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Expressive Vulnerabilities: Language and the Non-Human

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Abstract

Emmanuel Levinas's work seemingly places a great emphasis on language leading some commentators towards a Kantian reading of him where moral consideration would be based on the moral patient's capacity for reason with language functioning as a proxy for this. Although this reading is possible, a closer look at Levinas's descriptions of language reveal that its defining characteristic is not reason but the capacity to express beyond any thematized contents we would give to the Other. This expressivity (which Levinas calls face) would confront me with their singularity, infinity, and interiority tying me to them in a relation of responsibility. And the "content" of such an expression is a vulnerability and exposure tied to their mortality which continually entreats me though I cannot take it away. It is by means of this bare expression of an exposure to death as the core of language that it will become possible for non-human mortal beings to have what Levinas calls language. This possibility, although not explicitly addressed by Levinas, is at least left open by his account of Bobby the dog as well as his agnosticism over a snake's face.

Keywords: Environmental ethics; animal language; mortality; responsibility; Levinas

1. Introduction

Much ink has been spilled on the question of the Other in the work of Emmanuel Levinas, especially from those concerned with environmental questions and the seeming anthropocentrism of Levinas' position wherein it would appear that only humans can be both ethical agents and patients. Attempts have been made to either explicate the limitations of Levinas' work or to engage in an expansion of it such that non-human entities would be able to be a concern for humans. Many of these questions ultimately turn on the way in which we interpret the terms that Levinas uses to explain his positions. In this paper, we will focus specifically on the way in which Levinas thinks of language or speech and how this relates to our ethical encounter with the face and the status of the beings to whom we might be responsible. The ultimate goal will be to show that language or speech, as Levinas understands it, cannot be taken in a way that would make it exclusive to humans and that the consequences of this include the possibility of attributing faces to non-humans and thus the potential for a non-human ethical patient and agent.

In the first section, we will begin by looking at the Kantian reading of Levinas developed by John Llewelyn in his book, *The Middle Voice of Ecological Conscience*, before going on to critique its deployment of language and reason. This will open the path for a non-anthropocentric understanding of language in Levinas which will be connected to the experience of the face of the Other. This opening will then lead us into considering the implications of such an expansion insofar as it would imply the recognition of a non-human Other and the consequences that would entail in terms of this Other's relation to the third. After considering these implications, we will briefly review two possible ways in which they can be dealt with, either through politics or expansion.

2. From Rational Language to Bare Expression

In Llewelyn's chapter on Levinas, he develops a Kantian reading that is based on the emphasis that Levinas seems to give to the capacity for language or speech. As he tells us, '[i]n the metaphysical ethics of Levinas I can have direct responsibilities only towards beings that can speak and this means beings that have a rationality that is presupposed by the universalizing reason fundamental in the metaphysics of ethics of Kant' (1991, 58). It is not only that the Other would have to speak but that this speech would be of the kind that would presuppose the capacity for rationality. Speech thus becomes a stand-in for reason and reason becomes that through which moral obligation becomes possible. If the Other must speak, this means that the Other must also be capable of moral responsibility and it is this capacity for responsibility that makes it such that the Other can put me in question. In this way, reason and responsibility become tied together for Llewelyn making it such that the Other (as another responsible agent) must be human. As he tells us:

we can be under obligation only to a being with whom we can be, as we say, face to face . . . [and] The only face we behold is the human face . . . [since] that is the only face in which there is a trace of any being to which we can be directly beholden . . . Just as Kant maintains that I can have obligations only to a being that has or . . . is of the kind that can have obligations, so Levinas seems to imply that I can have responsibilities only toward beings capable of having responsibilities . . . I do not judge the Other. The Other judges me. (53)

Understanding the Other as a being that, because it must be a responsible agent, must, therefore, also be human since responsibility is only possible through rationality and only humans have

reason is problematic on several levels. There is, of course, the basic problem that arises in any text attempting to establish a criterion for the Other, that is, that because the Other is radically Other and transcendent with respect to me, it cannot be defined or given a content in any way thus making the criterion that the Other must be a rational speaking being too reductive. As Diane Perpich puts it in her essay, 'Scarce Resources,' 'Levinas's is not a philosophy in which some quality or capacity, no matter how important or distinctive, is that in virtue of which I am responsible to or for an other' (2012, 71). What this means is that the Other cannot be defined in advance for to do so would erase what is fundamental to the experience of the Other which is the mere fact of the presentation of a who before any contents would be attributed to them. As Levinas tells us in *Totality and Infinity*:

To ask *what* is to ask *as what*: it is not to take the manifestation for itself. But the question that asks about the quiddity is put to someone. He who is to respond has long already *presented* himself, responding thus to a question prior to every question in search of quiddities. In fact the "who is it?" is not a question and is not satisfied by a knowing. He to whom the question is put *has already presented himself*, without being a content. He has presented himself as a face. The face is not a modality of quiddity, an answer to a question, but the correlative of what is prior to every question . . . To be sure, most of the time the *who* is a *what* . . . The answer presents itself as a quiddity; it refers to a system of relations. To the question *who?* answers the non-qualifiable presence of an existent who *presents himself* without reference to anything, and yet distinguishes himself from every other existent. The question *who?* envisages a face. The notion of the face differs from every represented content . . . The face, preeminently expression, formulates the first word: the signifier arising at the thrust of his sign, as eyes that look at you. (1969, 177–178)

What is clear in this passage is that the presentation of the Other as a distinct being is prior to any specific content which could be given to them. It is, therefore, not possible to establish a criterion based on a quality, such as rationality, in order to determine which beings have a face. This is why Perpich tells us that 'the face does not *create* value nor is it the *recognition* of a value . . . [rather] the ethical mode in which the other faces me opens the possibility of valuing without itself existing as a value. Whatever does this work . . . can be or have a face' (2012, 69).

On Perpich's reading, the possibility of non-humans having faces is, at least, left open since the Other, as a being which cannot be defined in advance, can only be found in the singular encounter of their presentation to me where this presentation of themselves to me is a presentation of 'a being's exposure unto death; the without-defense, the nudity and the misery of the other . . . [and] the commandment to take the other upon oneself, not to let him alone' (Levinas 2001, 48). We thus find in the face both the presentation of a vulnerable and unique being *as well as* a demand to care for this being. If this is what is occurring in the experience of the face of the Other then it does not seem to be in any way mediated by rationality or language as traditionally understood. Rather, the 'face is a living presence; it is expression' (Levinas 1969, 66) and it is this bare expression of its own vulnerability that shows me the *who* of the Other which is fundamental to it and precedes any content it would have.

This is where a certain complication can arise if we are not careful, where we might wish to ontologize the face into a substance with predicates. For how can a face be a 'living presence' or an expression if it *cannot be a content*? As Jacques Derrida tells us in 'Violence and Metaphysics,' '[t]o express oneself is to be *behind* the sign' (1978, 101) and, later, '[t]o be behind the sign which is in the world is *afterward* to remain invisible to the world within epiphany . . . [such that] the other is given over in person *as other*, that is, as that which does not reveal itself, as that which cannot be made thematic' (103). What we can identify here is that the face is without content since, in its very expression, what it *gives* is not a *thing*, but a *resistance*. Its 'content' is a resistance to any reduction to a content. If the face can, therefore, be understood as the epiphany of the unrevealable (105), then we can understand better why Derrida can tell us that the Other 'is a certain nonphenomenon, its presence (*is*) a certain absence. Not pure and simple absence . . . but a *certain* absence' (91). The face shows us the presence of an absence, but not as a negativity, rather, as the transcendence of another origin of the world, another perspective, that is, an interiority which can never be accessed because it is a hidden depth. Thus, when Derrida tells us that '[t]he stranger is infinitely other because by his essence no enrichment of his profile can give me the subjective face of his experience *from his perspective*, such as he has lived it' (124), he clarifies for us the basis of Levinas' anthropocentrism. If the face expresses *no content* and yet is identified with humans (thus seeming to identify it with a genus or content), it is because Levinas believes that humanity's essence lies in its being a non-synchronizable 'whole' of non-identical interiorities which allows each one to express themselves

in their singularity as face. The vulnerability the face expresses can now be understood as that of an interiority whose experience, as mortal, is always already threatened with an extinction.

But what, then, do we make of Levinas' seeming emphasis on language? Just as with the face, language is not a straightforward term and does not refer to what we ordinarily associate with it. If language is not a system of signification through which we express our universal reason, then what is it? As Levinas tells us '[l]anguage does not belong among the relations that could appear through the structures of formal logic; it is *contact across a distance*, relation with the non-touchable, across a void. It takes place in the dimension of absolute desire by which the same is in relation with an other that was not simply lost by the same' (1969, 172; emphasis mine). Because language is nothing more than this contact between radically distinct terms, Levinas tells us that it must begin in the face for it is through the face that one is first called into relation with the Other thus leading him to say that '[l]anguage is above all the fact of being addressed' (2002, 169–170). If language is nothing more than this address from the Other by way of the face, then language must be thought of more broadly. After all, as Levinas tells us, 'the whole body – a hand or a curve of the shoulder – can express as the face' (1969, 262). Language thus begins with this bare expression of our mortality and vulnerability which can emanate from anywhere on the surface of a body.

It would seem then that, for Levinas, language would have no fundamental relation to reason since it is nothing more than this unmediated expressive call from the Other which would connect me to them in a relation of responsibility.¹ To be sure, language can also be rational but any rational language would first presuppose this more originary expressive essence of language which would make it possible which is why Levinas tells us that '[w]hatever be the message transmitted by speech, the speaking is contact . . . there is in speech a relationship with a singularity located outside the theme of the speech, a singularity that is not thematized by the speech but is approached' (1998a, 115). There cannot be a rational language until there is first established this contact across a distance. Moreover, a rational language would not appear to be *necessary* in any way since the expressivity of the face need not be rational. Hence, we can see that '[r]esponsibility is the first language' (Levinas 2001, 108) as experienced in the face of the Other that calls me.

3. Alterity and Responsibility

If we have been able to show that language need not be limited to a system of signification which would stand in for rationality and can, therefore, be more broadly understood as *any* expression of vulnerability that places me in a relation of responsibility, then it would seem that language could be more broadly applied to non-humans. After all, once we leave the realm of sign-making to the immediate presentation of the vulnerability of an Other expressed through any part of the surface of their body, it would seem to be difficult to deny this expressive capacity, at the very least, to animals.² Skipping over the problems intrinsic to what would appear to be an analogical extension of the face,³ there are still other more fundamental problems that arise here. And this returns us to a variation on the Kantian reading of Levinas.

As we mentioned earlier, Llewelyn thinks that reason is a necessary pre-condition for being an Other in Levinas because reason would be that through which a responsible agent would be formed and it is only another responsible agent which would be able to hold me accountable and put me in question. Although we have shown that reason may not be necessary to be an Other for Levinas, the problem of whether the Other must be a responsible agent is not thereby necessarily solved. And this gives us a different way of understanding Levinas' anthropocentrism. It is not based on reason being a unique capacity of humans, but responsibility.⁴ As he tells us, 'in relation to the animal, the human is a new phenomenon . . . [that] breaks with pure being, which is always a persistence in being . . . with the appearance of the human . . . there is something more important than my life, and that is the life of the other' (2002, 172). This is what he calls 'saintliness' and it is where the human begins as 'the first value, an undeniable value' (173). We are thus led to wonder whether or not the Other might need to be a responsible agent in order to put us in question. If so, then, since only humans can be responsible, the Other would have to be human, and yet, as we have just seen, insofar as the face is understood as a bare expression of vulnerability, it would seem difficult to deny it to non-human mortal beings. How, then, can we reconcile these concerns?

As Levinas tells us in *Totality and Infinity*, there exists more than one Other to whom we are responsible since we exist in society and this opens up the problem of politics, and so is introduced the figure of the third who is the Other of the Other, but also my neighbor. As he says, '[t]he third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other – language is justice. It is not that there first would be the face, and then the being it manifests or expresses would concern himself with justice; the epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity' (1969, 213). In my experience of

the face of the Other, I am already placed in relation to the third and this occurs because the entreaty of the face leads one, not just into a relation of responsibility for the Other, but also towards a search of justice for the third who is already there. Levinas continues:

The face in its nakedness as a face presents to me the destitution of the poor one . . . but this poverty and exile which appeal to my powers . . . do not deliver themselves over to these powers . . . [since] The poor one . . . presents himself as an equal. His equality within this essential poverty consists in referring to the *third party*, thus present at the encounter, whom in the midst of his destitution the Other already serves. He comes to *join* me. But he joins me to himself for service . . . The *thou* is posited in front of a *we*.
(213)

What we find here is the idea that the Other is *already* related to the third and entreats me in such a way that we should form a just society in which all Others are considered and taken care of. This is the conceptual movement in Levinas from ethics to politics, from responsibility to the Other to justice for the third and, although they are separated out in his exposition, they are meant to be understood as contemporaneous with one another, which is why he tells us that ‘[i]n no way is justice . . . a degeneration of the for-the-other . . . that would be produced in the measure that for empirical reasons the initial duo would become a trio. But the contemporaneousness of the multiple is tied about the diachrony of two: justice remains justice only, in a society where there is no distinction between those close and those far off’ (1998b, 159).⁵

For our purposes, what is important here is the implication that the Other that entreats me does so as another responsible being and that the opening onto the third is, in fact, facilitated by this such that the ‘responsibility [that] is initially a *for the Other* . . . means that I am responsible for his very responsibility’ (Levinas 1985, 96). If language is instituted by the face of the Other and if the face of the Other expresses, not just a destitution, but a command and a putting in question of the ego related to this opening to justice towards the third, then we have found a different avenue through which the Other would be sustained as only human. Not through reason but through responsibility as the unique, human capacity. The question that we are left with now is whether the non-human can still somehow be an Other and thus have language or whether they must be dealt with on a different terrain, that of politics.

4. The Non-Human Other or Third?

The two ways in which commentators have attempted to apply Levinas to environmental questions have been either through an expansion of the applicability of the face of the Other or a political reading in which concern for the non-human enters through the political opening of the third.⁶

As we have noted in the previous section, it would appear that the Other is a responsible being, and that it is through this very responsibility that the opening to the third occurs. That is, it is because the Other is *also* responsible that in my infinite responsibility to the Other, I take on *their* infinite responsibility to their Other(s) and so on and so forth, in this way opening the dimension of consciousness in which I must make judgments by comparing incomparables to answer the question of who shall come first. However, as we saw before, precisely because the Other has an Other and is responsible, they entreat me to help them assist Others rather than putting themselves first. As another responsible being, then, they also put me in question and judge me. They are not simply ethical patients but, as ethical agents, they question my choices and ask for justification. As Perpich puts it, '[t]o respond to the face . . . is not only *not to kill the other* but to put a check on my spontaneous freedom in the name of a world that is shared with others' (2012, 93).

The third, as the figure of that which the Other is concerned with, however, might be thought of more broadly. Rather than denoting only a concern that the Other would have with other Others, it might also denote the possibility of more than this. In other words, although all responsible beings will be a part of the set of all thirds, it is also possible that within that set there might be included other beings which could be of concern to us without directly attributing faces to them. This is the strategy that Perpich pursues when she tells us that 'Levinas give[s] the human face priority . . . Not because he views humans as more intrinsically valuable than other beings . . . but *because it is only in human society that it is possible to worry about justice for others*, human and animal others alike' (92). In other words, although the human being may be exceptional in their capacity for ethics for Levinas, this does not thereby mean that they would only be concerned with other humans. This is clarified still further when she tells us that 'we need to remember those [passages] in which the face is quintessentially that which calls the ego into question and introduces into it both the demand for and the possibility of critique' (93). It is this demand for critique which leads to the putting into question of the ego by the Other done in such a way that I can be held accountable for my actions insofar as they affect *any* sort of being.

As she tells us, '[i]f the dog or snake or a place-world is secondary in terms of its role in opening up the critical dimension of human existing, this most certainly does not entail that such beings can only be secondary when it comes down to deciding what to save or whose interests to protect' (93). It is in the realm of political adjudication that they are able to become a concern.

What is interesting in Perpich's paper, however, is that she does not entirely close down the possibility that non-humans could have faces. As we mentioned before, she leaves it open with her statement that whatever is able to open up 'the possibility of valuing without itself existing as a value' (69) has a face. This opening up of the possibility of valuing, as we have seen, is done by the expression of a vulnerability and the command to take the Other upon myself felt as responsibility, which includes being placed into a chain of responsibilities that exceeds me and opens up the political dimension of judgment.

The thesis which I should like to suggest here is that the face of the Other *can* be expanded beyond the human, but not on analogical grounds. And here, again, we hear the echoes of Derrida since the expansion of the face that would occur in a non-analogical way would have to be done transcendentally rather than empirically. As he tells us, 'the face is not "of this world." It is the origin of the world. I can speak *of it* only by speaking *to it* . . . I must only reach it as inaccessible, the invisible, the intangible' (1978, 103). In other words, what we seek is not a content we could grasp, but what allows content to appear; that which makes a being an *origin of the world*. Accordingly, it is not because the Other has certain physical qualities in common with us that they should concern us, at which point we would be attempting to produce a criterion for the face again. Rather, I would like to suggest that since 'the face is a certain way of expressing philosophically . . . the *conatus essendi*, the effort to exist which is the ontological principle' (Levinas 2002, 173), then we must think of all mortal beings as having faces, which would also mean of having, at least in principle, the capacity to suspend their *conatus essendi* to care for the Other. After all, as Derrida tells us, '[t]he other cannot be what it is, infinitely other, except in finitude and mortality' (1978, 114). What this all means to say is that it is with mortality itself that value comes into being. And, insofar as a being is mortal and, therefore, vulnerable and exposed, it can either seek to persist in its existence to the exclusion of all others or it can put the existence of another before itself. For Levinas, the former is the 'law of being' and corresponds to the expected determinism of ontological existence while the latter is the gratuity that breaks with being's own law and opens the way for freedom as the unpredictable action no longer

capable of calculation. As he tells us, '[e]ssence . . . as *persistence in essence*, fills every interval of nothingness that would interrupt it. It is a strict book-keeping where nothing is lost nor created [such that] . . . Freedom in the genuine sense can only be a contestation of this book-keeping by a gratuity . . . [which] could be responsibility for another and expiation.' (1998b, 125). What I seek to suggest then is that, because of this, any mortal being, by virtue of being mortal, is an Other and, *also*, capable of responsibility, that is, of recognizing alterity and being affected by it to such an extent as to motivate actions. As soon as one lives, one can live for oneself or for the Other and one is, in some sense (however subtle), troubled by this. As Levinas tells us, after all, 'to approach the face of the other is to worry directly about his death, and this means to regard him straightaway as mortal, finite' (2001, 135) and, elsewhere, '[t]he relationship with the Infinite is the responsibility of a mortal being for a mortal being' (2000a, 117).

Although Levinas seems to deny the capacity for responsibility or saintliness in non-human beings, there are many places where he seems to go back on this or imply the possibility of non-human ethicality, sometimes even within the same sentence. There is, of course, the well-known example of Bobby the dog who, in his recognition of Levinas and his fellow prisoners, breaks with his own persistence in being as well as the example of the dogs of Egypt who did not growl at the Israelites such that Levinas is led to tell us that 'with neither ethics nor *logos*, the dog will attest to the dignity of its person . . . There is a transcendence in the animal!' (1997, 152). Somehow, there is transcendence in the animal, and yet, the animal is *still* considered to be without ethics. Elsewhere, he tells us that 'the force of nature is pure vitality. It is more this which characterizes the dog. But it *also* has a face' (2002, 169; emphasis mine). The implication is that the dog is *not* pure vitality since it also has a face which marks it, not just as a being with whom we should be concerned, but also as a being which could recognize the Other and be concerned with them and put them in question. In fact, the very statement from him that he does 'not know at what moment the human appears, but . . . that the human breaks with pure being' (172) implies that the human should not be understood according to a specific corporeality or rational capacity, but only according to responsibility.

Outside the work of Levinas, there are numerous examples of non-humans suspending their *conatus* such as grey whales that protect seals from orca attacks. Although we can always take the strategy of reducing these examples to biological rules, there would seem to be no reason for us to rule out the possibility of these being a suspension of one being's *conatus* in

favor of another. What I am suggesting is that life and responsibility are coextensive with one another such that wherever a mortal being exists there is, at least in principle, the possibility of a suspension of their *conatus* and that this is due to the very condition of being mortal. Although other beings may not conceptualize or understand mortality as we do, they do so *in their own way* and respond to Others subject to their way of being in the world.

This might mean more or less ethical action depending on their specific constitution although it is important to note that to designate any action as ‘more’ or ‘less’ is already to have left ethics and entered the politics of calculation and comparison. Moreover, since one must judge from a perspective, presumably we would be judging the actions of non-humans according to a human criterion of ethicality thus reinscribing humans into a privileged position as supreme judges. It perhaps suffices to say that this limitation of having a specific way of being in the world according to a particular biological constitution is, ultimately, a political limitation that conditions what Others we are able to see and respond to effectively. Accordingly, each being will be compelled, by virtue of its particular bodily constitution, to judge the actions of others in a particular way that is only visible from its perspective. Humans, therefore, need not be enshrined transcendentally as supreme judges. Nevertheless, as humans, we will necessarily be forced to make judgements from a human perspective. The caveat, then, is to remember that this perspective is limited, especially on the terrain in which it applies itself once it is fully posited thematically, that is, the terrain of the political where my determination as *this* being limits what I can see. This is true as much for us as it is for non-humans and is the reason why the analogical extension of concern is so attractive, for it is an extension that feels natural to us based on our particular way of experiencing our world. That which is built like us and perceives like us, we can more easily understand and sympathize with.

To say that all beings that are mortal have faces, however, is not an analogical extension since I am not trying to say that mortality is a property that a being could or could not have. Rather, mortality is that which allows a being to present itself as a *who* where such a presentation would ‘precede’ our understanding of its quiddity.⁷ It functions as that which allows for the possibility of valuation without itself existing as a value. It is only with mortality that something can be valued for itself insofar as this mortal being must now be protected from death. To be sure, this is not to say that we should have no concern for non-mortal beings such as rocks, but the political terrain that is opened by the third is what would bring in consideration for the non-

mortal elements of an environment (along the same lines as Perpich's argument above). The advantage of such an interpretation is that it allows us to establish a direct responsibility to all living beings, regardless of whether or not they can be physically seen by us since it would be a transcendental condition of the possibility of valuation itself rather than an empirical contingency. In other words, whatever is mortal would be of concern to us *in some sense*, whether it be a cockroach or a rhino, although the question of *how* it should be a concern to us remains and must be adjudicated in the political terrain of comparison. That is, the suggestion is not that humans, cockroaches, and rhinos are all of equal moral worth but, rather, that they all must be taken into account in our political adjudications precisely because, as mortal beings, they all sustain within them an interiority that marks each one as its own origin of the world.

This helps to deal with the problem in Levinas of the coextension between humanity and alterity for what we are suggesting is that humanity should be replaced with (or that its 'meaning' should be reconceived as) mortality. In this way, we can escape the temptation to analogical extension since, as nothing more than a mortal alterity, we cannot imagine any predicates for the Other (as we can for the more equivocal term 'human'), in this way, clarifying that the Other is not a substance, not a concept, and cannot have predicates. At this pre-original level of an ethics 'before' politics, humans and rhinos are the 'same' (in their difference) precisely because they are not anything 'yet.' It is only at the level of thematization, politics, and clock time that we begin to see things in a synthesizing vision within a spatial extension and temporal horizon in which every mortal alterity (every *who*) would now be distinguished as a cat or a dog or a fish (take on its *what*). The level of bodily manifestation is, therefore, always already the level of politics even while it retains an ethical meaning and import that conditions it and drives its justice. This is how we can clarify that the intuitive experience of feeling sympathy for suffering animals as well as the 'saintliness' that has been described within ethology (where an animal sympathizes with another animal similar, but not identical, to itself), or even botany (where trees may share carbon with other trees) could be interpreted as phenomena wherein the thematic manifestation would be privileged (to the extent that it manifests resemblance), even while there is an extension beyond the *conatus essendi* of the being in question. There is an irreducible tension here at the level of the manifestation of the Other's image as a *what* that both drives me towards the comparison of analogy (and the necessity of such a comparison) while

having to check that comparison by the radical alterity of their bare mortality which reminds me not to allow the image to overwhelm me.

In other words, analogical extension appears so attractive because it is based on our own experience but, precisely because of this, it is also limited since this experience is conditioned by the type of body I have which is itself a determination occurring at the level of the theme; a political limitation of my perspective.⁸ Thus, when Levinas tells us that ‘justice remains justice only, in a society where there is no distinction between those close and those far off’ (1998b, 159), we should understand this to be a warning against the analogical preference for those who are ‘closest’ to me whether this refers to race, gender, class, ethnicity, or species.

In the context of environmental questions, this would entail a rethinking of all appropriative action as there could no longer be any innocent appropriation since we would no longer be concerned with humans alone but with all mortal beings. In other words, while limiting concern to humans alone could leave the appropriation of pigs or wheat as innocent actions in some sense, now, they would have to be reckoned with and not in a way that would simply draw a new line across which there would exist a different set of freely appropriable beings since, after all, we must eat and what we must eat, as humans, must be something that was living, even if it is a cabbage rather than a cow. Such choices (eating cabbages rather than cows) would thus exist, as we mentioned previously, on this level of the political adjudication between interests in our search for, not the elimination of appropriation (an impossible task), but how to appropriate in a just manner. As Perpich tells us, summarizing Derrida, ‘[i]f it is the case that there can be no untroubled opposition between human and nonhuman . . . then appropriation of the other – human and nonhuman alike – is inevitable. The ethical question is not do I or should I have eaten the other . . . but how to eat well. How to appropriate the other in a spirit of gift rather than sacrifice’ (2012, 75). And here, too, we are reminded of what Levinas calls the ‘bad conscience’ of justice which ‘expresses more than just a contradiction between a certain project of culture and its results . . . [but] the anguish of committing crimes even where concepts are in agreement’ (2000b, 134–135).

5. Conclusion

Although Levinas may have attempted to sustain human exceptionality by maintaining that responsibility is uniquely human, what should be clear by now is that neither reason nor language as traditionally understood can be held to be part of the exceptionality of humans in his

body of work. By understanding language as the bare expressivity of a being's mortality and the necessity of our response to it, we have opened up a way for non-humans to be given language. However, as we saw, since this bare expressivity is connected to the face of the Other and since the Other appears as another being with their own responsibilities, we had to be prepared to admit the possibility of non-human responsibility (as shown through a suspension of their *conatus*) in order to allow them to have faces and thus speak (and listen). This was done by looking at mortality as that which is most fundamental to the expression of the face of the Other. Accordingly, we might say that perhaps all living beings are 'human' to the extent that they are mortal and capable of suspending their *conatus*. Our ability to speak to them and be reciprocally understood, however, would be limited politically by our specific points of view and corporeality. Nevertheless, to the extent that the Other appears to me as Other, there is no doubt that they communicate to me, even if it is nothing more than the bareness of their own vulnerable existence. In the end, in the domain of environmental concerns, a search for justice would entail going beyond our perceptual limitations (while still keeping corporeal difference in mind) to judge the interests of all living beings – as far as how we relate to them and harm them – as well as recognizing their own agency in the world. This is what it would mean to be in communion with them and have the contact across a distance necessary for us to speak to one another.

¹ It is important to note, however, that, in Levinas, there is ontological reason and pre-original reason where the latter refers to responsibility for the Other. To the extent that language is responsibility, it is fundamentally rational as long as we understand reason as pre-original. See Herzog (2013).

² Of course, to be able to understand the expression of the Other to some extent is different than being understood by the Other. Considering that responding to the Other and assisting them will often require communication of a more ordinary kind, there will be intrinsic limitations to my capacity to respond to the non-human. There are also, of course, intrinsic limitations to my capacity to respond to the human Other. In this sense, one may consider these limitations to be a reflection of the problem of thematization and consciousness (thus, as we will see, politics). That is, while language in its pre-original signification binds me to the Other in a relation of responsibility, in its manifestation as a system of signification, it will always be limited by the impossibility of any full communication which is itself guaranteed to occur by the radical difference between myself and the Other. This distance can be broached somewhat, but it can never be eliminated. The extent to which such a distance can be partially broached seems to itself be a function of how far any language can achieve a coincidence between those parties with whom contact of some sort has been established. That communication occurs between humans and animals seems clear enough even if its level of sophistication and efficacy is less than that between humans (though not always) corresponding to the greater distance between them in this respect, that is, on the level of thematic manifestation.

³ That is, if we extend the face of the Other to animals because animals appear to have an expressive capacity similar to humans then it would seem that we have returned to this problem of establishing a criterion for the Other where this criterion would be 'similar to humans in their expressive capacity.' For more on this, see Perpich (2012).

⁴ As we noted when discussing Derrida, it seems that for Levinas, humanity is coextensive with the possibility of having the depth of a singularized, interior experience. Similarly, we might say here that responsibility is

considered to be a unique human capacity since it arises out of the experience of interiority itself. In other words, for Levinas, the subject's interiority is itself constituted by means of its relation to alterity in responsibility such as is found, for instance, in his description of the *other in the same* (1998b, 114).

⁵ This is a common structure in Levinas where two modalities which are described as if they occurred in a temporal sequence are, in fact, to be understood as always already within a simultaneity even if there is a sense in which one gives the meaning to the other. Accordingly, it cannot be properly said that one 'thing' (ethics, metaphysics, diachrony) is a ground or foundation for the other (politics, ontology, synchrony) as, strictly speaking, such a relationship can only occur within ontology which is consequent to the very 'establishment' we are seeking to explain.

⁶ For the former strategy see, for instance, Atterton (2012). For the latter, we can stay with Perpich (2012) or Halls (2012).

⁷ Of course, as we have previously noted, the presentation of the *who* and the *what* would be simultaneous, nevertheless, this conceptual separation is helpful for clarifying some points. To say that mortality is that which allows a being to present itself as a *who* is not to say that it will be necessarily perceived by all those who pass by it, and this would be for two reasons that have to do with the *what* that stands 'in front of' the *who* in the political situation in which I encounter it as a theme. (1) This *what*, depending on the analogical distance it has from the ego that encounters it may not be readily recognized as having a *who* standing behind it (and this would explain why, intuitively, we are more likely to imagine our responsibility to a cow rather than to an ant as one has a *whatness* that more immediately corresponds to our own) and (2) the very limitations of our own corporeality as biological beings places a hard limit on what can appear as a *who* by limiting what can appear as a *what* such that, for instance, there are lifeforms that we simply cannot perceive and, even if we could, would be at such a level of analogical distance that we would likely encounter the first issue again.

⁸ Owing to this limitation of our perspectives then, it would seem there might be intrinsic limits to the degree to which we might be able to extend our concern. Nevertheless, the injunction to go as far as possible in taking into consideration *all* mortal beings in our actions . . . Is this not but another way of expressing the impossibility of fulfilling an infinite responsibility?

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