In this commentary I will focus first on the overall thesis of Gary Steiner’s new book, laid out in sweeping terms in the first pages, according to which postmodernism does not give us any ‘principles’ and therefore is not useful for animal ethics. Second, I will consider his critiques of Michel Foucault in particular and will offer some more constructive ideas about Foucault’s usefulness for animal ethics.

Steiner tells us in his Acknowledgements that his motivation for writing *Animals and the Limits of Postmodernism* was that he and Gary Francione were concerned about the “increasing interest of postmodern thinkers in questions bearing upon the moral status of animals” (ix). This is a worry for Steiner and Francione since they believe that postmodernism is a “dead end” (ix) for ethics generally and for animal ethics in particular. Steiner thus wondered aloud why no one had written on the limits of postmodernism for ethics—and for animal ethics specifically—and Francione encouraged him to write a book on this topic. Although this is simply an anecdote in the Acknowledgements, I nevertheless think that it should give us pause. As I shall discuss below, I am first of all astounded that Francione and Steiner do not know that reams have been written on the question of whether postmodernism is useful for ethics and politics. As a Foucault scholar, I cannot give a lecture or make it through a job interview without someone asking me the ‘normativity question’ about Foucault: how can I use Foucault for political and ethical
philosophy given that, allegedly, he gives us a deterministic and relativistic philosophy and provides no grounds for normative claims? It is only someone who is profoundly uninformed about this field of philosophy who could assume that the motivation for Steiner’s book was to fill a gap in the literature; perhaps the application to animal ethics is somewhat new, however it goes without saying that if postmodern thinkers cannot provide us with the grounds for any moral or political philosophy, they could not provide us with the grounds for an animal ethics.¹

This anecdote about Steiner and Francione’s conversation should also give us pause as one would think that the fact that new circles of scholars are coming to take an interest in animal ethics would only be seen as a good thing by animal ethicists. Surely we want as many people as possible to be concerned about these issues. The point is not that individuals who previously approached animal ethics in analytic terms were switching over to less effective postmodern approaches, but rather that people who were previously uninterested in animal ethics, or were part of a school that traditionally did not take an interest in animals, were now engaging in these moral questions. Even if one does not think that postmodernism is the best way to go about theorizing animal ethics, surely we should be glad if more and more circles of people are coming to recognize the importance of issues that were previously not on their radars.

Steiner notes in his Introduction that instead of taking “seriously our moral obligations toward our animal kin” (2) what we find in postmodern discussions of animals is merely “a panoply of vague gestures toward some indeterminate sense of continuity between human and animal life, and a general sense that we ought to have more compassion for animals” (2). Although I will agree with Steiner that there has been a great deal written on animals in continental philosophy that disappointingly fails to address ethical issues in a straightforward manner, this is not a problem unique to or intrinsic to postmodern philosophical approaches.
Moreover, there has also been a considerable amount written in this literature that argues for
our ethical responsibility towards other animals in ways that cannot be described as ‘vague
gesturing’. To take just one example, the Foucauldian scholar Matthew Cole concludes his
article, “From ‘Animal Machines’ to ‘Happy Meat’?” with the unambivalent statement that
“Veganism [not ‘happy meat’], ... is the compassionate and rational response to the human
oppression and exploitation of ‘farmed’ (and all other) animals” (97). It is not the case,
moreover, that all postmodern authors writing on animals focus on some “indeterminate sense of
continuity between human and animal life”; on the contrary, many Levinasians have stressed the
*alterity* of other animals as the grounds for our ethical responsibility toward them. Unfortunately
Levinas and the large body of Levinasian literature on animal ethics that has emerged in recent
years are not discussed by Steiner other than in a handful of passing references and footnotes. 2

But why, for Steiner, is postmodernism a “dead end” for animal ethics? He writes:

An examination of the terms of postmodernism makes it clear why its proponents never
get to the point of making definitive claims about the moral status of animals: fundamental to postmodernism is the endeavor to challenge the pretensions of traditional philosophy to objective truth and determinate principles. From an epistemological standpoint, this endeavor is born of the belief that all experience is essentially obscure and indeterminate, and that any characterization of experience in perspicuous terms is an idealized distortion of the irreducible complexity of experiential phenomena. From a political standpoint, the endeavor is born of a conviction that abstract principles are simply tools for the suppression of difference; the appeal to abstract principles, we are told, simply reproduces established regimes of dominance and submission. Principles thus become reduced to nothing more than weapons in polemical struggles in which those in power seek to preserve their position of dominance and thwart the endeavor of the powerless to attain recognition and empowerment.

The notion of principles is part of a larger ensemble of notions such as selfhood, agency,
right, norms, responsibility, and rational argumentation, notions that are absolutely
essential to the humanism that is a prime target of much contemporary postmodern
thought. (2)
Steiner does not actually refute any of these alleged arguments of postmodernism, but rather rejects them based on their purported pernicious effects. In contrast to this picture of postmodernism, Steiner invokes his own assertion in his previous book that “what is absolutely clear is that cosmic justice demands universal veganism, the refusal to consume animal products of any kind”, and notes that no such ‘vegan imperative’ could be derived from a postmodern philosophy: “Postmodernists... refuse to embrace anything like ethical veganism because of their epistemological and political opposition to principles” (3). As with many of the claims that Steiner makes about postmodernism, I am not sure who Steiner is talking about here as he tends to not refer to or cite anyone directly. Contra Steiner, however, there are of course “postmodernists” (like myself and other people in this room) who are ethical vegans and promote ethical veganism in their philosophical work. I think that what is going on here is that for Steiner, unless one accepts his own universal vegan imperative, one does not have any principles, and one is not embracing “anything like ethical veganism.” There can only be one kind of principle, for Steiner, which is a universal one, and there can only be one kind of argument for veganism that counts as “anything like ethical veganism,” and this is his own universalizing one. “Ethical veganism” is being conflated with an acceptance of Steiner’s universal “vegan imperative.”

As noted, there are many postmodern writers writing today—who do not figure in Steiner’s bibliography—who are ethical vegans and promote ethical veganism in their philosophical writings and teaching. Why would these people be said to have “no principles”? It might be the case that such thinkers would not support a “universal vegan imperative,” applied in a blanket way not only to people like ourselves but also to subsistence hunters living in poverty in Alaska, to impoverished African-Americans living in food deserts in the United States, and to certain aboriginal peoples with complex relations to animals and the land; at least, such thinkers
would allow conversations about these cases to take place, which Steiner’s universal imperative would foreclose. These authors might also question whether veganism enables us to have clean hands given that even to eat vegetables we kill animals, and might also question whether veganism is absolutely always the choice that entails the least harm to animals, and what we should do in scenarios where it isn’t. For instance, lately I spent days biking around the isolated prairie city where I live trying in vain to find vegan sandals. I eventually went online and found vegan shoe stores in places like London, England, from which I could order sandals, at £100 with the shipping and handling. I wondered if I might do better to buy used leather sandals across the street for a quarter of this price, and donate the rest of the money that I would save to PETA, and not engage in the environmentally irresponsible act of having sandals flown to me from Europe. But then I would be wearing dead cows on my feet and not be being a vegan. In the end I ordered the sandals from London, but I am aware that this was not necessarily the choice that did the least harm to animals—including wild animals—and also that I can only afford to consistently make choices such as this one because my individual income is more than double that of the average household in the province where I live. What does it mean for someone like me—or Steiner—to say that everyone should act how we act? I worry most of all that by focusing on dilemmas like this one—which approach animal ethics via principles like the universal vegan imperative—all of our attention is paid to our individual practices as consumers, and all the moral responsibility falls on us as individual shoppers and agents, rather than on systematic structures of oppression, discourses and institutions. I may in fact think that the Alaskans and aboriginal people and African-Americans in food deserts should do their very best to be vegan, for of course we would not accept the consumption of human children just because one lives in an urban food desert or in a geographically remote area, but I also want to recognize
that it is much harder and more complicated for these people than it is for Gary Steiner or myself to abide by his imperative. I think that we should at least recognize the need to consider multiple forms of intersecting oppression when we consider these cases, and that we need to acknowledge our own privilege, and that these examples introduce complexities that we should not silence by simply announcing a universal imperative that erases all differences. To say that unless one accepts Steiner’s universal vegan imperative, or that if one allows a consideration of complex social and cultural situations that include other forms of oppression than speciesism, one has no principles and is not arguing for ethical veganism at all, is to foreclose ethical discussion in a way that should seriously trouble us.

In reading Steiner’s claims that postmodernists “dispense with principles altogether” (3), I was reminded of the arguments that were made in the ’80s and ’90s on the part of liberal feminists, warning that despite the popularity of postmodern thought amongst feminists, postmodernism should be recognized as dangerous and unhelpful for feminism. The reasons given were that since postmodernism (supposedly) argues that there are no subjects, no truth, no norms, no responsibility, and no agency, and since such a view (supposedly) could not possibly ground a politics, postmodernism could not be a theoretical basis for feminist theory or praxis. In declaring that the subject is dead, postmodernism would (apparently) deny that women can be subjects or agents, and would undermine the category of “woman” itself—and if women don’t exist, then what would feminism be struggling for? In suggesting that postmodernism would deprive us of the grounds for normativity, Steiner is making similar kinds of arguments, over two decades later, only applying them to animal ethics rather than gender politics. Judith Butler published a powerful article in 1992, titled “Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question
of ‘Postmodernism’,” in response to precisely these kinds of claims. I will cite her at some
length, as I think that her text directly anticipates and addresses Steiner’s book. She writes:

The question of postmodernism is surely a question, for is there, after all, something
called postmodernism? Is it an historical characterization, a certain kind of theoretical
position, and what does it mean for a term that has described a certain aesthetic practice
now to apply to social theory and to feminist social and political theory in particular?
Who are these postmodernists? Is this a name that one takes on for oneself, or is it more
often a name that one is called if and when one offers a critique of the subject, a
discursive analysis, or questions the integrity or coherence of totalizing social
descriptions?

I know the term from the way it is used, and it usually appears on the horizon embedded
in the following critical formulations: “if discourse is all there is ... ,” or “if everything is
a text ... ,” or “if the subject is dead ... ,” or “if real bodies do not exist....” The sentence
begins as a warning against an impending nihilism, for if the conjured content of these
series of conditional clauses proves to be true, then, and there is always a then, some set
of dangerous consequences will surely follow. So ‘postmodernism’ appears to be
articulated in the form of a fearful conditional or sometimes in the form of paternalistic
disdain toward that which is youthful and irrational. Against this postmodernism, there is
an effort to shore up the primary premises, to establish in advance that any theory of
politics requires a subject, needs from the start to presume its subject, the referentiality
of language, the integrity of the institutional descriptions it provides. For politics is
unthinkable without a foundation, without these premises. But do these claims seek to
secure a contingent foundation of politics that requires that these notions remain
unproblematized features of its own definition? Is it the case that all politics, and feminist
politics in particular, is unthinkable without these prized premises? Or is it rather that a
specific version of politics is shown in its contingency once those premises are
problematically thematized?

To claim that politics requires a stable subject is to claim that there can be no political
opposition to that claim. Indeed, that claim implies that a critique of the subject cannot be
a politically informed critique but, rather, an act which puts into jeopardy politics as such.
To require the subject means to foreclose the domain of the political, and that foreclosure,
installed analytically as an essential feature of the political, enforces the boundaries of the
domain of the political in such a way that that enforcement is protected from political
scrutiny. The act which unilaterally establishes the domain of the political functions,
then, as an authoritarian ruse by which political contest over the status of the subject is
summarily silenced.

... A number of positions are ascribed to postmodernism, as if it were the kind of thing
that could be the bearer of a set of positions: discourse is all there is ... ; the subject is
dead, I can never say “I” again; there is no reality, only representations. These
characterizations are variously imputed to postmodernism or poststructuralism, which are
conflated with each other and sometimes conflated with deconstruction, and sometimes
understood as an indiscriminate assemblage of French feminism, deconstruction, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Foucaultian analysis, Rorty’s conversationalism and cultural studies. On this side of the Atlantic and in recent discourse, the terms “postmodernism” or “poststructuralism” settle the differences among those positions in a single stroke, providing a substantive, a noun, that includes those positions as so many of its modalities or permutations. It may come as a surprise to some purveyors of the Continental scene to learn that Lacanian psychoanalysis in France positions itself officially against poststructuralism, that Kristeva denounces postmodernism, that Foucaultians rarely relate to Derrideans, that Cixous and Irigaray are fundamentally opposed, and that the only tenuous connection between French feminism and deconstruction exists between Cixous and Derrida....

I propose that the question of postmodernism be read not merely as the question that postmodernism poses for feminism, but as the question, what is postmodernism? What kind of existence does it have? Jean-François Lyotard champions the term, but he cannot be made into the example of what all the rest of the purported postmodernists are doing. Lyotard’s work is, for instance, seriously at odds with that of Derrida, who does not affirm the notion of ‘the postmodern,’ and with others for whom Lyotard is made to stand. Is he paradigmatic? Do all these theories have the same structure (a comforting notion to the critic who would dispense with them all at once)? Is the effort to colonize and domesticate these theories under the sign of the same, to group them synthetically and masterfully under a single rubric, a simple refusal to grant the specificity of these positions, an excuse not to read, and not to read closely? For if Lyotard uses the term, and he can be conveniently grouped with a set of writers, and if some problematic quotation can be found in his work, then can that quotation serve as an “example” of postmodernism, symptomatic of the whole?

But if I understand part of the project of postmodernism, it is to call into question the ways in which such “examples” and “paradigms” serve to subordinate and erase that which they seek to explain. For the “whole,” the field of postmodernism in its supposed breadth, is effectively “produced” by the example which is made to stand as a symptom and exemplar of the whole; in effect, if in the example of Lyotard we think we have a representation of postmodernism, we have then forced a substitution of the example for the entire field, effecting a violent reduction of the field to the one piece of text the critic is willing to read .... (3-5)

Butler goes on in this article to defend the possibility of feminist politics after the foundations of the rational, Cartesian subject, of the universal category “woman”, and of universal truth claims have been undermined. Similarly, I think we can and must argue for the possibility of an animal ethics after the loss of the foundations of human exceptionalism, humanism, and universal truth claims in moral philosophy.
We can return to these points, but for the moment I want to stress that the rhetorical move that Butler problematizes between what one so-called postmodernist has said to what all so-called postmodernists believe is enacted many times in Steiner’s book. For instance Steiner moves from Derrida’s statement that he was “a vegetarian in [his] soul,” despite not being a vegetarian in practice, to the claim that no postmodernists have or ever could put forward arguments for veganism. Similarly, Steiner asserts his decision to focus on Derrida as exemplary of the limitations of so-called postmodernism, claiming that Derrida’s “failure” serves “as an index of the best we can hope for from postmodern thought regarding the moral status of animals” (5). But why should Derrida be taken as an index for all postmodernism, given that, as Butler notes, Derrida didn’t even see himself as a postmodernist and that he and other so-called postmodernists (who also rejected this label) were seriously “at odds”? Should Derrida’s supposed failure to provide an animal ethics stand in as an appraisal of Foucault’s utility for animal ethics, when the two philosophers had little to say to each other and disagreed in what they did say? This kind of move—from Derrida to all “postmodernists”—simply seems like an excuse to not read the enormous body of literature that one is purporting to refute.³

To take another example of this kind of rhetorical move, Steiner writes that “Foucault himself acknowledges at the end of volume I of The History of Sexuality that the terms of postmodern thought render the prospect of liberation as illusory as the ideal of absolute knowledge that the proponents of postmodern thought wish to dispel” (4). Steiner is referring to—but misconstruing—Foucault’s argument that there is no liberation from power. By this Foucault means that there is no outside of power. Within the context of his discussion, Foucault was arguing that the sexual liberation movement of the 1970s was wrongheaded to think that we could have sex lives that would be completely free of power relations, and that “good sex” would
mean sex beyond power. Foucault is not saying, however, that we might as well accept sexual domination, sexual normalization, the discourses of sexual scientists, and the institutionalization and medicalization of supposed perverts. He is not saying that since there is no liberation we might as well throw up our hands and do nothing, or that political struggle is futile. On the contrary, Foucault’s book is engaged in just such a political struggle against sexual normalization. Foucault believes that there are practices of freedom, that there is always resistance to power, that power relations can be changed for the better, even if we should not understand these as “liberation” from power. What this means for the animal liberation movement is that our aim cannot be to completely “liberate” animals from power relations with humans, and that good human-animal relations would not simply mean “leaving them alone”—we might note, for instance, that human decisions impact other animals even in the wild and thus that we are always going to be in complex power relationships with all animals on the planet—but this does not mean that we should not abolish animal agriculture and animal laboratories as surely as we should abolish the institutions of human confinement and oppression of which Foucault wrote. What Steiner does with Foucault’s claim that there is no liberation, however, is to take it to suggest that a consequence of postmodern thought is that there is no point in liberation struggles such as, presumably, animal liberation. But we can first of all note that Foucault is making this claim about modernity and about modern power relations in particular. He is not talking about postmodernism and this is not a claim about a set of conditions that only apply if one is a postmodernist. Indeed, Foucault rejected both the postmodern and poststructuralist labels, saying that he was engaged in a critical history of modernism; we are still in the modern era, as far as Foucault was concerned, and it was still this era with which he was engaging. Foucault’s claims are thus not an “acknowledgement” of the limitations of postmodern
thought, but are about the limitations placed on us by modern power relations. Even if we were to insist, against Foucault, that he is a postmodernist, and thus that as a postmodernist he is denying the possibility of liberation from power, and even if we were to misinterpret this as a kind of political quietism, it would still be wrong to then say that this is true of all postmodernists, for not all postmodernists are Foucauldians or would agree on this point.

The failure to read, or to read carefully, the literature one is refuting is perhaps permissible on Steiner’s terms since all we need to know is whether the authors in question agree to certain assumptions of humanism and if they do not, we need not read them—not because these assumptions have been philosophically refuted by Steiner, but because dire consequences would purportedly follow from any rejection of these tenets (tenets which allegedly are necessary for any possibility of political or ethical thought or to “have principles”). In this way, as Butler puts it, Steiner suggests that there can be no political opposition to his claims as any opposition to his claims jeopardize the very possibility of ethics. In this way, Steiner shuts down moral or political dissent, and also excuses himself from having to read a vast body of writing—writing that I will now argue does accomplish ethical and political tasks.

The commentary by Patrick Llored (also published in this issue) discusses some of the ways in which Derrida’s work has in fact been useful for animal ethics, and in what follows I would similarly like to indicate some of the ways that I think that Foucault’s work can be useful for thinking about animal ethics. First, Foucault scholars and Foucault himself have written genealogies of specific forms of oppression such as sexual oppression, ableism, and racism, showing how it is that modern, eugenical societies came to be characterized by the forms of biologizing heterosexism, ableism, and racism that they are. I think that we can likewise take up the tools that Foucault has given us to provide genealogies of speciesism. In a very fragmentary
form, I think that Chapter Six of Peter Singer’s *Animal Liberation* is aiming to do something like this: Singer provides a sketch of the history of Western civilization from Ancient Rome to the present in order to see how it is that we came to have the forms of speciesist intuitions that we do. The point of genealogy is to show that even if a certain way of seeing the world is deeply entrenched, is experienced as visceral, and appears natural and inevitable, it is nevertheless contingent and came about through a series of historical accidents. What is politically useful about this project is the insight that if things could have been otherwise, they can still be otherwise; if they came to be, they can come out of being. Far from postmodernism leading to nihilism and quietism as Steiner suggests, a genealogical, Foucault-inspired approach to studying speciesism should convince us of the possibility of creating a different world, a world without speciesism.

Second, a series of Foucauldian authors have provided powerful analyses of the situation of animals—including agricultural animals, zoo animals, and companion animals—through the lens of Foucault’s models of sovereign power, disciplinary power, biopower, and pastoral power. Again, these forms of power are presented by Foucault as contingent historical phenomena, and understanding both how they work and how they came to be is arguably essential for understanding how we might resist them; one argument that Foucault makes in *The History of Sexuality* is that the sexual liberation movement is ineffective because it does not understand the relationship between modern power and sexuality: it understands this power as repressive rather than constructive, and thus attempts to liberate it from repression instead of resisting the ways that it is being constructed through scientific discourses and biopolitical practices. Similarly we might say that the animal liberation movement will be ineffective so long as it does not understand how power is working to construct human-animal relations. For instance, I have
found it useful to think about meat-eating in terms of disciplinary power, and to think about how alimentary identities are constituted much like sexual identities according to Foucault’s analysis. This insight has enabled me to better understand why there is so much resistance to the ethical requirement that we change how we eat and that we stop eating animals in particular. Understanding that people eat how they do, not because they do not know about factory farms, and not because they are not yet rationally convinced by the moral arguments for veganism, but rather because their bodies have been disciplined into certain normalized dietary regimes, and because their identities or souls are products of these disciplinary and normalizing practices on and of the body, has helped me to think about what might be the best strategies for changing how we eat despite the fact that this is a far more difficult task than most analytic moral philosophers have acknowledged.

Thus, while it is true that Foucault does not tell us, or enable me to tell you and everyone else, that whoever you are in the world and whatever your situation, you must be vegan, I do think he has given me some useful tools for animal ethics. I am thus agreeing with Steiner that Foucault does not give us universal moral imperatives—and nor would I want him to—but I disagree with Steiner that this means that he is useless for animal ethics, or for ethical and political thought more generally. I do not think that our only two options in philosophy are universal truth claims versus uselessness, nihilism and quietude. Saying that we do not have truth with a Capital T does not mean that everything we say, think, and believe is merely an “illusion,” as Steiner implies (41). It is not the case that we need to have universal and objective moral imperatives, or else there is no possibility of having principles at all or that “anything goes” in the ethical realm. To return to Butler’s article, she writes: “To refuse to assume, that is, to require the notion of the subject from the start is not the same as negating or dispensing with such a
notion altogether; on the contrary, it is to ask after the process of its construction and the political meaning and consequentiality of taking the subject as a requirement or presupposition of theory” (4). Similarly, to refuse to assume, that is, to require the notion of universal truths and thus universal moral principles is not to say that “anything goes” either epistemologically or morally. Far from being uninterested in truth or believing there is no truth, Foucault urges us to ask how we came to have the truths that we do. This does not mean that we could have had any other truths whatsoever—there are surely reasons why some truth claims stick more easily than others—but it is to say that we could have had different truths if we had had different discourses and different practices. It is worth noting that this is a very good thing for animals: it means that if we stopped thinking about and talking about animals as we do and stopped treating them as we do we might one day come to live in a world where there would be different truths about human-animal relations—and given how things are now, this could almost only be for the good.  

Notes

1 Moreover, continental philosophers themselves have repeatedly drawn attention to the historical failure of continental philosophy to adequately address issues of animal ethics (although this is rapidly changing as more and more continental philosophers take on this issue, and although these authors would not suggest that this is a problem that is intrinsic to continental philosophy). See Cary Wolfe’s work and see Jodey Castricano’s Introduction to Animal Subjects. Thanks to Christiane Bailey for drawing my attention to these points.

2 Steiner claims there has been nothing useful written on animal ethics in the postmodern school of philosophy, but most of the texts and authors that come to my mind on this topic go unmentioned in his book. Large sections of the book are either not about animals or are not about postmodernism, even while very significant bodies of literature within the area of what we might call postmodern critical animal studies go unmentioned.
3 Indeed, many philosophers whose names come to mind when we think “postmodernism”—such as Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Jean-François Lyotard—do not get mentioned a single time in this book. Steiner apparently believes he can dismiss them without so much as naming them.

4 Steiner argues that Foucault “proceeds ... as if there were at least one form of discourse [genealogy] that can achieve something like objectivity in its observations about history and the human condition” (39). He suggests that Foucault fails to confront “the self-contradictory nature of a philosophical discourse that implicitly claims absolute truth in the exact moment that it reduced all truth to perspective” (39). Likewise I anticipate that Steiner might question how I can make statements about what would be “good” for animals, and how I can advocate for veganism (even if not a universal vegan imperative). He may assume that I too am falling into the same self-contradiction and false sense of immunity that he (incorrectly) attributes to Foucault. In fact, Steiner is simply wrong in his accusations against Foucault, for in the very essay that Steiner is discussing Foucault is clear that genealogy itself is always political, biased and declares its own “injustices.” (He writes: “‘Effective’ history [genealogy] deprives the self of the reassuring stability of life and nature .... It will uproot its traditional foundations and relentlessly disrupt its pretended continuity. This is because knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting” (“Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” 88). And again: “The final trait of effective history [genealogy] is its affirmation of knowledge as perspective. Historians take unusual pains to erase the elements in their work which reveal their grounding in a particular time and place, their preferences in a controversy—the unavoidable obstacles of their passion. Nietzsche’s version of historical sense is explicit in its perspective and acknowledges its system of injustice. Its perception is slanted, being a deliberate appraisal, affirmation, or negation; it reaches the lingering and poisonous traces in order to prescribe the best antidote. It is not given to a discreet effacement before the objects it observes” (90). Likewise, I recognize that my own position on animal ethics is biased and perspectival and not “absolute truth”. Some of my bias, I would argue, comes from the way I have self-fashioned myself away from how I was disciplined to be: I was raised in a meat-eating family that “euthanized” cats rather than paying for vet bills. I was brought up to be a speciesist but I transformed myself over the years through self-chosen practices such that today I bankrupt myself on vet bills and do not consume animal products. On the other hand, some of my bias is surely the result of how I was constituted by my family and my culture; for instance I am aware that in my veganism I am representative of the main demographic group of vegans in North America: white, middle class women, and more specifically white, middle class, childless women who are not in intimate relationships with men. Many aspects of being white, feminine, bourgeois, and not in relationships with men and not a mother makes it easier and more predictable for me to be a vegan than if I were in most other demographic groups in North America, and so I do not ascribe my veganism entirely to the rational expression of my agency or my moral autonomy, nice as that would be. Thus, with Foucault, I will acknowledge that my food choices and my moral truths are in part a reflection of my agency and my self-fashioning, but they are also a reflection of how I have been constituted by society. As this suggests, what ‘postmodern’ philosophers offer to animal ethics is something more nuanced and complex than the simplistic dichotomy between universal imperatives taken up by fully rational and autonomous agents versus the ethical ‘dead ends’ and political quietism
that Steiner describes. Although I disagree with Steiner about what our options are in moral philosophy, ultimately I would stress that we are on the same side, and on the same side as the other panelists presenting today: we are ethical vegans and we want to use philosophy to convince others to be vegans because we want to help animals, and we are all engaged in using the tools at our disposal to do that. I think that we surely also all agree that our pressing task is not to demonstrate that postmodernism—whatever that is—or any other philosophical tradition is useless, but rather to put all the philosophical tools that we have to use to stop the bloodbath in which we live.

Works Cited


