

Ethos Between Ethics and Ethology: *Middlemarch* and Spinoza

In George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, the narrator writes with empathy and concern for the human characters she conjures. In a famous passage early in the book, Eliot writes of the narrator's task:

I at least have so much to do in unravelling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven, that all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe. (91)¹

The “particular web” in this case is the fictional village of Middlemarch. Eliot's novel is a study of the behavior of some of this village's inhabitants, yet the “web” that is Eliot's overriding concern is the universe and everything that inhabits it. It is her ultimate aim to expand the horizons of her readers and their knowledge of emotions, an aim that drives her provisional focus on a particular web of human lots. In other words, Eliot's ethology (or “the science of the formation of character,” as John Stuart Mill described it in 1843) establishes an ethics. In this essay, I explore Eliot's concerns with *ethos* in both its forms to elaborate on her non-humanist humanism: that is, how she puts the human front and center without demeaning the non-human. As I will show, Eliot's overriding concern for human flourishing is undergirded by theological and ontological commitments to the more-than-human.

To better lay out some of this conceptual terrain, I focus on Eliot's debt to another thinker of non-humanist humanism: Baruch Spinoza. In 1856, George Eliot became the first translator into English of Spinoza's key work, the *Ethics* (though her translation would not be published

¹ All parenthetical citations are to George Eliot, *Middlemarch: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, Criticism*, ed. Bert G. Hornback, Second Edition (New York: Norton, 2000).

until 1981). The *Ethics* is a strange work. Spinoza writes of metaphysics, epistemology, and theology as if they were mere matters of geometry. Yet, as Spinoza's title suggests, his philosophy serves the purpose of ethics as anthropology: a philosophy of human nature and how we relate to one another. Thus, in the preface to Part III of his *Ethics*, Spinoza writes of emotions in the same way he had previously written of God and the Mind: he "shall consider human actions and appetites as if the subject were lines, surfaces, or solids."² Eminently human characteristics like emotions are, for Spinoza, of the same ontological status as God or nature. Thus, Spinoza's *anthropology* is *non-anthropocentric*: he thinks we as beings are immersed in a world of things that affect each other constantly, things that are themselves but modes of one Substance — the famous *Deus sive Natura* ("God, or nature").³ Spinoza's philosophy has as its aim to describe grounds for human flourishing. Yet he finds that this task is identical to the task of describing how humanity is "part of nature": ethics (an eminently philosophical project) is identical to ethology (the study of character through human actions — emotions for Spinoza and "human lots" for Eliot).

In 1849, Eliot wrote to her friend Charles Bray that:

What is wanted in English is not a translation of Spinoza's works, but a true estimation of his life and system. After one has rendered his Latin faithfully into English, one feels that there is another yet more difficult process of translation for the reader to effect, and that the only mode of making Spinoza accessible to a larger number is to study his books, then shut them and give an analysis.⁴

² Benedictus de Spinoza, *Spinoza's Ethics*, ed. Clare Carlisle, trans. George Eliot (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 162.

³ In this summary reading of the *Ethics* I follow Beth Lord, ed., *Spinoza beyond Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).

⁴ George Eliot, *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon Haight (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), 1:321.

In light of this passage, many scholars have read *Middlemarch* as a “translation” or “application” of Spinoza’s *Ethics*.⁵ As Brian Fay has recently emphasized, this reading is too simplistic.⁶ *Middlemarch* talks back to Spinoza; like a fish squirming out of a fisherman’s hands, the literary text wiggles out of attempts to confine it. Yet staging the reading of *Middlemarch* through Spinoza’s influence on its author is productive, I argue, not least for present concerns with posthumanism that themselves owe a foundational debt to Spinoza (especially through Deleuze’s recuperation of his philosophy). Borrowing from Spinoza, I therefore frame *Middlemarch* as a project of humanism or anthropology that avoids anthropocentrism, humanism’s ugly underbelly.

First, I ask: in what ways is *Middlemarch* humanist? Two conventional definitions of humanism map well onto Eliot. In the Renaissance, humanism was a scholarly project that recuperated ancient Roman and (especially) Greek texts, profoundly influencing subsequent Western culture.⁷ Eliot learned fluent Latin, and it is no accident that *Middlemarch* dwells at length on the glories of Rome and of the ancients more generally. Eliot has also been taken up in Britain by modern secular humanists, who see in her an atheist (at least from her translation of Feuerbach on) who still is sympathetic to religion. These are both historically minded definitions of humanism, ones that are well worth exploring as they relate to Eliot. Yet my argument is that

⁵ For instance, Miriam Henson, “George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* as a Translation of Spinoza’s *Ethics*,” *The George Eliot Review*, January 1, 2009, <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/554>; Dorothy Atkins, *George Eliot and Spinoza* (Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, Universität Salzburg, 1978).

⁶ Brian Fay, “What George Eliot of *Middlemarch* Could Have Taught Spinoza,” *Philosophy and Literature* 41, no. 1 (July 5, 2017): 119–35, <https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.2017.0008>.

⁷ “The term *umanista* was used in fifteenth-century Italian academic slang to describe a teacher or student of classical literature and the arts associated with it, including that of rhetoric. The English equivalent ‘humanist’ makes its appearance in the late sixteenth century with a similar meaning. Only in the nineteenth century, however, and probably for the first time in Germany in 1809, is the attribute transformed into a substantive: *humanism*, standing for devotion to the literature of ancient Greece and Rome, and the humane values that may be derived from them.” Nicholas Mann, “The Origins of Humanism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, ed. Jill Kraye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1–2.

Middlemarch is concerned more fundamentally with an aspirational humanism: a concern for human flourishing, and thus establishing a future-oriented ethics based on acute analysis of human actions.

Eliot studies characters with profound acuity and emotional depth. Thus, *Middlemarch* is an ethology in Mill's original sense. Mill distinguished between "Psychology ... the science of the elementary laws of mind" and "Ethology ... the ulterior science which determines the kind of character produced in conformity to those general laws by any set of circumstances, physical and moral."⁸ Eliot was greatly influenced by Mill; after all, he was the proprietor of the *Westminster Review*, the prestigious journal that Marian Evans edited before she began writing novels.⁹ Psychology flourished over the next century and a half, while ethology languished until eventually repurposed by zoologists concerned with the study of *animal* behavior. Yet, as Pearl Brilmeyer has shown, ethology lived on in the work of nineteenth-century novelists like Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot.¹⁰ It is this kind of ethology that Eliot pursues as a humanist project.

The ethology of *Middlemarch* (the study of behavior through the actions of Eliot's characters) aims to produce sympathy — an ethical stance that looks to the future. Take, for instance, this early description of Dorothea Brooke:

Most men thought her bewitching when she was on horseback. She loved the fresh air and the various aspects of the country, and when her eyes and cheeks glowed with mingled pleasure she looked very little like a devotee. Riding was an indulgence which she allowed herself in spite of conscientious qualms; she felt that she enjoyed it in a pagan sensuous way, and always looked

⁸ John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive*, Eighth Edition (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1882), 602, <http://archive.org/details/systemofratiocinooilluoft>.

⁹ See Clare Carlisle, "George Eliot's Spinoza," in *Spinoza's Ethics*, by Benedictus de Spinoza, ed. Clare Carlisle, trans. George Eliot (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 43.

¹⁰ Pearl Brilmeyer, "Plasticity, Form, and the Matter of Character in Middlemarch," *Representations* 130, no. 1 (May 20, 2015): 60–83, <https://arcade.stanford.edu/content/plasticity-form-and-matter-character-middlemarch>.

forward to renouncing it. (7)

The gentle irony of the final sentence speaks volumes about Dorothea's character. Dorothea is neither skewered as hopelessly vain, nor romanticized as a young devotee. Instead, the narrator empathizes with this young woman both in her genuine pleasure in riding and in her conceit of proud renunciation. Yet this passage is not valuable in what it tells about Dorothea, but rather in how it instructs us as readers to behave towards each other. Like the narrator, we readers should balance scorn and mockery with love and charity. This is no message delivered from a pulpit; rather, it derives from Eliot's conviction that, as she put it in an 1873 letter to her publisher:

Unless my readers are more moved towards the ends I seek by my works as wholes than by an assemblage of extracts, my writings are a mistake. I have always exercised a severe watch against anything that could be called preaching, and if I have ever allowed myself in dissertation or in dialogue [anything] which is not part of the *structure* of my books, I have there sinned against my own laws.¹¹

The ethics that Eliot advances in her essays, in other words, is part of the very *structure* of her novels. The purpose of Eliot's sensitive study of character, her uptake of Mill's ethology, is to produce such an ethics.

Eliot's project of ethology requires a provisional focus on a few characters, a "particular web" chosen from a universe that contains not just many more humans but much beyond them, too. It is tempting to range over the vast universe, employing the humanist implements of ethology — empathy — on all it contains. Yet Eliot is sensitive to the stakes of this temptation:

If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk around well wadded with stupidity. (55)

¹¹ Eliot, *The George Eliot Letters*, 5:459. Quoted in Leah Price, *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel: From Richardson to George Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 131. Italics in original.

This passage could be read as simply metaphorical: feeling “all ordinary human life” would simply be *like* “hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat.” Yet such a reading would be paying short shrift to Eliot’s metaphysics, which in fact entails ontological and theological commitments to the more-than-human. As Rosi Braidotti has argued with reference to this passage, with *Middlemarch* we step

into a monistic universe of intersecting affective relations that simply make the world go round. ... The roar which lies on the other side of the urbane, civilized veneer that allows for bound identities and efficient social interaction is the Spinozist indicator of the raw cosmic energy that underscores the making of civilizations, societies and their subjects. ... It also constitutes the core of a posthuman sensibility that aims at overcoming anthropocentrism.¹²

In this passage, Braidotti argues, we find Eliot’s commitment to the theological monism Spinoza espoused. For Spinoza, God is not transcendent, a watchmaker who provides the animating force for otherwise inanimate matter; rather, God is immanent *in* matter, which is full of vitality. The universe that Eliot is tempted to range over is full of things affecting one another, in what Spinoza famously called *conatus*. Eliot translates the three key propositions of Spinoza’s *conatus* in Part III as follows:

Prop. VI. Every thing, as far as in it lies [*quantum in se est*; trans. Curley “as far as it can by its own power”], strives to persevere in its existence. ... For particular things are modes by which the attributes of God are expressed. ...

Prop. VII. The effort by which every thing strives to persevere in existing, is nothing but the actual essence of that thing. ...

Prop. IX. The mind both so far as it has clear and distinct ideas and so far as it has confused ideas, strives [*conatur*] to persevere in its existence for an indefinite period, and is conscious of this effort [*conatus*].¹³

When Deleuze designated Spinoza’s morality as an “ethology,” it is this monism that he referred to. Deleuze praised Spinoza’s theology for making everything, even supposedly transcendent

¹² Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 55–56.

¹³ Spinoza, *Spinoza’s Ethics*, 169–71.

moral laws, *immanent*. As Deleuze quotes Nietzsche in saying, for Spinoza there is no longer Good or Evil, only good and bad, which have

a primary, objective meaning, but one that is relative and partial: that which agrees with our nature or does not agree with it. ... In this way, Ethics, which is to say, a typology of immanent modes of existence, replaces Morality, which always refers existence to transcendent values. ... The opposition of values (Good-Evil) is supplanted by the qualitative difference of modes of existence (good-bad).¹⁴

Eliot proposes precisely such an ethics. She does not judge Dorothea's horse-riding according to some transcendent moral code; instead, she lets an ethics of sympathy emerge from the particular actions of her characters. Her ethology, her study of Dorothea's character, is analogous to the "encounters" that produce joy or sadness, the affects that are synonymous with good and bad for Spinoza. As Clare Carlisle reminds us,

The great divide in the universe of George Eliot's novels is not between darkness and light but between restriction and expansion, between those who are narrow and those who are wide.¹⁵

Eliot's Spinozist insistence that human freedom comes from the expansion of our horizons and the opening and stretching of our souls is not merely ontological; it is theological. In particular, Eliot sides with Spinoza in her narratological theology. Eliot's narrator is no God as parent or secular judge, rewarding or punishing people for their actions. Instead, Eliot's narrator is an ethologist who studies behavior as a science of the formation of character. However, this does not mean that Eliot abandons ethics; instead, ethics consists precisely in how her characters reap their own rewards or suffer the natural consequences of their actions. The narrator's role is to practice compassion, because that is how we widen our *own* souls.

¹⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988), 22–23.

¹⁵ Carlisle, "George Eliot's Spinoza," 41.

Take as one last example the famous concluding paragraph of the novel, which describes Dorothea at the end of her life:

Her finely touched spirit had still its fine issues, though they were not widely visible. Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs. (515)

Note first the allusion to Cyrus' conquest of Babylon, as recounted by Herodotus — a clear sign of Eliot's humanist education. Yet the allusion is employed to an effect that is not so humanist — perhaps even Spinozist. Eliot identifies Dorothea's "spirit" with "her full nature," "her being," which is like "that river of which Cyrus broke the strength." How so? Both achieve a certain kind of freedom by being "incalculably diffusive." Set aside the fact that this diffusion "had no great name on the earth." What matters for Eliot as for Spinoza are actions themselves. Ethics is immanent, not transcendent. Dorothea does not achieve freedom through great deeds — neither through the intellect nor through the will — but rather

is free when [s]he comes into possession of [her] power of acting, that is [her] *conatus* is determined by adequate ideas from which active affects follow, affects that are explained by [her] own essence.¹⁶

Freedom for Eliot as for Spinoza is *in* our actions, the mark of our characters, our very essence.

To Mill's ethology as the study of character, taken up by nineteenth-century novelists, we have added two further meanings of the word: ethology as a subfield of zoology, concerned with the study of animal behavior ("the squirrel's heart beat"), and ethology as Deleuze's reading of Spinoza's ethics. In *Middlemarch* we see not just the appearance but the *coincidence* of these three kinds of ethology. Eliot's study of Dorothea is one way in which she takes up Mill's call to

¹⁶ Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 70.

establish a science of the formation of character. Yet this study of character is not limited to humans, as the later evolution of ethology would show and as Eliot herself says with reference to the “squirrel’s heart beat.” This ethology is most properly an ethical project, one that contains Eliot’s fundamental commitment to human flourishing, but that pursues this humanist aim not through the pursuit of transcendent moral codes but rather in seeking after ethics as immanent to ethology.