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Without Asking.

Language and Animality in Emmanuel Levinas

Introduction

Derrida's well-known essay *The Animal That Therefore I Am* undertakes a posthumous critical confrontation with Emmanuel Levinas. This book, published in 2006 and based on a cycle of lectures held by Derrida at the 1997 Cerisy Conference, provided a new impetus for a theoretical dialogue that had begun more than forty years earlier, with Derrida's *Violence and Metaphysics*. Unsurprisingly, Derrida's criticism towards Levinas revolves around similar motifs: in 1964, Levinas was accused of not being able to escape Western phonologocentrism; in 2006, his thought is more generally blamed for adhering to the so-called carnophallogocentrism¹, i.e., the Greco-Judeo-Christian-Islamic philosophical pattern that establishes the undisputed dominance of the male-man over the world and other beings². Namely, Levinas' lack of radicality emerges again in his dismissal of the animal question. In Derrida's eyes, Levinas assigns animals a subsidiary and secondary role. This impression is first and foremost confirmed by their quasi-total ab-

¹ See J. Derrida, *L'animal que donc je suis*, Galilée, Paris 2006; transl. by D. Wills, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Fordham University Press, New York 2008, p. 104. This notion first appeared in a 1989 interview with J.-L. Nancy. In this context, Derrida claims that "the concept of the subject" in Western philosophy responds to a "dominant *schema* [...] that implies carnivorous virility" (J. Derrida, "Il faut bien manger" ou le calcul du sujet, in "Confrontation", 20, 1989, pp. 91-114; transl. by P.T. Connor, A. Ronnel, "Eating Well", or the Calculation of the Subject, in E. Weber [ed.], *Points...: Interviews. 1974-1994*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1995, p. 280). As D. Baumeister explains, Derrida shows that Western subjectivity is always characterized by an "ingestive relation to nature". Such an attitude manifests itself as a manly force of interiorization that, although present in logocentrism as well, has its "paradigmatic form in the ingestion of 'animal' [...] flesh" (D. Baumeister, *Derrida on Carnophallogocentrism and the Primal Parricide*, in "Derrida Today", 10, 2017, p. 54).

² As known, Levinas is included in a "quasi-epochal" category of thinkers, along with Descartes, Kant, Heidegger, and Lacan (see J. Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, cit., p. 14.).

sence in the philosopher's work: animals are often employed as merely metaphorical figures or, when properly evoked, quickly liquidated as extraneous to the ethical discourse.

Nevertheless, according to Derrida's criticism, Levinas' lack of interest in the animal question cannot be reduced to a simple omission. On the contrary, it represents a full-fledged theoretical fault, which risks undermining the stability of Levinas' philosophical architecture, or, as Christian Diehm puts it, making it "ill-founded"³. The nature of such negligence can be easily grasped by considering the main purpose of the Levinasian philosophical system: defining absolute otherness and, even more significantly, measuring its power to hasten the subject's responsibility. In this respect, Derrida observes:

That can be a surprise, coming from a thinking that is so "obsessed" [...], so preoccupied by an obsession with the other and with his infinite alterity. If I am responsible for the other, and before the other, and in the place of the other, on behalf of the other, isn't the animal more other still, more radically other, if I might put it that way, than the other in whom I recognize my brother, than the other in whom I identify my fellow or my neighbor?⁴

With these words, Derrida tries to expose Levinas' philosophical proposal as profoundly incoherent and inconsequential. In Levinas' perspective, ethics can arise only when the subject abandons the temptation to approach the Other by including it in its horizon or looking for a middle-term able to mediate their relationship. As Levinas argues in *Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity*, the sovereignty of the Same only ends when the subject stops existing by progressively *identifying* foreign beings and discovers a "non-I access" to the Other, engaging in an asymmetrical relationship that excludes assimilation and resemblance⁵. In short, the more radical the alterity and difference are, the more easily the primacy of ethics can be acknowledged; the more distant and unattainable the Other's otherness is, the more urgent and compelling the call for responsibility resonates.

That is why, in Derrida's analysis, Levinas' dismissal of the animal question results in a patent contradiction: isn't the animal's Otherness more distant than *my* brother's, *my* fellow's, *my* neighbor's? Does not the choice of prioritizing the relationship with the other man forcibly rein-

³ C. Diehm, *Ethics and Natural History. Levinas and Other-Than-Human Animals*, in "Environmental Philosophy", 3, 2006, p. 39.

⁴ J. Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, cit., p. 107.

⁵ See E. Levinas, *La philosophie et l'idée d'infini*, in "Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale", 62, 1957, pp. 241-253; transl. by A. Lingis, *Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity*, in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, Nijhoff, Dordrecht 1987, pp. 49-50.

roduce symmetry and reciprocity, as Giovanni Gurisatti⁶ underlines? All in all, the other man – and even God, in whose image humankind was created – are still analogs to the human subject, who entertains a relationship of resemblance with them.

Yet, Levinas expressly negates the primacy of animality to the ethical question in the so-called *Animal Interview*, thoroughly mentioned by Derrida⁷. In this context, the philosopher claims that the Face of the animal can be attained only through human mediation: even though “one cannot entirely refuse the dog a Face [...], the wisdom of the Face does not begin with the dog”⁸. The other man alone provides *primary* access to the authentic dimension of the Face, while “the Face in the animal” can be discovered only “afterwards”⁹. As Derrida puts it, these observations “indeed seem to suggest that this discovery after the fact operates on the basis of an analogical transposition or anthropomorphism, which is a way of rendering it secondary”¹⁰.

While not being irreconcilable with such a notion (“I cannot tell you at what moment you have the right to be called ‘face’. What an insuperable line!”, Levinas adds), animal existence is outlined as less leaning towards transcendence and ordinarily coinciding with a brutal adhesion to Being¹¹. Animals are thereby regarded as less suited for an authentic ethical relationship. In a way, Levinas seems unable to recognize animals’ mystery and enigma¹²: far from being seen as cryptic or problematic, their

⁶ See G. Gurisatti, *L'animale che dunque non sono*, Mimesis, Milano-Udine 2006, pp. 47-48.

⁷ See J. Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, cit., p. 107. More precisely, Derrida refers to J. Llewelyn, ‘Who is my neighbour?’, in *The Middle Voice of Ecological Conscience. A Chiasmic Reading of Responsibility in the Neighborhood of Levinas, Heidegger and Others*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 1991, pp. 49-67. John Llewelyn himself conducted this interview at Levinas’ home in Paris. It is integrally reproduced in E. Levinas, *The Animal Interview*, in P. Atterton, T. Wright (eds.), *Face to Face with Animals. Levinas and the Animal Question*, Suny Press, New York 2019, pp. 3-9, from which I quote.

⁸ Ivi, p. 3.

⁹ Ivi, p. 4.

¹⁰ J. Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, cit., p. 108.

¹¹ See E. Levinas, *The Animal Interview*, cit., p. 4: “A being is something that is attached to being, to its being. That is the idea of Darwin. The animal being is a struggle for life, a struggle for life without ethics. Is that not true? It is a question of might, no? Darwinian morality. When I began reading Heidegger, you know, when Heidegger says at the beginning of *Sein und Zeit* that *Dasein* is a being that in its being is concerned for this very being [...]. Now that is the idea of Darwin: the living being struggles for life. The aim of life is life itself. However, with the appearance of the human – here is my entire philosophy – that is, with man, there is something more important than my life, and that is the life of the other”.

¹² As known, the notion is particularly associated with femininity and the erotic phenomenon in *Totality and Infinity* (E. Levinas, *Totalité et Infini. Essai sur l'exteriorité*, Nijhoff, The Hague 1961; transl. by A. Lingis, *Totality and Infinity*, Nijhoff and Duquesne University Press, The Hague-Boston-London 1969, p. 260). The notion of enigma is

existence is solved and brutalized in their alleged rootedness in the world and Being. In Levinas' perspective, the animal mystery is de-mystified, deciphered, and thus, made *irrelevant* to philosophical investigation and ethical discourse.

1. Levinas, Derrida, and the Ethico-Aesthetical Irrelevance of Animals

Despite his promising premises, the Lithuanian philosopher also falls back into an anthropocentric and humanistic perspective. This conclusion is often met with astonishment by Derrida, as if he were to say "Quoque tu, Levinas?"¹³. In this respect, he further comments:

One might be surprised, from another point of view, by what remains, in its very originality, a profound anthropocentrism and humanism. For a thinking of the other, of the infinitely other who looks at me, should, on the contrary, privilege the question and the request of the animal.¹⁴

In this passage, Derrida adds new elements to his analysis. Namely, he introduces the theme of the look of the Other. This argumentative *Leitmotiv* will prove decisive in describing the mechanism employed by Levinas to neglect the animal question. As Derrida argues in the opening pages of his essay, such a result emerges from a specific tendency of the philosophical tradition in which Levinas places himself, which consists of treating the animal as a "*theorem*" (*théorème*)¹⁵. As the italics suggest, this term is employed in a poignant sense. A very cursory etymological examination highlights that it derives from the Greek *theōreîn* in combination with the suffix *-ma*, which conveys the idea of passiveness. This preliminary observation alone might raise some perplexity. Specifically, one could ask how dismissing the ethical-philosophical significance of the animal question depends precisely on the animal's transformation into a *theoretical object*.

This paradox can be easily solved by considering the stratification of meanings that the verb *theōreîn* possesses, with which Derrida deliber-

mainly thematized in *Phenomenon and Enigma* (E. Levinas, *Énigme et phénomène*, in "Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale", 6, 1957, pp. 241-253; transl. by A. Lingis, *Phenomenon and Enigma*, in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, cit., pp. 61-73) as the modality through which Otherness comes to manifestation without disavowing its alterity in the phenomenon.

¹³ A similar remark is in fact made by Derrida about Levinas' position on vegetarianism: "This foreclosing or sidelining of the *animot* surprise us more coming from Levinas than from the other thinkers of the 'I think', from Descartes or Kant" (see J. Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, cit., pp. 112-113)

¹⁴ Ivi, p. 113.

¹⁵ Ivi, p. 14.

ately plays: when speaking of “theorem”, he does not refer to the intellectual value of the term, but rather to its original sensible meaning. In his discourse, then, a theorem represents something that offers itself passively to others’ sensible eyesight but cannot exercise its own gaze – “something seen and not seeing”. As Derrida further explains, anthropo-carnophallogocentric¹⁶ philosophers – Levinas included – allowed themselves to treat animals as an issue that did not *regard* them by making them something that can be looked at but is never able to actively watch anything (*qui ne regarde pas*). When discussing their approach, Derrida argues that

The experience of the seeing animal, of the animal that looks at them, has not been taken into account in the philosophical or theoretical architecture of their discourse. In sum they have denied it as much as misunderstood it [...]. It is as if the men representing this configuration had seen without being seen, seen the animal without being seen by it, without having seen themselves seen by it; without having seen themselves seen naked by someone who, from deep within a life called animal, and not only by means of the gaze, would have obliged them to recognize, at the moment of address, that this was their affair, their lookout.¹⁷

Despite being oft-overlooked, these observations have a major aesthetic significance. In Derrida’s perspective, anthropo-carnophallogocentrism deprives animals of their ability to both receive aesthetic impressions and actively capture the world through sensible sight. They are turned into a sort of windowless monads and confined in a dimension lacking whatsoever aesthetic exteriority.

Nevertheless, this is not the only aspect implied in Derrida’s subtle “jeux des regards”¹⁸. The philosophers of Western anthropocentrism have never seen themselves seen, i.e., have never seen themselves *as* seen. As Derrida remarks on several occasions, this means in the first place that they can-

¹⁶ Following Gurisatti (see G. Gurisatti, *L'animale che dunque non sono*, cit., pp. 21-28), I have chosen to widen the notion of carnophallogocentrism to that of anthropo-carnophallogocentrism. Although Derrida focuses on the central role of the male subject in Western thought, it is undeniable, as Derrida himself underlines in the passage mentioned above, that a major break arises between humankind in general and other creatures.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*. The translation is slightly modified. In Will’s rendition, Derrida’s French “sans s’être vus vus par lui” and “sans s’être vus vus nus” is translated as “without being seen seen by it” and “without being seen seen naked by it”. However, this solution is manifestly unsatisfactory, because it erases the essential sense of reflexivity conveyed by Derrida’s words.

¹⁸ O. Ombrosi, *Le face-à-face de Levinas avec le serpent et... la critique de Derrida. [Sur la “question animale”]*, in C. Pelluchon, Y. Tonaki (eds.), *Levinas et Merleau-Ponty. Le corps et le monde*, Hermann, Paris 2023, p. 234.

not recognize the animals' gaze as such and refuse to assign them a fully vital autonomy. But, more importantly, it implies that they have never *felt* affected by their gaze. They fail to recognize the chance of becoming the target of the animal gaze in their turn – or, if anything, do not grasp this situation as such when it takes place. They don't see animals as seers and, reflexively, do not see themselves as possible *objects* of their look.

In sum, Western philosophers “took no (thematic, theoretical philosophical) account of it”¹⁹ because they denied the possibility of being aesthetically affected by animals and neutralized their aesthetic agency. Analogously, human subjectivity has been held impermeable to animals' sensible catch, that is to say, never at risk of becoming *passive* when faced with animals. Such a subject was never held to be reachable or reached, impressable or impressed, touchable or touched by animal gazes. Let alone besiegeable or besieged, obsessable or obsessed, traumatizable or traumatized.

As I am trying to suggest, these deficiencies are crucial when analyzed in the light of Levinas' account of ethical subjectivity, somehow already evoked by Derrida himself when he describes the passiveness of the “philosophical body” not-seeing-itself-seen as naked²⁰. As known, in Levinas' analysis the notion of passivity assumes an ever-growing importance, eventually becoming the cornerstone of the emergence of the self in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond the Essence*. In this major work, he famously argues that the subject is anarchically determined by the contact with radical alterity, long before defining itself in its consciousness²¹. This priority of the Other over the subject's consciousness makes it evident that, in this pre-original contact, the self is *still* pure passivity or, as Levinas defines it more than once, “a passivity more passive than all passivity”²². In this originating moment and through this primordial trauma, the subject is awakened and called to its ethical responsibility: “Responsibility for the other, [...] in its antecedence to the present and to representation, is a passivity more passive than all passivity, an exposure to the other without this exposure being assumed”²³.

This digression in Levinas' analysis of subjectivity's ethical awakening is, in fact, closely related to our topic, because the Other's pre-original

¹⁹ *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, cit., p. 13.

²⁰ Ivi, p. 11.

²¹ As T.C. Wall underlines, the originality of *Otherwise than Being* and its radical detachment from Western metaphysical thought lies precisely in envisaging a subjectivity that “eludes that which is essential to subjectivity: self-certain presence to the self [...]” (T.C. Wall, *Radical Passivity. Levinas, Blanchot, and Agamben*, State of New York University Press, Albany 1999, p. 38).

²² E. Levinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, Nijhoff, The Hague 1974; transl. by A. Lingis, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond the Essence*, Kluwer, Dordrecht 1991, p. 14.

²³ Ivi, p. 15.

proximity is described as unfolding itself in terms of aesthetic sensibility. As Levinas writes:

This breakup of identity, this changing of being into signification, that is, into substitution, is the subject's subjectivity, or its subjection to everything, its susceptibility, its vulnerability, that is, its sensibility [...]. The response which is responsibility, responsibility for the neighbor that is incumbent, resounds in this passivity, this disinterestedness of subjectivity, this sensibility.²⁴

This brief passage unfolds fundamental elements for our analysis. In *Otherwise than Being* Levinas assigns growing importance to sensibility, which used to occupy a much more marginal place in *Totality and Infinity*²⁵. In this reformulation, sensibility hosts the subject's birth and constitution, which is contemporary to the subject's *call* for responsibility. This scheme leads to a decisive consequence: in Levinas' mature formulation of the ethical relationship, responsibility comes to have an aesthetic trigger. As Sebastiano Galanti Grollo underlined on many occasions, Levinas talks of an "embodied" responsibility emerging from a "flesh-and-blood subject"²⁶. In this scheme, "subjectivity can access [...] its ethical vocation only through its feeling"²⁷ that must be elicited by a "hetero-affection"²⁸. But that forcibly implies – needless to say – that only "others" capable of affecting the subject can provoke an ethical answer on its part.

In light of these observations, it is clear how crucial the outcomes of Derrida's criticism are. Ignoring the animal as my possible Other implies minimizing its aesthetic capacity to penetrate my subjectivity and affect it in a primordial aesthetic sense: strictly understood, the animal's ethical-theoretical erasure must be achieved by making their aesthetic expressiveness irrelevant. If we were to translate Derrida's discourse into Levinasian terms, we could say that when Derrida blames Western philosophers for never being able to see themselves as seen by animals, he means that the subject never feels *accused* by them. No matter how intensively they look at the subject, how heavily they touch it, or how loud they call it, they will never succeed in affecting a proper

²⁴ Ivi, pp. 14-15.

²⁵ According to J. Duyndam, radical passivity and sensibility are prefigured by the analysis of enjoyment in *Totality and Infinity* (see J. Duyndam, *Sincerely me. Enjoyment and the Truth of Hedonism*, in G. Hofmeyer [ed.], *Radical Passivity. Rethinking Ethical Agency in Levinas*, Springer, Berlin 2009, pp. 67-78).

²⁶ S. Galanti Grollo, *La "passività estrema" dell'incarnazione. Levinas e il tema dell'embodiement*, in "Teoria", 41, 2021, p. 209. In this regard see also S. Galanti Grollo, *La passività del sentire. Alterità e sensibilità nel pensiero di Levinas*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2018.

²⁷ Ivi, p. 210.

²⁸ E. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond the Essence*, cit., p. 121 (my emphasis).

Levinasian subjectivity *as* animals. The Human Face will always serve as necessary mediation for its aesthetic recognition and the unfolding of its ethical signification. This is why – as I will show – a mechanism of anthropo-aesthetization is almost always in play when Levinas takes into account animals as ethical actors.

2. The Linguistic Mediation in Levinas' Ethico-Aesthetics

Albeit correct, Derrida's analysis never comes to the point of clearly showing why Levinas' subject cannot feel hastened by animality. On closer inspection, the anthropocentric prejudice that characterizes Levinas' analysis is identifiable in a quite systematic way throughout its work. Namely, it depends on a strong theoretical position that, though progressively mitigated, marks his philosophical path from beginning to end. A possible hint at the proper reason justifying Levinas' position can be detected in a reference that Derrida²⁹ himself makes to the notion of the Face in *Ethics and Infinity*, underlining that, according to Levinas, the Face is already missed when one focuses on the color of its eyes³⁰. As Derrida points out, such observation certainly testifies that Levinas mainly "thinks of the other human".

But more importantly, it refers to a central principle in Levinas' characterization of its most significant philosophical device. As he repeatedly underlines in *Totality and Infinity*, the Face cannot be merely grasped through vision and cannot be reduced to its visible features. Understanding the Face in terms of vision or manifestation could put it at risk of being thematized and, thus, easily assimilated by the Same. Its transcendence is guaranteed by the fact that it unceasingly transfigures its physiognomy. This is why recognizing stable traits in it could definitively compromise its Otherness and, finally, cause its disappearance as such. The Face – Levinas unceasingly repeats – does not reveal itself as a phenomenon. Rather, it must be seized in a phono-linguistic dimension:

The manifestation of the *kath'auto* consists in a being telling itself to us independently of every position we would have taken in its regard, expressing itself. Here, contrary to all the conditions for the visibility of objects, a being is not placed in the light of another but presents itself in the manifestation – present before manifestation that should only announce it

²⁹ See J. Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, cit., 12

³⁰ See E. Levinas, *Éthique et Infini. Dialogues avec Philippe Nemo*, Fayard, Paris 1982; transl. by R.A. Cohen, *Ethics and Infinity*, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh 1985, p. 85.

[...]. Form – incessantly betraying its own manifestation, congealing into a plastic form, for it is adequate to the same – alienates the exteriority of the other. The face is a living presence; it is expression [...]. The face speaks. The manifestation of the face is already discourse. This way of undoing the form adequate to the Same so as to present oneself as other is to signify or to have a meaning. To present oneself by signifying is to speak. This presence, affirmed in the presence of the image as the focus of the gaze that is fixed on you, is said.³¹

Seeing the Other's eye color amounts to freezing the Face in a plastic image and depriving it of its exteriority. This exteriority lies in always coinciding with its content, without ever concealing its emergence and manifestation into a sharp and fixed appearance. To maintain its transcendence, the Face must constantly undo its form.

In order to avoid such a fixity, Levinas identifies the privileged mode through which a Face expresses itself in language. In *Totality and Infinity*, only discourse and linguistic expression secure the Face of its transcendence and unattainability. This centrality of language remains unchanged also *a parte subjecti*. In this case, too, language alone can offer the means through which the relationship with the Other is kept safe from thematization and assimilation. On various occasions, Levinas claims that the subject opens to the Other by invoking it: the relation with the Other can take place only “in the relation of language, where the essential is the interpellation, the vocative”³². In this analysis, language shapes the ethical relationship on both sides: on the part of the Other, which reveals itself in speech, and on the part of the subject, which testifies the transcendence of the Face by invoking it.

As I am trying to suggest, these brief observations highlight why Derrida's criticism never wholly detects the core of Levinas' carefree attitude towards animals. In Levinas' perspective, animals can never make the subject feel *seen* because gaze alone cannot establish any possible ethical reciprocity. The Other must be able to signify its transcendence in speech and the subject must testify it through its invocation. That is the proper reason why Levinas hesitates in recognizing animals a Face. When he claims that he is not sure “whether one finds it in a snake”³³, he expresses his struggle in granting the snake a kind of expressiveness that he cannot but interpret through the lens of language.

Despite the radical changes it presents, *Otherwise than Being* does not deprive language of its major ethical relevance. The permanence of this

³¹ E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, cit., pp. 65-66.

³² Ivi, p. 69.

³³ E. Levinas, *The Animal Interview*, cit., p. 4.

linguistic filter manifests itself in several theoretical and lexical choices. First, as already mentioned, the subject's anarchical exposure to Other is often described as an *accusation*. A new dimension enhances the "invoking subject" presented in *Totality and Infinity*, which must now be understood as declined in its accusative form³⁴. The subject is held accountable for a fault that precedes its constitution, for which it is nonetheless *called* to *answer*. Secondly, linguistic lexical tools come into play in characterizing the subject's passiveness. Namely, the subject's "exposure to the Other" is described through the renowned notion of *Saying*. Admittedly, this term does not refer to the most traditional thematizing language, which is described through the so-called category of the *Said*. Still, this linguistic reference is justified to the extent that it presents exposure as the "condition for all communication"³⁵. Far from being brutal and meaningless sensibility, the Saying constitutes significance itself: "The subject of Saying does not give signs, it becomes a sign, turns into an allegiance"³⁶. The Saying identifies subjectivity as sheer expressivity, signifinness, and availability to responsiveness. Far from being dimmed, language is then somehow distilled and restored to its purest form.

The last linguistic reference concerns the outline of the subject anarchic exposure to the Other. Namely, linguistic tools enter into play to characterize the so-called structure of The-Other-in-the-Same. This key notion – one of the most innovative in Levinas' *Kehre*³⁷ – is famously described through the cognate categories of inspiration and prophecy. Subjectivity recognizes itself as originally exposed to the infinite alterity of the Other as prophets are inhabited by the unattainable Word of God, to which they are bound to obey and "make sign"³⁸ before even comprehending it. In inspiration, "the extreme tension of language" takes place. The subject's obligation to respond to the Other and transform into a pure sign marks "the impossibility of being silent, the scandal of sincerity"³⁹.

This short itinerary in Levinas' theoretical path detects a constant *Leitmotiv* in his thought. Although ethics remains the core of his philosophical investigation, as Étienne Feron brilliantly highlights, Levinas never ceases to use linguistic expressivity as a privileged tool for describing ethical engagement⁴⁰. Even when Levinas analyzes the status of subjectivity

³⁴ See E. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond the Essence*, cit., p. 15.

³⁵ *Ivi*, p. 48.

³⁶ *Ivi*, p. 49.

³⁷ See S. Strasser, *Jenseits von Sein und Zeit. Eine Einführung in Emmanuel Levinas' Philosophie*, Springer, Berlin 1978, p. 219.

³⁸ E. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond the Essence*, cit., p. 143.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ É. Feron, *De la transcendance à la question du langage. L'itinéraire philosophique d'Emmanuel Levinas*, Millon, Grenoble 1992, p. 9.

from a more sensible and aesthetic perspective, his model for envisaging its potency-to-signify remains the linguistic dimension. Therefore, such a logocentric perspective – I contend – necessarily biases and narrows the area of deployment of Levinasian ethics.

Somehow, despite never referring to the “scene of name-calling” in *Genesis*⁴¹, Levinas, too, recognizes language as the feature that distinguishes men from the rest of beings and bestows upon them undisputed superiority. Animals cannot affect human subjectivity directly because their signifying expressiveness cannot be *immediately* traced back to the linguistic model. In Levinas’ perspective, animals’ *Sprachlosigkeit*⁴² makes them unable to call, respond, and expose themselves as pure signifiyng. Such an essential inability forecloses them “from the ethical circuit”⁴³ on both sides: as a possible Other that I am responsible for and as an ethical agent. The “Greek-Abrahamic law”⁴⁴ that Derrida speaks of remains in place in Levinas’ thought, too, and establishes man’s *ethical* superiority over animals.

In this respect, the cooperation between these two theoretical sources – the Greek and the Jewish – is called into question by Levinas in one of his confessional writings. In *Beyond the Verse*, he remarks that “Aristotle’s ‘animal endowed with language’ has never been thought, in its ontology, in terms of the book”⁴⁵, with an explicit reference to the Torah. By observing this, Levinas first and foremost acknowledges the legitimacy of Aristotle’s definition of man in the *Politics*⁴⁶, recognizing language as the feature that separates men from other beings. Nevertheless, he adds, such a Greek definition must be enriched with a Jewish understanding, that is, read in the light of the Bible. This remark is far from having a merely religious meaning. Rather it aims at characterizing man as that creature that is always exposed to a Word that bears infinity and to which he is called to respond. The “contraction of the Infinite” present in the Scripture makes it possible to grasp the proper ethical fallout of language:

Language which has become Holy Scriptures, and which maintains its prophetic essence – probably language *par excellence* [...]. It co-ordinates me with the other to whom I speak; it signifies in every discourse from the

⁴¹ As known, Derrida widely comments on the passage from *Bereshit* in which God charges Adam to name animals. His analysis mainly revolves around Benjamin’s analysis of the scene in *On Language as Such and On the Language of Man* (see J. Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, cit., pp. 18-20). On Derrida’s reading of Benjamin see G. Gurisatti, *L’animale che dunque non sono*, cit. pp. 30-39.

⁴² See J. Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, cit., p. 19.

⁴³ Ivi, p. 106.

⁴⁴ Ivi, p. 20. The text is slightly modified.

⁴⁵ E. Levinas *L’au-delà du verset*, Minuit, Paris 1982; transl. by G.D. Mole, *Beyond the Verse*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington-Indianapolis 1994, p. XI.

⁴⁶ See Arist., *Pol.* I, 3.1253a.

face of the other, hidden from sight yet unforgettable: from the expression before words my responsibility-for-the-other is called upon, deeper than the evocation of any images, a responsibility in which arise my replies.

In its most proper essence, language is prophetic. Its highest function is to expose the subject to the Absolute Other's Word, whose infinity it is called to testify in responsibility. For this reason, defining man as that animal endowed with *logos* means making him a prophetic one. Man is a prophetic animal insofar as, both in the strict sense of prophetic experience and in interpreting the sacred text, he knows how to manifest and respond to the call of that surplus of sense that has always inhabited him, tearing him apart in his claim to be self-sufficient. As such, he can access a privileged path toward ethical relationship, that unfolds both its polarities linguistically. That is why, in the last analysis, animals-not-endowed-with-language cannot appear as main figures in the ethical context. When they enter ethics – as I shall argue – they always need to be in some way traced back to and provided with human linguistic expressivity.

3. a. The Anthro-logical Animals

As known, an accusation of anthropomorphism is first and foremost leveled at Levinas by Derrida with reference to one of the most famous beasts of his “bestiary”⁴⁷: Bobby the dog. Levinas talks about *this* dog in a brief text contained in *Difficult Freedom*. The anecdote dates back to Levinas' captivity.

In the scenes he describes, Levinas and his comrades constantly feel seen: they feel seen “by the other men, called free”, by “the children and women who passed by and sometimes raised their eyes”; but all of them – he observes – “stripped” them of their “human skin”⁴⁸. Only Bobby, the “wandering dog” living in the camp, does not do that: “For him, there was no doubt that we were men”, Levinas observes. In Bobby's gaze – one could paraphrase – prisoners are still seen and felt seen as men. Indeed, this “certifying function” should already be considered a significant sign of the mere anthropological purpose that Levinas assigns this special dog. As Ombrosi remarks, “this pleasant text is manifestly

⁴⁷ I use this term in the sense of O. Ombrosi's *Le bestiaire philosophique de Jacques Derrida*, PUF, Paris 2022.

⁴⁸ E. Levinas, *Difficile Liberté. Essais sur le judaïsme*, Albin Michel, Paris 1963; transl. by S. Hand, *Difficult Freedom, Essays on Judaism*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1990, pp. 152-153.

anthropo-logo-centric, because it insists on prisoners' humanity from beginning to end, and not on the animality of this dog [...]. The man remains its center, it is, in fact, its center"⁴⁹. Still, there is more to it.

By virtue of such ethical behavior, Levinas famously defines Bobby as "the last Kantian in Nazi Germany"⁵⁰. This commentary received much attention and several explanations. Derrida argues that Bobby "is [...] anything but Kantian"⁵¹ for he is incapable of whatsoever universalization, as Levinas himself admits. On the contrary, Peter Atterton recognizes Bobby as a full-fledged moral actor in Kant's sense by interpreting Levinas' compliment as referred to the second formulation of the categorical imperative; it would therefore hint at Bobby's ability to express a form of personal "*reverentia*" as an "immediate response" in a proper Face-to-Face relationship⁵².

For my part, I do not intend to enter this quibbling debate but underline a different aspect of Levinas' story. Bobby recognizes the prisoners as men "without the brain needed (*n'ayant pas le cerveau qu'il faut*) to universalize maxims and drives"⁵³. One could paraphrase, *despite* not having a brain: despite its dogginess, animality, and lack of a universalizing reason, Bobby is still capable of ethical behavior. In this sense, Bobby represents some kind of exception if compared to other "normal" dogs. For example, he is radically different from Argos, Ulysses' "Greek dog", who can only recognize him in his Fatherland, expressing "its *conatus* and [...] joy"⁵⁴. Rather, he says, Bobby resembles the Egyptian dogs that witnessed the people of Israel in their breakaway from Egypt. The episode that Levinas refers to is taken from *Exodus* 11.7, where God commands dogs not to growl or bark against Jews. Levinas explains:

Israel is about to be released from the house of bondage. Slaves who served the slaves of the State will henceforth follow the most high Voice, the most free path. It is a figure of humanity! Man's freedom is that of an emancipated man remembering his servitude and feeling solidarity for all enslaved people. A rabble of slaves will celebrate this high mystery of man, and "not a dog shall growl". At the supreme hour of his institution, with neither ethics nor *logos*,

⁴⁹ O. Ombrosi, *Non seulement un chien. Les bestiaires de Levinas et Derrida*, in "Les Temps Modernes", n. 669-670, 2012, pp. 247-248.

⁵⁰ Ivi, p. 153.

⁵¹ J. Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, cit., p. 114.

⁵² See P. Atterton, *Dog and Philosophy*, in P. Atterton, T. Wright (eds.), *Face to Face with Animals. Levinas and the Animal Question*, cit., pp. 63-89, here pp. 70-71.

⁵³ E. Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, cit., p. 153.

⁵⁴ E. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond the Essence*, cit., p. 79. The difference between Argos and Egyptian dogs is mentioned at the end of *The Name of a Dog or Natural Rights* (see E. Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, cit., p. 153).

the dog will attest to the dignity of its person. This is what the friend of man means. There is a transcendence in the animal!⁵⁵

Just like Bobby, Egyptian dogs can testify to humanity in prisoners or slaves. Just like Bobby, they can do that without possessing ethics or reason, suspending the brutality of their animality. On this special occasion – Levinas remarks – dogs become capable of transcendence⁵⁶. This extraordinary status is gained in two stages: first, they become capable of respecting God's command, i.e., to hear and obey his Voice; second, they satisfy this order and *signal* the difference between Jews and Egyptians by keeping silent in the din of night and renouncing their instinctual reactions – it is the night of firstborns, Levinas recalls, and a loud invaded all the land of Egypt. The Hebrew expression describing the purpose of the dogs bark is *lem'an tede'un*, “so that you will *know*”. Despite not having *logos*, the Egyptian dogs demonstrate being able to listen to a linguistic command and perform a signifying and informational function, which contrasts with their ordinary behavior. In other terms, their extraordinary nature lies in getting closer to linguistic receptivity and expressivity. The para-linguistic outcome of this anecdote is suggested also by Levinas' concluding words, through which he compares the Egyptian dogs' silence to Bobby's bark:

He [Bobby] was a descendant of the dogs of Egypt. And his friendly growling, his animal faith, was born from the silence of his forefathers on the banks of the Nile.⁵⁷

Bobby's warm and welcoming greetings and the Egyptian dogs' silence are twined. They both violate their instinctive behavior and express a signifying capacity through which these animals can attest to prisoners' humanity and make them feel seen as humans. This brief analysis leads to a key point in my argumentation: even in its sensible deployment, Levinas cannot but comprehend the ethical relationship in pre- or paralinguistic terms. When animals get to enter the circuit of ethics, it is because they also get close to the linguistic dimension. The anthropomorphization of animals consists, more properly speaking, of an *anthropo-logization*.

⁵⁵ Ivi, p. 152.

⁵⁶ Levinas granting Bobby transcendence is thoroughly commented upon in P. Atterton, *Dog and Philosophy*, cit., pp. 64-71. These analyses are explicitly called into question and more widely discussed by Chiara Pasqualin, (see C. Pasqualin, *La trascendenza dell'animale a partire da Lévinas*, in “Giornale di Metafisica”, 45, 2023, pp. 239-242). Namely, the author considers the possibility of acknowledging animals as fully transcendent – and not the realization of their vulnerability – as a key factor in defining ethical responsibility towards animals in Levinasian terms.

⁵⁷ E. Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, cit., p. 153.

Besides Bobby, other lesser-known animals fill Levinas' pages. Two of them appear in a Talmudic reading collected in *Difficult Freedom*. Levinas discusses the coming of messianic times by commenting on the Talmudic tractate *Sanhedrin*⁵⁸. There will be people – he observes – who will not recognize the Messiah. The Talmud explains such inaptitude with an anecdote that describes an exchange between a bat and a cock⁵⁹: for the bat, it makes no sense to wait for daylight because it cannot see it anyway. Conversely, the cock is made for light, it can see it and recognize it before it shines forth, and so will those who are suited for messianic salvation. Again, a special quality differentiates an exceptional animal from other normal dull creatures. However, in this case, such a position seems to be described as gained through mere senses – through pure animality: “The cock perceives the dawn” and has “a nose for light”. Levinas immediately links this passage to a Jewish morning blessing that reiterates the excellence of the cock and its proximity to God. Similar remarks are contained in the conference *Transcendance et Intelligibilité*: “Isn't animal psychism already theology? That would be scandalous, wouldn't it?”⁶⁰. The scandal Levinas refers to lies in envisaging a scenario where not only an animal accesses a dimension of transcendence but does so in a more intimate way than humanity itself; or, as Ombrosi puts it, it consists of “the unheard chance of a proximity from the part of beasts to the Wholly Other”⁶¹.

Nevertheless, this apparent openness toward a purely animal transcendence is soon to be contradicted by the rest of the passage, which lends itself to an anthropocentric reading. The metaphoric nature of this episode – the Talmud itself explains that the tale represents a *mashal*, a “proverb” or a “likeness” – should already be a sign of its anthropo-oriented nature. Moreover, the quality that allows the rooster to distinguish night from day is explained through a para-etymological play. The term *sekhvi*, used in the passage to refer to the cock, also means “intelligence” or “understanding”. Therefore, the rooster announces the approaching day not by some instinctual, a-logical behavior, but through a mysterious and astonishing intelligence. Moreover, in the peculiar morning blessing that Levinas connects to this passage, Jews thank God for granting the rooster the intelligence (*binah*) to distinguish day from night. Significantly, it must be recited as soon as the cock announces the approaching day to humans through its *kol*, “voice”. The rooster is thereby transfigured into a rational and linguistic animal that serves men with a distinctly

⁵⁸ See *Sanhedrin* 11.54.

⁵⁹ E. Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, cit., p. 92.

⁶⁰ E. Levinas, *Transcendance et intelligibilité*, Labor et Fides, Paris 1996, p. 40.

⁶¹ O. Ombrosi, *Non seulement un chien*, cit., p. 251.

human-like intelligence, ending up being the anthropological animal *par excellence*. Through its chant, it *calls* men and returns them to their proper dimension of light, for, as Levinas says elsewhere, “as soon as the day begins, nothing savage (*sauvage*) remains”⁶².

3. b. The A-logical Camels. Towards an Ethics of Difference

This brief review confirms Derrida’s judgment: the “hymn to Bobby”⁶³ does not suffice to reconcile Levinas’ ethics with the animal question. The linguistic mediation that structures his ethics makes it impossible to grant animals a place unless they get anthropomorphized or “anthropologized”.

However, within Levinas’s bestiary, there is one final figure that, although oft-overlooked, may open a path towards non-anthropo-carnophallogocentric ethics in Derrida’s sense: the camels from *Genesis* 24.17-19. Levinas comments on this passage in the famous essay *The Bible and the Greeks*, included in *In the Times of Nations*. First, the philosopher retraces the anecdote in question:

In *Genesis* 24, Abraham’s servant, having come from afar in search of a wife for his master’s son, asks Rebekah, the future mother of Israel, for a drink of water from her pitcher. But Rebekah also waters the camels of the caravan, “until they have all done drinking”. She waters the camels who cannot ask to drink [...]. It is a prefiguration or an enactment of the revelation in the responsibility for the first person to come our way – even if it is a beastly creature (*un peu chameau*), so to speak: a responsibility exceeding the demand heard by myself in the face of the other.⁶⁴

This passage is crucial to our analysis. Rebekah not only gives drink to the servant but also quenches the thirst of his camels. This behavior baffles Levinas: does the text suggest that my neighbor could also be a camel? – he wonders. His answer resorts to a certain irony: yes, the one to whom I should feel ethically obliged could also be *un peu chameau*, literally “a bit of a camel”. Such an expression is commonly used in French to

⁶² E. Levinas, *Du sacré au saint. Cinq nouvelles lectures talmudiques*, Minuit, Paris 1977; trans. by A. Aronowicz, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington-Indianapolis 1990, p. 104. The subject of this reading concerns a passage from the Talmudic tractate *Baba Metsia* (*Baba Metsia* 85a-83b). Levinas particularly discusses the separation between day, insofar as a time consecrated to men and their work, and night, which belongs to wild animals.

⁶³ J. Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I am*, cit., p. 114.

⁶⁴ E. Levinas, *À l’heure des Nations*, Minuit, Paris 1988; transl. by M.B. Smith, *In the Times of Nations*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington-Indianapolis 1994, p. 134.

define a particularly unpleasant and unpalatable person. Despite appearances, this reply does not simply represent an innocent game of words. Rather, it is the umpteenth gimmick through which Levinas reduces biblical animals to a metaphor and traces them back to humanity.

Yet, the biblical text and Levinas' commentary bring forth another interpretative possibility, that may allow us to "challenge the metaphor"⁶⁵ and take the camels as camels, just as much as Levinas took Bobby as a dog. Rebekah – the text specifies – waters the camels "who cannot ask to drink". Their animality hinders them from calling for help. Yet, without asking for it, they are rescued. Rebekah – who is incidentally a woman, as Derrida would have probably underlined⁶⁶ – waters them without needing to hear their call or detect a signifying expressiveness ascribable to language.

On the contrary, her ethical act seems to be triggered precisely by the camel's lack of linguistic expressivity. Her call for responsibility exceeds what she can linguistically intend or hear from the part of her two-humped neighbors; and yet, that is exactly why her obligation is all the more compelling. The richness of this biblical passage opens up a path for understanding the appeal of animals as something Wholly Other, precisely because they do not possess language and cannot ask for help. Camels are envisaged as Others by Rebekah not because they mimic or

⁶⁵ E. Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, cit., p. 152.

⁶⁶ As Ombrosi remarks, Levinas does not underline that Rebekah is, in fact, a woman (see O. Ombrosi, *Non seulement un chien*, cit., p. 246) and the possible difference of a more "womanly" ethical attitude towards the Other does not enter his analysis. Nevertheless, it is certainly significant that, among the biblical examples taken into consideration, the only subject who feels responsible for the animal otherness is a feminine one. Not merely because it may hint at a general inclusion of women into Levinas' theoretical discourse – they are in fact present in it as figures of mystery and pure Otherness since its first formulations – but more properly because it could be taken as a proof of the considerable "feminization" of Levinas' subjectivity in *Otherwise than Being*. In fact, while *Totality and Infinity* relegates the feminine to a sort of ontological category of Otherness – "making it impossible", as Derrida appropriately remarks, "essentially impossible, that it could have been written by a woman" (J. Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence*, Seuil, Paris 1967; transl. by A. Bass, *Writing and Difference*, Routledge, London 2001, p. 412) –, in *Otherwise than Being* notions such as maternity and vulnerability give femininity a far more central role in the characterization of ethical *subjectivity*. Taking this biblical anecdote as an example of the exceeding responsibility of the ethical subject may well reflect this shift in Levinas' treatment of femininity and its rightful inclusion into full subjectivity. On women's role in Levinas' thinking – with particular reference to its biblical and Talmudic sources, see C. Chalier, *Figures du féminin. Lectures d'Emmanuel Levinas*, Cahiers de la nuit surveillée, Paris 1982 and H. Ben Pazi, *Rebuilding the Feminine in Levinas's Talmudic Reading*, in "Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy", 12, 2003, pp. 1-32. For a critical confrontation between Levinas' and Derrida's positions on the feminine, see C. Malabou, *Le sens du "féminin"*, in "Revue du MAUSS", 39, 2012, pp. 236-244 and S. Dadà, *Levinas e il femminile. Tra stereotipo ed etica*, in "Etica e Politica", 2, 2021, pp. 683-702.

resemble the humanity of their master, but because they are fundamentally *different* from him. In this unique case, the so heavily criticized principle of analogy in Levinas' treatment of the animal question fades away. Camels are not *ana-logues* to men, for they neither have *logos* nor share any expressive symmetry or reciprocity with them. Toward them, they are, in fact, *a-loga*: creatures utterly devoid of language. And yet, precisely because of this difference, they can enter the ethical relationship⁶⁷.

Conclusions

Unfortunately, such an evocative text represents an isolated case in Levinas' work. As Ombrosi remarks⁶⁸, Levinas does not develop his discourse further and is not daring enough with the conclusions he draws from this biblical passage. Nonetheless, this episode may well reveal a certain openness towards "animal fragility". This hermeneutic possibility is, in fact, present in the text, and Levinas certainly sees it. This hesitation in wholly seizing the deepest implications of the text defines a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, acknowledging the infinite semantic richness of the Bible as capable of supplying the hermeneutical basis for a non-anthropocentric and non-anthropological responsibility towards animals may first and foremost extend Levinasian ethics towards animals and finally free it from its theoretical inconsistencies. But, even more importantly, in a peculiar game of cross-references, it would allow humanity to reclaim their nature as linguistic and prophetic creatures, letting them bear witness to the infinite meaningfulness in the text and the boundless responsibility it relentlessly calls upon humanity to uphold.

⁶⁷ In this perspective, this ethics of difference, as I have called it, can be closely linked to the ethical aspects of Gurisatti's notion of "ontocentric ultrahumanism" as presented in his contribution within this volume: only by radically assuming the absolute *ex-istence* of men within Being, animals can be framed in an ethical relationship that is authentically *altruistic* (see G. Gurisatti, *Amicum animal, sed magis amica veritas. Alcune considerazioni critiche sulla narrazione "estetica / arte animale" in prospettiva ermeneutica*, in this issue on pp. 152-153).

⁶⁸ See O. Ombrosi, *Non seulement un chien*, cit., p. 246.

Without Asking. Language and Animality in Emmanuel Levinas

The animal question is one of the most significant points of the critical comparison between Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida. In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, the latter blames the former for relegating animality to a secondary role. In Derrida's perspective, Levinas renounces identifying the animal as a wholly Other and thus remains, despite his claims, a carnophallogocentric thinker. The main contention of this paper is that Levinas, as the perfect heir of the Greco-Jewish tradition, is not able to articulate the ethical relationship outside of the linguistic model. Therefore, he cannot grant animals a primary role and, when they enter the ethical discussion, they must always be anthropomorphized. The only exception to this model is represented by Levinas' analysis of a Biblical passage. As Levinas underlines, in this context, the matriarch Rebekah waters Abraham's servant's camels because they cannot ask for it, that is, precisely because they lack linguistic expressivity. Despite not being fully seized by Levinas, these hints of the biblical text could widen the applicational context of Levinasian ethics towards animals and properly pave the way for an ethics of difference. Moreover, in a paradoxical counterpoint, following such hints to the end and amplifying the unexpressed meanings of the Biblical text may lead to adhering to that prophetic dimension indicated by Levinas as the highest characteristic of human language itself.

KEYWORDS: Levinas, Derrida, Animals, Language, Ethics

Without Asking. Language and Animality in Emmanuel Levinas

La questione animale è uno dei punti più significativi del confronto critico tra Emmanuel Levinas e Jacques Derrida. In *L'animale che dunque sono*, il secondo accusa il primo di aver relegato l'animalità a un ruolo secondario, rinunciando alla possibilità di individuare proprio nell'animale l'assolutamente Altro e rimanendo così, in ultima analisi, un pensatore carnofallogocentrico. A partire dalla posizione derridiana, il presente contributo propone di riconoscere nel fondamentale primato che Levinas, come perfetto erede della tradizione greco-ebraica, assegna al linguaggio l'elemento che determina l'esclusione dell'animale della relazione etica. Attraverso un'analisi dei luoghi più significativi in cui Levinas si occupa del tema, si dimostrerà che, conformemente alle premesse indicate, gli animali levinasiani possono divenire attori etici solo nella misura in cui assumono caratteri più o meno marcatamente antropomorfi e antro-po-logici. L'unica eccezione a questo modello è rappresentata

dall'analisi di Levinas di un passo biblico, in cui la matriarca Rebecca abbevera i cammelli del servo di Abramo proprio perché questi non possono chiederlo, e cioè precisamente perché mancano di espressività linguistica. Benché Levinas non colga pienamente lo spunto in questione, seguirlo fino in fondo permette in effetti scorgere, già all'interno del testo biblico, la via per un'autentica e compiuta "etica della differenza". In un paradossale contrappunto, infine, riconoscere e valorizzare questa possibilità ermeneutica inespressa del testo non significherebbe solamente ampliare l'etica levinasiana in senso animalista, ma anche esercitare e dare attestazione di quella linguisticità profetica che il filosofo indica come caratteristica più propria dell'umano.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Levinas, Derrida, Animali, Linguaggio, Etica