

# Interpretation

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Corine Pelluchon, *Nourishment: A Philosophy of the Political Body*. Translated by Justin E. H. Smith and revised by François Cambien and Corine Pelluchon. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, 416 pp., \$79.30 (cloth), \$29.95 (paper).

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This brief comment on Corine Pelluchon's important new book on the social and political implications of eating needs a disclaimer. *Nourishment* is, to a large degree, an application of the insights of Levinas, and I am no Levinas scholar. As a nonphenomenologist, at first I thought Pelluchon was writing in code. I realized this reaction was unfair, since all books make assumptions about what readers are likely to know. In this case, if you are familiar with Levinas, you will have an easier time.

*Nourishment* might have been called *Taking Ecology Seriously*, for it proposes "a philosophy of existence that integrates what ecology teaches us about 'living from,' and...deduce[s] from this a political organization connected to the elaboration of a new social pact." Pelluchon argues that ecology as a field of study has not yielded the social and political results it promises. "Ecology has not succeeded in improving our relationship to others, to work, to our bodies, and to ourselves, since it remains external to our lives." Nor has it brought about a transformation of democracy: "it did not lead to revise the deliberative bodies to reinforce the participation of citizens, and to change the manner, the content and the argumentation of political programs." Pelluchon traces the limitations of ecology to the fact that it is cut off from the philosophy of existence. Neither the "philosophers of freedom" nor the "existential analytic developed by Heidegger in *Being and Time*" can correct this

deficiency (enter Levinas). The idea of the book is to “identify structures of existence, or existentials that translate the belonging of human beings to a reality which is both natural and cultural and from which they draw their nourishment.” A key point is thus that “the things from which I draw life are not given as objects or as utensils, even when I make use of them, but rather trace a horizon where utility and production are not primitive. This is why they are called ‘nourishment.’” Love and enjoyment are as much a part of nourishment as utility and labor (3–4).

The focus of the second part of *Nourishment* is constructive. Pelluchon proposes a new social contract in place of the old, morally bankrupt one. The new contract turns out to be grounded in a revision of Rawls’s original position that includes...the interests of animals! “We must also place behind the veil of ignorance our own belonging to the human species and our degree of rationality, which are among the non-deserved and arbitrary possessions that cannot justify that individuals who have them enjoy privileges” (238). This may sound goofy, but as an animal lover, I am persuaded by Pelluchon’s animal-inclusive version, even though it suffers from the same defects as the original original position, only more so. *Nourishment* concludes with a vision of a new cosmopolitanism (“beyond national borders”) that is, à la the requirements of phenomenology, not founded on any particular vision of the good.

*Nourishment* contains some of the most insightful and sensitive writing I have read on animals, both those we live with as pets and those raised for slaughter whose suffering we block from our consciousness. Pelluchon’s writing on empathy and responsibility for animals has an affecting depth much greater than the legalistic arguments generated by the “animal rights” literature, which has done little to protect animals from the vicious desires of human beings. Here is a passage:

When we consider the being of animals and the possibility of establishing communication with them, we place ourselves at the level of feeling, at which we encounter them as members of a moral community that merits our consideration. Not respecting their needs and their desire to live, preventing them from expressing the joy to exist, which is, as we have seen, originary, and which animals communicate as soon as they are in an appropriate environment, is to make the common world in which we encounter them into an alien world, where it is unlikely that we experience happiness. For animals are not other existences alongside our own: their existence is mingled with ours, whether we have forged bonds of affection with them, as for our pets, or whether we consider the attachment of farmers, in extensive farming, for the cows that they know and that they have seen being

born....[In factory farming] the living conditions of these animals do not permit them to communicate in any other way than in reacting by cries or by panicked movements....The cage, the darkness, the iron bars, and the overpopulation make up their surrounding world.... [Factory farmers] invent all sorts of strategies in order to not suffer (excessively) from the suffering of animals, but the majority of them remain haunted by traumatizing images as the employees of industrial slaughterhouses confess, which give them nightmares in which living animals are pursuing them. We are not able to mistreat sensitive beings without being profoundly harmed by what we do to them. (115–16)

The sweeping breadth of *Nourishment*, from its description of the “existentials” of the human condition to its proclamation of a new cosmopolitanism, does not for the most part allow room for detailed readings of philosophical texts or for detailed quantitative analyses; unfortunately, both deficiencies undermine to some extent the persuasiveness of the book as a whole. An example of the first is found in Pelluchon’s discussion of Locke as she examines insights from the major social contract theorists. As is well known, there has been much discussion of whether Locke was a concealed Hobbesian. Pelluchon writes as if it is obvious that Locke’s natural law prohibitions are real and should constrain the freedom of the state, a convenient reading of the text that supports her political outlook. She claims that, for Locke, “natural law, which requires us not to endanger the survival of the species, contains human greed within limits beyond which development is ecologically unsustainable and socially unfair.... The civil government must also respect and enforce a natural law that is a pre-political norm showing how ethics can limit politics.... Endangering the survival of the species makes the action illegitimate whether it be individual or collective” (217–18). To be persuasive, major conclusions require that textual evidence be presented.

Neither is there enough detail provided for conclusions drawn from quantitative data. Pelluchon notes “that one person out of eight is undernourished” owing to poverty (not shortages), “868 million people are suffering from hunger,” hunger and malnutrition “kill one child under ten years of age every five seconds.” These facts for Pelluchon “imply the denunciation of the international economic system and the rules of the global market” (156–57). Pelluchon does not see that the global market is amazing for *reducing* hunger (the rapid rise of a prosperous China should caution against the denunciation of global markets).

*Nourishment* is in the first place a lengthy philosophical essay on the implications of the corporeality of human and animal existence and in the second place an argument for radically evolutionary change in our political outlook. Pelluchon takes what she needs from the writings of great thinkers to advance an ordered vision, grounded in the point of view of Levinas, of what human life could and should be: everyone should live a life of joyful, constructive, responsible interactions with others (always on a full stomach). No hunger, no war. No tasteless nastiness, either. What is life without good taste? Pelluchon builds, step by step, a promising picture about how life could be better than it is if we just thought and felt differently about it. She taps into our desire for a better way of life. She is a scholar of superior intelligence and learning; she is also kind, open, and sensitive. She establishes a “we” with her readers, a community of concern for future generations, even while eschewing the possibility or even desirability of a shared moral horizon. Her caring includes the hungry, the poor, the sad and spiritually downtrodden, the mentally ill, and those who suffer from governmental injustice, and it includes animals, especially the caged and frightened ones that exist only to be unfairly killed and eaten by human beings. In our hearts we know that humanity can do better, that we should seek out a political vision that does more for people (and animals) than ‘human rights plus the welfare state’ can achieve. But what should it be?

To answer that question, *Nourishment* offers a new view of human existence with the intention of fostering a more just and more satisfying way of life for the people—and animals—of earth. The book conveys in up-to-date philosophical terms the profound dissatisfaction of progressive intellectuals with what the West has become, but also offers a revolutionary (or, more accurately, radically evolutionary) path to the future designed to end the unethical behavior of the developed democracies toward impoverished peoples, toward animals, toward their own vulnerable persons and groups, toward future generations, and toward the earth itself.