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Ethical Life after Humanism

Toward an Alliance between an Ethics of Eros and the Politics of Renaturalization

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In this essay, we aim to ground an alliance between Cynthia Willett's theory of an ethics of eros¹ and Hasana Sharp's argument for a politics of renaturalization.² Both approaches seek a vocabulary and practices for ethical life that the requirement of rationality does not circumscribe. Traditionally, ethical and political theory have as their starting points the idea of rational man as the aspirant norm. While it is acknowledged that no one is born rational – indeed, the empirical necessity of childhood is a kind of obsession and anxiety throughout the history of political thought – many agree that political and ethical principles should follow from what a reasonable individual would choose if unencumbered by the particular demands of his sensuous life. Feminists have long questioned both the desirability and possibility of this abstract notion of the autonomous man making decisions that do not reflect the particularity of his attachments, desires, and needs. If ethics and political institutions reflect what this imaginary figure would hypothetically choose, it is hard to see how they respond adequately to the texture and diversity of human lives.

Many feminists call for an ethics that reflects and respects our lives as desiring, needy beings implicated in a complex network of attachments and relationships.³ Moreover, they call attention to how our desires and needs generate not only vulnerability and dependency but also the communal infrastructure through which our lives become meaningful and our bodies and minds become powerful.⁴ We are not just affected by our sensuous involvement with others, we *are* that involvement. We join the feminist call for an ethics and politics that follows from a profound acknowledgement of life as a rich network of relations.

The relations to which an ethics of eros and renaturalization must attend include social relations – the tender ministrations of mothers, lovers, and friends that sustain and nourish (and sometimes threaten) each of us. Our lives, bodies, and minds, however, are also deeply involved with the non-human environment. Our existence depends on air, water, bacteria, shelter, and infinite other nonhuman beings. Our desires and needs include a habitable environment and, arguably, the indulgence of “biophilia,” what E.O. Wilson describes as a basic attraction to life and lifelike processes.⁵ The increasing fragility of our ecosystems suggests that there is more need than ever for an ethics that goes not just beyond man – although that is certainly an ongoing project – but beyond the human.⁶ This essay is an attempt to ally our approaches in the feminist effort to produce a broad basis for ethics, allowing for a robust consideration of nonhuman nature. This effort will likely raise more questions than it answers, but we hope others will join us in the project of developing a feminist, posthumanist ethics of desire.

Eros ethics, in contrast with logocentric moral philosophies, foregrounds desire as the source for a compelling vision of life. Yet eros as desire is also not reducible to subjective preference. The use of the ambiguous Greek term eros indicates that its meaning is not fully determinate, but interpretative and perhaps even mythic in import. In his eros dialogues, *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, Plato portrays eros as a daimon that overpowers the soul with a drive toward transcendence, generating images of life’s meaning and purpose. Even more, the logocentric emphasis on the individual cultivation of capacities for reason and control over subjective desires occludes not only transcendent but also nonconscious and communal dimensions of erotic existence from substantial consideration in philosophical thought. This occlusion begins with Plato’s own logocentric turn

and culminates in Kant's development of a moral system based on universal laws found in pure reason. Hegel modulates this rationalist legacy by embedding the modern moral individual in the traditions, rituals, and practices of ethical life. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, he interprets the individual not primarily in terms of rational control over wayward subjective impulses – although this feature of philosophy's rationalist heritage does play an important role – but as a struggle for recognition. Self-consciousness is first and foremost a desire, which is not to be understood as an interest in survival but as a desire for the desire of the other, and is, thus, at root social. Even if Hegel would aim finally to locate the practices or institutions that might subdue desire through logos, his dialectic of self-constitution turns on the real-life drama of intersubjectivity. For Hegel, this drama – the master/slave dialectic – begins with misrecognition, social conflict, and ontological alienation, but aims for reconciliation. The self emerges through the figure of the master, who gains an illusion of recognition for his spirited courage, at the expense of another who yields to his show of bravado and submits to a life of servitude. As Hegel insists, the coercion and subordination at the heart of the master/slave relation renders the master's claims to selfhood and recognition fraudulent. However, Hegel can only envision the overcoming of this fraudulent recognition through the rise of the rational citizen in the modern nation-state. He fails to question the ideology of servitude against historical accounts of ancient debt bondage or sexual and race-based slavery.⁷ He fails to question the disciplining practices that pose basic drives and vulnerabilities as asocial or savage and in need of rational suppression. And he fails to question the ethnocentric or humanist boundaries of the modern state.

By the twentieth century, it became clear that the Western canonical thinkers had in many ways set philosophy as a moral discipline on the wrong path. In response to the Holocaust, Levinas rejects the ethnic bonds of the nation-state and the figure of the master in the configuration of desire and ethical life, and establishes instead the ethical priority of the vulnerable and stranger. His "alterity ethics" – also known as "response ethics" or even as an "ethics of eros" – exposes the inhumane blindness that can warp considerations of rational and moral law or patriotic duty, and regrounds ethics in sheer generosity to the Other.⁸ In fact, eros ethics recuperates a critical tradition that Enrique Dussel traces back further than Jewish traditions or even the West.⁹ Along with a critique of the West

as the centre of a dominating world system parasitic on Latin America and other peripheral regions, Dussel develops this ethics of eros as a liberatory political project. Reaching back to pre-Western ethical writings, he adds a radical moral component and an expansive political critique of neocolonialism to Herbert Marcuse and the Frankfurt School's critique of bureaucratic discipline, instrumental reason, and capitalism as a system of exploitation and domination.

However, it is Audre Lorde who first takes eros ethics to its radical feminist – if still humanist – edge with her analysis of oppression as an appropriation of erotic energy.¹⁰ Only by freeing this erotic energy's creative play principle, and reasserting agency in its terms, can oppressed people tap into life's vital core. Luce Irigaray reimagines eros as a lyrical song and gesture of love between a couple, effectively displacing Hegel's rendition of mutual recognition and yet also insisting on desire as an intersubjective dynamic.¹¹ Toni Morrison and Patricia Hill Collins explore further eros's social force in essays on communal belonging and connection across the Africana diaspora and on history's rough force.¹² Finally, Donna Haraway's research on companion species and the symbiotic relationships of multispecies communities opens eros beyond humanism to encounters with other creatures.¹³ Eros ethics attends first of all not to principles, duties, pleasures, autonomy, or reason, but to encounters now understood as interspecies.

Eros ethics first aims not to measure utilities, lay down the moral law, or establish duties, but to heed to the exigencies of these encounters. Rather than moral systems, it engages communal and cosmopolitical practices of reconciliation, forgiveness, consolation, festive celebration, and the avoidance of assaults on relationships, or what the old tragedians termed hubris. Its critical edge, ranging from the anarcho-communitarianism of Occupy Wall Street to erotic bonobo social politics, combats – through negotiations, alliances, and solidarities – such oppressive, eros-draining structures as found in factory farms, finance capital, and the tyranny of alphas.

The politics of renaturalization draws its inspiration from the philosophies of Benedict de Spinoza and Elizabeth Grosz.¹⁴ Spinoza's ontology maintains that each and every being – human or nonhuman, animate or inanimate – strives to persevere in being and, when possible, to enhance its existence. This ethics understands all finite, singular things as “conative,” exerting effort to be the things that they are, and seeking to endure

and expand their power of existing whenever possible. This is as true of human beings as it is of thought formations, social networks, and, as he explicitly affirms, stones.¹⁵ Thus, rather than grounding ethics and politics (a subspecies of ethics, for Spinoza) in a feature of human nature imagined to be unique to our kind, Spinoza takes as his first and guiding principle what must be predicated of any being whatsoever, a yearning to be what one is as potently as one can muster. Insofar as we are conscious of this striving (*conatus* in Latin), it is desire: the desire to live and to live well.

Such a point of departure supports Grosz's effort to wrest feminism from the impulse to denaturalize every aspect of human existence.¹⁶ Although feminist and antiracist critics have irrevocably transformed our understandings of sex, sexuality, race, gender, ability, and more by revealing how these terms conceal histories of warring wills, Grosz and Spinoza ally to supplement and challenge this approach with an understanding of how human life is shaped by so much more than human volition and struggle. Grosz's feminist turn to the idiom of nature stems from her conviction that every humanism implies a masculinism, and seeking to include women (or nonhuman animals) within its terms confines us to a perpetually reactive stance in relationship to patriarchal imagination. Seeking inclusion risks leaving in place the masculine norms against which women, non-human animals, corporeality, and non-Europeans always appear deficient. Whereas traditional humanism stipulates a particular feature universally found in man and never found in nature as the ground of ethical responsibility, renaturalism seeks local sites of freedom and power without recourse to the figure of an exceptional human faculty, be it reason, moral sensibility, the capacity for autonomy, or even Hegel's desire for recognition. Grosz philosophizes absent the figure of man, while also transforming oppressive representations of nature as the ground of immutable essences, indifferent to the emancipatory strivings of incipient forms of life.

Combined also with inspiration from Haraway's appreciation of complex human hybridity that is both animal and technological as well as Spinoza-inspired anticapitalist theories (Louis Althusser, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, and Antonio Negri), the politics of renaturalization apprehends human desire as thoroughly permeated by its animal, machinic, social, and historical involvements. Spinoza maintains that we remain unfree as long as we continue to imagine that human existence is somehow different in kind from that of anything else – the idea that “man in nature”

is “a kingdom within a kingdom.” When we affirm that we are the history of our affective, corporeal, and intellectual involvements, we learn that it is only through transforming a whole network of relations that we can hope to live differently. Such radical rethinking of the human is as necessary for human liberation as it is for enabling new and better ways of living with (and as) nonhuman nature. Both approaches, in other words, find in desire an index of our psychic and corporeal involvement with others and our yearning toward a future in which those constitutive relationships are more nourishing, enabling, and satisfying. Desire, conative and erotic, is a desire not just to preserve our being, but to liberate it.

The two approaches diverge on just what desire is and for this reason offer contrasting visions of emancipation and freedom. For eros ethics, desire is a social drama, attended by an interplay of subjectivities. A stone or mechanical process could not enter into this interplay of social life, and hence would not be thought of as having ethical agency in the relevant sense. In a Spinozist project of renaturalization, agential networks cross boundaries and extend to any existent. Not only do cats and dogs join with humans in agential communities, but so do software systems, power grids, and sewage systems. The diverging ontologies of desire shed light on deeper questions regarding what these two traditions might offer and how they might conflict and complement each other, or raise questions that may or may not find any resolution.

Eros turns on subjectivity, which is anything but a settled notion. It is not clear which creatures have parallel or related modes of subjectivity or what subjectivity even is. Willett offers a four-dimensional model of ethical agency to capture some of the complexity of ongoing research, but the range and import of this creaturely ethics resists any systemization. The four dimensions are as follows: (1) the subjectless subjectivity that may be transmitted as waves of affect such as panic or calm; (2) affect attunement and companionship between individual creatures who seem to have some sense of self; (3) multispecies communal structures or clustering phenomena that carry a sense of home; and (4) ethical compassion for the stranger or other elevated spiritual demeanor.

- 1 Waves of laughter or panic and fear spread across populations, sometimes even across species, indicating a subjective response in the context of a biosocial scene.¹⁷ Singular creatures, varying along

lines of irritability or resilience, may respond to these waves in their unique fashion. Still, these affect waves may not involve conscious striving or intentionality. One infant in a nursery cries, and there goes virtually the whole room. These infectious waves indicate an ethos of subjective response and an ethical climate prior to what ordinarily might be called the emergence of a self or a subject. The emotional contagion traces the subjectless subjectivity of creaturely life that forms a basic layer of striving as biosocial, or *eros*. These responses may have a cognitive component as intelligent responses to a complex situation. But these affect cognitions cannot rely on rational reflection – not if, say, a synchronized flock of birds are to flee quickly and safely in unison from an approaching predator. Similarly, microexpressions of disgust (a gape mouth in humans) may spread across a group to indicate the need to withdraw from some foul pollutant or unwanted parasite.¹⁸ These expressions – often, like mood change in music, a matter of tempo or key – can prompt a shared group response below the level of awareness. Some of the most ancient social rituals and modern media techniques invoke cathartic practices to alter or compose social moods. Arguably, the American neoconservatives who declared the post-9/11 war on terror manufactured waves of panic and fear supportive of US hegemony in what Dussel calls the world system. Affects can charge a political climate by fuelling ethnophobias and reinforcing rigid boundaries between insiders and outsiders, but affect waves can also traverse ingroup-outgroup or even species boundaries, and destabilize hierarchies. As Lorde insists, *eros* is also a warrior's ethic.¹⁹

2 A second, and more complex, dimension of ethical interaction might be said to naturalize aspects of what Kelly Oliver terms, after Levinas, the ethics of “response-ability.”²⁰ For Levinas, the Other is encountered through a transcendent aspect of facial or linguistic expression that testifies to the presence of another creature and her urgent need. This Other in their singularity eludes understanding or empathy, and, in their vulnerability, solicits an infinite response akin to what various religious traditions term spiritual compassion or love. However, Levinas's transcendent ethics opens an abyss between humans and other animals as natural creatures that is difficult to challenge, at least if we are faithful to his dichotomous

metaphysics. In what could be called a renaturalized eros ethics, the encounter with the Other occurs originally not through the metaphysical appeal of some fleshless face or soundless speech, but through the flesh-and-blood call and responses of one creature to another. Rather than the vertical vector of a sacred appeal from an unfathomable stranger, these horizontal encounters across varying sensory modes reveal that we humans dwell in multispecies communities. Companionship may transmit signals across diverse media and mixed forms of expression, as in the dog's bark to human vocalization or face-to-crotch interaction, but nonetheless constitute, through these sensory rich stimuli, a creative basis for a social relationship in playful reciprocities.

- 3 Eros ethics features the affective waves and social drama of relationships rather than the self-organization of autonomous agencies or atomic individualism. For a multitude of creatures, these relationships are, to varying degrees, oriented beyond one-on-one encounters and clustered in groups or situated in a sense of place we might call home. Uprooted elephants transported to zoos or pushed into new lands, and effectively stripped bare of communal structure, experience the trauma of lost connectivity.²¹ Their symptoms of a lost sense of home are eerily similar to human modes of social alienation or deracination, and can pass tragically from one generation to another. Pain and loss are the destiny of mortal creatures, but the ritual grieving for losses found among mammals and birds bestow meaning through a shared sense of belonging.²²
- 4 This sense of belonging to something larger than a self-organized unit of subjectivity may take a vertical turn, orienting creatures toward moral or spiritual experiences of transcendence. Various creatures are now known to extend assistance to strangers within or even outside of their species with no expectation of reward, or even of the communal and political pleasures of a continued friendship.²³ Utilitarians and deontological thinkers argue that only an appeal to reason, claimed as a universal capacity unique to humans, can explain acts of kindness or a sense of obligation that breaks from any kind of expectation for reward. However, critical race theorists and feminists warn that these allegedly impartial or objective stances of "universal reason" are in fact inflected with implicit bias due

to the inevitable impact of social position, cultural traditions, and emotions. Meanwhile, some nonhuman creatures exhibit a capacity for ethical concern that transcends family or species boundaries. This transcendent capacity to come to the radical Other's assistance does not break from biosocial eros but is one of its most rare achievements. Here we find the spiritual naturalized, and nature spiritualized. Or perhaps, eros ethics eludes the natural/spiritual binary altogether.

In comparison to the ethics of eros, which evokes our sensuous experiences of erotic attachments, Spinozism and the recent philosophy of Grosz can seem cold and abstract. They begin with the most basic metaphysical categories like being, body, time, cause, effect, force, and expression. Yet, they start from the ground up as a kind of tonic for our imaginations. If we begin with the contention, for example, that every person only comes to be who she is because she is nourished by a mother's placenta and emerges from her body to be held and cared for, we affirm something profoundly true and often forgotten in the history of ethical and political thought.²⁴ Yet it is hard not to lean on our culturally and historically specific ideas of motherhood and fatherhood, and thus to export these ideas when considering the tragedy, for example, of a mother sow pinned to the factory floor, unable to provide her young anything but the nutrients necessary to sustain the barest of lives. It is probably right to see in the sow an unfathomable sadness, and a savage crippling of her conative desire in not being able to teach her babies to play and live in the ways characteristic of pigs. Yet, the strategy of the politics of renaturalization calls for a radical revision of our ontology from the ground up to interrupt the nearly irresistible tendency to anthropomorphize the totality of nature, to see the sow as a mother analogous (and yet inferior) to our own (or to an aspirant) ideal of motherhood. This urgency follows not just from a Copernican ambition to decentre man but from the conviction that our notion of *anthropos* is both profoundly mistaken and destructive.²⁵

Although Spinoza's ambition certainly was not to exorcise the masculinism that permeates our idea of humanity, his approach lends support to such a project. Because Spinoza uproots any antinaturalism and exceptionalism whatsoever in our conception of humanity, he opens the way to a radical redefinition of human agency. He is concerned that our idea

of human beings as exceptional – i.e., as the only beings (other than God and perhaps angels) that are not subject to the natural laws of cause and effect – foments resentment. He contends that his denial of a free will, immune to the push and pull of cause and effect, “contributes to social life insofar as it teaches us to hate no one, to disesteem no one, to mock no one, to be angry at no one, and to envy no one.”²⁶ In other words, the very human emotions that preoccupy Hobbes and become central to classical liberal political theory are, on this account, amplified rather than assuaged by conceiving society as the outcome of free human volition. In contrast to social contract theory, Spinoza rejects the notion that we freely desire our subjection to a sovereign authority, for we are not the kinds of beings equipped with a faculty of unconstrained will. According to his diagnosis, on our interpretation, the desire to see oneself and be recognized as free fuels an economy of resentment and a culture founded on misanthropy. Thus, although Spinoza would affirm Hegel’s descriptive account (indebted to Hobbes) that we seek recognition, he rejects the normative aspiration to be recognized *as freed from the determinations of nature*. Although feminists since Simone de Beauvoir have seen in Hegel’s doctrine a liberating rejection of natural determinism and an affirmation of our historically constituted limitations,²⁷ the renaturalist perspective worries that the cost of this critical perspective is that we – albeit a complex and constrained “we” – are held morally accountable for our own subjection. As a result, we will continue to hate ourselves and each other because we strive to be apprehended by others as exceptionally free, exceptionally minded, and even exceptionally desiring.

Renaturalism promotes what Hegel thinks of as a “primitive” portrait of an animate totality in which all beings are radically interdependent and ensouled. Spinoza urges us to be suspicious of any feature that provides a metaphysical explanation for our distinctiveness, including subjectivity. Indeed, the substantive “consciousness” does not appear in his philosophy. The ontological flattening of his system flies in the face of experience. Certainly there is something distinctive about our kind, for better and for worse. We seem boundlessly diverse and creative. We find so many ways to live and to find meaning, so many distinctive modes of cultural and artistic expression. We are likewise capable of what seem to be the profoundest forms of cruelty and widespread destruction. Yet, the critical edge of

renaturalization razes the props so familiar in the tradition of Western thought so as to operate unconsciously. Renaturalization urges us to affirm ourselves as bound and similar in some way to every other existent. It exhorts us to affirm common ground with everything from squirrels to celestial gases to cyborgs. In an age that threatens ecological catastrophe, it is more important than ever to see our fates intertwined with the universe itself.

Yet this threat also demands that we discern which beings, actions, and passions are undoing the characteristic relations that make our lives possible. We are the beings that we are because our strivings are integrated with those of other natural beings. We are in delicate symbiotic relationships with plant life, myriad micro- and macro-organisms, technologies, and infinitely many other powers that compose our ecosystems. Our practices and desires come together with others in magnificent ways, but are also in tension with the network that makes life on earth possible. The politics of renaturalization appeals to the need for massive structural reorganization of human desire, such that we cannot be induced to destruction whether we are “guided by reason or passion.”²⁸ That is, the denial of free will or given rationality means that change does not follow from an intersubjective appeal to act rightly or an intersubjective claim to be seen and treated in more eros-affirming ways. Likewise, it is not a program of information dissemination or a project of disinfectant through sunlight.²⁹ It begins with the notion of systematic constraint and seeks to reorient constraint in more enabling ways. If capitalists are now constrained to exploit workers, shareholders, and the environment to the greatest extent possible in order to remain in business, they cannot but desire the means of such exploitation, no matter how their reason or conscience may irritate them. We need to tie ourselves to masts to avoid the sirens’ calls. We need radical structural transformation. Renaturalization names the view that we can only hope to foment this kind of change when we cease to see it as following from exceptional human agency (e.g., “political will”), including an erotic drive toward mutual reconciliation.

One may wonder, however, from where the seed for this redetermination comes. Is there some notion of a transcendent urge lurking within this naturalist liberatory ethics? How do we decide to get the rope? Who do we enjoin to tie us to our masts? Spinoza, Filippo Del Lucchese argues,

denies the possibility of “bare life,” mere existence without yearning to act and to enhance one’s life.³⁰ Indeed, Spinoza affirms that “the mind strives to imagine only those things which posit its power of acting,”³¹ and in this imagining, it “rejoices,” which further amplifies its power. All beings, to the extent that their natures allow, seek a milieu in which they can apprehend themselves as actors and thereby rejoice in their existence. And the more others enjoy us – be those others infants, friends, animal companions, thriving vegetation, or buzzing power grids – the more we enjoy ourselves.³² Since others enjoy us to the extent that we please them, we seek to please others to please ourselves, generating an erotic economy of, in the best circumstances, mutual empowerment. If we want to insist on identifying this urge to experience ourselves as actors in a distinctively subjective drama proper only to moral agents broadly construed (humans and many nonhuman animals) and not to stones or electrons, it may not be descriptively problematic.³³ The renaturalist perspective worries, however, that marking off moral from causal agency excites the nearly irresistible urge to both exceptionalism and finalism, to which the ethics of eros appears to succumb insofar as it grounds itself in a basic impulse toward harmonization, reconciliation, and recognition. Although Spinoza elaborates the ontological possibility of mutuality, cooperation, and ethical harmonization, our erotic natures do not drive us toward a horizon of unity. He does insist on a basic determination to affirm one’s existence, driving finite life. Yet this is not transcendence. It is the fundamental vitality of material existence, operative everywhere – in cybernetic systems, ideologies, and toxins, as much as in the palpable yearnings of human and nonhuman animals.

Eros ethics, on the other hand, is born of struggle and alliance. To be sure, it shares with Spinozist renaturalization a suspicion of free will as a metaphysical shroud over the real politics of oppressive social structures. However, oppression calls up outrage (as an active form of slave resentment) and sets in motion social movements for solidarity and change. These movements share a sense of communal or social burden experienced across a range of animal species but not in striving stones. Freedom is found in lifting the heavy clouds of fear or despair that weigh down the ensouled creature; in mending the intersubjective dynamic warped by subjection and servitude; in reweaving disrupted communal bonds or, as

G.A. Bradshaw depicts among elephants, a haunted sense of home.³⁴ If the Greek word *eros* can serve to name the multidimensional connectivity that creatures seek, then the violation of vital relationships might be said to commit acts of overreaching, and sometimes appear as an unchecked power of acting.

Eros ethics would not aim to convert tragic loss to festivals of joy, or not at least without recognizing real suffering through rituals of mourning that reaffirm belonging. Elephants and dolphins demonstrate signs of depression over their losses, and like birds perform burial ceremonies to remember their passing. These losses are remembered because they occur among friends. Forms of friendship and communal attachment occur across a broad range of animal species. Marc Bekoff even observes friendships between animals who normally would operate in a predatory relationship.³⁵ The biosocial drama of *eros* ethics appears first and foremost in the particular attachments and communal drives and their renegotiation or challenge. Social practices such as consolation, forgiveness, reconciliation, or the rebuilding of alliances and the deposing of harsh leaders or exile of tyrants appear to various degrees across species in the animal kingdom.

In this context of desire, freedom signifies not first and finally self-actualization or self-expression, although it includes these elements. It is foremost intersubjective and communal engagement, or what in the post-Hegelian tradition is termed “social freedom.” Of course, in modern liberal traditions, freedom is more typically understood in negative terms as freedom from external interference or as the positive freedom to act in accordance with rational choice. In these modern traditions, both negative and positive concepts of freedom reinforce aspects of individual autonomy. Social freedom, in contrast, as the aim of an emancipatory project, is found in the drive of a social animal to thrive through symbiotic relationships of belonging. Here belonging does not signify possession, as when property relations are central to freedom’s meaning, but stems from dimensions of affective sociality and intersubjective agency. Through these multiple dimensions of agency, freedom appears as freedom from fear and panic, as limits to power and the tyranny of elites, and as the meaningfulness of attachment expressed through companionship and communal bonds. Freedom is not finally a concept of self-ownership, self-organization, actualization, or expression, but it may entail aspects of

these freedoms. Freedom as a biosocial ethic is an interspecies practice of environmental belonging.

Renaturalization affirms social freedom as well, but perhaps on different grounds. In the Hegelian tradition, social freedom is a liberating form of ethical life that a spiritual collective establishes and through which it comes to experience and know itself as spiritual, as the overcoming of nature. Although an interspecies eros ethics critically reappropriates the Hegelian tradition, it still draws a deep line between animate and inanimate beings, and thus locates ethics in an exceptional – if multilayered – form of agency. As a matter of practice, Spinoza contends that human beings do and should privilege human relationships as the greatest source of power and pleasure available to us. This means that he, too, exhorts us to form powerful affective bonds across human differences, reorganizing those features of social life that engender sad passions, like fear, panic, and anxiety, and seeking out those joyful encounters that most spur us to think and act. Yet, if the normative guides by which we determine whether our relationships need mending or whether forgiveness is called for invoke the distinctiveness of either subjective or spiritual agency, we fall into an erroneous and disabling self-understanding that ultimately undermines our social relations, as well as our relations with our nonhuman others.

Maybe stones cannot love us in the way that we love them, and maybe they do not mourn the destruction of magnificent mountains the way humans and some nonhuman animals might. Yet, in our effort to challenge our human exceptionalism and to appreciate the vast network of beings necessary to our subsistence, we should ask why this line between animate and inanimate is so important. When we act we cannot avoid selecting some relations, some beings, and some models of life as more valuable to us than others. Line drawing between ethically relevant and less relevant others is practically necessary but always dangerous. Spinoza himself succumbs to it. Although he mounts perhaps the most powerful critique of human exceptionalism in the Western tradition, he insists on the prudential requirement to prefer humanity above all, which, for him, entails excluding the needs and desires of nonhuman animals. Although Spinoza has specific, historical, and ideological reasons for his insistence on prudential human provincialism, he overlooks the liberating force of our involuntary affective community with nonhuman animals.³⁶ He was

not a romantic naturalist who saw in our biophilic urges a propensity to connect with vital and necessary sources of power and pleasure. Thus, renaturalization seeks to radicalize Spinoza's denial of human exceptionalism and to challenge his ethical provincialism. Feminist eros ethics shares with Spinoza the importance of acknowledging the distinctively empowering character of the human bond – love of those who have similar minds, bodies, and capabilities – but the alliance of eros and renaturalization must push us further beyond species provincialism and toward an interspecies ethics.

Eros ethics rejoins with a reconstructed Spinozist politics of joy to affirm the sometimes-mysterious affective community between humans and other life forms. For reasons we do not entirely understand, humans live longer, think better, and feel happier when they enjoy friendships with nonhuman animals. Perhaps the thrill that children manifest in the presence of nonhuman animals points toward the importance of contact and affective communion with our beastly kin? Although Spinoza feared that our agency would be undermined by the affective contagion between human and beast,³⁷ he never would have imagined the interaction a *National Geographic* contributing photographer describes between himself and a wild leopard seal in Antarctica. The photographer, Paul Nicklen, entered the water to photograph one of the predators, which can weigh in at 600 kilos. The seal thought that he might be hungry and offered him a penguin. Nicklen did not take it, and so the seal tried to teach him to eat.³⁸ The large predator was concerned with taking care of this other animal who was not a very impressive swimmer but otherwise seemed sufficiently intelligent and similar to herself. There are many ways in which nonhuman animals care for us, even if we often imagine that they depend on us. To see how we may be their charges, it is all the better for us is to acknowledge that our ethical agency is nurtured and sustained by much more than human social relations.

There may be even less obvious affinities and forms of connection between humans and our animal kin. Jane Goodall suspects that the ecstatic dances of African chimpanzees occasioned by waterfalls and violent gusts of wind “may be stimulated by feelings akin to wonder and awe.”³⁹ Michael Tobias witnesses immanent spirituality swimming in the ocean among whale sharks: “These sharks exhibit bliss, the ultimate state of meditation

and indwelling referred to by such diverse luminaries as Buddha and Thoreau.⁴⁰ Katy Payne discovers meditative moments among elephants.⁴¹ Barbara Smith learns the baboons in Gombe National Park display signs of reverence and awe in their communion at the still pools along the path to the sleeping trees. And Smuts finds a spiritual connection similar to baboon sangha with her dog, Safi, in a respite from a game of fetch played by a stream, where Safi caught Smuts's gaze and elevated her melancholic mood: "She held her position and my gaze for about twenty minutes and then quietly approached and lay down next to me. My dark mood vanished. This was my first lesson in meditation."⁴² These spiritual experiences may partake not only of nature's beauty but also of the sublime nature of its incomprehensible force.

And, of course, we can discern cross-species ethical compassion that does not involve us. Consider Kuni, the bonobo who assists a feathered stranger who lands in her cage, and whom she is destined to never see again, to a freedom that she will never know: "Kuni picked up the starling with one hand and climbed to the highest point of the highest tree where she wrapped her legs around the trunk so that she had both hands free to hold the bird. She then carefully unfolded its wings and spread them open, one wing in each hand, before throwing the bird as hard as she could."⁴³ Kuni's concern for the bird does not rest on any ordinary expectation for intimate attachment or friendship's eventual reciprocities. This act of compassion suggests a capacity for generosity that is unbound by any normal interest or attachment desire of any kind. Moral theory traditionally treats this capacity as a pure form of altruism, but more can be said. Unanticipated and limitless expressions of biosocial eros reveal to us the myriad forms of ethical community and agency that escape the masculinist anthropocentric imagination.

Despite their differences, we ally our projects in an effort to cultivate a receptivity to the nonhuman eros by which we are already nourished and to expand the possibilities for new connections and relations in our fragile worlds. Beyond man, beyond the human, and perhaps even beyond the animal kingdom, we call for a liberatory ethics that affirms and transforms our erotic and philic relations to maximize the possibilities for tenderness, collaboration, and joy.

NOTES

- 1 Willett, *Maternal Ethics and Other Slave Moralities*.
- 2 Sharp, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization*.
- 3 See the influential tradition of feminist ethics of care. For a somewhat recent example, Kittay, *Love's Labor*.
- 4 Butler, "Beside Oneself."
- 5 Wilson, *Biophilia*, 1.
- 6 For a good overview of this critical tradition, see Braidotti, *The Posthuman*.
- 7 On debt bondage, see Graeber, *Debt*. On Hegel's failure to question race-based slavery as well as Frederick Douglass's renaturalization of the dialectic from the slave's point of view, see Willett, *The Soul of Justice*.
- 8 Chanter, *Ethics of Eros*.
- 9 Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation*.
- 10 Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 53–9.
- 11 Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*.
- 12 Morrison, "Home," 7; Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 166. On freedom in this tradition, see Weir, *Identities and Freedom*, 11–17.
- 13 Haraway, *When Species Meet*.
- 14 This summarizes some core principles Sharp develops in *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization*.
- 15 See Bennett, "The Agency of Assemblages and the North American Blackout."
- 16 See especially *Time Travels*.
- 17 Here, the exchange of affects, or affect attunement, is understood to characterize social animals generally, which is an extension of my analysis of the biosocial significance of touch as a socially erotic drive between infants and mothers (a locus of presubjective sociality). Willett, *Maternal Ethics and Other Slave Moralities*.
- 18 Kelly, *Yuck! The Nature and Moral Significance of Disgust*. While he theorizes disgust as unique to humans, his general remarks on affect transmission should apply to any species that experiences the affect.
- 19 Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 41.
- 20 Oliver, *Animal Lessons*.
- 21 Bradshaw, *Elephants on the Edge*.
- 22 Bekoff, *The Emotional Lives of Animals*.
- 23 De Waal, *Primates and Philosophers*, 31.
- 24 See Simms, "Eating One's Mother: Female Embodiment in a Toxic World."
- 25 See ch. 6 of Sharp, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization*.
- 26 Spinoza, *Ethics*, part 2, proposition 49, scholium.

- 27 Beauvoir's Hegelianism, however, is a complex and critical reappropriation. There has been a great deal of analysis of her deployment of the master-slave dialectic and so I point only to one essay that I found particularly illuminating: Mussett, "Conditions of Servitude."
- 28 Spinoza, *Political Treatise*, ch. 1, para. 6.
- 29 This is not to say that normative appeals do not shape human activity. Simplistically, it means that such normative appeals and the transformations provoked by new information is the tip of a very big iceberg and thus has little explanatory power, causally speaking.
- 30 Del Lucchese, *Conflict, Power, and Multitude in Machiavelli and Spinoza*, ch. 3.
- 31 Spinoza, *Ethics*, part 3, proposition 54.
- 32 *Ibid.*, part 3, proposition 29.
- 33 Krause in "Bodies in Action" advances a compelling objection to the new materialist affirmation of distributed agency beyond the human. Willett's eros ethics in *Interspecies Ethics* shares Krause's suspicion of the attribution of agency to inanimate nature, but, in contrast to Krause, admits robust agency in nonhuman animals.
- 34 Bradshaw, *Elephants on the Edge*, 67.
- 35 Bekoff, *The Emotional Lives of Animals*, 17.
- 36 For further analysis, see Sharp, "Animal Affects."
- 37 See Spinoza, *Ethics*, part 4, proposition 68, scholium.
- 38 A wonderful video can be seen on National Geographic Live, "Face-off with Deadly Predator," <https://youtu.be/Zxa6P73Awcg>.
- 39 Goodall, "Primate Spirituality."
- 40 Bekoff, "A Gentle Heart," 173.
- 41 Payne, "On Being," originally aired 21 March 2013, <http://www.onbeing.org>.
- 42 Smuts, "Encounters with Animal Minds," 306.
- 43 De Waal, *Primates and Philosophers*, 31.