What is the Opposite of Speciesism? On Relational Care Ethics and Illustrating Multi-Species-Isms

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<th>Journal:</th>
<th>International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy</th>
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<td>Manuscript ID</td>
<td>IJSSP-09-2019-0176.R2</td>
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<td>Manuscript Type:</td>
<td>Original Article</td>
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<tr>
<td>Keywords:</td>
<td>animals, speciesism, multispecies, care, relational ethics, posthumanism</td>
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Abstract
This paper articulates a counter-concept to the notion of speciesism with the aim to encourage thinking beyond critique, towards imagining what non-speciesist worlds can actually look like. By using the concept of ‘multi-species-isms’ (or ‘multispecies’, as a simpler adjective), and linking it to feminist and relational ethics of ‘care’, the paper seeks to unite perspectives from both Critical Animal Studies as well as feminist, posthumanist theories. Already existing traces of multi-species-isms that exemplify different forms of multispecies care are visualised through annotated illustrations that accompany the text. These traces offer a cue for negotiating multispecies worlds without attempting to define their content in all too definite forms. Rather than focusing on critiquing oppressive structures, the paper contributes narratives of multispecies worlds that inspire further imagination towards the positive ingredients of such worlds and show more concretely how multispecies care is practised in everyday life. These insights frame a starting point for a repertoire that shows the numerous ways in which multispecies relationships between humans and other animals are already given form. By articulating the actual ingredients of multi-species-isms, rather than focusing on what they are not, the paper seeks to advance a move towards adding multispecies possibilities that can be especially helpful for those researchers, designers, and activists concerned with imagining alternative futures.

Introduction
Within the academic field of Critical Animal Studies (CAS), scholars and activists have produced extensive critical discourse around the meaning and practices of speciesism for decades. Speciesism, here, refers to the moral exclusion or discrimination of those who are not classified as belonging to a certain species (Singer, [1975] 2009; Horta 2010). It usually focuses on the numerous ways in which humans have systematically oppressed, killed, and exploited other animals for reasons of producing consumption (e.g. farming and hunting), generating entertainment (e.g. zoos, circuses, and pets), and carrying out research (e.g. animal experiments). With a slaughter count of over 150 billion animals a year (The Vegan Calculator, 2018) and the catastrophic impact certain forms of animal agriculture have on our planet (Tilman et al., 2001), it can be said that speciesist practices entail the largest, deadliest, and most environmentally destructive form of oppression that exists.

Apart from analysing and deconstructing speciesist practices, the field of CAS also aligns itself with other areas of critical theory by highlighting the intersectional connection between speciesism and other forms of oppression such as racism (Spiegel, 1996), colonialism (Armstrong, 2002), sexism (Adams, [1990] 2005), and classism (Hribal, 2007). For most people on our planet, however, speciesism is something completely normalised, justified, and encouraged through many facets of dominant culture.
Besides CAS, there are other fields and perspectives engaged with deconstructing a traditional philosophical legacy that has installed the idea that other animals can be considered as fundamentally lesser beings. In areas such as animal political theory, animal rights, and animal ethics, speciesist practices are critiqued structurally, and scholars/activists have aimed to install new frameworks for animal liberation. These frameworks often focus on negative rights and forms of thought with the aim to end animal oppression (cf. Donaldson and Kymlicka, 2011: 7). This paper, on the other hand, is concerned with articulating a more relational-ethics approach to identifying positive ingredients of such a society.

Several perspectives deriving from ecofeminism and (critical) posthumanism can be helpful in not only challenging speciesism but also conceptualising everyday practices for being in the world together with other animals. However, the research area of Critical Animal Studies, as well as the other mentioned domains of animal ethics, animal rights theory, vegan studies, comprise the very few places in which the notion of speciesism is actively used to describe the oppression of other animals. In ecofeminism and (critical) posthumanism, the central idea of problematising speciesism explicitly is rarely discussed. Moreover, the reception of posthumanist, welfarist, or ecofeminist theories by CAS scholars, has often demonstrated a fundamental disagreement with regards to the kinds of attitude towards other animals that are deemed acceptable (cf. Rossini, 2006; Svärd, 2008; Weisberg, 2009; Pedersen, 2011). For this paper, the point of departure is that, although terms like anti-speciesism, post-humanism, or non-anthropocentrism attempt to describe ideologies that break with our dominant and traditional paradigms, they inevitably maintain a focus on what they are actually against. For example, in asking the seemingly simple question ‘what does a non-speciesist society look like?’, the use of a negation to imagine the ingredients of such a society forces us to focus on what it is not. Rather than generating ideas, these terms obscure what kind of alternative possibilities can be envisioned.

Such a focus on negative terminology may lead to a philosophical dilemma in which we become unable to facilitate scholarly, artistic, or activist discourse about certain positive ideologies because there are very few notions or linguistic expressions that describe or embody these ideas. The danger of such a lack is that we come up against something we cannot resolve because we do not have the words for it. Feminist scholar Sara Ahmed described ‘sweaty concepts’ as: “trying to describe something that is difficult, that resists
being fully comprehended in the present” (Ahmed 2017: 12) and continues “We need to work out, sometimes, what these concepts are (…) but that working out is precisely not bringing a concept in from the outside (or from above): concepts are the worlds we are in.” (ibid.: 13). Theoretical fields such as CAS, animal ethics, and animal political theory are crucial in analysing and critiquing animal oppression. Furthermore, they are able to formulate and discuss general concepts, as is the case in the work of Donaldson and Kymlicka on ideas of animal citizenship (2011) and philosopher Eva Meijer’s work on interspecies democracy (2019). However, these concepts are often worked out as theoretical concepts or end-goals that describe a desired society in its totality. Our everyday relationships with other animals, on the other hand, are often much more complex, intertwined-with, and enacted-through what this paper describes as a ‘doing ethics’ in practice. Such a relational understanding – one that is more often applied in (eco)feminist theory and (critical) posthumanism – can identify the positive ingredients of more desirable practices not as end-goals, but as traces that are already enacted, and thus already exist. These traces can inspire the practical making of alternative societies through ideas for positive policies, for developing non-speciesist communities, as well as for materialising non-speciesist practices through art and design. Such an approach is helpful in practically giving form to positive aspects of non-speciesism on a local and everyday level, and engaged with the relationships we already have with other animals.

This paper unpacks a notion of ‘multi-species-isms’ (and the simpler adjective ‘multispecies’) as an opposing concept for speciesism that fits with a feminist idea of plurality, as well as the formulation of a relational ethics of ‘care’ that can identify already present traces of multispecies encounters. The aim is to advocate for concepts that can unite perspectives from both CAS, animal ethics, and posthumanism/(eco)feminism. Furthermore, the paper facilitates a more everyday-oriented, relational, and localised imaginative discourse for formulating ideas about what a non-speciesist society entails. The annotated drawings that accompany this text illustrate traces of multispecies encounters from which further multispecies imaginations can continue. This paper thereby proposes to address possibilities for alternative societies, rather than solely critiquing the past or present.

Fabricating Concepts

It is perhaps philosophically impossible for humans to imagine something by only describing what it is not. As an analogy, try to imagine you are a product designer tasked with a project to design a new kind of chair. This chair, however, needs to be an artefact that is not used for
sitting, but for something else. Actually, it is a chair built for anything else, but not sitting. The new chair cannot even have any sitting-related activities connected to it.

But if all chairs are used for sitting as a primary function, how is it possible to imagine something that can be called a chair, but is not used like one? It is not until you characterise a description of what you actually want to design instead of a chair that ideas start to emerge. Perhaps it is a table, a hammock, a carpet, or a kitchen counter? Or a combination of those.

This example serves to clarify that concepts do not exist in vacuums but are actively fabricated, and this creation is continuously enacted through its use. This can also be said for the notion of speciesism, and consequently for its counter-concept. The infinite meanings of speciesism are continually re-enacted by the entities that are involved in its practices, and any animal has an entirely different perception of its meaning that cannot be universalised or accurately captured with a single definition.

To be able to imagine particular worlds – worlds that we want to bring into being – we need to actively and continuously create those concepts that fit with the unfolding perspectives that embody and inhabit those worlds. And with regards to this challenge, this paper argues that the notion of non-speciesism is counter-productive and paralysing for future-oriented practises because rather than creating a new concept to think-with when focusing on imagining alternatives, it only offers a break-down (non-) of an already existing (and omnipresent) concept (speciesism).

So, what concepts can we use to describe those worlds that reject speciesism, without saying what they are not?

Besides the notion of non-speciesism (or anti-speciesism and post-speciesism), there are some terms we use to describe opposite kinds of relations. Words like animal ‘liberation’,
‘freedom’, or ‘justice’, for example, have essential functions in animal activism: they arguably point towards the crucial actions that need to be undertaken to end animal suffering (such as through protests, civil disobedience, sanctuaries, laws, and adoption programs). In various ways, these terms describe the goal of a non-speciesist society but say very little about what such a (liberated, free, just, or equal) society contains. Moreover, on a more abstract and philosophical level, what would it mean to be in a world which is truly free for all species?

Other crucial vocabularies in CAS and other anti-speciesist domains involves notions around ‘ethical veganism’, sometimes also used to describe post-speciesist societies (‘vegan societies’), but this term usually refers to a (human-centred) consumption ideology: vegan shoes are made without animal body-parts, vegan milk is made out of plant-based ingredients, etc. When extending this to everyday encounters and interactions, it would be unusual to say that I just had a vegan encounter with a squirrel, perhaps confusingly implying that we did not eat each other. Non-speciesist relationships between animals, however, entail much more than consumption practices alone. The term also presupposes that eating another animal or their products is by definition excluded from a world that is not speciesist. Yet, it can be argued that this idea insufficiently accounts for the relationships of other animals with their prey (something that most ethical vegans also would describe as non-speciesist) as well as human animals living under certain circumstances (such as regions without sufficient access to plant-based proteins). In a broader understanding towards non-anthropocentrism, it can further be said that it is too definite to claim upfront that non-speciesist worlds do not include any form of animal consumption by humans at all. Raising the difficult question: can animals be consumed in non-speciesist manners? A question to which scholars and activists have widely different responses, but that is unanswerable, and difficult to discuss, without identifying the various meanings that ‘non-speciesist’ could entail (and without saying what it is not).

The problem is that the terms mentioned here to describe non-speciesist societies indicate a rather ‘clean’ or ‘hands-off’ so-called abolitionist ideology. In this framework, the best possible relationship between humans and other animals would be no relationship at all (cf. Donaldson and Kymlicka, 2011: 6-8), turning the imagination of desirable non-speciesist futures into a rather paralysing thought experiment. Still, it is often those humans abiding by (ethically motivated) vegan ideologies who are already continuously practising engagements with the imagination of what non-speciesism can actually entail in daily life and thereby formulate new ideas on how to live differently with other animals on an everyday basis. In creating worlds that abandon speciesism further, beyond dietary habits, it becomes crucial to pay special attention to people that are already used to making vegan choices every single day. This text merely argues that the term ‘vegan’ by itself is not enough to account for the variety of worlding practices that living beings undertake in a non-speciesist society.
Other terminology that aims to describe respectful and compassionate ways of living with other animals are actually more human-centred on a closer look. In Jainism, for example (as well as other schools of Indian thought, including Buddhism and ancient Hinduism), a virtue to describe a compassionate way of thinking and living with other beings is described as ‘ahimsa’ (Walli, 1974: 60). This term, however, is also derived from a negation: a-himsā – meaning no-injury, and carries the meaning that to hurt another being (both in thought and action) is to hurt oneself and to hurt the divine energy (ibid.: 76) (rather than emphasising the hurting of the other animal). Second, terms like ‘animalism’ or ‘sentientism’ – derived from a broadening of a ‘humanist’ ideology – imply an expansion of anthropocentric modernist traditions of humanism towards a kind of zoo-centrism, merely raising the status of other animals, creating a new moral boundary at the question of what counts as ‘sentient’, as well as maintaining a modernist idea of higher versus lower entities that are ‘animal-’ or ‘human’-like. These ideologies tend to get stuck with questions like ‘what about plants, bacteria, fungi, and artificial intelligence?’, maintaining that, to be included into a framework that offers serious moral consideration by humans, entities need to have certain ‘sentient’ (or human-like) characteristics (placing the weight of moral considerations at someone’s intellectual or bodily capabilities). According to animal philosopher Eva Meijer, assigning moral consideration based on questions of sentience, agency, or cognitive capabilities is problematic because of lacking empirical material and our general incapability to draw accurate lines between groups of animals when scientific insights on animals’ experiences of suffering change continuously (Meijer, 2019: 159). Third, some other notions from posthumanist perspectives that generally aim to de-centre the position of the human, such as ecofeminism (cf. Miles, n.d.), deep-ecology or ecosophy (cf. Madsen, n.d.), and bioethics (cf. Zylinska, 2011), aim much more broadly at deconstructing the category ‘human’ as something unique, distinct, and at the centre of the world. Although a non-speciesist framework might fit into these concepts at large, these categories are so broad that they do not sufficiently emphasise or describe our relationships with other animals in a way that includes a firm rejection of speciesism. In the abstractions and philosophies of the scholars engaging with these terms, the focus is often returned to the meaning of being human within these worlds, while – in this text – the aim is to emphasise the relationships between humans and other animals with a focus on non-speciesism.
The imaginative gap that this section seeks to clarify perhaps becomes clearer if it is articulated it like this:

*We are suffering from a lack of non-speciesist imaginations because we are only emphasising what they are not. We cannot seem to describe what they are actually like. What is the opposite of speciesism, without saying what it is not?*

This paper suggests that a more deliberate focus on creating and enacting concepts to describe non-speciesism, with a focus on our everyday relations with other animals, can be a helpful addition to critical theory and practice, especially when it comes to future-oriented forms of thought.

**Multi-species-isms**

When attempting to think about non-speciesism as a continuous relational enactment that can be practised in everyday life rather than only in abstraction or theoretical concepts, we need to devise a term that can encompass the plurality of worlding activities that are continuously undertaken by all animals. For, as scholars from various fields have emphasised, it is not only humans that make worlds (cf. Kohn, 2013; Tsing, 2015; Morton, 2017). Despite critique from CAS scholars on the enabling and normalisation of speciesist norms in the work of Donna Haraway (cf. Weisberg, 2009), it is the notion of ‘multispecies worlding’ that she articulates in her 2016 book, that (this paper argues) comes closest to a counter-concept for speciesism as a universal recognition and response-ability towards all animals that make worlds. Still, to acknowledge the critique that CAS scholars have articulated on Haraway’s scholarship, this text proposes the use of ‘multi-species-isms’ in the effort of fabricating a concept that builds on (but does not univocally align with) Harawayan theoretical contributions.

Multi-species-isms, in the context of this paper, means that multiple species (including humans, other animals, as well as other living entities such as plants) are involved with the making of worlds, without assigning any particular order, direction, or hierarchy (as would be
indicated by notions like inter-species or trans-species). The term multispecies includes simpler and more open-ended adjective that can evolve further in different directions while maintaining a focus on living entities. This is not meant to eradicate the object-oriented-ontology approach that includes the potential worlding capacities of non-living entities such as snowflakes and rocks (cf. Abram 2010, Morton 2017). It instead establishes a particular focus on entities that are alive, within the context of this paper.

However, with regards to multispecies, why stick to the term ‘species’? According to object-oriented philosopher Timothy Morton, the notion of species is “violently antique” (2017: 19). This statement involves a more recent branch of posthumanism that breaks down the concept of ‘species’ by illustrating that it is impossible to identify individuals. Rather than single entities or organisms, we are actually ‘holobionts’: our bodies are largely made up of other species: microbes, bacterial symbionts, and complex ecosystems that comprise and interact with our anatomy, genomes, development, immune system, physiology, and the ways we evolve (Gilbert, 2017: M73-M89). These symbiotic entanglements of everyone’s bodies make it impossible to say where one species starts and another one ends. Any attempt at creating boundaries between inside and outside ontology is “arbitrarily produced by acts of violence (social, psychic and philosophical) on beings that cannot in any sense be arbitrarily divided in such ways” (Morton 2017: 24).

This paper agrees that this should indeed be taken into account. The holobiont idea broadly redefines what it means to be a human living entity that is involved with other animals on this planet. To reconcile the concept of the holobiont with the problematisation of speciesism, however, the complete lack of perceivable boundaries (accurate or simply made up for the time being) risks removing all aspects of response-ability with regards to animal oppression. We might, for example, start blaming the bacteria in our gut for encouraging massive animal slaughter and thereby relocating ethical grounding in undefinable and inseparable entities that make up the temporary totality of our worlds. As much as this is an interesting and relevant ontological posthumanist meditation on what it means to be in the world, in our everyday encounters with other entities we continuously shape our actions and make decisions on intuitively (albeit inaccurately) grouping together and separating the things we encounter. A
critique of speciesism, for instance, requires the possibility to group entities, otherwise the
notion of speciesism (or any conceptual category for living beings) could not be identified.
Therefore, this paper argues that the multi-aspect of the term multispecies should account for
the fact that the ‘we’, ‘I’, and ‘them’ are not as easily defined as we used to think, while at the
same time the -species element of the multispecies concept can firmly and continuously
remind us that this concept seeks to define the opposite meaning of speciesism.

As a noun, the term multi-species-isms indicates the pluralist ideology that carries these
worlds. This text means to align with -isms that advocate against oppression with multiplicity
(such as feminisms, multiculturalisms, multiracialisms, and postcolonialisms), while at the
same time indicating that -isms can take strong foci and moral stances within a pluralist
understanding of worlds. That is to say that -isms (in plural) are continuously negotiable
(explained in more detail in the next section). Nonetheless, the ideologies that are
conceptualised within scholarly practice can also have an opposite effect in that they might be
too definite and close down further conceptual thinking. Furthermore, other scholars and
activists might prefer a different terminology to describe the ideologies that they wish to
materialise (e.g. as mentioned, advocating for ‘vegan societies’, ‘animal citizenship’, or
‘interspecies democracy’) in an attempt to reduce possibilities and promote single solutions,
rather than opening up multiplicities that might complicate these ideas. Yet, it must be noted
that such terms are arguably utopian, as speciesism (like other forms of oppression) cannot be
universally ‘solved’ with a single solution. At worse, then, the notion of multi-species-isms
can be seen here merely to make space for the positive ingredients of non-speciesist societies,
or even as a placeholder for a better term, one that perhaps continuously needs to be re-
invented.

So, for the remainder of this text, the adjective ‘multispecies’ or the noun ‘multi-species-isms’
is used to identify the actual (rather than negating) ingredients of worlds that are ‘response-
able’ towards other animals (rather than speciesist). It is essential to reiterate that the ‘multi-
species-isms’ concept does not only mean that multiple species are involved (as the term
‘multispecies’ is used in everyday language), but is expanded to include the multiplicity
derived from posthumanist/(eco)feminist perspectives that state that all involved entities are
engaged in shared practices of making worlds and that these worlding practices enable the
ability to respond and to be heard.

Now that we have a concept (and in the worst case a placeholder-term) to describe desirable
worlds without focusing on what they are not, the next challenge is to find ways to imagine
what these worlds actually contain. What does this ‘response-ability’ mean, in practice? And
how can we further imagine multispecies possibilities more concretely?
While accepting the relationality and lack of totality that (eco)feminist and (critical) posthumanist positions imply, this text argues that we need to pay more attention to those multispecies encounters that are continuously appearing right in front of us. They could be helpful starting points for further imagination and knowledge generation. As Elisabeth Grosz argues: “if dominant modes of knowledge (causal, statistical) are incapable of envisioning the absolutely new, maybe other modes of knowing, other forms of thinking, need to be proposed” (1999: 21). The next section further articulates this position by outlining a particular approach to a relational ethics that evolves around the notion of ‘care’ (as theorised in the work of feminist technoscience scholar Maria Puig de la Bellacasa). This framework for doing ‘ethics in practice’, detailed in the next section, further articulates how multispecies worlding skills are inspiring our everyday lives already and is therefore a useful approach to emphasise existing multispecies traces in our relationships with other animals.

A Relational Ethics of Care

Traditionally, the meaning of ethics resides in a search for what is good or bad, right or wrong, or moral or immoral. Depending on one’s understanding of the world, certain perspectives on ethics evolve. In a mythological worldview, for example, what is right or wrong is understood through the knowledge of the divine. Thus, in major contemporary religions, moral obligations derive from god’s commands, either as a duty or because it has positive or negative consequences. Other, more modernist worldviews, imply that an awareness of what actions are ‘ethical’ emerges from things like pleasure versus pain, knowledge versus ignorance, freedom versus control, positive versus negative outcomes, moral versus immoral motives, agreement versus disagreement, or equality versus inequality.

In particular feminist or new materialist understandings of the world, however, the development of ethical frameworks can become an even more complicated affair, because the fundamental grounds from which stable, ethical principles are worked out is lacking. If there
is no singular fixed world – out there – but worlds instead are enacted all the time, there is no basis on which ideas of right and wrong can be developed. Ethics, then, rather than formulating a set of principles to live by, shape different types of narratives about lived experiences, without any stable answers as to what kind of actions these narratives imply. In other words, rather than following grand descriptions that prescribes ethics (such as in modernist or mythological understandings), one’s ethics are inspired by lots of different, smaller, narratives (Gaard 2019: 4-5). Moreover, and aligning with relational approaches, these narratives are continuously changing and thereby able to shift ethical perspectives. Importantly, this does not mean that we cannot take strong stances on what we understand as right or wrong or attempt to convince others of our perspectives (such as with regards to anti-speciesism). It instead means that our stances cannot form a basis for claiming universal ethics but only for relational ethics. A kind of ethics that inherently has to be continuously contested and rethought. Following the work of Puig de la Bellacasa, such ethics are not concerned with fixed explanatory visions or normative (moral or epistemological) stances, but instead, focus on how things could be. One keyword that can help to understand this kind of ethics further is ‘care’.

When we think about the meanings that the word ‘care’ evokes, we might initially focus on its positive or pleasant aspects, such as taking care of someone or something through nurturing and affection. Care can involve other humans, other animals, and plants, but also non-living things like caring for our home, our home caring for us, or caring about intangible concepts such as spirituality or death.

But contrary to our initial understanding of the word (or the positive descriptions it may have gained in feminist care theory), care is not always something pleasant or innocent. It is much more ambivalent than that. Sometimes, for example, we might care too much, pretend to care, be worn out by care, or perhaps care for the ‘wrong’ things. This understanding, in which care is relational and can never be defined as a single thing makes it particularly suitable for an understanding of ethics in which other animals participate. So how can the notion of care become a useful approach to multispecies ethics?
Maria Puig de la Bellacasa describes the notion of care as “everything that is done to maintain, continue, and repair “the world” so that all can live in it as well as possible” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 161). Importantly, the idea of living “as well as possible” includes a continuous hesitation on the meaning of “well” that is crucial for doing any kind of relational ethics (ibid.: 7). Therefore, such ethics require an “indecisive critical approach, one that doesn’t seek refuge in the stances it takes, aware and appreciative of the vulnerability of any position on the ‘as well as possible’.” (ibid.).

One example that, I think, clarifies this point with regards to other animals, resides in all of our recurring trips to the grocery store in daily life. Any type of fixed ethical approach to inform decisions on what kinds of food to buy would claim to solve this question through a ready-made formula: based on a number of factors that someone opts to take into account (such as financial resources, available options, health, taste, quality, and the means through which it is produced [such as fair-trade, ecological, organic, vegetarian, or vegan]), it is possible to, ultimately, make the best decisions on what to eat and use this stance – in principle – to guide all of our subsequent visits to the store. In practice, however, going to the grocery store is much more of a continuous effort in doing ethics every single instance, in which no one is innocent or always makes the ‘right’ decision. The ethical stances by which we decide to buy something are continuously shifting (albeit perhaps minimally, based on the narratives that inspire us as well as other subtle or less-conscious influences), and motivating different purchases every day. How am I caring about the planet today? How much thought do I put into thinking about my health? Who else will be affected by my decisions today? What do I feel like eating? Why should I care? Who should I care for?

A relational (or speculative) approach to ethics, therefore, acknowledges the complexity of world-making and grounding ethical decisions, and sees this process as continuously evolving and changing. It is about doing ethics, in practice, rather than defining ethics, in theory. When we incorporate the meaning of ‘care’ into this process, we can ask ourselves, next time we
find ourselves doing groceries: how do I practise care today? What am I caring for, and what am I neglecting? And how does this influence my actions? How am I interpreting the meaning of living “as well as possible” today? Knowing that the next time things can change.

In other words, acting ‘with care’ becomes a non-innocent, impure, and open-ended approach to life that is always involved with the practical question of how to care (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 6). Relational ethics, then, is a hands-on, ongoing process of re-creation of ‘as well as possible’ relations and therefore one that is unthinkable without a specific context in which it is applied (ibid.). This definition of care, as a starting point for multispecies ethics, as a doing, broadens the meaning of care theory in several ways that, this paper argues, are crucial for engaging with multispecies worlds.

**Multispecies Care**

A relational approach to ethics recognises that “‘no one acts alone’ (…). We relate, know, think, world and tell stories through and with other stories, worlds, knowledges, thinkings, yearnings.” (Haraway, 2017: M44). Our ways of caring are impossible to locate precisely, because they take unexpected and highly complicated turns: it is not always clear to us why we care. Caring most often involves asymmetry and surprise, as well as violence and neglect. With regards to the practice of care in relation to other animals, Puig de la Bellacasa also cites Haraway’s reflections on how humans and other animals already live, work, and play together to construct relationships of significant otherness in various complex ways (2017: 83). Care, in this understanding, recognises that power is often distributed a-symmetrically in relations between species, but in these relations organisms also continuously reconfigure the shifting meaning of “as well as possible” in all kinds of different contexts. This should not be confused with something like sole empathy or with an attempt to become spokespersons for those that are neglected. Relational ethics also does not lead to any kind of finished universal statements that should determine one’s actions, as has been proposed in feminist care theory.
(cf. Donovan 2006: 310). Instead, this paper argues that multispecies relational ethics includes a shift of focus from the consequences or outcomes of the situation towards the activity of *doing* ethics-in-practice.

In trying to align relational ethics to existing feminist theories on care, it can perhaps still be compared to the dialogical approach, as elaborated upon by Josephine Donovan. She describes dialogical care ethics as a matter of paying attention towards other animals and listening to them, thereby incorporating the animal’s position and wishes dialogically in the human ethical-decision-making process (Donovan 2006: 316-217). Though importantly, in relational ethics emphasis is placed on *doing* ethics as a process of continuous learning and challenging what living “as well as possible” could mean without residing in universal answers. In this context, we can ask questions like: *who* is caring about *what*? And what is happening right *now*? Such a process allows us to speculate further about different ways of living with other animals in complex and entangled situations without attempting to propose fixed solutions that define our relationship once and for all. Thereby we are continuously adding different layers and ways of thinking to reality, instead of remaining stuck in deconstructive critique, rejections, or simplifications of the matters of concern. To be able to imagine more desirable futures and express multispecies possibilities in today’s already existing realities, we need such relational (or speculative) ethics to think-with. An approach that, rather than close off possibilities, adds richness to our thinking-with care.

Furthermore, where other (postmodernist) approaches to ethics are situated around the position of the human as the only being that can seriously engage with the complexities and narratives of ethics, it does not require much knowledge about the lives of other animals to recognize that also they continuously practise care. The notion of care is therefore capable of addressing things that are at stake for all kinds of different entities and resituates the practice of ethics from a solely human-centred philosophical affair towards a much broader engagement of all sorts of species in all facets of life.

Some scholars have critiqued the usage of ‘care’ as a concept in ethics. Janet Biehl, for example, states that “as an emotion, ‘caring’ cannot be universalized as the basis for social organization outside one’s own small group, whether kinship based or not. Nor can the kind of caring that a mother (or father) feels for a child be universalized” (1991: 148). As a form of ethics, then, care can be particular and limited, risking to become “whimsical, subject to prejudices and can hardly provide a solid foundation for emancipatory political life” (Archambault, 1993: 21). According to Puig de la Bellacasa, however, this is precisely the point: care cannot be universalised. And this is why care becomes a suitable concept for relational ethics. It thereby allows us to continuously question who and what is cared for, and how this is done. Here it must be emphasised that although many researchers have used the concept of care in their scholarship over the last decades (cf. Donovan and Adams 2007, Donovan 2006, Gaard 2011: 38), many of the arguments surrounding care (as these two examples critique) have been aligned with a feminist theoretical grounding in emotion and affect as a foundation in itself or with the use of care as a means to inspire universal anti-speciesist guidelines. In contrast, this paper (as well as Puig de la Bellacasa’s work) adopts an
understanding of care as a way to rethink and reconfigure our relationships with other animals through an approach aligning more to the field of feminist technoscience and feminist new materialism as a relational practice that can be useful to speculate about possible futures. To further clarify this difference, feminist technoscience philosopher Joanna Zylinska has described such (minimal) ethics “to refer loosely to a set of actions we can undertake once we have intuitively grasped this constant movement of life, of which we are part, and then turned to our compromised and imperfect faculty of reason—which is perhaps primarily a storytelling faculty—in order to tell better stories about life in the universe, and about life (and death) of the universe.” (Zylinska 2014: 43). In sum, the concept of care can here be understood as a framework for rethinking and reconfiguring relationships in practice – as always ontologically ongoing – not as a positive form of affect or value in itself as it has often been expressed.

Another point of critique that should be included here involves the risk of relational care ethics becoming relativistic or uncriticisable from the position of a normative framework. Here, we may wonder whether this approach is not merely a matter of description of ambiguous morality (rather than a general set of rules to live by). Moreover, we can question if the acknowledgement of complexity actually helps to find the ingredients of a multispecies society or if it merely hides these aspects behind a ‘care-fully’ crafted narrative. An emphasis on pluralities and entanglements thereby risks replacing concrete everyday decisions with scholarly stories. While acknowledging such entanglements is important to understand multispecies encounters, it can also redirect our ability to respond to other animals with a discussion on complexity and thereby reproduce the status quo (cf. Giraud 2019). However, the annotated illustrations in this text aim to demonstrate that rather than ambiguous statements or theoretical reflections on complexity, such positive ingredients can also be traced and expressed in much more detail through narratives. Thereby, answers arguably become more concrete and more precise, rather than providing abstract ideas or encompassing totality with singular definitions and universal statements.

Coming back to the questions that opened this text (the ones asking what non-speciesist societies look like), it is useful to reiterate here that answers to these questions can be found in
paying renewed attention to traces of these worlds that are already present in our daily lives. Activities such as learning to listen to other animals, asking different questions, becoming curious, proposing ideas, bearing witness, negotiating conflicts, or paying attention are all examples of everyday responses that practise relational and multispecies forms of care. The possible meanings of multi-species-isms that arise from these practices are additive and aim to make worlds richer (cf. Despret 2016). Thus, rather than subtracting knowledge, and coming up with a single solution, a counter-concept to speciesism emerges by creating a repertoire of multispecies relationships with other animals.

Throughout this text, possibilities for multi-species-isms have appeared in the form of annotated drawings. Hopefully, by now, it will start to become more apparent how these illustrations are narrating the multi-species-isms that we can already find in today’s worlds. As humans, we cannot escape that they are always stories told from a particular perspective (often – but not always – the human one), inspired by already existing realities (for example as stories told by other people and animals, various personal perspectives, and different shared experiences).

In this case, the drawings become a tool to depict realities that are not singular, and that cannot easily be put into words (Law, 2004: 122). Instead, their interpretations take continuous effort by the maker and the viewer; the illustrations purposely lack summarising captions or referrals from certain parts of the main text. The drawings thereby offer a cue for negotiating multispecies worlds without attempting to define their content in all too definite ways. As constructed artefacts, they provide merely one collection of views into a multispecies world that can allow for further imaginations.

The multispecies narratives that appear in this text are not future scenarios because imagining alternatives is a practice that is grounded in the present. To avoid thinking in abstract concepts, sterile blueprints, or far-fetched utopia, a counter-concept of speciesism must be inclusive of the complexity and multiplicity of relationships between animals that exist in our everyday lives. As argued by philosopher Amy Allen, such heterotopias (aligning with Foucault) make deliberate space for concrete and real counter-sites that “serve as glimmers or anticipatory illuminations of other possible worlds.” (Allen, 2015: 525). Thereby, it can furthermore become more accessible for all humans (and arguably even for other animals as well) to imagine multi-species-isms in the present, inspired by the relationships we already have with each other. Negotiating possibilities for multispecies futures requires that there are possibilities to negotiate (or speculate) with. These are not found in finished statements or definite concepts. Instead, these possibilities are inscribed in the present. An additive framework that adds layers of possibility, rather than a subtractive type of ethics that attempts to reduce concepts to a single account, is needed to imagine the ingredients of non-speciesist worlds. By articulating and expressing the traces of multispecies worlds that are already enacted, we can speculate with what it means to live “as well as possible” with other animals. Thus, the possible meanings of multi-species-isms cannot be determined on paper but must be lived with other animals, in practice.
These annotated illustrations aim to offer cues for further negotiation. All of the drawings propose different ways of responding to other animals that are somehow able to escape dominant speciesist narratives. Rather than articulating a type of closure (in ways that rules, definitions, or blueprints would do), the illustrations express an opening from which further multispecies practices can be imagined.

Can we live together differently with sheep, and protect each other from harm (cf. Galloway, 2019)? Can we imagine science fiction stories that are less human-centred? Can we think of trees as interlinked networks that care for each other (cf. Powers, 2018)? How can mice help us restoring ecosystems on their terms? Can we design artefacts together with other animals for meaningful interspecies interactions (cf. Westerlaken and Gualeni, 2016)? How do I learn to see my body as a healthy host for other species? How can homes be designed to accommodate other animals? What stories do mushrooms tell us about forests that are disturbed by humans (cf. Tsing, 2015)? How can we design public squares as suitable resting places for pigeons? What do ants do with their leisure time? How do we respond with affection to each other and in what spaces does this take place?

These are just some of the possibilities (one per illustration, in the order they appear in this text) that can arise for further negotiation about the ingredients of multi-species-isms. Some of these are already explored in the resources mentioned above. Yet, instead of foregrounding singular solutions or further critiquing the questions, these negotiations break down existing grand-narratives about speciesism by creating cracks in the social repetition of the world. Instead of offering a single answer, they help us to come up with multispecies stories, alternative interpretations, and care-full responses that form relationships with other animals and thereby determine the possible meaning of multi-species-isms.

Still, a call for practising care with other animals should not tone down the critique on animal oppression by accepting all kinds of violence as simply part of our complicated lives together (cf. Giraud 2019). We cannot hide our ethics behind a veneer of care because we can continuously question how such ethics help us to care differently in all sorts of speciesist scenarios. This is not an attempt at embracing uncertainty or relativism that claims that anything is possible. Quite the opposite, relational ethics of care and a search for the positive rather than negating ingredients of multi-species-isms are an attempt at defining more concretely and practically what this can look like in our lives already. It requires us to respond and negotiate multispecies encounters in everyday life, instead of more abstractly in ethical or political theory. It is not easy to continuously remain aware of our response-ability in daily interactions with other animals. Caring, here, also involves paying attention to the lives of those animals that make us feel uncomfortable, or the animals that remain hidden from our views in daily life, such as behind the closed doors of factory farms. In other words, it does matter how we choose to care about speciesism and what kind of actions this practice of care inspires for imagining multispecies worlds. Regardless of our efforts to embrace more flexible forms of doing ethics-in-practice with other animals, this text proposes that we should maintain the notion of multi-species-isms (or a continuous re-invention of another counter-
concept to speciesism) at the heart of this inquiry into matters of multispecies care to avoid naivety or romanticism in our thinking about other already existing multispecies worlds.

Importantly, these depictions of multispecies worlds are not a rejection of critique or deconstructionism, and they do not attempt to attach to a utopian narrative out of despair. They rather present a way forward in the present. They break down the existing dominant grand narratives that seem all-explanatory to tell all kinds of different stories about the shared lives of humans and other animals. The aim is to create narratives of multispecies worlds that inspire further imagination towards the positive ingredients of such worlds and show how multispecies care is already practised in many different ways. Following a framework of relational ethics and care, this means that there is no one ‘correct’ multi-species-ism that can give final answers, but many different ways in which multispecies relationships between different animals can and should be negotiated.

References


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