

Date: 22nd May 2023

RE: Report on Mira Reyes PhD dissertation.

Dear Colleagues,

Here is the report on Mira Reyes PhD dissertation, "Otherwise than Anthropocentrism: Levinas Face-to-Face with the Animal."

At this stage in the process, I recommend a pass with minor changes. This is very good and clear work. It meets the required overall standard for a PhD. Changes in line with point (1) below would be minor and enough to get the text over the line. The other points are there to show how a problem of voice, explained in (1), may be rippling through the text and leading to secondary issues. None of these detract from the overall high quality of the work.

Yours faithfully,

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The dissertation “Otherwise than Anthropocentrism: Levinas Face-to-Face with the Animal” is written to a suitable standard for PhD work, constitutes an original contribution to Levinas scholarship and animal ethics. At least three research papers could be cut from it and published in journals of good standing. It has a number of strengths, such as a solid understanding of the relevant Levinas materials on the concept of the face, and its many ambiguities. The grasp of the animal ethics materials is also good, and there is a clear appreciation of the main lines of division and discussion over the past two decades. Several potential problems have been avoided, e.g., preoccupation with doctrinal alignment on animal ethics at the expense of a serious interrogation of key concepts; and the candidate has avoided both overly literal reading of the Levinas concept of the face, and a refusal so acknowledge its relation to actual human and animal faces. This is all good. As is the technique. The candidate sets out clear objectives and, in the conclusion, tries to show that they have been met.

I will look in a little more detail at several issues that the student might address at the Viva, in support of their position. Issues which might also be addressed in ways which could improve the text. None of these go beyond typical dissertation points. For convenience, I will refer to them as “problems,” but this should not be taken to indicate that the overall dissertation is “problematic.” It is not. The main problem is set out in (1). The remaining concerns are there in part to help the candidate appreciate the way in which the problem of (1) ripples through the remainder of the text generative various localised difficulties. Points (2)-(4) are not there to suggest the need for any large-scale rewrite.

- (1) **Voice.** My largest concern is with an issue of *voice*. The candidate often speaks *for* Levinas in contexts where we really do not know what Levinas would say because he did not address the topics in question. E.g., “Levinas would be supportive of wild animal relations as the basis of freedom from colonization” (p.256); “Levinas would not look much into the utilitarian calculus of transgenerational and trans-spatial animal suffering” (p.259). “What would matter for Levinas is wildness that is translated as freedom from appropriation or colonization...Levinas would exhort the ethic of wild animal assistance (p.267). This approach, of telling the reader what Levinas *would* say recurs throughout the dissertation and is sometimes unconvincing. The reader might reasonably think that Levinas would say something else. Given that Levinas seems to be inconsistent in his approach towards animals and says things apparently in conflict with his overall ethic, it is unreliable to claim knowledge of what he *would* say, rather than what *could* say or *should* say, if he happened to be more consistent.

Consider the following, pivotal and excellent passage: “This demand of Levinas that for a being to be considered ‘face’ and ‘other,’ she must be capable of altruism, is kind of puzzling for me because in his ethics, the one under interrogation for moral action is the human-I and not the other animal (not the nh animal). This is how I understand Levinas’s ethics. Levinasian ethics is unilateral and non-reciprocal. In the language of animal ethics, we are not interrogating the moral action of the moral patient but the one who is the agent” (p.140). Once it has been conceded that Levinas is *not* actually saying what Levinasian ethics point towards, then it becomes difficult to keep on speaking for him rather than speaking on behalf of a more consistent form of Levinasian ethics. I would suggest that the candidate is

actually speaking for the latter, but is repeatedly pulled towards apologetics in a way that cuts across their own more consistently non-anthropocentric position. This problem, of speaking for Levinas while saying things that clearly go beyond his views of Levinas, is my main concern.

- (2) **Anthropocentrism.** The choice of voice, of *speaking for* Levinas, influences a number of substantive claims. E.g., the decision to try to show that Levinas' is not anthropocentric in an ethically concerning sense, but only in a less concerning epistemological sense. This is an instance of "thinning" in the formal sense. I.e., the candidate does not need to show this in order to support their central claim. It is an unnecessary claim thrown into the argument, and adds an unnecessary vulnerability to the overall argument. It is also the least plausible part of what is said. It leads to the candidate setting out a concept of anthropocentrism which is divorced from an idea of human-/nh animal equality and focuses upon other concerns. Horta, and the sources cited as authorities, do not make this move. They place equality at the heart of the problem. When anthropocentrism is understood in anything like this normal sense, it becomes very difficult to say that Levinas is *not* anthropocentric in ethically troubling ways because he *does not* seem to be considering humans and nh animal interests equally. His epistemic point about the priority of the human face in understanding the concept of face is, in fact, used to justify an unequal consideration of interests. This may be inconsistent with other aspects of his ethic, otherness, the face, and so on, but you have already conceded a level of inconsistency in his writings. Conceding that Levinas is anthropocentric in ways that conflict with his important aspects of his own conception of ethics, would not require abandonment of a Levinasian approach. Nor would it require any sudden agreement with Bob Plant or other commentators whose understanding of the character of Levinas' position differs in some respects from the candidate's position.
- (3) **Overclaiming.** Beyond the unnecessary attempt to absolve Levinas of anthropocentrism, there is additional over-claiming about the uniqueness of what he offers. "No one attempts to prove that a human could genuinely fall in love with the nh anima and vice versa; it is always considered a pet-ty affair" (p.278). Setting aside the appeal to proof, quite a number of people do this. There clearly *is* a literature building animal ethics around emotion response, and love. Levinas is not the only approach of this sort. Feminist approaches to animals have always tended in this direction, and some Wittgensteinian influenced approaches do something similar (e.g., Aaltola, Milligan). It is not a unique niche or "lacuna that Levinas has patched up in the animal ethics discourse" (p.277). A Levinasian can, of course, contribute to setting out this approach *in a distinctive way*, but the approach itself is not unique to Levinas.
- (4) **Nature & culture.** The candidate endorses some version of the Anthropocene concept: e.g., "in view of the era of the Anthropocene, there is hardly any patch of wilderness that has not been invaded by humans and as such, the wild/domestic cannot be understood anymore as 'mutually exclusive but rather as positions in a continuum'" (pp.203-4, see also p.196, p.222-3, and p.256). This is an important move concerning another discourse that Levinas was unfamiliar with. The candidate's comment above is actually an excellent statement of a problem for wild/domestic, and hence conventional and anthropologically naïve

understandings of a nature/culture divide. Challenging the latter is at the heart of the discourse of the Anthropocene outside of the physical sciences. (The go-to names here are Descola, Latour and Marisol de la Cadena. But for animals a good place to start would be Haraway and the idea of our evolution as co-evolution.) A further interesting statement of this problem closes out the dissertation: "filiation is the birthing of the new world order in which, in a sense, there is no division anymore between wild/non-wild spaces" (p.280). However, this approach is not adopted consistently throughout the text but appears late on and so we do not get any real sense of whether or not Levinas is also appealing to an artificial separation and separateness in his comments on the face. It also looks suspiciously like the earlier discussions, e.g., of Francione versus Donaldson & Kymlicka may also be operating with a problematic conception of nature/culture divisibility which underpins the wild/non-wild distinction. The attempt to then claim some sort of middle path in that debate leads to another unnecessary and difficult claim, that "unbreeding-unto-extinction may become a natural direction of things in the future: it does not have to be forced as a totalitarian system" (p.223). This unnecessary claim threatens to unravel the candidate's entire position. It is difficult to see any sense in which a final solution option for domestic animals might conceivably be an extension of Levinas, or even the kind of thing that Levinas would advocate given the right economic conditions. It looks, rather, like a reversion to the animal ethics that the candidate is trying to get away from. I.e., the kind that focuses on animal sentience, capacity for pain, and whether or not any sequence of actions might avoid unfair sorts of pain experience and therefore be morally permissible. This is not the kind of ethic that the candidate has been trying to set out, with the assistance of Levinas. On matters of this sort, the candidate should trust themselves a little more even if it involves saying that someone is simply wrong.

Recommendation: pass with minor changes, focusing upon the problem outlined in (1).

Dr Tony Milligan