

THE PRIORITY OF THE HUMAN IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF EMMANUEL  
LEVINAS

by  
DEREK HARLEY MOYER

A THESIS

Presented to the Department of Philosophy  
and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Master of Arts

June 2010

“The Priority of the Human in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas,” a thesis prepared by Derek Harley Moyer in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in the Department of Philosophy. This thesis has been approved and accepted by:

---

Ted Toadvine, Chair of the Examining Committee

May 27, 2010  
Date

Committee in Charge: Ted Toadvine, Chair

Accepted by:

---

Dean of the Graduate School

© 2010 Derek Harley Moyer

## An Abstract of the Thesis of

Derek Harley Moyer for the degree of Master of Arts

in the Department of Philosophy to be taken June 2010

Title: THE PRIORITY OF THE HUMAN IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF EMMANUEL  
LEVINASApproved: \_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Ted Toadvine

Emmanuel Levinas has recently been given much attention for the resources that his writing could provide for an ethics of the non-human. While some commentators dismiss the humanistic biases of Levinas' analyses in favor of expanded sites of application, others argue that Levinas' anthropocentrism is central to his philosophy. This debate is resolved by demonstrating that Levinas' analysis of language and separation in *Totality and Infinity* is an analysis of the human *only*. For Levinas, ethics signifies the peculiar way of being in the world that is found in the site of the human. This way of being in the world *is* the emergence of concerns about justice, the emergence of reason and discourse, but it does not restrict moral consideration to humans. Despite Levinas' own tendency to align the non-human animal against the ethical, there is nothing in Levinas' analysis that prevents granting full moral consideration to the non-human.

## CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME OF AUTHOR: Derek Harley Moyer

PLACE OF BIRTH: Portland, Oregon

DATE OF BIRTH: 2 September 1981

### GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:

University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon  
Warner Pacific College, Portland, Oregon

### DEGREES AWARDED:

Master of Arts, Philosophy, 2010, University of Oregon  
Master of Arts, Interdisciplinary Studies: Individualized Program (Sociology,  
Religious Studies, Philosophy), 2010, University of Oregon  
Bachelor of Arts, Philosophy and Religion, 2005, University of Oregon

### GRANTS, AWARDS AND HONORS:

Graduate Teaching Fellowship, Department of Religious Studies, University of  
Oregon, 2008-2010

George Rebec Prize for Best Graduate Student Paper ('Searle's Sincerity  
Condition and the Role of Psychological States in Speech Act Theory'),  
University of Oregon, 2009

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I wish to thank Ted Toadvine at the University of Oregon, who has patiently and persistently challenged the positions that I attempt to articulate in this thesis. My conversations with him have been constitutive of my capacity to think about the problems that I address here. I also wish to thank Brian Elliott, who volunteered his time to read drafts of this thesis and give me invaluable input, oftentimes revealing to me aspects of my own thinking the implications of which I had not yet recognized. Also at the University of Oregon, I wish to thank Beata Stawarska and Ken Liberman, whose teaching is everywhere evident here. I would like to thank Terry Baker at Warner Pacific College, who has profoundly shaped how I think philosophically, and who introduced me to the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. I have had too many good teachers in my life to name them all here. I wish to thank my family and friends, who have been supportive throughout this process. Most of all, I wish to thank Megan, my best friend and my wife, who has put up with way more than she should have and has done way more than her fair share throughout the time I spent writing this. If it were not for her, I would still be on the first page.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
II. CRITICISMS OF LEVINAS' PRIVILEGING OF THE HUMAN.....	11
III. LEVINAS' PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE HUMAN IN <i>TOTALITY AND INFINITY</i> .....	21
IV. THE SPECIAL PLACE OF HUMANS IN THE WORLD AND THE PROSPECTS OF ANTHROPOCENTRISM FOR ANIMAL ETHICS.....	38
V. JUSTICE AND THE CONCERN FOR JUSTICE .....	43
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	48

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The work of Emmanuel Levinas has become increasingly visible across academic literatures in the United States over the last twenty-five years. The resources of Levinas' philosophy offer rich analyses of the ethical relationship that are easily expanded into the social sciences amid perpetual concerns about the reemergence of colonialism in different forms. Beyond this, Levinas' philosophy has also been of interest recently to those working in the fields of environmental and animal ethics. But along with applications of Levinas' philosophy in these fields there has been increasing attention to new forms of colonialism that some commentators think is smuggled in under the name of humanism. This attention has led to the formulation and reformulation of some critical questions regarding Levinas' philosophy.

The logic of the questions is diffuse. The same questions appear in different contexts and for different reasons with regard to Levinas' thought. The questions include: Why does Levinas privilege the human as the proper space of the ethical relation? Does this not contradict Levinas' own 'trans-phenomenological' analyses that lead to the ethical? Does Levinas' ethics in fact rest on *ontological* suppositions? If so, does this not completely undermine or reverse the trajectory of Levinas' philosophy, where he intended to show that ethics precedes ontology? What, in fact, is the relationship between ethics and ontology in Levinas' philosophy?



This last question perhaps entails the rest. It is also one of the most familiar questions put to Levinas' thought. Already in 1967 Derrida had asked this question in the essay 'Violence and Metaphysics', though in that case the focus was on the writing or the discourse of ethics.<sup>1</sup> He returned to the question thirty years later in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, this time focusing on the primacy of the human over the animal in Levinas' thought.<sup>2</sup> The question of the relationship between ethics and ontology could fairly be characterized as the *only* question with which Levinas deals in his philosophical writings. Every analysis, every reflection, every argument is couched in this question. Even his early phenomenological analyses are overtures to 'something' *beyond* ontology, perhaps prior to it.<sup>3</sup>

So the question that others have asked of Levinas' philosophy—what is the relationship between ethics and ontology—is perhaps finally the only question that I am responding to. But really we do not finally want to know the answer to this question. What we want to know is: what is just? We want to know whether we are working towards justice. We want to know what it means, or what it could mean, to say that we are working towards justice, or for justice. We do not care about the relationship between ethics and ontology. We care about *being* ethical. We care about the possibility of justice in the world. And of course, Levinas was never finally interested in the relationship

---

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics', in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 79-153.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008). In this text Derrida wonders whether Levinas' privileging of the human is perhaps enough to call into question his entire discourse. See 109ff.

<sup>3</sup> See Parts III and IV of *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987); and *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonse Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1978), 86ff.

between ethics and ontology. For Levinas, his philosophical writing was always an attempt to diminish suffering and to promote justice in the world. The preface to *Totality and Infinity* argues for a profound link between philosophical thought and human politics.<sup>4</sup> One of the epigraphs in *Otherwise Than Being* reads: ‘To the memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists, and of the millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-semitism.’<sup>5</sup>

My point here may seem banal, common. *Of course*, when we engage in philosophical argument about ethics, we are concerned ultimately with justice and goodness, and with right living in the world. My point is rather that this commonplace has methodological implications. An analysis of the question of the relationship between ethics and ontology is fundamentally inseparable from specific sites of ethical life. Inversely, the analysis of a specific ethical question ultimately calls for a metaphysical interpretation and argumentation.<sup>6</sup> Just as the church bell and the peasant’s shoes bring to bear an entire world in Heidegger’s analyses, so a certain ethical question would elicit a fundamental sense of the world beyond that question, or with that question as the locus of an ethical discourse. To begin by asking ‘what is the relationship between ethics and

---

<sup>4</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 21-30. Hereafter cited in the text as *TI*.

<sup>5</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> By ‘ethical question’ I do not mean an ethical *problem*, in the famous sense that Edmund Pincoffs uses this term in his seminal essay ‘Quandary Ethics’ in *Mind*, 80 (1971), 552-571. An ethical *question* in the sense I am using this term is not a situation in which I am unsure how to act but an aspect of the world whose ethical status is uncertain.

ontology' is to have already missed the space in which that question can illuminate either ethics or ontology.

Of course, for Levinas ethics and ontology have specific and idiosyncratic meanings. First of all, ethics does not signify a system of ethics, or specific program for formulating or thinking about ethical problems. So the signification of *ethics* is restricted and very narrowly delimited, and does not at all mean what we usually think of as ethics—although it is very important to note that it is not at all *unrelated to* what we usually think of as ethics.

On the other hand, the scope of the signification of *ontology* is expanded to incorporate the whole of the western philosophical tradition, from a certain tendency in Platonic thought in Ancient Greece all the way through to Levinas' immediate forebears and contemporaries. Ontology in this sense is closely related to other important terms in the tradition: knowledge, truth, comprehension, understanding, reason, logic, phenomenology. Ontology in this broad Levinasian sense signifies the tendency of the tradition—and, fundamentally, the tendency of human thinking—to subsume everything under a totalizing or systematizing discourse. As we will see later, ontology is not something merely to be overcome or opposed to ethics. Ethics and ontology belong together equiprimordially, even if ontology is given its orientation and very meaning *in ethics*. But for now, our question is not explicitly this relationship between ethics and ontology.

The question is: why does Levinas privilege the human as the proper space of the ethical relation? Why does he privilege humans over animals, primarily, but also, why

does he privilege humans over rocks, trees, river systems, corn, the earth? Why is it that—as we will see—only humans are *ethical*? So the terms we will avoid delimiting at the beginning are ethics, ontology, human, animal, earth, nature. Our question will primarily be ‘what does the human have that the animal does not?’

This question has been asked and answered many times in the literature over the past twenty years. It has not yet been asked or answered adequately. John Llewelyn was perhaps the first in the English-language literature to devote an essay to it.<sup>7</sup> This piece, and his book *The Middle Voice of Ecological Conscience* which incorporates the essay, remain among the most interesting commentaries on the question.<sup>8</sup> However, this essay already received extensive treatment elsewhere, and is somewhat more peripheral to our concerns here. David Wood and Jacques Derrida have perhaps been the commentators to ask the question most forcefully and most critically. What follows will be in constant communication with Wood’s essay entitled ‘Some Questions for My Levinasian Friends’<sup>9</sup>, and with Derrida’s book *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Diane Perpich has recently made a helpful assessment of the literature on this question—and offered her own answer—in her book *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*.<sup>10</sup> There are a handful of

---

<sup>7</sup> John Llewelyn, ‘Am I Obsessed by Bobby? (Humanism of the Other Animal)’ in *Re-Reading Levinas*, eds. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 234-245.

<sup>8</sup> John Llewelyn, *The Middle Voice of Ecological Conscience* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991), esp. Chapter 3, ‘Who is my neighbor?’.

<sup>9</sup> David Wood, ‘Some Questions for my Levinasian Friends’ in *Addressing Levinas*, eds. Eric Sean Nelson, Antje Kapust and Kent Still (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 152-169. There is a slightly revised version of this essay in Wood’s book *The Step Back* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Diane Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), esp. Chapter 5, ‘Scarce Resources? Levinas, Animals and the Environment’.

other secondary essays that deal with this question, and I will occasionally refer to them throughout the essay. The essays above will be the most prominent, and have asked the question most lucidly.

Among Levinas' own writings the question of the relation between the human and the non-human animal is addressed frequently in *Totality and Infinity*, but in a rather flat and oppositional way. It might be better to say that animality in *Totality and Infinity* is a surrogate concept that can be aligned with nature and, in *Otherwise Than Being*, the *conatus essendi*. There is much to critique in Levinas' formulations of these concepts in his philosophy, and others have already done so.<sup>11</sup> Levinas never really addresses the question in his published writings in the way in which it is taken up in the 1986 interview published under the title 'The Paradox of Morality', which is far and away the most relevant place for Levinas' thinking on the question.<sup>12</sup> But it is a short interview and only about half of it is dedicated to the question of the animal. There is an essay in *Difficult Freedom* that speaks of a dog in the prison camp that held Levinas during World War II.<sup>13</sup> This essay is often cited in the literature as a possible avenue for reading Levinas against himself in order to glean some kind of statement about the ethical relationship between humans and animals. I do not think that this essay can be appropriated for this purpose, but I will refer to it in what follows since it appears often in the literature.

---

<sup>11</sup> See Robert Bernasconi, 'Levinas and the Struggle for Existence', in *Addressing Levinas*, eds. Eric Sean Nelson, Antje Kapust and Kent Still (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 170-184; and Matthew Calarco, *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, 'The Paradox of Morality' in *The Provocation of Levinas*, eds Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (London: Routledge, 1988), 168-180.

<sup>13</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, 'The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights' in *Difficult Freedom*, trans. Sean Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 151-153.

As I have already said, though the question of the relation between the human and the animal has been asked many times with regard to Levinas, I do not think it has been adequately answered. The literature has tended to focus on the texts I have just mentioned, and on a few other interviews. The question has rarely been addressed in the context of his philosophical writing.<sup>14</sup> Particularly the analyses put forth in *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise Than Being* (and related essays) have not been adequately brought to bear on this question. This is unsurprising, since there are few explicit resources in those texts with regard to the question. Nevertheless, I think that an adequate discussion of the relation between the human and the animal in Levinas' philosophy ultimately requires an understanding of the relation between ethics and ontology—and an understanding of what Levinas means by *ethics*. This requires that we situate the question of the relation between the human and the animal within Levinas' philosophy as a whole.

Chapter II frames the question within the work of some of Levinas' commentators. David Wood, Jacques Derrida and Diane Perpich figure largely here. The first two come to some similar conclusions about Levinas' philosophy, though their analyses are diffuse, and Derrida's is a much more complex analysis. Perpich assesses this same literature, and offers her own critique and response to the question at hand. Indeed, the trajectory of this essay is structurally similar to that of Perpich. Where I diverge from Perpich's analysis is in giving priority to the parallel problems of the

---

<sup>14</sup> Ted Toadvine has recently made some headway in this regard, in his essay 'Enjoyment and Its Discontents: On Separation From Nature in Levinas', in *Faces of Nature: Levinasian Ethics and Environmental Philosophy*, eds. James Hatley, William Edelglass, and Christian Diehm (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, forthcoming).

human/animal relation and the ethics/ontology relation. Nevertheless, the conclusions I come to here are largely in accordance with what Perpich lays out.

Within this chapter, I identify a number of objections to the human/animal relation as articulated by these commentators. The most prominent objection is that Levinas' ethics rests on an ontology that privileges the human, and that this undermines his claim that ethics precedes ontology. This is both a phenomenological problem and an epistemological one. While I make critical assessments of these commentaries in Chapter II, the primary purpose is to sharpen the focus of the human/animal and ethics/ontology question, and not to offer detailed refutations of the interpretations. I will eventually focus in on the question 'why is the human the privileged scene of ethics?'

Chapter III attempts to glean an answer to this question from Levinas' philosophical writing, occasionally using his comments in interviews as a guide. It is in this chapter that the close relation between the human/animal question and the ethics/ontology question is made clear. I argue that in *Totality and Infinity* Levinas provides a set of related phenomenological analyses that delimit a way of being in the world that is peculiar to humans. It is only within *this* peculiarity that ethics exists. We may be able to say that ethics is the original structure of human existence—though we might have to say that it is *pre-original* and *a-structural* (*an-archic*). This would seem to confirm the suspicions of Levinas' commentators when they wonder whether his ethics relies on an ontology. I argue that the analyses Levinas' provides are intended precisely

to argue that the human way of being in the world is not *primarily* ontological.<sup>15</sup> For Levinas, human language and is not first of all an ontological schema. It is a *pre-original*, *an-archic* scene of human existence that *constitutes* ethics.

In Chapters IV and V I address concerns that this ‘privileging’ of the human belies a fundamentally *unethical* comportment. These concerns usually decry an anthropocentrism that is denigratory to the non-human, whatever that non-human might be. This concern is voiced by almost all of Levinas’ commentators on this question, with the exception of Diane Perpich. Insofar as Levinas’ claims are rooted—albeit complicatedly—in phenomenological analyses, such concerns would need to take up these analyses. Furthermore, such concerns would need to be clear about *what* they are objecting to when they object to the human as the ‘privileged’ space of ethics. This is because Levinas’ ethics does not prescribe moral programs or systems of social mores. It does not lay down political ideals or specific claims of political justice. It does not provide an outline for an ethics of the environment or of animals.

Ethics, in Levinas’ sense, *resides in a ‘u-topia’*—it is without place, u-topic.<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, it is disingenuous to claim that Levinas’ ethics is purely kataphatic.

Levinas’ ethics is not *unrelated* to the kinds of ethical comportment that we encounter

---

<sup>15</sup> I use the ‘language of being’ consistently throughout the essay. Levinas became increasingly concerned in his later writings with the ontological foundations of philosophical discourse.

<sup>16</sup> So Levinas tells Richard Kearney in a late interview. Richard Kearney, *Debates in Continental Philosophy: Conversations with Contemporary Thinkers* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 65-84. This is consistent with numerous other places in Levinas’ philosophy, including the comments on place and utopia in *Difficult Freedom* and the way that Levinas situates the themes of *Totality and Infinity* within an eschatological framework in the preface to that book. As I see it, these are fragmentary thematizations of a ‘characteristic’ of the ethical that resists formalization. Eschatology, prophecy, the ‘to-come’ (*à-venir*), u-topia, are all formulations of the ethical. For more on the notion of the ‘to-come’, see the interview with Levinas entitled ‘Philosophy, Justice, and Love’ in *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 115.



and enact in the world. The human does not limit ethics or confine it to certain ontological domains. The human is what allows ethics to *show up* in the world. The *ways* that ethics shows up in the world Levinas eventually comes to call justice. The space of justice is the space of our reasoning together to decide the kinds of ethical comportment that we want to enact in the world. Justice is an ontological question, a *rational* question. Levinas does not call for the abolition of rationality in questions concerning justice. Levinas calls attention to the fact that the *concern for justice itself* does not arise in reason, in rationality. The concern for justice *interrupts* reason, calls it into question. It is in this way that Levinas can claim that the uniqueness, the ‘new phenomenon’ of the human, is *unreasonableness*. Levinas therefore reverses the Aristotelian and Kantian formulation: ‘Man is an *unreasonable* animal’.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> ‘The Paradox of Morality’, 172. Italics mine.

## CHAPTER II

### CRITICISMS OF LEVINAS' PRIVILEGING OF THE HUMAN

Levinas writes in *Totality and Infinity* that the 'Other [*Autrui*] remains infinitely transcendent, infinitely foreign...' (194) A significant portion of this work consists in unpacking the implications of such a claim. Thus Levinas resorts to what we would like to call hyperbolic language. But we are not sure that we can call it that, since to do so would indicate a more 'reasonable' claim that Levinas is making. Reasonableness is a danger to alterity. Reasonableness implies comprehension; comprehension implies conceptualization. Just these ways of 'thinking' about the other cannot reach the other. 'The Other is not other with a relative alterity as are, in a comparison, even ultimate species, which mutually exclude one another but still have their place within the community of a genus...' (*TI* 194) Even talking about the *differences* between the other and me implies a space of communion where such comparisons could be made.

How is it, then, that a few pages later the other, alterity, and 'the face' by which we meet alterity, are aligned with the human? Levinas says that 'the epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity' (*TI* 213). This claim comes in the midst of a difficult passage in *Totality and Infinity*, one to which we will return in Chapter III. But even if in this passage it is not immediately apparent what Levinas is claiming, he makes it clear in numerous places that alterity, the face and ethics are encounters with humanity. In his 1982 interview with Philippe Nemo, Levinas equates the rupture which ethics effects in

being with ‘the humanity of man’.<sup>18</sup> And in the interview entitled ‘The Paradox of Morality’, Levinas insists that ethics is to be found first of all and primarily in the face-to-face with the human. Levinas even seems to go so far as to equivocate the term ‘face’ with ‘human’. ‘You ask at what moment one becomes a face. I do not know at what moment the human appears, but what I want to emphasize is that the human breaks with pure being...’<sup>19</sup> And throughout Levinas’ writings, the examples given of the ethical situation are without fail *human*: the widow, the orphan, the hungry one with outstretched hand.

Some commentators have asserted that these two aspects of Levinas’ philosophy are inconsistencies that require correction.<sup>20</sup> That is, they claim that given the radical formulation that Levinas’ alterity requires, it would exclude the possibility of tethering that formulation to a particular being. After all, is not Levinas’ project to break with the totalizing—and totalitarian—tendencies of ontological categorization? Why then does he restrict the ethical to a peculiar domain of being? According to this reading, there is an incipient anthropocentrism—perhaps inherited by Descartes or Husserl or Heidegger—that is inconsistent with the broader movement of Levinas’ own thinking. Nevertheless, it is possible to read Levinas against himself and to rid Levinasian ethics of humanistic

---

<sup>18</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 87.

<sup>19</sup> ‘The Paradox of Morality’, 172.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Christian Diehm, ‘Facing Nature: Levinas Beyond the Human’ in *Philosophy Today*, 44 (Spring 2000), 51-59; and ‘Natural Disasters’ in *Eco-Phenomenology*, eds. Charles S. Brown and Ted Toadvine (New York: SUNY Press, 2003), 171-185. Peter Atterton expresses a similar sentiment at the end of his essay ‘Ethical Cynicism’ in *Animal Philosophy: Ethics and Identity*, eds. Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco (London: Continuum, 2004), 51-61.

tendencies. In fact, Levinas' philosophy itself provides resources for denying a humanistic privilege in ethics. This is one response that has been offered to this problem.

There are at least two other responses to this apparent problem in Levinas' thinking. The first response is the strong suspicion voiced by David Wood that 'Levinas' ethics rests on an ontology, one which is importantly flawed'.<sup>21</sup> Derrida also thinks that Levinas inserts a flawed ontology into his analyses of the ethical, 'a profound anthropocentrism and humanism'.<sup>22</sup> I will return to Derrida below.

Wood's essay 'Some Questions for My Levinasian Friends' consists of a litany of objections to Levinas' thought. For the most part, Wood intends to outline his objections, and does not pretend to have offered a full argument in support of many of his objections. While I find many of Wood's objections to be 'importantly flawed' themselves—often Wood is arguing against a man made of particularly fine straw—he nevertheless formulates in a very straightforward manner the problem of Levinas' equivocation of the human and the ethical.

Wood wonders that if only the human is the *really* other, does not such a claim rest on some kind of an ontology? And, we must ask, what is the human? 'We no longer say that man is rational...Now we say that the human other can speak. Or that the human other is aware of his mortality. Or belongs to a species, many members of which can speak or "die" in the full sense. But it is hard not to conclude that what all this comes

---

<sup>21</sup> 'Some Questions for my Levinasian Friends', 152.

<sup>22</sup> *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 113.

down to is “beings like us”.<sup>23</sup> Wood points out that such a line of argument clearly rests on ‘humanistic principles’, principles that seem to be in tension with the very idea of alterity or of otherness.<sup>24</sup> If the other resists categorization, indeed if it is the interruption of categorical reasoning, how can we follow Levinas in identifying alterity with humanity?

Wood does not think that there are resources worth pursuing in Levinas’ philosophy with regard to this problem. He thinks that he has discovered an uncritical appropriation of certain ontological commitments by Levinas, and that these commitments are an inherent problem in his philosophy.<sup>25</sup> I think that Wood is wrong here; that he does not offer good reasons (though, as I pointed out, he does not claim to have given full accounts of his objections); and that beyond raising interesting questions about Levinas’ philosophy, Wood’s own answers to those questions are uninteresting and uncritical.<sup>26</sup> But he does offer a direct formulation of the problem of equivocation between alterity and humanity in Levinas. If the other is *infinitely other*, if she resists all categorization, if she is the interruption of ontology, how can Levinas claim that she is also human? As Wood points out, even if we do not define the human as a ‘rational

---

<sup>23</sup> ‘Some Questions for my Levinasian Friends’, 156.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>26</sup> It is a kind of sad irony that Wood takes Levinas to task for his hermeneutics. Taking his cue from Heidegger, he says that Levinas goes counter to Heidegger rather than ‘going to [his] encounter’. (153) Wood says this requires a hermeneutics of generosity, a generosity that Levinas never extended to Heidegger. On 153 he says: ‘By generosity I mean foregoing the temptation to oppositional thinking...’ The mean polemic that Wood takes up in his essay could hardly be called generous! While couched in a tone of ‘questioning’, it is clear that Wood has made up his mind about Levinas. But the Levinas he has made up his mind *about* is the Levinas of Wood’s own *oppositional* construction.

animal’, we will have to make some claim—that the human has language, or is being-toward-death—that is unavoidably *ontological*. If not, if we just say that the human is the ethical and the ethical is the human, the claim is vacuous. In any case, it is clear that what Levinas means when he says human is just what we mean when we say human. And Wood is right to say that this pretty much comes down to ‘beings like us’.

Derrida carries this questioning a step further when he takes up the question of the equivocation of alterity and humanity. He wonders with irony how Levinas can put ‘the animal outside of the ethical circuit’ when his thinking is ‘so “obsessed” . . . , so preoccupied by an obsession with the other and with his infinite alterity’.<sup>27</sup> Is not the animal ‘still more other than the other human’?<sup>28</sup> Derrida is asking: what is alterity? If alterity is about that with which we hold nothing in common—or with which we hold the least in common—would not the animal be still further away than the human? Derrida and Wood both identify Levinas’ humanism as being derivative of a Judaic humanism, where animals and the earth are resources for humans, even if, with Levinas, they are resources to *help* other humans. I do not think that this is a necessary consequence of Levinas’ philosophy, but it is clear that the non-human did not receive Levinas’ otherwise clarion voice of concern throughout his philosophical writings.

Derrida’s consideration of the relation between the human and the animal in Levinas’ philosophy encompasses all the questions that are raised in the above critiques. Derrida thinks, like Wood, that there is a profound and deep-seated humanism that is

---

<sup>27</sup> *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 107.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

demonstrated in this aspect of Levinas' thinking. But Derrida is more forceful than Wood in delineating the implications of the human-animal relation in Levinas. For Derrida, the ambiguity or ambivalence of the status of the animal in Levinas' risks 'calling into question the whole order and configuration [*ordannancement*] of Levinas's discourse'.<sup>29</sup>

Many of the arguments that Derrida makes are familiar from what we have already seen. I will not rehearse all of those arguments here. I will instead focus on what seems to be the most crucial aspects of Derrida's assessment. The first, most damning criticism is in response to some of Levinas' answers from the 1986 interview entitled 'The Paradox of Morality'.<sup>30</sup> Here, Derrida points out, Levinas repeatedly demonstrates that he cannot answer specific questions with regard to the animal and the face. At one point Levinas says: 'I cannot say at what moment you have the right to be called face...I don't know if a snake has a face. I can't answer that question. A more specific analysis is needed.'<sup>31</sup> This is for Derrida a telling admission of incapacity on the part of Levinas, and it is just this admission that Derrida thinks threatens to dismantle the entire edifice of Levinas' discourse.<sup>32</sup> Derrida:

---

<sup>29</sup> Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 109. I should note that it is also this risk that for Derrida is 'a responsible, courageous, and humble way to leave every chance to what is to come' (109). However, Derrida mentions this in passing and focuses his commentary on a negative assessment of the fate of the animal in Levinas' philosophy.

<sup>30</sup> Derrida misidentifies this interview in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* as having been conducted by John Llewelyn at C erisy. This is incorrect. The version of the interview published in *The Provocation of Levinas* says that it took place in Paris in 1986 between Levinas and three graduate students from the University of Warwick. See 168 of 'The Paradox of Morality'.

<sup>31</sup> 'The Paradox of Morality', 171.

<sup>32</sup> Derrida is always careful to say that Levinas' admission here only *threatens*, or 'calls into question', Levinas' discourse. It does not undermine or collapse it, but instead introduces a risk or a fundamental ambiguity. See 109ff. of *The Animal That Therefore I Am*.

For declaring that he doesn't know where the right to be called "face" begins means confessing that one doesn't know at bottom what a face is, what the word means, what governs its usage, and that means confessing that one didn't say what responding means. Doesn't that amount, as a result, to calling into question the whole legitimacy of the discourse and ethics of the "face" of the other...?<sup>33</sup>

Derrida says that 'it is difficult to assess, or in fact to ascribe any limit at all to the gravity and consequences of these declarations in the form of a modest avowal'.<sup>34</sup> Derrida's arguments throughout *The Animal That Therefore I Am* are aimed at uncovering aspects of philosophical thinking about animals that are uncritical and unreflective, and that a more sustained analysis of these blind spots in philosophical thought inevitably reveal ambiguous and transgressive conceptualizations that problematize thinking about animals and the human. In the section on Levinas, Derrida takes this admission of ignorance by Levinas as opening onto such a problematization, right 'at the heart' of Levinas' thinking—that is, thinking about the face of the other.

There is certainly an aspect of hyperbole in Derrida's concerns, since he does not really think that we should be ridding ourselves of Levinas' thinking. Moreover, we would not expect that Derrida really thinks that a hypostatization of the concept of the face along the lines that he calls for above would in fact be a boon to philosophizing. Nevertheless, Derrida's reflections have the effect of bringing to the fore a critical

---

<sup>33</sup> *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 109.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.



problem for Levinas' thought. If Levinas is to confine the phenomenon (or the event<sup>35</sup>) of the face—or responsibility, speech and language—to human beings, then he ought to be able to say what it is about the face that can only be found in human beings. This entails knowing and articulating something about what the face is. But as we have seen, it is precisely this entailment that raises the problem of ontology. It seems that any explanation of why humans have faces and snakes do not (or at least the human face as the originary or primary face) will have to involve the delimitation of ontological categories. Ethics would be confined within ontological boundaries. Such a conclusion would indeed call into question Levinas' entire discourse, as Derrida suggests, since we will see that the priority of ethics is to be found in its first of all giving meaning and orientation to ontology, of *calling ontology into being*, as it were. What is at stake here is therefore much larger than uncovering an incipient humanistic bias in Levinas' thoughts on animals or on the face. The question of the human-animal relation in Levinas instead brings to bear a cluster of fundamental problems in Levinas which we articulated in the introduction, the most encompassing of which is whether and how Levinasian ethics can avoid reliance on an ontology and thus not undermine his entire philosophical project, which is to show that ethics has precedence over ontology, and that it ought to.<sup>36</sup>

Before proceeding to Chapter III, wherein I will offer my own reading of Levinas with regard to some of the questions that have been raised above, I want to address a

---

<sup>35</sup> The phenomenological status of the face is a problem here as well, and we will return to this in Chapter 2. See 'The Paradox of Morality', 171.

<sup>36</sup> Another problem in Levinas' philosophy, which we cannot deal with here, is the relation between the descriptive and prescriptive modes of inquiry that he seems to fluctuate between. This raises the further problem of whether Levinas is proposing a kind of ethical naturalism, which is a worry that Perpich briefly addresses on 174-175 of *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*.

recent appraisal of this same literature and some of these same questions that we have been looking at. Diane Perpich, in her book *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, argues that Levinas' critics are right to ask the questions of 'how I am faced by the other, of who can be an other, and of what responsibility demands of me'.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, Perpich thinks that these critics have misunderstood Levinas' strong claims—especially in the interview entitled 'The Paradox of Morality'—that the human is the originary site of ethics. On Perpich's reading, Levinas' privileging of the human is simply that 'it is only in human society that it is possible to worry about justice for others, human and animal others alike'.<sup>38</sup>

Now, it is clear that Levinas would not disagree with Perpich here. On one level, *no one* would disagree with this claim. The reason that no one would disagree with this claim is because it is banal and uninteresting. *Of course* it is only in human society, as far as we know, that there are concerns about justice, ethics, and what is good. But what is human society? Perpich says that 'it would be mistaken...to read Levinas as suggesting that language is a necessary precondition for an ethical relationship...'<sup>39</sup> Neither could it be based on 'a principle or a faculty of Reason'.<sup>40</sup> So what is it about human society that makes it possible to worry about justice, ethics, the good? In any account one could give, language-use and reasoning would have to be included as fundamental to human society. Perpich says: 'What is distinctively human is the question itself...The priority of the face

---

<sup>37</sup> *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, 172.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

is not the priority of this “thing” (which, in any case, the face is *not*) but the priority of practices of critique understood as justification before the other and all the ever new others of the other.’<sup>41</sup> Perpich seems to be saying that the ‘face’ is really those practices of critique that are used to give an account before the other.

There are at least two problems with this. First, this would seem to ally the ‘face’, the primordial ethical event, with something that Levinas (and Perpich elsewhere) says comes after and is in tension with the face—namely reasoning about justice. Second, if what Perpich says is right, then she seems to be making the rather uninteresting claim that what is *different* or *unique* about humans is that only we have ethical agency, that only we ask ethical questions. This is true, but then, this is not really what is at stake in the question of the relationship between humans and animals. What is in fact at stake in this question is whether there is an ontological (or, with Levinas, some other) break between humans and non-human animals, what is the nature of that break, and what are its implications for questions about justice in the world, for both humans and non-humans. What is at stake is whether non-human animals have moral standing, and what is the relationship between Levinas’ philosophy and the guarantee of that moral standing. Perpich’s assertion regarding the uniqueness of the human in Levinas’ philosophy—that it is only in human society that one can ask questions about justice—fails to address the problem of this break, and specifically what is the nature of this break in Levinas’ philosophy. It is precisely this question that I address in the next chapter.

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 176.

**CHAPTER III**  
**LEVINAS' PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE HUMAN IN *TOTALITY AND***  
***INFINITY***

In the first chapter I identified some basic ways of addressing the question of why Levinas privileges the human as the proper site of ethics, and why the non-human animal is primordially excluded from this site. The first way of proceeding was to say that Levinas is inconsistent on this issue, and that given his account of the face and of the ethical situation we cannot privilege the human, or even the animal. Commentators like Alphonso Lingis, Silvia Benso and Christian Diehm have recently argued that we should amend Levinas' analysis to open the ethical event not only to animals but to trees, landscapes and other environmental 'faces'.

The second way of proceeding, as found primarily in the criticisms of David Wood and Jacques Derrida, is to say that in arguing for the priority of ethics over ontology Levinas implicitly *relies on* an ontology in identifying the ethical with the human. Wood thinks that this means that Levinas' philosophy is 'importantly flawed' and that we should move on from it. Derrida thinks that Levinas' inability to say exactly 'what' a face is admits of the possibility that the entire edifice of Levinas' thought is threatened.

We can see in each of these lines of reasoning a cluster of related concerns with regard to the priority of the human in Levinas' thought and the question of whether

Levinas makes use of ontological suppositions to argue for the priority of ethics over ontology. To broadly restate the most general concerns, we could say that if Levinas privileges the human as the proper or primordial site of ethics; if such a privileging means that Levinas implicitly relies on an ontology in his delineation of ethics; if this reliance means that Levinas' concern to show that ethics *precedes* ontology is fundamentally undermined; if Levinas' own analyses *do not seem to support* the privileging of the human; and finally if Levinas' own phenomenological analyses *are at odds* with his claims in this regard; then we have at the heart of Levinas' philosophical project a set of contradictions and tensions that seem to upset the purported radicality of his thinking and its critical implications for philosophy. We have a crisis of understanding that, as Derrida says, threatens to fundamentally undermine the force of Levinas' philosophy.

As we have seen, the first way of proceeding admits of this fundamental flaw in Levinas and instead expands the ethical situation and the phenomenon or event of the face to animals, 'natural objects', and environments, using aspects of Levinas' thought to show how these ought to belong to Levinas' own analyses, or how they can belong to them. This is certainly a plausible phenomenological project, and might turn out to be a very felicitous way of proceeding for environmental philosophy and environmental ethics.

However, I do not think that this project takes Levinas' philosophical project seriously, and moreover I think that this way of proceeding overlooks the content and direction of the very phenomenological analyses that Levinas puts forth in *Totality and*

*Infinity and Otherwise Than Being*. The analyses contained in those two works deal exclusively with the ethical as an event in the human. To this extent, I think that critics like Wood and Derrida take Levinas more seriously when they pay attention to just this aspect of his thinking. An appropriation of Levinas' philosophical thinking for the promotion of any broader concerns about justice, politics, or practical ethics has to account for the fact that Levinas' philosophy is *anthropocentric*. It is not enough to dismiss this anthropocentrism as uncritical and then proceed by making use of Levinas' analyses in expanded contexts. Rather, Levinas gives an account of the very emergence of concerns about justice, politics or practical ethics through a phenomenology of the encounter with the human other. Crucial to this account is that language and reason are founded upon and solicited by the ethical encounter with the human other. On Levinas' view, one might give an account of a kind of ethical encounter with a cat, for example, but insofar as one can grasp in reflective consciousness the ethicality of that encounter one would already have made use of reason and language. For Levinas, this solicitation is derivative of the pre-original or primordial solicitation of language and reason by the human other. To part ways with Levinas here, his critics would need to give phenomenological accounts of how the encounter with the cat can found language and reason, can solicit these originally. There may be other ways of approaching this critical problem in Levinas' writings, but this seems to me the primary problematic facing critics of Levinas.

The preceding argument and position that I have proposed requires a reading of Levinas that shows that Levinas' account is phenomenological; that this

phenomenological account shows the foundation of language and reason as emerging pre-originarily from the ethical encounter with the human other; and that this account does not first of all suppose an *ontological* situation, or a claim about the ontological status of the human. While I am going to focus on *Totality and Infinity*, I think that this reading becomes even more complicated in *Otherwise Than Being*, where Levinas expands the analyses given in *Totality and Infinity* to include corporeality as a fundamental aspect of the ethical encounter. It is precisely this aspect that many commentators have taken up in an effort to apply Levinas' analyses to ethical encounters beyond the human. However, these commentators have failed to recognize the continuity between *Totality and Infinity*, and more precisely that these analyses are once again situated specifically within the human ethical encounter and that they are irreducibly bound in his account to language and reason, both in its emergence from the primordial ethical encounter in *Totality and Infinity* and to the renewed phenomenological analyses of language in *Otherwise Than Being*.<sup>42</sup>

Before I attempt a reading of *Totality and Infinity* that justifies these claims, it is important to address the question of the role of phenomenology in Levinas' philosophical method. This is a fundamental problem in Levinas' work, and one that he consistently keeps in view in his writing. It is not my intention to give a systematic or comprehensive treatment of this problem, since others have already done this and since it is beyond the

---

<sup>42</sup> This being the case, I think that the same problematic that I delineated above with regard to the emergence of language and reason is relevant to the notion of corporeality as it is elucidated in *Otherwise Than Being*, though I cannot argue for this here.

scope of this essay.<sup>43</sup> Rather, I am going to look at two places where Levinas addresses this problem that I think are representative of how he views phenomenology and his philosophical method in relation to phenomenology.

In the preface to *TI*, Levinas says that ‘intentionality, where thought remains an *adequation* with the object, does not define consciousness at its fundamental level. All knowing qua intentionality already presupposes the idea of infinity, which is preeminently *non-adequation*’ (*TI* 27). First, we can see that Levinas is offering a critique of Husserlian phenomenology, in that it cannot account for the direction or the orientation of thought, that it ‘does not constitute the ultimate event of being itself’ (*TI* 27). In *TI* this ‘ultimate event’ will turn out to be the ethical relationship with the other that solicits thought and intentionality. Consciousness, then, in its most fundamental concern, ‘does not consist in equaling being with representation, but rather in overflowing this play of lights—this phenomenology...’ (*TI* 28). Levinas says that Heideggerian disclosure as much as Husserlian intentionality misses this fundamental orientation of consciousness and thought. In both the Husserlian and Heideggerian versions, thinking remains a grasping, a com-prehension, that fails to account for the orientation *away* from the same and towards the other.

Nevertheless, Levinas wants to retain phenomenology as a philosophical method. He says that ‘the presentation and the development of the notions employed [in *Totality and Infinity*] owe everything to the phenomenological method’. (*TI* 28) Levinas argues

---

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, John Drabinski, *Sensibility and Singularity: The Problem of Phenomenology in Levinas* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001); and ‘Levinas: Chinese and Western Perspectives’, Special Issue of the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 2008.



that the basic insight of Husserl—despite Husserl’s own understanding of this insight—opens the phenomenological method onto that which cannot be given in thinking, that which does not itself appear. ‘Notions held under the direct gaze of the thought that defines them are nevertheless, unbeknown to this naïve thought, revealed to be implanted in horizons unsuspected by this thought; these horizons endow them with a meaning—such is the essential teaching of Husserl.’ (*TI* 28) For Levinas, this fundamental insight of the phenomenological method should be understood as opening onto that which itself cannot be grasped phenomenologically, namely the orientation toward the other, or exteriority, and this contra Husserl’s attempt to make such unsuspected horizons available to intentional consciousness. This is for Levinas precisely the move to the metaphysical as Levinas conceives it in *Totality and Infinity*, as that which is exterior to or supercedes phenomenological consciousness. But, as Levinas says, the argument he employs here is explicitly phenomenological.

The deployment of the phenomenological method in this way for the delineation of that which is non-adequate to consciousness or to thinking might also be understood in terms of the way that Heidegger appropriates Husserl’s method. Although Levinas was resolutely critical of Heidegger’s project of a fundamental ontology and insisted that this project never escapes the adequation of thinking to itself, his occasional later comments regarding phenomenology tend towards a Heideggerian conception of it. In his 1979 preface to the republication of *Time and the Other*, Levinas says with regard to the Infinite or the other that it

is a relationship with the In-visible, where invisibility results not from the inaptitude of knowledge as such—from its in-adequation—to the Infinity of the absolutely other, and from the absurdity that an event such as coincidence would have here. This impossibility of coinciding and this inadequation are not simply negative notions, but have a meaning in the *phenomenon* of noncoincidence *given* in the dia-chrony of time.<sup>44</sup>

This way of approaching the event of the other seems very close to the way that Heidegger describes the phenomenological method in the Introduction to *Being and Time*. Heidegger says that the appearing of phenomena is not itself a phenomenon. ‘Appearing is a *not showing itself*.’<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, he says, ‘with the word “appearance” we are pointing to something in which something appears without itself being an appearance...’<sup>46</sup> Levinas says that precisely that which cannot itself appear as an adequation in representational thinking nevertheless has a *meaning* and is *given* in that which *does* appear. Just as for Merleau-Ponty the background against which an object appears is not itself visible in a given gestalt but is that which allows the object itself to be given to consciousness, so it seems that for Levinas the fundamental orientation towards the other shows up as meaningful precisely as hiding itself as a pre-original structure of given phenomena. This is what Levinas was pointing to when in the preface

---

<sup>44</sup> *Time and the Other*, 32. While the language of invisibility might better suit a comparison with Merleau-Ponty’s later writings, it seems to me that the Heideggerian conception of phenomenology would be the inspiration of both Levinas and Merleau-Ponty on this point.

<sup>45</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), trans. Joan Stambaugh, 26.

<sup>46</sup> *Being and Time*, 26.

to *TI* he points to the unsuspected horizons wherein phenomena are given to intentional consciousness.

If this account of Levinas' relation to the phenomenological method is correct, then his readers have to take seriously his claim that the 'presentation and development' of his work in *Totality and Infinity* is phenomenological in the sense that has been delineated above. To be clear, Levinas' phenomenological analyses in *Totality and Infinity*, and perhaps in *Otherwise Than Being*, cannot be read strictly as a phenomenology of the other, or of the ethical. Rather, Levinas' analyses of human being in the world point towards or open onto aspects of the human which are themselves not accessible to phenomenology *but which show up as meaningful in these analyses*. Just as Heidegger does not offer a phenomenology of *Being* (since Being is not a thing), and just as Merleau-Ponty does not offer a direct phenomenology of the *background* or of the *invisible* (since these are not objects), so Levinas does not offer a phenomenology of the other, the face or the ethical situation, but he 'lets be' the fundamental structural significance of these through a phenomenology of human being in the world.<sup>47</sup>

Having said something about the role that phenomenology plays in *TI*, it is important to situate that role within the logic and structure of the text. Sections II and III of *TI* are where Levinas primarily gives his account of what I would like to call a *phenomenology of human existence*.<sup>48</sup> In Section II, 'Interiority and Economy', Levinas'

---

<sup>47</sup> On 29 of *TI* Levinas parrots with irony the Heideggerian language of 'letting be', but in reference to the 'metaphysical exteriority' that is opened up by his analyses.

<sup>48</sup> More specifically, in the introduction I claim that Levinas' analyses show that the human way of being in the world is not *primarily* ontological. Of course, this is an extremely problematic claim, since Levinas increasingly distances himself from the language of 'being' after *TI*. It is not the goal of this essay to

concern is with a general phenomenology of human existence, wherein he sees the fundamental structure—against Heidegger—as being that of *jouissance*, or of ‘*vivre de...*’ Ted Toadvine has recently given an exceptionally clear recounting of Levinas’ difficult analyses in Section II, and so I am only going to take up these analyses insofar as they show up and bear upon Section III, ‘Exteriority and the Face’.<sup>49</sup> It is in Section III that Levinas tells us about the ethical and about how the relation with the other effects a rupture or an interruption in the separated existence of the human that he describes in Section II. Levinas had already said at the beginning of *TI* that ‘the *relation* between the same and the other...is language’ (*TI* 39). But it is not until Section III that he gives an account of the meaning of this claim. He says that ‘language is a relation between separated terms’ (*TI* 195). This claim evokes the whole of Levinas’ analyses of Sections II and III, and draws them together. If Levinas is right, then in its very possibility language—and reason, which is founded on and is inextricable from language—is possible only given the phenomenological world that Levinas describes. Furthermore, it is precisely through language that we have a relation with the other. Finally, this relation with the other is what opens onto ethics, or rather, the relation with the other precisely is ethics. If this is right then we can draw a provisional line in *TI* from the phenomenology

---

systematically interrogate this problematic in Levinas’ discourse, which Derrida rigorously analyzed in ‘Violence and Metaphysics’. Nevertheless, I will sometimes resort to language of this sort in order to characterize what Levinas is up to, since as Derrida points out, methods of avoiding this language do no less to entangle one’s discourse within it. I think that it might be possible to reconcile a later Heideggerian language with some of the analyses that Levinas lays out, but this is a claim that I cannot argue for here. Francois Raffoul has also pointed toward this possibility in his ‘Being and the Other: Ethics and Ontology in Levinas and Heidegger’ in *Addressing Levinas*, 138-151.

<sup>49</sup> ‘Enjoyment and Its Discontents’.

of the human to the phenomenology of language to the event of the other, which is the ethical.

But first of all, why is language the privileged way that the event of the other is disclosed in *TI*? Why are speech and discourse so pervasive in his analyses? I think that there are a number of ways that a reader of Levinas can answer these questions. First, Levinas frequently positions speech or language in contradistinction to vision and its requisite phenomenological ‘lighting’, which for Levinas is always a comprehension, a taking up into the same of that which is given to thought. Levinas is trying to think the other in a way that resists being subsumed into egoistic understanding, into the grasp of the same. Similarly, he will not be happy with an account of the other that is placed in relation with the same by way of a set of terms that is outside of the same and the other, since this is merely a re-inscription of the other within a more comprehensive sameness, a sameness which reaches its apogean articulation in Hegel and Heidegger.

Besides this way of distending the event of the other from the possible grasp of ontology, there is a more fundamental and profound reason for Levinas’ persistent reference to speech, language and discourse. We have already pointed to the importance of the claim that ‘language is a relation between separated terms’. It is worth quoting at length what Levinas says after this:

To the one the other can indeed present himself as a theme, but his presence is not reabsorbed in his status as a theme. The word that bears on the Other as a theme seems to contain the Other. But already it is said to the Other who, as interlocutor, has quit the theme

that encompassed him, and upsurges inevitably behind the  
 said...The knowledge that absorbs the Other is forthwith situated  
 within the discourse I address to him. Speaking, rather than “letting  
 be,” solicits the Other. Speech cuts across vision. (*TI* 195)

I can take up the other thematically, that is, in my thinking about, talking about, or speaking to the other, I can and I tend to represent the other according to certain conceptual or thematic schemas. Of course, for Levinas it is exactly the other that is lost in this thematization, and so the other that is thematized is never adequate to the one that is standing here before me. But that is not Levinas’ main concern in this passage. Instead, he is pointing to ‘the formal work of language’ that is revealed in this basic observation about language. (*TI* 195) The ‘formal work’ that he points to is precisely that language in its very structure, speech in its very effect, consists of an orientation to an interlocutor. Speaking is speaking *to another*. Thinking is always *in relation* to someone to whom I may be speaking. Levinas says that ‘language conditions thought—not language in its physical materiality, but language as an attitude of the same with regard to the Other irreducible to the representation of the Other...’ (*TI* 204)<sup>50</sup>

This fundamental structure of language, as always being directed towards the other, is the reason that Levinas places it in the center of the relation between the same and the other. Signification and meaning are in their essence directed towards the other

---

<sup>50</sup> Among other aspects of Levinas’ analysis of language that cannot be addressed here is the very important one found in III. B. 4.—‘Discourse Founds Signification’. Here, Levinas cites Merleau-Ponty to point towards recent work in the philosophy of language that shows that ‘disincarnate thought thinking speech before speaking it, thought constituting the world of speech, adding a world of speech to the world antecedently constituted out of significations in an always transcendental operation, was a myth’ (206).

and effect the relation with the other. Language is not first of all or primarily a system of signs whose meaning is determined in a Saussurian complex of interrelated cross-references. Language certainly *is* this very complex on an empirical level. But the meaningfulness of language, the signification of language in its very signification, is not determined by this complex but by its very directedness towards the other. ‘Meaning is the face of the Other, and all recourse to words takes place already within the primordial face to face of language’ (*TI* 206). There could not be within the totalizing and all-encompassing horizon of thought—that is, the same—anything that accounts for the very upsurge of signification to begin with. Nothing would elicit it. ‘That “something” we call signification arises in being with language because the essence of language is the relation with the Other’ (*TI* 207). And, ‘signification is infinity, that is, the Other’ (*TI* 207). It is precisely the relation with the other that elicits or founds language. It is the condition of possibility for language in its essence as directedness towards the other and in its ‘material physicality’, that is, language as a fundamentally interrelated concept of signs.

In his 1964 essay ‘Meaning and Sense’ this claim about the essence of language becomes even more explicit.<sup>51</sup> Levinas begins the essay by summarizing with remarkable clarity and depth the insights of phenomenology with regard to language in Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Bergson and others, and this against positivistic accounts of language. But, Levinas wonders, what is the orientation of signification in the phenomenological account of language? This is the same question that we saw above in

---

<sup>51</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, ‘Meaning and Sense’ in Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi, eds., *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 33-64.

*TI*. How does language arise? Or better, *what calls for speaking?* ‘Absurdity consists not in non-sense but in the isolation of innumerable meanings, in the absence of a sense that orients them.’<sup>52</sup> Levinas is here playing off of the double meaning in French of *le sens* as both sense/meaning and direction/orientation.<sup>53</sup> The meaning of language is *un sens unique*, a one-way movement from the speaker to her interlocutor.<sup>54</sup> This is the first meaningfulness, the fundamental orientation of language, which is assumed by and grounds the standard phenomenological-semiotic account that Levinas endorses in *TI* and more directly in ‘Meaning and Sense’.

Returning to our guiding concern for a moment, we can now ask how this account of language, if it is right, circumscribes Levinas’ analysis within the human. The other is still the other, that is, still an encounter with what escapes all thematization and which cannot be confined to a particular ontological sphere. The other resists thematization and cannot be discovered through ontology. As Wood and Derrida have objected, if this is the right account of the other, we still cannot say that the other is a human other. Even if we know empirically that language is only had by humans (and Derrida and others want to problematize this claim), this does not mean that its solicitation can only be garnered via another human. But the structure of language, its ‘formal work’, does not consist only in

---

<sup>52</sup> ‘Meaning and Sense’, 47.

<sup>53</sup> Merleau-Ponty also makes this connection in a slightly different context, and ‘Meaning and Sense’ was written partially as a response to Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy (esp. his book *Signs*), which was becoming increasingly influential for Levinas. For more on this relationship with regard to ‘Meaning and Sense’, see Robert Bernasconi, ‘One-Way Traffic: The Ontology of Decolonization and its Ethics’ in Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith, eds., *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990), 67-80.

<sup>54</sup> Bernasconi helpfully points out in ‘One-Way Traffic’ the resonance that this phrase has with a ‘one-way street’, in French, ‘*rue à sens unique*’. See 73 et passim.



what we have said so far. Remember that ‘language is a relation between separated terms’. We have now to consider the import of separation for the structural work of language in Levinas’ phenomenology.

This is perhaps one of the most confounding aspects of Levinas’ philosophy. His statement that the relation with the other is a relation without relation, a ‘*rapport sans rapport*’ manifestly resists a simple discursive explanation. Again, the key for Levinas is language. ‘To be in relationship while absolving oneself from this relation is to speak’ (*TI* 215). We must keep in mind here the linguistic resonances of absolution and absoluteness. For Levinas, the one-way orientation of language in its fundamental signification is absolute, it does not return and cannot be incorporated into a reciprocal system of equitable interlocutors—the speech of the speaker is always first of all oriented only towards her interlocutor, the other, and cannot be taken up into an ideal-semiotic totality. Again, it is certainly also always the case that this happens—this is the empirical reality, the ‘physical materiality’, of language—but it is not how language receives its signification in the first place.

There is always an essential difference between the I and the other in speech. Or better, language is grounded first of all by the ‘I-Other conjuncture, the inevitable *orientation* of being “starting from oneself” toward “the Other” (*TI* 215).<sup>55</sup> This essential structure of language does not only signify this fundamental orientation but reveals essential positions within this structure. More precisely, it reveals the position of the I and

---

<sup>55</sup> Levinas continues: ‘The priority of this orientation over the terms that are placed in it (and which cannot arise without this orientation) summarizes the theses of the present work [That is, *Totality and Infinity*. DM].’

the absolution from positionality of the other. Levinas is saying that, if we were to look for the foundations of language within ‘a diversity all of whose terms would maintain reciprocal relations among themselves...in which there would on occasion be produced a being existing for itself, an I, facing another I’, then we would never get to a place where language is really *called for* (TI 215). These terms (these I’s) would always maintain themselves within a totality that would not account for the fundamental upsurge of language. Why does one speak? ‘Language does not take place *in front of* a correlation from which the I would derive its identity and the Other his alterity’ (TI 215). And again, ‘the separation involved in language does not denote the presence of two beings in an ethereal space where union simply echoes separation’ (TI 215-216). I and other do not signify terms within a total diversity. As we have already seen, this would be to reinscribe the other within an all-encompassing same, which is to deny the other. Levinas’ point is that even this account would require a reason for its accounting. Why do we speak? ‘Not even the language that narrates it can depart from the orientation of the I to the Other’ (TI 215). This fundamental orientation of language thus requires a separation of terms, such that these terms are in relation while remaining separated. ‘The I disengages itself from the relationship, but does so within relationship with a being absolutely separated’ (TI 215).

We have already said that the I-Other conjuncture of the structure of language requires that the I be revealed in a position while the other is absolute with regard to positionality. Levinas specifies further: ‘Separation is first the fact of a being that lives *somewhere*, from *something*, that is, that enjoys’ (TI 216). He continues:

The identity of the I comes to it from its egoism whose insular sufficiency is accomplished by enjoyment... This egoism is indeed founded on the infinitude of the other, which can be accomplished only by being produced as the idea of Infinity in a separated being. The other does indeed invoke this separated being, but this invocation is not reducible to calling for a correlative. (TI 216)

This passage recalls the reader to the analyses in Section II, and shows the importance of the notion of separation with regard to the phenomenology of language that Levinas works out in Section III. *Existence as separation* is precisely constitutive of the possibility of language and thus of the emergence of the ethical, which is to be challenged by the other, and oriented by the other in our very being.

Given the way that Levinas organizes his analyses in *Totality and Infinity*, it would appear that first of all there is the emergence or establishment of the separated being, that is, the human, and that this separated being then makes possible the encounter with the other, which is experienced as an interruption or a challenge to the self-sufficiency and self-concern of the egoistic being in its separated existence. At least, that is how the analyses are ordered. But throughout, Levinas warns us that this is to mistake his project. It is easy to read *Totality and Infinity* through the lens of a kind of Hegelian chronology, where what follows emerges from what has come before. But for Levinas, the separated being in its pure enjoyment as it is described in Section II is described in a kind of ‘as if’ way, a description that tries to show what the enjoying being is like in its enjoying being. But Levinas is careful to point out that this description ‘does not render

the concrete man' (*TI* 139). 'In reality man has already the idea of infinity, that is, lives in society and represents things to himself' (*TI* 139). All the aspects of human existence are thus always already present, but it is necessary to their description that, in order to show how they *work*, they are taken up piecemeal in order to be put together again, though always in a tense and irreconcilable collection.

What, then, is the relationship between the separated being in its separation and the other in its infinity and transcendence? Given what we have already said, it is tempting to give a dialectical account of this relation. This is part of what Levinas has in mind, though this does not account completely for this relation. 'Separation is not only dialectically correlative with transcendence, as its reverse; it is accomplished as a positive event' (*TI* 173). Separation must really be separation, and remain so in the relation with the other. It is only in this paradoxical situation, where a being that maintains 'the possibility of shutting oneself up at home with oneself' is able to welcome the other into that same home, that the ethical relation can be established (*TI* 173). The ethical relation—the revelation of the other—and the separated being of human existence in the world, require each other in a kind of dialectic wherein the terms taken for themselves are able to remain absolute with regard to the dialectic, like Gyges and his ring, 'accepting the rules of the game, but cheating' (*TI* 173). 'Thus the idea of infinity, revealed in the face, does not only *require* a separated being; the light of the face is necessary for separation' (*TI* 151).

**CHAPTER IV**

**THE SPECIAL PLACE OF HUMANS IN THE WORLD AND THE PROSPECTS  
OF ANTHROPOCENTRISM FOR ANIMAL ETHICS**

If in the very structure of separation—which is the human—we find the very heart of the ethical relationship—the possibility for language, as an absolute orientation without the possibility of reciprocation—then we can begin to see how, for Levinas, the human is primordially aligned with the emergence of the ethical. Only a being that has the kind of being of humans has the possibility of speech, of language, and as we will see, of reason and justice, through which are mediated all of our attempts to respond ethically. But this claim, that the ethical relation *par excellence* is peculiar to human being in the world (separation), does not prop up the ethical on the foundations of the ontological, because as we have seen, separated being is one side of the coin of the ethical relation. There is no time when the separated being was first of all and then came the encounter with the other. Human existence is, from an immemorial past, a ‘past that has never been present’, always already in society, that is, constituted by the ethical relation, enveloped in reason, and existing as a separated being—this is the human. David Wood is confused about the analyses in Levinas’ philosophy when he criticizes Levinas for having an ‘apparent opposition to ontology’.<sup>56</sup> There is always already ethics and ontology together. The ethical was never first of all in existence, and then came the ontological. What would

---

<sup>56</sup> ‘Some Questions for my Levinasian Friends’, 157.

this mean, to be ‘opposed to ontology’ in the way Wood is concerned about? But what Levinas teaches is that the ethical overruns or escapes what can be given account ontologically, and that moreover the ethical relationship is what *calls for* and *orients* the ontological, the phenomenological, the rational. I cannot imagine that a careful and considered reading would lead to the concerns that Wood raises in his essay. When Levinas says that ‘the third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other’, that ‘language is justice’, he is saying precisely that there never was a purely ethical or a purely ontological existence (*TI* 213). One is always already fully shot through with the other, and constitutively so. Ethics—language—is already and only there with ontology—reason—all of which are discovered only in the peculiar way of being that is human being.<sup>57</sup> *Human being in the world is ethical*. ‘To be *kath’auto* is to be good’ (*TI* 183).

Part of the purpose of the preceding analysis was to show this entanglement of the ethical and the ontological in Levinas’ philosophy, which is often overlooked or undiscovered in commentators like Wood. But more importantly, this exposition attempts to show the peculiar human way of being in the world that is the ethical. Those commentators who wish to take up Levinas’ philosophy for the purposes of analyzing our ethical relationship with environments, with ‘nature’, or with non-human animals, fail to take account of the peculiarity of Levinas’ phenomenological analyses, and of what his claims are about ethics. The *anthropocentrism* of Levinas’ philosophy, which is often enough attacked, is not a political bias but a phenomenological one. That is to say, Levinas’ claims about ethics are anthropocentric precisely because he thinks that the

---

<sup>57</sup> Levinas points explicitly to this in Richard Kearney’s interview with him in *Debates In Continental Philosophy*. Cf. especially 76-77.

ethical relation requires the kind of phenomenological structure of the human that he analyses throughout his philosophy. Ethics is precisely the orientation toward the other which is discovered in the structure of language, and which requires the separated existence that is peculiar to human being.

At least, this is what Levinas persistently tried to show. Commentators such as Alphonso Lingis, Christian Diehm, Silvia Benso and others, are interested in expanding Levinas' analyses to non-human animals and to 'nature'. This is an interesting project, and an urgent one. In the face of the technologization and commodification of the life, death and flesh of all of the billions of animals that we consume every year, it is important that we call attention to the profoundly unethical and unjust ways that we treat these beings with which we once shared the world, or at least the space of the world. It should be clear that such analyses will have as much to say about humans as about non-humans, insofar as these commentators are interested in talking about the relationship between the two.

But if we are to take seriously Levinas' analyses, then we need to take seriously the account he gives of the ethical in the human. Do we really think that this account can be straightforwardly expanded to non-humans? That non-humans have a way of being like humans? Of course not. Levinas' analyses give an account of the emergence of the ethical, which is the emergence of the possibility of thinking and speaking (being rational) about justice and goodness. According to Levinas, this possibility is primordially and continually elicited in the face of the human other, in the encounter with the human other, and in the fact of our constitutive dependence on the human other for

concerns about justice and goodness. Do these commentators and thinkers who wish to expand Levinas' analyses think that such a constitutive structure can be given account in our relation with a backyard garden, a river system, or a domesticated dog? I cannot imagine so, but then, these commentators should *assent* to the anthropocentrism of Levinas' philosophy, insofar as he gives an account of the emergence of concerns about justice and goodness (this emergence is the ethical), and furthermore, these commentators should incorporate this anthropocentrism into their analyses, since it is no doubt of fundamental importance when analyzing ethical relations that we keep in view of those analyses the very structure of the possibility of ethical relations to begin with.

I am not saying that we humans do not experience ethical encounters with non-human animals, with my cat, my garden, or with a river system from which I take fish to eat. Nor am I saying that one could not give a phenomenological account of such encounters that takes up insights from Levinas' philosophy. My claim is rather that such accounts must pay attention at the same time to the phenomenological analyses that are *peculiar to the human*, in those accounts' own description of other kinds of ethical encounters. This does not necessarily mean that there need be an analogical transference of ethical status from the human to the animal, as Derrida and Wood worry about. However, although it is not the purpose of this essay to argue this here, I think that there will be an extremely complicated story to tell about the relationship between human/human ethical encounters and human/non-human ethical encounters such that we can probably never escape from the specter of transference in the ways that Derrida and Wood discuss it.



In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Derrida points to an opening onto this kind of analysis when he takes up the interview entitled ‘The Paradox of Morality’, which we looked at in the first chapter.<sup>58</sup> Levinas is asked whether animals have a face. He responds: ‘I cannot say at what moment you have the right to be called face...I don’t know if a snake has a face. I can’t answer that question. A more specific analysis is needed.’<sup>59</sup> Derrida points out the ambivalence of this statement, which at once allows for the possibility of the failure of Levinas’ philosophy as being unable to account for the face of the animal, and the ‘responsible, courageous, and humble way’ that it leaves ‘every chance to what is to come’.<sup>60</sup> We should certainly agree with Derrida that, for Levinas himself, he ‘seems to remain closed off’ with respect to the question of the ethical encounter with the animal.<sup>61</sup> But this does not mean that we can simply move on from the phenomenological accounts that Levinas gives, or straightforwardly expand them into the domain of other encounters that we might call ethical.<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> This discussion takes place starting on 107 of *The Animal That Therefore I Am*.

<sup>59</sup> ‘The Paradox of Morality’, 171.

<sup>60</sup> *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 109.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>62</sup> Certainly it is possible to do this, to critique Levinas’ accounts and show their failure as a philosophical project. In that case, though, it is unclear why one might want to make use of them in expanded contexts. It is incoherent to claim the deficiency of Levinas’ prioritization of the human in his analyses, and then take up those same analyses in expanded contexts, precisely because his analyses are analyses *of the human*.

## CHAPTER V

### JUSTICE AND THE CONCERN FOR JUSTICE

I argued above that the phenomenological analyses in Levinas' philosophy demonstrate the way in which the emergence of ethics is to be discovered, through the structure of language, in the peculiar way of human being in the world that is separation. Furthermore, I argued that the relationship between ethics and ontology is always already entangled in the human, and that there never is a purely ethical encounter—ontology is already implicated in ethics. However, the asymmetrical and one-way structure of the ethical relationship in language precisely escapes or exceeds ontology, reason and the grasp of consciousness. I tried to address some of the concerns about the implications of this identification of the ethical with the human in Levinas' philosophy, and I endorsed a way of thinking about Levinas' anthropocentrism that maintains the integrity of his analyses while opening the possibility of making use of them in expanded contexts.

In fact, I think that such an approach is not only consistent with Levinas' project but is already to be discovered within it. Certainly, Levinas did not take up the project of exploring ethical encounters with non-human animals or with environments or 'nature'. Often enough, Levinas writes in such a way as to implicate nature or non-human animals as antitheses to the human, as that with which the human breaks in opening onto the ethical relationship. So Levinas says in an interview with Richard Kearney that ethics 'is, therefore, *against nature* because it forbids the murderousness of my natural will to put

my own existence first'.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, Levinas makes it clear that moral consideration—this is justice—ought to be, or is, extended to 'all living beings'.<sup>64</sup> Elsewhere, Levinas points out the ethical implications of the flesh that we eat, that confronts us even 'at the family table, as you plunge your fork into your roast'.<sup>65</sup> He says that in being confronted with 'the butchery that every day claims our "consecrated" mouths' there is 'enough there to make you a vegetarian again'.<sup>66</sup> Later in the same essay he says that 'there is a transcendence in the animal'.<sup>67</sup> While it is clear from many other places in Levinas' writings that this cannot be read straightforwardly as putting the non-human animal on an equal phenomenological footing (with respect to the structure of the ethical) as the human, it is also clear that the non-human animal is not so far away from concerns about justice, not only for Levinas himself, but for those who take up his philosophical work in search of resources for thinking about the human relationship with the non-human.

The question that I have been trying to address so far has been *in what way* Levinas' philosophy can be put to work in helping us think about the human/non-human relationship. Many of the commentators on Levinas that I have engaged with are concerned that there is something about the anthropocentrism of Levinas' philosophy that would denigrate the non-human. As I have argued, though, it is unclear in what this

---

<sup>63</sup> *Debates In Continental Philosophy*, 76.

<sup>64</sup> 'The Paradox of Morality', 172.

<sup>65</sup> 'The Name of a Dog', 151. I agree with the reading that Perpich, in disagreement with Llewelyn, gives of this essay in *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*. Cf. 152-154 for this discussion.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

denigration would consist if we read Levinas as providing a phenomenological account of the peculiar structure of human existence that is the ethical, in separation and language. Some of these commentators—for example, Wood—would seem to have a problem with these very phenomenological accounts. I have tried to show at least briefly that Wood is not a very good reader of Levinas (or at least not a very charitable one), and that his criticisms (at least with regard to the ethics/ontology relation) do not hold up against a careful reading of Levinas' phenomenological analyses. For the most part, though, these commentators are not concerned about the particular analyses that Levinas gives but about the privileging of the human in these analyses. Well, these are phenomenological analyses that Levinas undertook *of the human*. A phenomenology of the human/human relation cannot moonlight as a phenomenology of the human/cat relation, unless one can give a phenomenological account of the similarity of these two structures. I do not think that such an account is forthcoming, and it is certain that if it were it would be in basic disagreement with the claims of Levinas, and then it would be unclear why one would be turning to Levinas as a resource for thinking these relations.

What is forthcoming, what in fact has already begun, though barely, to be worked out, are analyses of the complex of ethical encounters that we can discover in human/non-human relations. As I have already noted, this is profoundly urgent work given the state of these relations in our time. But insofar as those who are doing this work want the resources of Levinas' philosophy at hand, it is important that one recognize the crucial role that Levinas' *anthropocentrism* plays in his philosophy, and that this anthropocentrism is precisely that which shows what makes it possible to worry at all

about ethics, justice, goodness and our relations both with humans and non-humans. I think that Levinas' philosophy has much to offer as an informant to these analyses, not because the human/human relationship *comes before* or is somehow *morally privileged*<sup>68</sup> but because a phenomenology and ethics of the human/non-human relationship requires in part a phenomenology of the human way of being in the world, which is ethical in the peculiar Levinasian sense, and which is not fundamentally reoriented or rewritten depending upon which ethical encounter we might be concerned with at any given time. In fact, if Levinas taught us anything, it is that the relationship between ethics and ontology is always and in any case a difficult and ambivalent one. It is a relationship that cannot be reconciled to a set of terms that would be taken up into a consistent system that allows for seamless accounts to be given of justice and goodness in the world. This is because the very emergence of concerns about justice and goodness in the world *short circuits* the mechanisms by which we as humans always and necessarily try to secure justice and goodness, the mechanisms by which we think about ethics. This is, to quote the title of the famous interview with Levinas, 'the paradox of morality'.

My primary claim through all of this is that it is a mistake to read Levinas' philosophy as *excluding* the possibility of an ethical comportment towards non-human animals or towards environments. Instead, Levinas gives an account of the very opening up of the possibility of concerns about justice, goodness and ethical comportment. This opening up—which Levinas discovers through a phenomenology of human being in the

---

<sup>68</sup> Note that I use the word *morally* here. Levinas is quick to point out the distinction between morals, understood as practical ethical programs, and ethics, which is the peculiar way of human being in the world. See, for example, *Debates in Continental Philosophy*, 80.

world—is called ethics. Justice, goodness, and every kind of ethical comportment (which will always be *concrete*) are ontological questions<sup>69</sup>, that is, *rational* questions. As Levinas teaches, our very ability to respond ethically to any being whatsoever requires ontology and reason. We are embodied beings, and this embodiment of ours carries with it certain ontological structures. It is our very embodiment that makes it possible to give to someone, to alleviate the embodied suffering of another being, and to first of all be approached with an ethical concern. Moreover, we never have found ourselves in a time or place where ethical concerns do not surround us, come at us from every side, and clamor for our attention. So all of our concerns about justice and goodness in the world are always already mediated by *reason*, that capacity to represent these clamoring concerns and to make decisions with regard to what is most *just*, that which edges towards goodness.

We are concerned about justice, but the *concern for justice itself* does not arise in reason and, moreover the *concern for justice itself* does not emerge from some kind of expression of a *telos* or structure that can be ontologically accounted for. Rather, the concern for justice itself requires *disinterestedness*—non-inter-being-ness—which is precisely the phenomenological structure or an-archy of the human. It is this very way of being in the world—which is at the same time a break with being—that opens onto the possibility of being concerned about justice and about our ethical comportment in the world, and this includes concerns about justice for animals and our ethical comportment towards the non-human, animal or otherwise.

---

<sup>69</sup> See, for example, Section III of *TI*.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Atterton, Peter. 2004. Ethical Cynicism. In *Animal Philosophy: Ethics and Identity*, eds. Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco, 51-61. London: Continuum.
- Bernasconi, Robert. 1990. One-Way Traffic: The Ontology of Decolonization and Its Ethics. In *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, eds. Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith, 67-80.
- Bernasconi, Robert. 2005. Levinas and the Struggle for Existence. In *Addressing Levinas*, eds. Eric Sean Nelson, Antje Kapust and Kent Still, 170-184. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Calarco, Matthew. 2008. *Zoographies*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1978. *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Derrida, Jacques. 2008. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Trans. David Wills. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Diehm, Christian. 2000. Facing Nature: Levinas Beyond the Human. *Philosophy Today* 44: 51-59.
- Diehm, Christian. 2003. Natural Disasters. In *Eco-Phenomenology*, eds. Charles S. Brown and Ted Toadvine, 171-185. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Drabinski, John. 2001. *Sensibility and Singularity*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1996. *Being and Time*. Trans. Joan Stambaugh. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Kearney, Richard. 2004. *Debates In Continental Philosophy: Conversations with Contemporary Thinkers*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1969. *Totality and Infinity*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1978. *Existence and Existents*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1987. *Time and the Other*. Trans. Richard Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1988. The Paradox of Morality. In *The Provocation of Levinas*, eds. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood, 168-180. London: Routledge.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1990. *Difficult Freedom*. Trans. Sean Hand. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1996. *Basic Philosophical Writings*. Eds. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1998. *Entre-Nous: Thinking of the Other*. Trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1998. *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- Llewelyn, John. 1991. *The Middle Voice of Ecological Conscience*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Llewelyn, John. 1991. Am I Obsessed by Bobby? (Humanism of the Other Animal). In *Re-Reading Levinas*, eds. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, 234-245. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Perpich, Diane. 2008. *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Pincoffs, Edmund. 1971. Quandary Ethics. *Mind* 80: 552-571.
- Raffoul, Francois. 2005. Being and the Other: Ethics and Ontology in Levinas and Heidegger. In *Addressing Levinas*, eds. Eric Sean Nelson, Antje Kapust and Kent Still, 138-151. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- Toadvine, Ted. Forthcoming. Enjoyment and Its Discontents: On Separation From Nature in Levinas. In *Faces of Nature: Levinasian Ethics and Environmental Philosophy*, eds. James Hatley, William Edelglass and Christian Diehm. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- Wood, David. 2005. *The Step Back*. Albany: State University of New York Press.



Wood, David. 2005. Some Questions for my Levinasian Friends. In *Addressing Levinas*, eds. Eric Sean Nelson, Antje Kapust and Kent Still, 152-169. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.