

## **Otherwise than Anthropocentrism: Levinas Face-to-Face with the Animal**

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### *Review*

Since I am not an expert in animal ethics, my review will primarily focus on the way the present dissertation applies the central concepts of Levinas's thought to the problems of animal ethics. Regarding the basic question of the possibility of using Levinas' philosophy for the purposes of animal ethics, I agree with the author that Levinas' thought allows it. While Levinas himself understands his thought as philosophical 'ethics before ethics' and thus distinguishes it from 'applied ethics', he nevertheless acknowledges that it is certainly possible to apply his ethics, even if he does not do so himself.

I find the central theoretical assertion of the thesis very convincing, according to which Levinas is no hard-core anthropocentrist and the focus should be not so much on his ambivalent anthropocentric remarks on non-human animals (although some of Levinas's reflections on animals are remarkable, such as the passage where he reflects on where the face begins and ends and compares the face of a dog, a snake and a flea) but on the possibilities of applying the central concepts of his ethics to the essential problems of non-human animals.

In my opinion, the author has succeeded in demonstrating unequivocally that Levinas's ethics has the capacity to treat the animal as a face. In relation to the author's second area of interest, animal ethics, then, the work performs, in my view, a convincing Levinasian turn. If the classical discourse of animal ethics focused on the resemblance/ sameness between human and animal, on shared capacities and qualities, and on an emphasis on continuity in the question of anthropological difference, the Levinasian turn emphasizes the otherness of the nonhuman animal, its face without identity, which calls us to an ethics that transcends the sameness of our species. „If the classical discourse of animal ethics seeks to combat the polar (and hierarchical) opposition between humans and animals by pressing on the continuities between them (the negative alternate), my move is precisely to escape from this framework, to move to the alter region. (...) The point of departure should not be on what qualities reside in the human or in the animal as prompted by identity politics, but how the animal breaches the ego totality, on how the animal influences the human toward an ethics beyond herself and her species.“ (p. 138-139)

Aside from the general layout articulated in the introduction with the phrase “other than anthropocentrism”, I find the third chapter of the thesis most compelling, where the author extends Levinas's naively anthropocentric (but not anthropocentrist, as she rightly points out) notion of face to non-human animals. At the same time, however, I find the way in which the author works with Levinasian concepts problematic in two main ways, which also constitute the two main objections I have to the present dissertation.

The first objection concerns the relation of the human ethical subject to the face, i.e., to non-human others. It seems to me that the ethical turn towards the preservation of the life of the

nonhuman other, in which "the animal breaks the ego totality," exclusively emphasizes the positive moment of Levinas's analysis of the encounter with the face and does not theoretically sufficiently appreciate the dark side of our relation to the face as a vulnerable other. For the relation to the face is, according to Levinas, essentially ambivalent: the one who reveals his vulnerability I am at once tempted to kill, but obliged not to do so. This ambivalence at the core of the ethical subject in Levinas has been well articulated by Judith Butler: „For Levinas, violence is one "temptation" that a subject may feel in the encounter with the precarious life of the other that is communicated through the face. This is why the face is at once a temptation to kill and an interdiction against killing. The "face" would make no sense if there were no murderous impulse against which it had to be defended. And its very defenselessness is what apparently stokes the aggression against which the interdiction functions. Levinas has articulated a certain ambivalence for the subject in the encounter with the face: a desire to kill, an ethical necessity not to kill.“ (Frames of War, p. 172-173). The question might be this: does the Levinasian turn in animal ethics formulated in the thesis account for this ambivalence of the ethical subject, for the fact that the encounter with the vulnerability of the other may not only mean "prompting the human toward a cognition of the infinite otherness of the nonhuman species" (p. 152), but that it may also imply the possibility of cruelty, the temptation to kill? Is this basic ambivalence sufficiently reflected in the methodology of the author's dissertation? The thesis certainly takes into account certain ambivalences in the motivations of animal keepers, e.g. in the case of the caretakers of Keiko the killer whale, but more along the lines of ambivalences between saving a creature/species and personal enrichment, or the predilection for having an animal mascot at home, but not along the lines of ambivalences between the ethics of preserving life and purely destructive potential.

The second objection again concerns ambivalence. This time the ambivalence of Levinas's concept of eros and also the concept of eros, which the author also works with in her application of Levinas's thought to animal ethics. From the relevant chapter, it seems that eros is nothing other than the transfer of the ethical relation to the face into the realm of affectivity, intimacy, corporeity. Certainly, in his early work in particular, Levinas thinks of eros as a modality of relation to the other, to the feminine, but in *Totality and Infinity* (on which the author also draws) he explicitly considers the ambiguity, the ambivalence of the erotic relation, between the desire for the other and the fulfillment of one's own need. In the chapter "Eros and the Significant Relationship with the Animal", however, it seems as if the erotic relationship is purely ethical. The author even speaks of "the ethics of eros" (p. 223).

This lack of consideration of the ambivalence of the phenomena in question, the ethics of the face on the one hand and the phenomenology of eros on the other, the failure to acknowledge their shadow side (the temptation to kill, or to satisfy one's own needs), is perhaps the cause of the most problematic passages in which eros is identified with sexuality, and where such basic distinctions as eros (romantic love) and philia (brotherly, parental love) are missing. „In psychology, the sexual includes the sensual which is touch and caress. Levinas has a phenomenology of touch and caress which will be discussed later. From this, it could be said that even parents who caress their children are said to have a sexual relationship with them, but not coital.“ (p. 206) Another similar passage: „I tried to establish that there is such a thing as a sexual attraction to the animal, which could be rightfully called eros, since the relationship involves a lot of touching, but non-coital, as in parents who love to cuddle and kiss their children even if they do not engage sexually with them, strictly speaking. I established that the desire to touch the other is sexual, though not always coital, and that this is a mark of significant

relationship.“ (p. 276). Could this "erotic" relationship with a vulnerable other (a child, or a non-human significant other) be abusive, in spite of the fact that his face speaks to me, or because of it? Is my relationship to a child or a pet really erotic, "sexual but not coital", is it not more of a philia?

In addition to these main substantive remarks, I have one more rather formal remark. The author states at the beginning of the work that she will refer to the human subject as a "she", while she will refer to the non-human animal as a "he". The question the reader may ask is whether this personal pronoun is appropriate in the case of the human subject in Levinas's thought (whose ontology of femininity is demonstrably sexist in the way it associates femininity with certain roles while identifying masculinity with universal humanity).

Despite these partial objections, I consider the overall layout of the submitted dissertation to be a highly original contribution to the discussion linking Levinas's philosophy and animal ethics, and recommend the thesis for defense, and for the candidate to be awarded a PhD.

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