Levinas and Animal Ethics

WANG Jiajun

Abstract
Levinas’s ambiguous stance on the question “Do Animals Have a Face” not only indicates the limitations of his ethics in dealing with animal questions but also suggests the potential of applying it to animal ethics. In view of Derrida’s criticism of Levinas’s thoughts on animals, we tend to consider “death of animals” a subjectivity-shaping ethical event. Human beings should bear a sense of guilt as survivors towards animals, and turn it into ethical responsibility. Animals should be seen as “the third party,” or the Other of the Other in Levinas’s philosophy, and be included in an open community. In such an ethics-based Levinasian community, animals as the Other is equal to humans and humans must be responsible for them.

Keywords
Levinas; sense of culpability; animal; ethics

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All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others.

—George Orwell, Animal Farm

For everything and everyone we are culpable, and I feel more than all others.

—Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov

About the author
WANG Jiajun, Ph.D. of literature, is a professor at the Department of Chinese Language and Literature, East China Normal University. His studies focus on French theory and Literary Ethics. Email: wangjiajun83@foxmail.com

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As one of the most influential philosophers in the 20th century, Levinas, who advocated extreme respect, responsibility, and even obedience to the Other, has often been quoted in recent discussions of animal ethics. Derrida’s pioneering exposition of animal ethics, much affected by Levinas, as well as the analysis of Levinas’s ideas therein, make Levinas a crucial prophet in the present study of animal ethics. Yet according to Derrida’s analysis, this “prophet” was ultimately, notwithstanding his illuminating ethics, an anthropocentrist who rejected animals’ right to have a “face.” Derrida’s assertion has extensively impacted following studies on Levinas, but these researchers did not actually pay adequate attention to Levinas’s original words. The author tries to take the “animal question” back to Levinas’s text in order to prove that his ethics can be critically applied to the field of animal ethics.

1. Animal and Ethics in Levinas’s Thought

1.1 Does animals have a face?

Levinas’s arguments on animal ethics are chiefly included in two texts: one is an interview called *The Paradox of Morality* in 1986, in which the interviewer directly raised this question; though it necessitated an immediate response, Levinas seemed to vacillate. The other is Levinas’s essay entitled *The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights*, and this moving essay records his encounter with a dog named Bobby during his captivity.

In *The Paradox of Morality* (Wright et al.) the interviewer asked if there was anything distinctive about the human face that sets it apart from that of an animal. Levinas, first, admitted that the dog has a face, but he also noted that the face is preferentially found in humans, followed by dogs. When he was then more specifically asked whether an animal has a face, he added, “I cannot say at what moment you have the right to be called ‘face’. The human face is completely different and only afterwards do we discover the face of an animal” (172). In other words, the ethical significance of the face is human-specific in a sense, so the dog’s face is merely an extension or translation of the human face. In that way, he separated “face” from “nature”. Face is human-specific and represents
“freedom.” In Levinas’s thinking, “freedom” stands for “ethics” 1, whereas the
dog partakes more of something natural, and nature stands for pure vitality and a
law of being, viz. “struggling for life.” 2 Accordingly, given the intimacy between
“face” and ethics, the face is not in its purest form in the dog.

Yet he did not deny the existence of a dog’s face: “But it also has a face.
There are two strange things about the face: its extreme fragility—the fact of be-
ing without medium—and further authority, as if God spoke through the face.”
On account of the two dimensions of “face” as described by Levinas, the dog
may have a face for two reasons: first, the dog’s face can be somehow fragile
(maybe even more fragile than the human face, as the dog is in a sense more vul-
nerable to harm), and such frailty, according to Levinas, can be directly revealed
without medium; second, inside the frailty, there is an authority heralding that “as
if God spoke His authority through the face.” This authority does not stem from
the contrast of power—as Levinas said, God has authority but no coercive power
(Wright et al. 169)—but is born of the “benevolence” of ethical subjects. There-
fore, ethical relations are ultimately grounded on ethical subjects rather than
ethical objects. In the face of “benevolent” subjects, any object, be it a human or
animal, may become an ethical object. In this regard, animals surely have a face
and can ask humans to be accountable to them. Therefore, in answering whether
we have obligations towards animals, Levinas replied,

“It is clear that, without considering animals as human beings, morality extends to
all living beings. We do not want to animals to unnecessarily go through pains and so
on. But the prototype of this idea is derived from human morality. Vegetarianism, for
example, arises from the transference to animals of the idea of suffering.” (Wright et al.
172).

Intriguingly, when asked “according to your analysis, the commandment
‘Thou shalt not kill’ is revealed by the human face; but is the commandment not
also expressed in the face of animals? Can an animal be considered as the Other
that must be welcomed?” (Wright et al. 171), Levinas was in hesitation. He then
said, “I don’t know if a snake has a face. I can’t answer that question. A more
specific analysis is needed” (172). As he remarked, it is by virtue of its fragility

1 “Freedom” here refers to the ethical freedom, the difficult freedom, the chosen freedom, the freedom
as the sole ethical undertaker and subject and the passive freedom in Levinas.
2 Levinas associated Darwin’s view with that of Heidegger here. See Wright et al. 172.
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that the face shows its authority, which issued the greatest commandment in the Ten Commandments, i.e. “Thou shalt not kill”. Because of the fragility of the face or other people, we must not harm them but accept responsibility for them. As mentioned earlier, such fragility can also be expressed in an animal’s face, and Levinas also recognised that the dog can have a face, so why did he hesitate?

In my opinion, the crux is that this question involves the concept of “killing”, the violence that ethics resists most. “Thou shalt not kill” is universally applicable to all human beings as a commandment, but Levinas never said that it could be extended to “Thou shalt not kill an animal.” In some sense, such an extension may not make sense in his philosophy. First, this is because, for Levinas, that humans and animals are obviously unequal. Humans, after all, have a divine nature, while animals are more associated with nature. Nature is often regarded by Levinas as a collection of various elements. It is, first, the source of enjoyment for the subject and, second, the object of the subject’s labour, based on which the subject can build himself or herself a home. Animals are in large measure natural elements at the service of the subject or humans, even though the “service” cannot be loosely understood as possession or consumption. More importantly, “the Other” in Levinas’s philosophy keeps resisting any conceptualised, categorised or caste-based inclusive understanding, but he also indicated that the absolute other is the human other, and human beings have absolute priority over the “others.” In the final analysis, “human” is still a species, so the definition of the “human” other as the absolute other is distinct and self-explanatory in Levinas’s philosophy. Yet that is not the case with animals. As Derrida said, the concept of “animal” entails biodiversity. The “animal” is, in some sense, not a taxonomic concept of species but just a simple reference to or a term for biodiversity.

In brief, Levinas’s wavering and even contradictory sentiments on the issue—whether animals have a face mostly lie in, first, biodiversity and other complex connotations of the “animal” prevented him from making a general or definitive judgment immediately; second, though not definitely an anthropocentrist, Levinas apparently endorsed the priority of humans, from which we can infer that he did make a distinction between humans and animals. The very dichotomy between nature and freedom as well as between the being and ethics was extended

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3 Levinas mentioned “anthropocentrism” several times, though he did not take a clear-cut stand. But we can semantically infer that he is not a proponent of “anthropocentrism.”
by him to biology & morality and animals & humans.

Levinas clearly differentiated morality from biology and thus humans from animals based the classification mentioned above. He explicitly rejected the Darwinian positioning of humans whereby evolution linearly associated animals with humans and humans are merely animals that have evolved to a higher order. Nevertheless, what Levinas underlined is the rupture between humans and animals, also humans and survival or being and the law of nature. This law is defined by Levinas as “the being of animals is a struggle for life, a struggle for life without ethics. ... Living beings struggle for life. The aim of being is being itself” (Wright et al., 172). However, the law of being is challenged with the advent of man, since

“man is an unreasonable animal. Most of the time our own life is much dearer to us, and most of the time men are looking after themselves. A man, in his being, is more committed to the existence of others than to his own existence. (172).

Humans are concerned about other persons apart from their own survival and being. The concerns do not always relate to self-interest but are sometimes out of pure “altruism”, and this is what ethics about. This ethics happens to run counter to the law of being defined by Levinas, namely egoism, or self-consciousness and return-to-self of being. In this sense, ethics transcends the being, and human transcends animality. The advent of the humans signalled the rupture between the law of being and history.

1.2 Animals and the Rights of Nature

In the above dichotomous classification, animals dependent on the law of being and that of nature are virtually isolated from ethics. In Levinas’s autobiographical essay The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights, however, he seemed to deny that dichotomous classification, in that the “dog” therewas largely viewed as an ethical agent that is more “human” than many humans.

In the essay, Levinas first analysed the lines in Exodus: “You shall be holy men before me; therefore, you shall not eat any flesh that is torn by beasts from animals in the fields; you shall cast it to dogs” (Exodus 22: 31) (Levinas, “Difficult Freedom,” 151). He firstly explored the quote by putting it into the tradition of interpreting Scripture that tends to consider the whole sentence as a metaphor (including “dogs” at the end of this quote) to seek its implications. Viewed with
this tradition, dogs might be dismissed as the contemptible weak, the servile, or humans of a wild nature. He questioned the interpretation of the dog in a figu- rative sense, and suggested that the dog is literally a dog in Egypt at the moment, and it has the right to enjoy the feast of torn flesh in the field, which, in his own words, is the sign of “a pure nature leading to rights” (Levinas, “Difficult Freedom,” 152). That is to say, he believes that an animal as a representative of pure nature has its own rights of survival and enjoyment. Nature cannot only be enjoyed by humans, it also has the right to enjoy itself.

The dog Bobby, who plays the leading role in this essay, does not actually appear after a half of the essay. Levinas’s memories of Bobby are saturated with affection: during his captivity in Nazi Germany, Levinas and his inmates were not treated as human beings at all by those “free men.” Because of racial discrimination, disparity in status and language barriers, prisoners were not human beings in the eyes of those “free men.” Instead, it was the stray dog, Bobby, who entered their lives unexpectedly, gave the prisoners the warmest and the most sincere response with the warmth of humanity. “For him, there was no doubt that we were all human beings. ... This dog was the last Kantian in Nazi Germany, though without the brain needed to universalise his maxims and drives” (Levinas, “Difficult Freedom,” 153). The first half of this sentence is one of the most famous lines by Levinas, while the latter half is often cited as an example of his remaining antropocentrism. The researchers concluded that Levinas was implying that everything Bobby did was out of natural instincts rather than ethics, and the warmth of humanity it offered was nothing but a human self-projection. In a nutshell, a dog is inferior to a human because it lacks “a brain”.

I, on the other hand, would maintain that the latter half of the sentence could be considered as a playful continuation of the first half. It indeed conveys Levinas’s deep disappointment with Germany in his times: Bobby was the only animal that expressed humane concerns, which could not be promoted and popularised, in that country. The wide chasm between Bobby and the Germans was not only biological but also ethical. The reference to Bobby as “having no brain” can either be taken literally, or it may represent some kind of irony in Levinas’ reference to “reason”. This sentence is followed by the final line: “He was a de-

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4 In other words, not only can humans enjoy nature, but nature can also enjoy itself. However, considering animals as the purely natural or the representative of nature is actually drawing a clearer line between humans and animals as well as between saintliness and nature.
scendant of the dogs of Egypt. His friendly growling and his animal faith were born from the silence of his forefathers on the banks of the Nile” (Levinas, “Difficult Freedom,” 153). It links Bobby with what is mentioned earlier in Exodus: the silent dogs when the Israelis were liberated from Egypt. The connection between the memories of reality and the biblical verses, in a way, entitled the “dog” to a natural and even divine right. In previous paragraphs, Levinas noted that the dogs, who stopped growling with witnessing the emancipation of the Israelites, embody an “animal transcendence”: “At this supreme moment of founding, with neither ethics nor logos, the dog will attest to the dignity of man. This is what the friend of man means. There is the transcendence in animals!” (Levinas, “Difficult Freedom,” 152).

This statement is quite interesting, as “transcendence”, an unusual concept in Levinas’ philosophy, usually refers to a kind of ethical transcendence, but in this case this supreme concept is associated with “animals”. This suggests the possibility of a place for animal ethics in Levinas’s ethics.

2. Towards a Levinasian Animal Ethics

Matthew Calarco attempted to critically combine Levinas’s philosophy with animal ethics. In his view, Levinas’s distinction between being and ethics corresponds to the distinction between animality and humanity. The animality, as Levinas noted in the interview, is the struggle for the “self” life, while ethics can transcend the law of being concerned about self being, and establish the law of “being for the Other.” In this sense, Levinas’ concept of transcendence, “other than being” , could be equated with “other than animal nature” (Calarco 56). However, Calarco soon drew on several biological studies to suggest that Darwin had discovered long ago that “altruism” is also prevalent in animal groups. Although this phenomenon seems to be at odds with natural selection, Darwin still believed that ethics exists well beyond the human (Calarco 60). Calarco added that animal altruism should not be understood only in biological terms, but requires more empathy as well as a focus on animals’ psychology and emotions in performing altruistic actions. Undoubtedly, if we admit animal altruism at the ethical level, then the dichotomy between “being” and “ethics” as well as “animality” and “humanity” in Levinas could be scrapped. Calarco’s biological insight,
though somewhat persuasive, can hardly provide ample ontological proofs for the
difference of ethics in animals, for these “altruistic” phenomena usually exist as a
few exceptions that is difficult to generalize to all animals. It fails to provide suf
ficient proof for the ethical potential of animals, as Blanchot said: “we can also
see mutual aid out of self-interest or selflessness in animals, but this not enough
to constitute the basis an idea of pure group co-existence” (Blanchot 8).

This biologically based argument is illuminating, but turns out to be futile in
resolving Calarco’s question—can animals become the object, or even the
subject, of ethics? The main point of this question in the context of Levinas’
philosophy is: can animals become ethical responders or senders of ethical de
mands? We have analysed earlier how Levinas hedged on this issue. In a manner of speaking, the dog Bobby, from the perspective of Levinas, established itself
as an ethical responder that was more “human” than the indifferent Nazi soldiers
and racists. Calarco further activated the ethical sense of Bobby’s actions in a
more sympathetic manner. He noted that Levinas overlooked the crucial fact that
Bobby was also struggling for survival in the same dangerous situation like the
prisoners. However, it still greeted them and cheered them on, even if the inmates
had nothing to give it. Calarco saw this as an ethical act of selflessness, altruism
and excellence that perfectly matches Levinas’ description of ethics. Although
Bobby did not cede the bread from its own mouth to the prisoners, as Levinas is
fond of exemplifying, yet it accompanied them in their struggle for survival with
out asking for anything in return, bringing them energy, joy and emotion. That
represents a genuine “transcendence of the animal itself” (Calarco 58-59) via its
ethical actions, not simply in the form of a witness to the human creation, like
what the dogs in Exodus did, and this transcendence marks a break with the law
of being (59).

Calarco therefore criticised Levinas for prematurely excluding animals from
the Other, segregating them into a category and depriving them of the right to ex
press themselves, as if their expression is nothing but a “sign without meaning”
(Calarco 57), which is exactly what the racists did to the prisoners and Jews. But
here is the thing: we know very little about, and can never be fully aware of “what
animals can do and what they might become” (Calarco 63), just as we do about
the inexplicable altruistic actions of animals. In this sense, animals are perfectly
capable of being the human Other, and this mystery of the unknown also coin
cides with Levinas’s definition of the Other.
As Calarco mentions, Levinas’s most important definition of the Other in his *Totality and Infinity* is that the Other cannot be understood or defined in terms of any place or category. The Other becomes a genuine, absolute other since it cannot be covered by any definition of totality. Paradoxically, Levinas still invented a placeholder for the other, namely the human, as the absolute other is and can only be an actual human other. According to the author’s analysis, the Other in Levinas’ philosophy could be divided into two categories, the “human Other” and the “Outside”. The former is a direct ethical object of the self that allows the self to achieve ethical transcendence, while the latter can represent all alien objects (except human others) outside the sovereignty of the self, such as nature, elements and even death, which does not necessarily allow the self to produce an ethical transcendence. In this sense, animals are more of “Outside”. Nevertheless, Calarco took a different view that does not fit perfectly the original meaning of Levinas’s text, but could further activate the ethical potential in it. The “human other” in Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity*, Calarco argued, cannot be literally confined to the genuine “human,” just as the “feminine” described in the same book could not be limited to the real “woman”. It is more akin to a metaphor for some aspects or qualities in ethical relations. In short, they are, above all, ethical concepts rather than species concepts (Calarco 65). Now that the “human Other,” the most pivotal ethical concept in Levinas’s philosophy, can transcend the limits of species, animals can naturally be included and become “human Others”.

In this sense, animals can surely have a face. Because Levinas said in the interview that he could not be sure at what moment one has the right to be deemed to have a “face,” Derrida criticised him, saying he did not know fundamentally what a face is (Derrida, “Animal,” 109). For Calarco, however, it proves that the face is wide open without a clear definition, so it can also embrace animals. Indeed, the face or the other is something undefinable in Levinas’s philosophy, which defies any category or species, so it should embrace all the others, including animals (Calarco 71). The openness of the face, in Calarco’s view, can be an effective corrective to those reason-based moral considerations that presupposes some “criteria for entry”, including “superior animals” and “animals that feel pains” in terms of terms of animal ethics, for objects which could enter into moral relations or for which subjects must be responsible. Although these moral criteria have become increasingly inclusive and diversified, they could hardly evade the following limitation: this model, based on a predetermined moral access, will al-
ways divide between “insiders” and “outsiders”, with those who meet the criteria crossing the threshold and those who do not being denied access. This is just as Thomas Birch suggested:

whenever we closed off the question [of moral considerations] with the institution of some practical criteria, we later found ourselves in error, and had to open the question up again to reform our practices in a further attempt to make them ethical (Calarco 72).

Therefore, such moral considerations based on reason and definition are inherently flawed because of the exclusivity that accompanies its inclusivity, and could even possibly evolve into a new kind of violence against the excluded. In this sense, the ethics of Levinas’ philosophy, which promotes extreme respect for the Other, prior rational consideration and rejection of categorisation and inclusive understanding of the Other, turns out to be more ethical than this moral access mechanism, and more applicable to the construction of the ethics for animals, though Levinas’ “anthropocentrism” has not gone as far as this.

Calarco’s statement clearly reveals the inspiration that Levinas’ ethics can offer us with regard to animal ethics:

If we are to learn anything from Levinas, it is that ethical experience occurs precisely where phenomenology is interrupted and that ethical experience is traumatic and not easily captured by thought. Given its diachronic structure, ethical experience can be only partially reconstructed in thetic form. This would, it seems, require us always to proceed as if we might have missed or misinterpreted the trace of the Other (73).

But Calarco did not articulate whether it means that there are no criteria for ethics or morality and all the criteria are based on the ethical subject itself. In other words, will it give rise to a situation where ethics are defined by the subject’s will to power? Is the final ethical object for which the subject is ultimately responsible based solely on the subject’s own choices or preferences? If not, does it then mean that the subject should be unconditionally accountable to all the Others and all creatures? If so, will this utopian fantasy end up spelling its practical futility (this is also the criticism often encountered by Levinas’s ethical metaphysics)?

In order to answer these questions, we need to return to Levinas’ ethics. A Levinasian animal ethics can only really stand up to scrutiny if we can effectively
answer the questions above through Levinas’ theory itself. It is therefore vital that we take a deeper dive into Levinas’s ethics from two specific aspects.

**2.1 Animal Ethics and a Sense of Culpability**

First, a Levinasian ethical subject is not likely to become a subject whose ethics is based on its will to power, as Levinas has revolutionized the definition of the subject. The “sub-ject” in Levinas’ philosophy is the patient, the subordinate, the latecomer and the hostage. In this sense, instead of choosing its ethical object, the subject is chosen by the object. In light of Levinas’ most fundamental ethical principles, the self has no room or right to choose the ethical object. The ethical command of the Other and the infinite responsibility of the self to the Other encounter and befall me unpredictably. I can do nothing but accept all that. This encounter with the Other can occur at any time, depending on the extent to which my ethical vigilance sharpens. The most sensitive ethical vigilance means that we have such an ethical attitude towards everyone and I feel an unpayable debt and responsibility to all people at all times and in all places. This exactly reflects Levinas’ most cited quote from Dostoevsky: “for everything and everyone we are culpable, and I feel more than all others” (nous sommes tous coupable de tout et de tous devant tous, et moi plus que les autres) (Levinas, “Philosophy,” 277). What Levinas did not realize is that Dostoevsky’s words have prepared the ground for his transition from ethics to animal ethics, for in these words we are culpable not only for “everyone” but also for “everything.” It seems that all culpability could be imputed to “me”, the most culpable of all, and I shall assume responsibility for all my sins. Levinas’ ethics is established upon this grievous sense of culpability, through which we can further solidify Levinasian animal ethics.

Second, Levinasian animal ethics needs to be founded on a sense of culpability, which is intimately related to the death of animals. According to Derrida, Levinas denied that animals have a face, or as he said it, he denied animals’ right or power to die (Derrida, “Animal,” 110), as the face of the Other will issue me with the first ethical commandment: thou shalt not kill. However, if animals have no face, they cannot issue this commandment. Put it another way, animals can be

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5 Jill Robbins suggests that this sentence “articulates an ecstatic Franciscan spirituality, a universal responsibility that extends to the love of the earth, plants, and animals.” Therefore, it can indeed be related to this anti-anthropocentric perspective. See Jill Robbins. Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature. University of Chicago Press, 1999, p. 149.
killed, and its death is not my concern. In this way, death, as an ethical event, is forever stripped from animals.

Death is crucial to Levinas’ ethics, in which the so-called dead are those who “can no longer respond”. It is the fear that others can no longer respond that makes me value their lives and their responses. Unlike Heidegger, who considers death the most personal event, Levinas suggests that death is the most alien to the subject, since no one can really experience it. The subject may only encounter, or experience, the deaths of others; we understand death from other persons. A further inference is that death is always an event that befalls the other person, but I am the bearer of that event. The death of the other person calls for my responsibility, so does the fact that the other person will die. More importantly, death, as an event that always befalls others and is witnessed and borne by me, implies that others die for me, and for that I must haobor a sense of survivor’s guilt which will further transalte into my ethical awareness of those others who are dying or will die. The sense of guilt of the survivor as encountered in Levinas’s work is often puzzling, but it becomes more accessible as long as we associate it with Levinas’s state as a Jewish survivor after World War II (this sense of guilt is more marked in Primo Levi’s and Paul Celan’s writings) and the Jewish nation’s self-positioning as the survivor of the Shoah.

So Levinas said:

For us survivors, there is his or her passing away in the death of others, and the extreme loneliness in this passing away. I think that human beings are just opening themselves to the death of others, and becoming human beings in the possession of his or her death. What I am talking about here may seem like a sacred thought, but I believe that around the death of my neighbor, what I once called human nature is revealed (Levinas, “Philosophy,” 277).

To wit, it is the death of others and my ethical witnessing of the death that demonstrates human nature, as the first prerequisite to humanity is the ability to ethically feel the “death of others”. So, is there a place available for animals amid the birth of humanity?

The answer is yes. If we set aside anthropocentrism, there is no ontological difference between the death of animals and the death of other humans. First, following common sense, it is fair to say that most people begin to understand death from childhood with the death of animals. Our tender mind in childhood might
digest a trace of death for the first time from a dog, a cat, a sparrow, or even a
daffodil. Transplanting Levinas’ path, we might say that these animals or plants
in a sense have died for us. Second, it is beyond question that animals are much
more vulnerable than humans, and that most animals (especially those who often
accompany humans, like domestic animals) have a much shorter lifespan than
humans, so humans should be more concerned about those who are weaker than
man and about their possible deaths according to Levinas’ ethics. Finally, the
sense of culpability that the living as the survivor feel about the dead can be more
directly projected onto the human-animal relationship. It is easy to see why this is
happening: as the initiator of ecological destruction, human beings are supposed
to have a grievous sense of culpability for the death and survival of all animals
and other living things, since humans are, directly or indirectly, undermining their
lives almost constantly, whether we want to or not. In turn, this sense of guilt and
culpability towards animals can be reflected in our sense of guilt towards other
people, in that my existence is already a detriment to others since I as a latecom-
er inevitably occupy the resources of those who come earlier than me, whether
I harm them or not. In consequence, influenced by this sense of guilt, we need
to take further responsibility for the Other and atone for our own existence, as
Levinas elucidates: “it is a debt that precedes borrowing” (Levinas, “otherwise”
111) and my existence is destined to be the atonement itself.

2.2 Animals as the Third Party and the Open Community

As the matter stands, we are confronted with the aforementioned question: if
Levinasian animal ethics means that the subject should feel guilty for all creatures
and be unconditionally open to and responsible for all Others, would this ethics
be too idealistic to be possible? Is it possible to have an ethics guided by the basic
principle of “for the Other” without any specific rules? More to the point, if the
subject fails to meet the requirements of such an extremity, does it mean he could
only leave behind the Other to be harmed in frustration, be the Other another per-
son or an animal? In a nutshell, how can an ethics that upholds the sole absolute
ethical principle of “for the Other” without the backing of other more specific
ethical principles, or even institutions, be genuinely effective?

Derrida also touched on this issue. In discussing the question of hospitality
in Levinas’ philosophy, he noted that “absolute hospitality” and “relative hos-
pitality” complement and also disrupt each other. Specifically, the principle of
absolute hospitality underscores the unconditional nature of hospitality, that is,
the need for my territory to be open to and to receive all Others, be they angels or robbers, while the principle of relative hospitality, however, endorses a necessary selection of guests to exclude robbers. Thus, a noticeable conflict arises between absolute hospitality and relative hospitality, but in the meantime, they are intrinsically interdependent: without the help of the principle of relative hospitality, absolute hospitality would become empty words and could not really be implemented; and if there is no absolute hospitality for relying on, relative hospitality would be reduced to a rational calculation, as it could not be counted as hospitality in essence.

Derrida’s comment is insightful in itself, but he has somehow deliberately misinterpreted Levinas, who did not leave the question untouched. According to Levinas’ classification, “absolute hospitality” is associated with ethics while “relative hospitality” is a political issue. Absolute hospitality, an ethical principle, resides in the relationship between “the subject” and “the Other,” where “subject” is always the “sub-ject” and the Other always takes precedence over me. So, the subject should always be the servant and hostage of the Other. In this sense, the guest confronting the subject, be it an angel or a robber, will definitely not go against unconditional hospitality, in that the subject is destined to yield to him. Levinas, however, added that in real social life we are not confronted with just one Other, but with many Others, and these Others, which he calls “the third party”, are other than the one we are confronted with. The advent of the third party has given rise to demands for justice, which are oriented towards the principles of “relative hospitality” that are embodied in the various institutions and regulations. For example, when I face two other persons: A and B, one of them is the Other and the other is a third party. If A hurts B, I have to make a judgment about who is right and who is wrong and about who I am more responsible for. That is exactly a demand for justice, which ends up translating into various institutions or regulations at the societal level. The principles of “relative hospitality”, by Derrida’s logic, serve the principles of “absolute hospitality,” and there is no inherent paradox between them in Levinas’ philosophy thanks to the intervention of a third party. Levinas has insisted that the law, or “relative hospitality,” is indispensable, except that it must have ethics, namely “absolute hospitality”, as its first prerequisite, otherwise the law would be a purely rational calculation or contrivance, and would be inhuman, and hence not righteous, so it could hardly qualify as true justice. He therefore asserted,
Levinas and Animal Ethics

What seems to me very important is that there are not only two of us in the world. But I think that everything begins as if we were only two. It is important to recognize that the idea of justice always supposes that there is a third. But, initially, in principle, I am concerned about justice because the other has a face (Wright et al. 170).

With the concept of “the third party”, Levinas extends his ethics to politics which implies that ethics is bound to be built on ethics or absolute principles, supplemented by essential institutions or relative principles, if it is to be truly implemented. Transplanting this idea over to animal ethics, it seems that the protection of animals and that of environment also necessitate the reciprocity of such ethics and institution. Admittedly, there have been a number of laws and regulations on animal and environmental protection, but the Levinasian ethics of extreme otherness is bound to have a dramatic impact upon this existing regulatory framework, because, in the final analysis, the majority of relevant laws and regulations are still human-centred. We need to protect endangered animals and environment, for their destruction will negatively affect our lives. In other words, the legal system is designed primarily in consideration of human interests, and this is what Levinas has criticized. Such a legal system based on rational or self-interested calculations mostly downplays the singularity of victims, in which the Other is still defined for the sake of classification and categorisation. Second, wedded to the ultimate principle of rationality or self-interest, it might well make judgments detrimental to the other. If so, the rules and regulations based on the “for-the-Other” ethics would no longer take animal protection as a cause that ultimately protects human self-interests, but would treat the harmed animals as equals, ont only interms of the endangerment of their group but also their individual suffering. If, like Levinas, we define humanity in terms of the respect for extreme otherness, the human beings who commit crimes against animals are indeed acting not only against animals but also against humanity.

It is no secret that there is still a sort of humanism, which, however, does not necessarily equal anthropocentrism. Levinas noted that structuralism and Heidegger’s philosophy of existence that rose in the 20th century both implied an anti-anthropocentrism that sought a universal principle beyond human beings (Levinas, “Philosophy,” 284). This anti-anthropocentrism is progressive in opposing the inflation of “human” subjectivity since the Enlightenment. However, in Levinas’ eyes, with the loss of humanism ethics will be lost, since the Other is the other subject that is first presented as the human Other. If the human subject
is no longer the object that demands concern, then ethics will cease to be the primary idea and hence not the first philosophy that Levinas spoke of. Given this, he pointed out that what he aimed to construct is a “humanism of the other person”, which, first and foremost, upholds a humanism oriented towards the Other rather than the self. That way, it adheres to humanism and meanwhile overcomes the egoism intrinsic to humanism. Levinas’ argument here is still confined to “the other person”, but it can be open to the other Others, as we have striven to do throughout the current study: to construct a “humanism of the Other”.

In short, all we have to do is to include animals into the common community ethnically, politically and legally, instead of protecting them condescendingly, as a master does his pet or resources. Derrida has laid a path for that to a certain extent by positioning animals as “the third party” or “the third person” in Levinas’ philosophy:

The animal, the animal-other, the Other as an animal, occupies the place of the third person and thus of the first appeal to justice, between humans and the faces of those who look upon each other as brothers or neighbors. But when Levinas reflected on the Other of the Other who is not simply a semblable and who brings the question of justice to the fore, that non-semblable is still a human, a brother, not an Other who is different from humans or from other humans, and it is still called ‘human’ and responds only to that name (Derrida, “Animal,” 112).

It is a pity that he confined himself to the criticism of Levinas and overlooked the potential for animal ethics in the concept of “the third party.” In addition, Derrida, out of obsession with “difference,” only stressed the third party as “the Other of the Other,” namely the dimension of radical difference (so he said that animals are more different Others than “human Others”), without appreciating the common power implicated in “the third party” in Levinas’ philosophy.

In my doctoral dissertation, Being, Difference and The Other: Emmanuel Levinas and Contemporary French Literary Theory, I tried to distinguish “the Other” and “difference” in French theory. “The Other” in Levinas indicates an alterity that can be transcended (Wright et al. 170). It is not equivalent to “difference” in a comparative sense, but epitomises my respect for the “difference” between the self and the Other. This respect points foremost to a sort of identity or commonality; yet “difference” is more of a neutral “distinction”. “Difference” in the eyes of postmodern philosophers like Lyotard, Deleuze, or the early Derrida, was initially a state of Being more ontological than “otherness” insomuch as “the
other” would not exist if there is no “difference” between the self and the Other. In this sense, ontological difference takes precedence over ethics. But they may have neglected the possibility that the difference happens to arise from my respect for the Other. Put it another way, difference would be not exist without my respect for the difference or recognition of otherness. Such logic enables ethics to override existentialism.

Levinas’ view is preferred when it comes to animal ethics. In brief, difference must start out with the respect for the Other and the intercommunity between the self and the Other. No intercommunity, no difference. This point can effectively refute certain semblable rule in ethics that Derrida criticised: we should take more responsibility for the more semblable. And that may come down to a chain of ethical hierarchy, like relatives > fellow humans > apes > mammals⋅⋅⋅ But meanwhile, it does help us reject another implicit view held by Derrida that was based on his misinterpretation of Levinas: now that we have to respect otherness, the more different the object is from us, the more respect we should offer. From this perspective, we should offer animals more respect because they are more different from us than fellow humans. A major flaw here is: if it is true, does this mean we should offer more respect for plants than for animals as well as more for microorganisms than for plants?

When it comes to ethics, neither the principles of semblable nor those of “difference” can hold water. What ethics really depends on is intercommunity. Intercommunity is not universality that is aimed at constructing the exclusive homogeneity or oneness of a race or genus, but stresses the communicability between the self and the Other. Intercommunity is different from universality, which reduces the diversity to a unity, and it is the coexistence of various differences, including the self, the Other and the third party. Previous mainstream thinking might view animals as the other, albeit excluded from community. Future animal ethics, fundamentally, rests upon the continuous construction of the human-animal community, which does not take place of its own accord, but entails coordination of multiple arenas such as culture, law, and administration. Specifics of the construction can hardly be clarified in a few words here, but one thing is for sure: this community is always open to the Other; it is never-ending and will never truly take shape, since a shaped community is bound to be enclosed. It may be intruded upon by the Other like Bobby at any time and in any where. There is no doubt that in Levinas’ memory, Bobby and the prisoners have co-built up a
community via reciprocal responses, which, in Agamben’s words, was always a “coming community” (Agamben, title). But this name also suggests that it is never perfect or flawless, as it is open to some animal-Others, it may miss out other animal-Others, or non-animal-Others. The same situation in human society, as Derrida stated:

I can respond only to some Others, at the expense of other Others. I am responsible to anyone (that is to say any Other) only by failing in my responsibilities to all the Others, to the ethical or political generality (Derrida, “Gift,” 70).

In this sense, this community is first ethical and second political, or in other words, it is a political tie based on ethics, as the subject starts to open itself to the community in the face of “the death of the Other,” as Blanchot said:

That other person, in his death, made himself absent. To remain present in the presence of another who, by dying, removes himself definitively, to take upon personally the death of the other person as the only death that concerns me, this is what places me outside of myself, and only such a separation, in its very impossibility, allows me to move towards a community open wide. Georges Bataille writes: ‘A man alive, who sees his fellow man die, can only continue to live outside himself’ (9).

In this sense, the ethical commitment to the death of the Other, the survivor’s sense of guilt and the opening of a community are united. The subject is passive within the community. On one hand, it is largely still the Levinasian subject lower than the Other; on the other hand, it is equal to other Others. Through the concept of “the third party,” Levinas endowed the subject with rights out of obligation: with “the third party” as intermediary, “I” could be the Other. The third party is the Other of the Other for me, while I am also the Other of the Other for the third party. The intervention of “the third party” sets the stage for the transformation of me and the third party into the other. Interactivity is hence born out of the trio of the self-the Other-the third party. The self is no longer just the subject responsible for and yielding to all the Others; likewise, I can also ask the Other to take responsibility for me. That precisely represents an appeal to justice. The transformation and ascent of identity, for Levinas, is God’s divine grace and blessing for me, who, however, can do nothing but “thank God.” Accordingly, if we incorporate the question of animals into this regime, a follow-up question may arise: can animals also be identified as the ethical subject rather than the
ethical object? Or, can animals hold themselves responsible for other animals and human beings, just as humans do for animals? This question can be further expressed as follows: what we have discussed earlier is implicitly assuming an inclination to treat animals as humans, for example, including animals in a community of humanity. However, the exchange of identities brought by the third party leads us on to further questioning: can humans become animals? The prerequisite of our earlier discussion is to distinguish humans from animals and then to incorporate animals and humans into a community. Yet despite the recognition of a human-animal community, such inclusion, after all, is differentiating humans from animals in terms of the individual or the person. Is it possible to transcend the established vision through the inspirations of the third party? Is it possible to completely discard the differences between humans and animals and take a fresh look at animal ethics in light of interchanges between animals and humans?

**Conclusion**

Confronting the follow-up questions, we must acknowledge that the paths taken by Levinas and Derrida seem to be far less radical than the “becoming-animal” of Deleuze and Guattari or the “companion-animal” of Haraway. At the back of their thinking there always lingers the human priority, the human-animal distinction, a grievous sense of guilt, and profound religious influence. It is open to criticism by Braidotti as follows:

> Anthropomorphizing them so as to extend to animals the principle of moral and legal equality may be a noble gesture, but it is inherently flawed, on two scores. Firstly, it confirms the binary distinction human/animal by benevolently extending the hegemonic category, the human, towards the others. Secondly, it denies the specificity of animals altogether, because it uniformly takes them as emblems of the transspecies, universal ethical value of empathy. In my view, the point about posthuman relations, however, is to see the inter-relation human/animal as constitutive of the identity of each. It is a transformative or symbiotic relation that hybridizes and alters the ‘nature’ of each one and foregrounds the middle grounds of their interaction... The middle ground of that particular interaction has to remain normatively neutral, in order to allow for new parameters to emerge for the becoming-animal of *anthropos*, a subject that has been encased for much too long in the mould of species supremacy. Intensive spaces of becoming have to be opened and, more importantly, to be kept open (79–80).
By that yardstick, this study is still stuck in the focus on ethical issues in the context of “human” rather than “posthuman”, but we do not mean at all to forge such a provocative path. Braidotti’s posthuman ethics is stridently opposed to humanism. In *The Posthuman*, she sums up a number of variations of humanism (e.g. animal rights activists are defined as post-anthropocentric neohumanists) and criticises each of them (Braidotti 76). It is a pity that she failed to take into account another possibility of humanism, namely the aforementioned Levinasian “humanism of the other,” which differs from humanism that prioritises the subject. In the final analysis, the most critical cause of Braidotti’s rejection of humanism boils down to the priority of the subject. As we have discussed, Levinas’s “human” could be developed into an ethical concept from a species concept. In this sense, “human” could be open to all species. Some may argue that, if so, why do you insist on taking “human” as a synonym for ethical concepts? There are two reasons: first, we do not intend to make a complete break with the traditions. The reform of traditions usually requires a solid footing. “Human” is probably one of the most stable footings, even for “posthuman.” Second, we are not radical anti-humanists. “Humanism”, as a historical and cultural concept, is flawed in some respects, but it is always present as a universal belief, and it does not derive from a specific historical period. In the interview, Levinas says:

> I think that ethics is not an invention of the white race, of a humanity which has read the Greek authors in school and gone through a specific evolution. The only absolute value is the human possibility of giving the other priority over oneself. I don’t think that there is a human group that can take exception to that ideal, even if it is declared an ideal of holiness (Levinas, “Philosophy”, 281).

We do not believe that Braidotti would take exception to that ideal, either. Would it collide with humanism? How could Braidotti’s anti-humanism, involving concepts of freedom and becoming, break off all relations with the humanism that spawned these very concepts? So, we hold that as long as “human” exists (albeit in the form of “posthuman”), both the concept of “human” and “posthuman” could not be absolutely separated from humanism. In this sense, the first thing we should do is to further activate the potential of humanism and evade its deficiencies, rather than radically get rid of it. Or put another way, “humanism” as a concept is always changing and developing, a process that will never be completed. The adherence to humanism will surely not give rise to an antagonism
towards the possibilities of considering animal ethics in a more radical anti-anthropocentric way. Quite the contrary, attempts by philosophers such as Deleuze, Agamben, Haraway, and Massumi to further eliminate human-animal differences could be a useful addition to the conservative approaches of Levinas and Derrida.

Works Cited


---. *Otherwise Than Being, or, Beyond Essence*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis, Duquesne University Press, 1998.


