelling, the only intimation of perfection in Eden is the “wife, who agreed completely with [Adam’s] nature.” What was perfect, on Spinoza’s account, was not a particular human faculty or power, but the seamless suitability of the human pair, the fact that “there could be nothing in Nature more useful to him than she.” Yet Adam forsook the perfect communion (*convenientia*) he might have enjoyed with Eve “after he believed the beasts to be like himself” and “began to imitate their affects” (E IVp68s).

The lesson of paradise lost, on Spinoza’s naturalized rendition, is that the perfection of our power can only be had in the human bond. Spinoza’s account of “the fall,” we will see, reveals that even if he is sharply critical of the philosophical pillars maintaining *humanism*, he in no way advocates a turn away from humans. On the

contrary, although Spinoza staunchly denies human exceptionalism, he urges us to seek human unity above all else.

Let us consider more closely his account of “the first man.”

And so we are told that God prohibited a free man from eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and that as soon as he should eat of it, he would immediately fear death, rather than desiring to live. Then, man having found a mate who completely agreed with his nature, he knew that there could be nothing in Nature more useful to him than she; but that, believing that the beasts were similar to him (*bruta sibi similia esse credidit*), he soon began to imitate their affects (see IIIp27) and allowed his freedom to escape. (E IVp68s)

An unusual version of the story in which neither Eve nor a deceitful animal seems to do anything, Adam loses his freedom by virtue of a belief in his similarity to nonhuman animals, which prompts him to incorporate brutish affects. The “social psychology” of the *Ethics* describes an involuntary circulation of affect among those beings we imagine to be similar to us (IIIp27): we feel what those who appear to be similar to us seem to be feeling. There is a lot of room in terms of who or what is similar to us. Since it is an involuntary form of corporeal communication, I take Spinoza to be implying that we cannot but feel something similar to those around us in a crowd of people cheering exuberantly for their favorite football team (even if one, like this author, does not especially enjoy sports), but that we may not feel anything like what a bird feels when a flock of pigeons suddenly takes off toward a near rooftop (which is not to say that we do not feel anything upon noticing the coordinated flight of a bunch of feathered creatures). Yet, Adam felt with and like the neighboring beasts in the garden, which shows that nothing prevents us from communicating affectively with nonhuman beings – beings that, Spinoza maintains, have a “different nature” from ours. Whatever difference of nature exists between human and bestial bodies, it is not so profound that we are not susceptible to genuine transformations provoked by animal affect. Indeed, in this case, the contagion of animal affects explains what is traditionally represented as a dramatic transmogrification of human existence that accounts for pain, evil, shame, and the need for morality, among other things. The communication of affects between Adam and the beasts marks the dawn of at least one narrative of human genesis and history. That is, on Spinoza’s

undeveloped account, involuntary communication with animal affects marks something important about the human condition itself.

As we observed above, humans do not enjoy a natural accord by virtue of our shared humanity. “Men can disagree in nature insofar as they are torn by ... passions” (E IVp33). Yet, insofar as two beings agree in power, they agree in nature (E IVp32d). Spinoza uses the word *convenientia* (from *convenio*) to indicate agreement, which implies a coming together rather than an identity. In contrast, when two natures do not accord with one another, they decompose one another’s power. Warren Montag, in his reading of this passage, therefore suggests that “the inhuman” names for Spinoza all that threatens to decompose our power (Montag 2009), which is not safeguarded by stable species boundaries. It is, I suggest, the lack of ontologically grounded difference between man and beast that arouses Spinoza’s concern about human-animal compassion and companionship. His claim about the incompatibility between our natures signals his concern that human agency is utterly fragile and that our attraction to nonhuman animals somehow threatens it. Why would Spinoza think that the human tendency to emulate animals is so great that he must regularly assert our difference from animals, a difference he has otherwise been at great pains to attenuate?

In the story of the garden of Eden, at least, we can observe that Adam had before him in the garden another human whose nature (essence) agreed perfectly with his own. Adam and Eve might have joined minds and bodies to engender great joy and lively ideas, and thereby enhance their perfection and agency. Had he turned toward Eve rather than undergoing the affects of beasts, Adam might have enjoyed the freedom that emerges when “two individuals of entirely the same nature are joined to one another,” composing “an individual twice as powerful as each one” (E IVp18s). There was no other being in the garden with which he could have combined powers to better effect; nothing could have increased his power more than she. Yet, despite the fact that he “knew that there could be nothing in nature more useful to him than she,” his feeling of kinship with the beasts disrupted the human bond that might have allowed him to live, like philosophers and gods, beyond good and evil (Ep 19).

Spinoza’s odd recapitulation of the Fall follows the proposition that reads, “If men were born free, they would form no concept of good and evil so long as they remain

free.” The counterfactual in the proposition suggests that Spinoza does not, like other interpreters of the story, maintain that Adam was originally free, equipped with perfect knowledge. Indeed, he begins his account of the Fall elsewhere as follows:

Yet most people believe that the ignorant violate the order of Nature rather than conform to it; they think of men in Nature as a dominion within a dominion. They hold that the human mind is not produced by natural causes but is directly created by God and is so independent of other things that it has an absolute power [*potestatem*] to determine itself and use reason in a correct way. (TP 2.6)

Spinoza proceeds to meditate again on the Fall and concludes that “it must be admitted that it was not in the power of the first man to use reason aright, and that, like us, he was subject to affects” (TP 2.6). Adam shows us that, originally and irreducibly, the human condition is one of “intellectual vulnerability” (Ravven, 2001: 29). Our minds are vulnerable, moreover, not because they are entwined with our bodies, but because they are “produced by natural causes.” Minds, no less than bodies, are bound in a community of cause and effect, necessarily affecting and affected by ambient forces, including nonhuman ones, like beasts.

Neither Adam nor any of us is born free and omniscient. Spinoza takes “as a foundation what everyone must acknowledge: that all men are born ignorant of causes” (E Iapp). As a result, we are compelled to look to a “model [*exemplar*] of human nature” and to form concepts of good and evil relative to this model. “I shall understand by good what we know certainly is a means by which we may approach nearer and nearer to the model of human nature we set before ourselves,” and by evil “what we certainly know prevents us from becoming like that model” (E IVpref). Thus, like Maimonides and unlike many in the Christian tradition, knowledge of good and evil is not an index of our perfection. Shlomo Pines thus remarks that, for Spinoza and Maimonides, Adam did not illicitly taste knowledge of good and evil and thus receive punishment lest he become too powerful “like God,” but that knowledge of good and evil, being an inferior mode of knowing, is itself the punishment for transgression (Pines, 1983: 149)! Although I think it is not quite right to assert that knowledge of good and evil follows from the affective imitation, since, on Spinoza’s

telling, I think that Adam knew what was good – “he knew that there could be nothing in Nature” better for him than Eve – but his knowledge was overwhelmed by his feeling of similitude with respect to the animals. Pines is astute to note, however, that moral knowledge is a consequence of our finitude according to Spinoza. The human condition forces us to calculate the relative virtues of good and evil in a given situation to remain viable. Moreover, to have a moral sensibility means that we must, like Adam, act without awareness of what our decisions will yield. We reach out for the means of becoming more powerful, or we find ourselves attracted to what appear to be sources of vitality and pleasure – “So when the woman saw the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes...” (*Genesis* 3:6)⁷ – but there is never any guarantee that these ambient agencies will amplify our capacities, let alone in the ways anticipated.

Whether Spinoza tells the story as a decomposition provoked by toxic fruit or the affects of beasts, the Fall is a story of a finite, imperfect being, undermined by a disabling relationship. Adam loses freedom (power) because he does not know what kind of being he is, in multiple respects. Adam exhibits what might be called the “humanist problem”: Adam believes that he is different in kind from other beings, elevated out of nature, unaffected by the sensual and affective operation of cause and effect. That is, he does not adequately appreciate that he is a part of nature, and therefore profoundly affected by his involvements with others, both human and nonhuman. The abstraction of the garden of Eden allows one to see a man in relationship to some of the greatest influences on his freedom and power: God/ nature, woman, and beast. These impact his power the most because they are potent features of his imaginary life, and fantasy matters. A lot. With Adam’s tale, we observe the human tendency to imagine God as a legislator, his human mate as a danger rather than a helper, and beasts as worthy of emulation. Spinoza thinks that we go astray when we dream that we are God ruling over nature, or evade human solidarity, or imagine ourselves as beasts, for we estrange ourselves from those to whom we are, in actuality, most similar.

⁷ I am citing from the revised standard version, available online at < <http://www.bibleontheweb.com/>> (accessed 2 February, 2011).

The tragedy of the Fall is a tragedy Spinoza observes everyday: it is the failure to regard the human bond as the most essential source of power and freedom. His entire philosophical project urges us to see in one another the greatest source of strength rather than predation (“man is a wolf to man”) or deceit (“beware the sirens’ song”). At least one moral of the story is that, despite his denial of a universal feature of humanity supplied by Cartesian rationality and will, Spinoza urges an ethical and political identification with fellow humans. Spinoza refers to our “desire to form an idea of man, as a model of human nature to which we may look,” and thereby warns us against striving to be other than we are. He notes that “a horse is destroyed as much if it is changed into a man as if it is changed into an insect” (E IVpref) to remind us that no being is liberated by transcending its nature.⁸ To become as free and powerful as we can hope to become, Spinoza maintains that “it is necessary to come to know both our nature’s power and its lack of power” (IVp17s). Adam, our archetype, reminds us that we will never enjoy a mind “so independent of other things that it has absolute power to determine itself and use reason in a correct way.” Indeed, “it is no more in our power to have a sound mind than a sound body” (TP 2.6). Yet Adam’s story is not such a tragic story, since the portal to freedom has not been closed. He, and perhaps we, need, first and foremost, to overcome our estrangement from Eve to amplify our powers. Yet, as finite beings, we will never cease feeling torn in different directions – toward and away from our fellow human beings – because we are still part of nature, mutating in response to our surroundings. Sometimes it is not so surprising that we might prefer beast to man.

Spinoza’s philosophical naturalism seeks to portray singular beings, especially “men,” as he says many times, as they are, and not as we would like them to be. But we cannot avoid erecting exemplars, or models, that give shape to our projected futures and the life we hope to build. Spinoza’s suspicion toward universal categories like species notwithstanding, he maintains the need for provisional boundaries to our idea of “humanity.” He urges us to think of ourselves in a way that excludes other kinds of beings and warns against allowing our fantasies of other kinds of beings to govern our guiding fiction, the human ideal. Spinoza’s story of the fall suggests that Adam

⁸ Spinoza is thus not a friend to “transhumanism,” a peculiar philosophical vision of technologically produced immortality. See Wolfe 2009: xv.

suffered because his self-ideal allowed him to blur himself with beasts and alienated himself from Eve. Despite Spinoza's insistence elsewhere that women are naturally inferior to men (TP 11.4), it is significant that sexual difference does not diminish the perfect agreement between Adam and Eve. We might even detect, in the story about Adam's mistaken identification with beasts, an obscure consciousness on Spinoza's part of the barrier posed to human community by (male perception of) sexual difference. If Adam had been perfectly free, he would have acted on his clear and distinct perception of the perfect agreement between his body and Eve's. Moreover, he would not have done so because he viewed himself and her to be equally human, equally worthy of personhood, but because he perceived their distinctive natures to be perfectly compatible with one another. Without perfect awareness of which bodies best agree with ours, Spinoza thinks we can lay down a general maxim that agency is most fortified by human community and friendship. Adam's exemplarity reveals that, first and foremost, humans need compatible partners to enhance their minds and bodies. Moreover, in contrast to the Aristophanic ambition, Spinoza urges us to join ourselves to as many partners as possible. An enabling exemplar of humanity shows that paradise is regained when we "so agree in all things that the minds and bodies of all would compose, as it were, one mind and one body" and men "want nothing for themselves which they do not desire for other men" (E IVp18s; cf. IVp68s, the conclusion of the parable of the Fall).

Spinoza contra Spinoza

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 (1998 [1642], epistle dedicatory). Humans can be political animals, but this possibility, for Hobbes, must be produced and then vigilantly maintained by the state's monopoly on violence. Although I lack space to justify this claim now, Hobbes's example points to the possibility that an image of man as beast can motivate self-negation rather than the affirmation of our affinities with animals. Moreover, Spinoza may be thinking of Hobbes when he suggests that 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. In Hobbes' state of nature, the threat of the (imagined) wolf eclipses Eve, and arouses the admittedly present human susceptibility to imitate the affects of the ferocious and overly self-protective guardian and tear one another apart. Of course, in reality, wolves are much more peaceful toward their own kind than many humans, but these philosophers play with the image of the animal-man as the figure of aggression and bloodlust.

The threat of the animal-man is real in a certain sense, since Spinoza's naturalization of humanity is such that neither language nor volition nor reason distinguishes him finally from beasts. Thus, Spinoza may be even more vulnerable to the accusation, so often hurled at Hobbes by his contemporaries, of animalizing man (cf. Ashcraft, 1971). There is no clear boundary between species and no definite moment of anthropogenesis for Spinoza. Thus he inserts boundaries based on his preconceptions about what kinds of associations are best able to secure our power to think and act, in a world in which we cannot but be affected by the affects of beings like and unlike us.

If Spinoza's concern, however, was human finitude and the fragility of our thinking power, subject always to passions, he overlooked the enabling possibilities of beastly affective contagion. Thinkers such as Deleuze and Haraway suggest that an exclusionary paradigm of humanity that exiles dogs, plants, and robots from our sphere of primary concern may be a self-negation not unlike the one Spinoza worries about in his retelling of *Genesis*. Denying our affinities with animals may be a separation of ourselves from our own power, just as Adam's denial of his affinity with Eve cost him a powerful possibility for solidarity and communion. Posthumanist thinkers suggest that by disavowing that we only are who we are by virtue of the bacteria, nematodes, pace-makers, affections and labors of companion animals, and so many other involvements with nonhumans, we mutilate ourselves and the vital forces in our midst. It seems hard to deny that, just as Adam was weakened by forgetting his need for Eve, we are diminished if we disregard our need for animal affection. There is clear evidence that our minds no less than our bodies are enabled by relationships with nonhuman animals. We are rendered powerful not just by instrumentalizing them as food or test subjects for pharmaceuticals, but by simple attentive co-presence, or companionship. Alzheimer's patients, for example, show improved memory upon

friendly interaction with cats or dogs (Hines and Frederickson, 1997). Likewise, research reveals a “cardiovascular benefit” for males with dogs (perhaps Adam had a heart defect?). 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 (Garrity and Stallones, 1997). Although Spinoza does not offer reasons to proscribe human interest in favor of animal flourishing (as Genevieve Lloyd argues), 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. Indeed, in our epoch, it may be a sign of progress that young people are tempted to imagine romance with werewolves.

In this article, I have sought to make three points. First, Spinoza’s case suggests that the early modern tendency to assert a rigid species boundary may not be a result of a mechanistic worldview that ceases to see nonhuman beings as part of a (hierarchically ordered) cosmic whole in which we are all embedded. Rather, mechanism, for Hobbes, Spinoza, and a number of philosophers influenced by their naturalism and materialism, can imply an increased proximity among humans and animals. This proximity, along with the permeability and plasticity of human nature suggested by early modern naturalists, threatens the distinctiveness of humanity. Indeed, the lack of metaphysical frontiers is precisely why Spinoza and others regularly insist on the difference between humans and animals. Thus, those who aim to defend animals by highlighting our similarities might take heed of the fact that humans have been historically threatened by these affinities, such that they seek to deny rather than acknowledge the aims and needs of nonhuman life.

Second, my interpretation of Spinoza is meant to show that he was not so much anxious to preserve a sense of human superiority over nonhuman nature (cf. E Iapp), but rather to affirm the human bond and its power to nourish our minds and bodies. For Spinoza, arguing on behalf of animals sounds like a threat to human solidarity. This feeling of the threat posed by compassion for beasts may or may not have been paranoid, but the difficulty of producing durable forms of human solidarity was certainly palpable in his day, as it is in ours, albeit in different ways. I suspect similar fears are in evidence when people react so passionately to demands to curb our

exploitation of animals. As someone who is horrified by our treatment of nonhuman animals, I seek to understand and respond constructively to the incredulity and fear provoked by animal activism. Perhaps it will help to take into account the way that compassion for animals is felt by many as a rejection of humanity.

Finally, I argued that, by denying the affective community we share with nonhuman animals, Spinoza overlooks the joyful and enabling features of our proximity to them. As many of us have occasion to experience the uplift and pleasure of simply being near nonhuman animals, we might seek to better appreciate the mysterious and involuntary corporeal communication that contributes so positively to the quality of our lives and to those of our animal companions. Although some animal rights activists oppose pet “ownership,” and it can certainly take many ugly forms, I doubt our anthropocentric psychology has even begun to glimpse the urgent affinity children feel with animals or the thrill a dog feels within her human pack. We long for even the most subtle contact with nonhuman animals, and the delight is only a hint of what we might be able to enjoy if we came increasingly to see their thriving and happiness as a condition of our own.

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