

# AN OTHER FACE OF ETHICS IN LEVINAS

BARBARA JANE DAVY

## ABSTRACT

The main threads of Emmanuel Levinas's theory of ethics, developed in his philosophical works, *Totality and Infinity* (1969), and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1998), instruct that ethics require transcendence of being and nature, which he describes in terms of a transcendence of animality to the human. This apparent devaluation of the nonhuman would seem to preclude the development of Levinasian environmental ethics. However, a deconstructive reading of Levinas recognizes a subtext that interrupts the main threads of his argument running against the inclusion of nonhuman others in ethics. Through a critical reconstructive reading of Levinas, I develop an ethic extraneous to Levinas's transcendent ethics, an ethic outside his "otherwise than being."

In the main body of his philosophical work, *Totality and Infinity* (1969), and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1998), Emmanuel Levinas presents ethics as exclusive to human relations. He suggests that because plants and animals lack language and do not have faces like human faces, we cannot enter into ethical relations with nonhuman others in what he calls "face to face" relations. This apparent devaluation of the nonhuman would seem to preclude the development of Levinasian

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Direct all correspondence to: Journals Manager, Indiana University Press, 601 N. Morton St.,  
Bloomington, IN 47404 USA iuporder@indiana.edu

environmental ethics. However, a deconstructive reading of Levinas recognizes a subtext that interrupts the main threads of his argument. Through this reading of Levinas, I develop an ethic extraneous to his ethics, an ethic outside Levinas's "otherwise than being." Through a critical reconstruction, I propose developing his ethics beyond the interhuman, toward a Levinasian environmental ethic.

Ethics beyond the interhuman, as I develop them here, may not entirely coincide with what is usually thought of as environmental ethics. Environmental ethicists such as J. Baird Callicott argue that environmental ethics must be ecocentric, ethics that protect ecosystems, habitat, or "the environment" as a collective. Some environmental ethicists feel that protecting groups, particularly species at risk, is more important than the rights of, or responsibilities toward, individual others. The ethics I develop here are not particularly "environmental" in this sense. Their strength, following Levinas's work, is in recognizing one's responsibilities for and to specific others.

While my reading of Levinas finds his work partially open to the possibility of ethics beyond the interhuman, I also necessarily question his portrayal of the face of the Other in face to face relations as a human face. I argue that Levinas's writings about the face are better interpreted metaphorically, and that Levinasian ethics should not require that the call to ethics be issued literally in human speech. What is crucial in ethical relations is that the Other expresses infinity, that the Other teaches, and that the Other can provoke oneself to ethics, not that the call to ethics be given through the speech of a human face. Not only human others can provoke ethical obligations in oneself, but also other than human persons such as other animals, plants, rocks, and other entities. While this interpretation is not true to the historical Levinas, it is faithful to the spirit of his work. It is a better interpretation in the sense that it is more ethical. Extending Levinas's ethical theory beyond the interhuman is not a distortion of his work. Rather, this critical reconstruction of his work is an ethical reading of it. As Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley have suggested, an ethical, rather than appropriating, reading of Levinas necessarily puts his work in question rather than harmonizing its dissonant notes into a totality (Bernasconi and Critchley 1991, xii).

The key restriction in using Levinas's work to develop interpersonal environmental ethics is that he feels only humans can meet one face to

face and inspire ethics in oneself. He did not develop an argument about excluding animals and others from his understanding of ethics, but assumed that only humans have faces. His technical understanding of “the face” restricts ethics to interhuman relations. In his reasoning, only humans have language, and only a human Other can interrupt one’s thematization, interposing signs of their own and presenting another view of the world. However, he also speaks of expressivity beyond literal speech. Moreover, Levinas instructs that the Other obligates oneself before being thematized, and maintains that the capacities of the Other are irrelevant to my obligation to give the Other ethical consideration. These are the strengths of Levinasian ethics for developing interpersonal environmental ethics. I am responsible to the Other regardless of what capacities the Other might possess, before recognizing the Other as human or otherwise. The Other is first a person, and only after ethics have come to pass (or failed to come to pass) recognized as human, plant, animal, rock, or known through some other thematic category. “Person” is in this sense not a thematic category, just as “Other” is not a thematic category. The Other stands before me in relation, rather than (or prior to) being something described by thematic categories and known to have certain capacities.

In broadening Levinas’s sense of the Other I aim to include not just humans and other animals, but any Other. While for Levinas the Other is always assumed to be a human being, I take his phenomenological understanding of the Other beyond categories such as human, animal, plant, rock, wind, or body of water. In Levinasian ethics, the Other is met as a person rather than thematized or interpreted through categories. The Other interrupts one’s thematization of everything into one’s own view of the world. I contend that other sorts of persons can also interrupt one’s thematization of the world in this manner.<sup>1</sup>

#### ANIMALS AND ANIMALITY

Most discussion of extending Levinasian ethics beyond the interhuman has focused on animals because of his writings on “animality.”<sup>2</sup> As John Llewelyn notes, discerning Levinas’s views on animals is complicated by the fact that when he is speaking of animality, it is usually the animality of humans to which he is referring (Llewelyn 1991, 50). It is the “animal” nature of humans, one’s material needs and the instinct to sat-

isfy them, that are transcended in Levinas's ethics; whether or not other animals can be met face to face is a question unheard within the main body of Levinas's philosophical work. When such questions were put to him in an interview, recorded as "The Paradox of Morality" in *The Provocation of Levinas*, Levinas says that other animals do not have "faces" like humans do, and that animals' faces are understood "in accordance with *Dasein*" (Wright et al. 1988, 169). By this he means that animals' "faces" are on the level of being and nature, expressing a *conatus essendi* but not ethics.<sup>3</sup> Levinas suggests that animals do not have faces in the "purest form," which, he thought, is the human (Wright et al. 1988, 169). Later in the same interview, he confesses that he does not know "if a snake has a face," but asserts that we still have obligations toward nonhuman animals because they can suffer (Wright et al. 1988, 172). He posits that humans are aware of ethical obligations because of interhuman face to face relations, but that we can transfer the idea of responsibility into our interactions with other animals.

Of course snakes have faces in the common sense meaning of "face." A snake has eyes, a nose, and a mouth, and a snake can return one's gaze, but Levinas is not sure that a snake has a face in his sense of being able interrupt the themes one applies on seeing it. Levinas has not met a snake face to face, but I have. To be startled by a snake forcefully challenges one's cheerful possession of the world walking along a country lane. But I do not want to too easily dismiss Levinas's hesitation. He is concerned that humans not be mere objects, that the Other can transcend one's possession of the world, can interrupt the themes one applies to prevent one's view of the world becoming a totalizing vision in which one encounters only one's own ideas, rather than meeting another face to face. He is afraid that humans need to be held apart as different so that it is reasonable to think that we are not each locked in our own sphere of being, unable to reach beyond our own categories of thought, locked in a Kantian view of the universe in which we never really know anything other than what we think about the world.<sup>4</sup> I share Levinas's concern, but would like to challenge the Kantian view more radically. Even though our preconceptions do condition our perceptions of others, they do not wholly determine how we experience the world and encounter others. Otherwise we could never learn anything new. Nonhuman others frequently challenge our preconceptions, but are more likely to do so if we approach them with an attitude of openness to possibility.

For Levinas, the ethical command in face to face relations calls one out of the state of nature. He speaks of emerging out of nature and animality, as human through ethics. According to Levinas, what Spinoza called the *conatus essendi*, the right to be, is called into question by the face of the Other (Levinas 1986, 24). As Richard Cohen notes, for Levinas, “the human” first emerges in the face to face (Cohen 1994, 124). It emerges out of being and what Levinas feels is the natural *conatus essendi*. When questioned, Levinas explicitly says that the ethical command “Thou shalt not kill,” seen in the face of the Other, “emerges as a limitation of the *conatus essendi*” (Wright et al. 1988, 175). He suggests that the work of Darwin and Heidegger indicates that being tries to look after itself (Wright et al. 1988, 172). It is only inasmuch as we are human, transcending our animal nature, that we act responsibly. Levinas holds that the human emerges out of animality as it emerges out of being and nature, taking Darwin’s theory of evolution to mean that animals “struggle for life without ethics” (Wright et al. 1988, 172) on the level of being. Humans transcend this level of being in face to face relations, Levinas indicates, through expression and responsibility.

When Levinas does speak of animals, rather than the animality of humans, he is still preoccupied with human states, presenting the human as a “higher” form of vegetable and animal matter. Levinas distinguishes “animal needs” from “vegetable dependence” and human “Desire.” He suggests that plants cannot be said to experience needs, while animals do experience their needs. However, animals’ needs, he suggests, are “inseparable from struggle and fear” (Levinas 1969, 116). Humans experience needs differently from other animals, because we are subjects capable of satisfying our needs for shelter, food and drink (Levinas 1969, 116). Levinas thus distinguishes between material needs, which we have as animals and can satisfy as subjects, and metaphysical Desire, the Desire for the Other, which is not something one can satisfy independently. In this formulation, height appears as a characteristic of humans in general, rather than of the Other: “already human egoism leaves pure nature *by virtue of the human body raised upwards, committed in the direction of height. This is not its empirical illusion but its ontological production and its ineffaceable testimony*” (Levinas 1969, 117). Plants, animals, and humans are here placed in a hierarchical system. The plant, he says, has no sense of itself, while the animal has a sense of itself but lacks a sense of (or Desire for) the Other, that is, the animal lacks transcendence.

However, it cannot be literal height that matters. Otherwise Levinas would be compelled to recognize giraffes, trees, or cliffs as having the advantage over humans. Even the characteristic of the human body raised upward, which Levinas suggests is a uniquely human orientation in uprightness, is a trait one might be excused for recognizing in apes and bears, who also stand upright and walk on two feet. Taken literally it becomes silly to talk about transcendence and height, associating literal uprightness with a capacity for moral uprightness. The metaphors fit for Levinas, but this is only due to the development of Western languages that maintain such associations of transcendence with height (or ascent), and darkness with evil. Transcendence signifies beyond, not necessarily above.<sup>5</sup>

David Clark suggests Levinas restricts face to face relations to humans because of a fear that we will lose ethics altogether if humans and animals are the same (Clark 1997, 168). If we are all animals, then perhaps there is no transcendence of being, and it does not matter if people are treated like mere animals. However, Levinas does not simply maintain the distinction between humans and other animals in a conventional sense, seeing humanity as “free from the blind force of nature” (Clark 1997, 181). Levinas does not say that humanity is free of nature, but that we can exit being to the otherwise than being of ethical relation. Clark seems to suggest that when Levinas speaks of the emergence of the human he means simply out of animality, but it is primarily out of being at home with itself, the self-enclosed ego.

Levinas’s statements in interview regarding obligations to animals lead some to suggest that within Levinas’s thought nonhuman others can be included in justice, rather than ethics. In his later work, Levinas distinguishes between ethics, which come to pass in face to face relations, and justice, which is the measuring out of obligations between multiple parties. For Levinas, ethics come to pass between two persons: oneself and the Other. These ethical claims are absolute; one is obliged to the Other to the point of being held hostage. If we were in relation with only one Other at a time, the question of justice would not occur. However, with the appearance of a third person, justice is required, a system which compares and chooses between others (Levinas 1998, 157).<sup>6</sup>

Llewelyn argues that in Levinas’s view humans have responsibilities *for* animals, but not directly *to* them (Llewelyn 1991, 64), as a face to face

relation would require, since the ethical command is heard directly solely in interhuman face to face relations. Following a similar line of reasoning supplementing Levinasian ethics with Heidegger's work, Silvia Benso finds that Levinas's ethics take the human face to face as exemplary, relegating ethics beyond the interhuman as derivative. Benso feels that Levinas needs to be supplemented with Heidegger in order to develop an ethic of things, because she finds that Levinas's ethics are partial in that they do not recognize "the Other of the Other," which she identifies as things (Benso 1996, 136). I see the other of the Other as the third party, the other beyond the face to face relation, who instigates the demand not for ethics but for justice. This might suggest that Levinas's position on ethics beyond the interhuman should be that humans have obligations to nonhuman others in justice, but not in ethics. If animals do not have "faces" like humans do, they cannot be met face to face, and can at best be given consideration in justice. However, Levinas is not completely clear in excluding nonhumans from face to face relations. The Other who questions my right to be in a face to face relation or proximity, might be an other than human Other. Including others beyond the interhuman is already a question of justice, but it is first a question of ethics.

Levinas's philosophy is unambiguous in saying that ethics require transcendence of being and nature, but he never fully developed a position on animals and ethics within his philosophical work. This leaves room for further questioning, especially since Levinas himself indicates that the question of animals is an open space in his work, saying that the question of transcendence in the animal "reminds us of the debt that is always open" (Levinas 1990, 152). In this passage, taken from his essay, "The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights," Levinas's philosophy remains open to the Other, even nonhuman others.

#### DOGGONE OTHERS

"The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights" is published in *Difficult Freedom*, a "confessional" rather than philosophical text. As such it deals more explicitly with religious themes that are left implicit in Levinas's philosophical work, and sometimes engages in commentary on biblical passages. Here Levinas comments on a verse from Exodus: "You shall be men consecrated to me; therefore you shall not eat any flesh that is torn by beasts in the field; you shall cast it to the dogs" (Exodus 22:31). He

poses, and answers, the question, “So who is this dog at the end of the verse? Someone who disrupts society’s games (or Society itself) and is consequently given a cold reception [*que l’on reçoit comme un chien dans un jeu de quills*]?” (Levinas 1990, 151). Upon noting the role of dogs in the freeing of Israel from Egypt on the night of the slaying of the first born (Exodus 11:7), Levinas exclaims, “There is a transcendence in the animal!” (Levinas 1990, 152). He says that dogs have “neither ethics nor *logos*” but that “At the supreme hour of his institution . . . the dog will attest to the dignity of its person” (Levinas 1990, 152). Levinas then links the dogs from the biblical passages to a dog who appeared in the camp where he was held prisoner by the Nazis during World War II. This dog, Levinas says, “was the last Kantian in Nazi Germany,” because he recognized the prisoners as people, in contrast to the Nazis.

Levinas’s exclamation, “There is a transcendence in the animal!” does not harmonize with the rest of his writings on animals and ethics in his philosophical work, nor with his statements in interviews. “The Name of a Dog” interrupts. Levinas allows an ethic beyond the interhuman to interrupt his thought, much as he finds ethics to interrupt philosophy in general. As Cohen explains, interruption is significant in Levinas’s thought, and on occasion appears as a device in his writing. In Levinas’s work, the face of the Other interrupts the monologue of the self as being at home with itself. In philosophical writing, ethics can similarly interrupt the totalizing narratives of philosophy. Cohen notes that Levinas’s mention of his debt to Franz Rosenzweig interrupts his exposition of phenomenology, appearing halfway through the preface to *Totality and Infinity* (Cohen 1994, 227). As Michael Oppenheim explains, it is Rosenzweig’s discussion of the Greek literary figure of the tragic hero that Levinas’s work alludes to in describing being at home with itself (Oppenheim 1997, 13). The tragic hero, Rosenzweig says in *The Star of Redemption*, is deaf to the voice of the Other, trapped in its own sphere of being. Its existence is a monologue, an uninterrupted narrative. “The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights” appears approximately halfway through *Difficult Freedom* (pages 151–53 of about 300), interrupting the text, and Levinas’ philosophy as a whole, with an extraneous ethic.

The phrase in the title of the essay, “The Name of a Dog,” is itself an exclamation, an interjection that is used to express surprise or irritation. In the original French, *nom d’un chien*, is a mild expletive, a polite ver-



sion of *nom de Dieu*, “in the name of God” (Levinas 1990, 299), which is akin to the English “doggone.” The interruption of doggone ethics into Levinas’s philosophy is both a surprise, and an irritation to its coherence. Within the essay, the interruption is magnified in Levinas’s remark that the dog in the verse from Exodus is “Someone who disrupts society’s games (or Society itself) and is consequently given a cold reception [*que l’on reçoit comme un chien dans un jeu de quills*]?” (Levinas 1990, 151). The other animal, the nonhuman animal, interrupts the thought of just (human) society, the “game” of society. The other domestic animal is the one who lives in society with us, but who we do not admit to society or acknowledge in relations of ethics and social justice. The game in the French expression Levinas uses, “*que l’on reçoit comme un chien dans un jeu de quills*,” is skittles (a game similar to bowling). A dog interrupting the game to chase the ball would be thrown out. Similarly, if one tries to include other animals in the idea of society, of community, or of neighborhood, the “dog” is thrown out, exiled, or at least marginalized, from philosophy proper. The nonhuman others are in exile, where ethics come to pass in Levinas’s thought, outside being at home with itself.

In allowing the doggone others to interrupt his philosophizing about ethics, Levinas’s work remains open to further questioning. Allowing the interruption prevents Levinas’s philosophy from forming a completely coherent system that would be totalizing in its effects and hence contrary to the aims of his ethics. Levinas allows that the interruption of doggone others “reminds us of the debt that is always open” (Levinas 1990, 152).

The interruption of doggone others provides space to develop Levinas’s ethics beyond the interhuman. The fact that his work is not completely consistent on the question of interspecies ethics provides room to suggest that it is not nature or animality, or even being, that must be transcended for humans to express ethics, but a particular way of being, being at home with itself. Other animals need not be implicated in a need for transcendence of their being as animals due to human limitations in this regard, since being at home with itself is a mode of human being, not of other animals. It is the “animality” of humans that Levinas refers to in saying that ethics transcend nature and being, not the animality of other animals. The transcendence required for interspecies ethics is not a transcendence of animality or nature, but a transcendence of anthropocentrism. Ethics beyond the interhuman are not extraneous in a negative

sense, but transcendent; doggone ethics are not beyond being, but beyond the merely human being of being at home with itself.

These doggone ethics could be ethics for a more than human world, but only if they go beyond including animals in ethics to also include other nonhumans such as lakes, rivers and oceans, summer breezes and the west wind, boulders and bedrock, pine trees and dandelions, and cicadas and grasshoppers. I question that Jacques Derrida's assertion that the alterity radical enough to break through the identification of the self with itself is not the Other human as Levinas says, but the Other animal. Derrida asks, "Must not this place of the Other be a human? If this is indeed the case, then the ahuman, or at least the figure of some—in a word—*divinanimality*, even if it were to be felt through the human, would be the quasi-transcendental referent, the excluded, foreclosed, disavowed, tamed, and sacrificed foundation of what it founds, namely, the symbolic order, the human order, law, and justice. Is not this necessity performed secretly in Levinas . . . ?" (Derrida 2003, 134).

Derrida suggests that the division between humans and other animals is basic to Western philosophy, a founding erasure of the power of the human subject to dominate other animals and deny their subjectivities. As Cary Wolfe explains, Derrida argues that in Levinas "the ethical status of the 'community at large' is purchased at the expense of the sacrifice of all forms of difference that are not human—most pointedly, of course, of the animal" (Wolfe 2003, 27).<sup>7</sup> However, it is not just other animals that are excluded, it is all others relegated to the realm of "nature." Bruno Latour (2004) argues that it is the division of human culture from nature that has rendered political representation of nonhuman others impossible in Western thought.

It is relatively easy to argue that other animals have faces. There is an extensive literature on animal rights, and it is reasonably uncomplicated to argue for the inclusion of nonhuman animals in some form of ethics, at least since Jeremy Bentham's assertion that what matters is not whether other animals think but whether or not they can suffer. The emotional life of animals is well documented (Masson and McCarthy 1995), as are the further cognitive, social, and ethical capacities of animals (Bekhoff et al. 2002; de Waal 1996; Noske 1997). Levinasian ethics have the potential to add the idea that the capacities of the Other are completely irrelevant to my obligation to meet them as persons and extend them ethical con-

sideration. This cuts through debates about the capacities of animals to allow the inclusion of not only other animals, but also other nonhuman persons.

I am disturbed by the direction of some arguments in favor of including animals or certain types of animals in ethics while excluding others, such as arguments to include other primates because they demonstrably have some capabilities in common with humans. I fear the setting up of categories that would allow the creation of a class of “nonconsideranda,” a class of beings to whom no obligations whatsoever are owed, as Thomas Birch has suggested (Birch 1993). It is unethical to apply criteria of considerability, because this functions to create a class of beings to whom no obligations whatsoever are owed. As Birch says, this is itself unethical, hence everyone and everything should be given moral consideration, including rocks. The problem, as Llewelyn indicates, is in the evaluative comparison that suggests a ranking is possible in deciding who deserves consideration, or can obligate oneself in ethics (see Llewelyn 1991, 249-50).

#### **OTHER FACES**

According to Levinas, it is not the capacities of the Other that matter, but that the Other faces oneself, challenging one’s view of the world with his/her own. Ethics arise in the face of the Other (Levinas 1989, 82–83), Levinas says, but he cannot say whether or not a snake has a face, let alone other nonhumans. His use of the term “face” demands further thought. In Levinas’s work, the face is that which expresses the vulnerability of the Other, through the Other’s eyes and nakedness. The face speaks: the face’s expression, whether given in words or other outward expression in the composition of the features, means something apart from what one conceives about it. The face of the Other says of itself, gives out of itself, surpassing all one’s thematization about the Other. The uprightness of the face also expresses height, or vertical transcendence. In Levinas’s work, the Other is in two senses above me and beyond my grasp: the Other transcends my idea of the Other, and transcends being. Thus the Other transcends being at home with itself, beyond being conceptually and metaphysically. “The face” in Levinas’s description of face to face relations is a metaphor. The Other need not be able to speak as a human for ethics to come to pass. The characteristics Levinas attributes

to “the face” are not restricted to humans, so nonhuman others can also be met as persons and inspire ethics in oneself.

Levinas says that “The eyes break through the mask—the language of the eyes, impossible to dissemble. The eye does not shine; it speaks” (Levinas 1969, 66). This “language of the eyes” is a metaphor, and should not be forced back into literality when the suggestion is made that the leaves of a tree do not merely shine but speak. If an eye can speak why not a leaf? This leaves aside, of course, the fact that other animals have eyes even as do humans. Who can say the eyes of the animals featured in the campaigns of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) are not expressive?<sup>8</sup> A bit of quartz in a piece of granite also shines, and can also speak to me. Its expressivity is not essentially different from the shine of the eye of a human that “speaks,” if “speaks” is a metaphor.

According to Levinas, the expressivity of the Other’s face is not only in the voice of the Other, but in the eyes and overall expressivity of the Other’s body. Expression is not merely verbal for Levinas, because the significance even of actual speech is not just words but meaning. The Other means something in saying something. Levinas explains, “To signify is not equivalent to presenting oneself as a sign, but to expressing oneself, that is, presenting oneself in person. The symbolism of the sign already presupposes the signification of expression, the face. In the face the existent par excellence presents itself. And the whole body—a hand or a curve of the shoulder—can express as the face” (Levinas 1969, 262).

A paw, a curving tree branch, or a naked rock face like the Eagle’s Nest, a granite cliff in the village in which I grew up, can also express as the face. Levinas, of course, would disagree. He distinguishes between things and persons who can speak. He writes:

The work of language is entirely different [from that of things]: it consists in entering into relationship with a nudity disengaged from every form, but having meaning by itself . . . signifying before we have projected light upon it . . . Such a nudity is the face. The nakedness of the face is not what is presented to me because I disclose it, what would therefore be presented to me, to my powers, to my eyes, to my perceptions, in a light exterior to it. The face has turned to me—and this is its very nudity. It is by itself and not by reference to a system. (Levinas 1969, 74–75)

“Things” cannot speak the way humans do, Levinas says. Yet, it is not clear why his metaphorical understanding of speech in humans cannot be

extended to understanding the expressivity of nonhumans. If “the face” describes the whole phenomenon of human expressivity, including body language, why would the body language and more subtle expressions of nonhumans be excluded? If it is the nakedness or nudity of the face of the Other, understood metaphorically, rather than the issuing of words out of a human mouth that matter in expressivity, a nonhuman Other can oblige oneself in ethics.

The nakedness of the Other and the nudity of the face have at least two related meanings for Levinas. The nakedness of the Other is a metaphor not only for vulnerability, but for the difference Levinas sees between mere things, which we know through applying themes, and the faces of persons, who express of themselves beyond all thematization. The face is naked of thematization: the face of the Other speaks to me before I apply themes to cognize the Other. In this, the face of the Other transcends my idea of it, and is thus an expression of infinity. However, all other entities exceed our ideas about them. It is not possible to exhaust the details of a thing in description. I can describe a tree as a red maple thirty feet tall, brilliant red in the fall, contrasting beautifully with the surrounding white pines. These details do not fully describe everything that the tree is. The tree can be thematized, but as Martin Buber explains, one can also come into relation with it, such that “it confronts me bodily and has to deal with me as I must deal with it—only differently. . . . What I encounter is neither the soul of a tree nor a dryad, but the tree itself” (Buber 1970, 58–59). The nakedness of the Other in terms of thematization should not restrict Levinas’s understanding of the face to the human.

The convergence of the nakedness of the Other in terms of being beyond themes and in terms of vulnerability is significant for Levinas, because the Other does not only resist thematization in the nakedness of the face, but reveals the vulnerability of “the nakedness of the body that is cold and that is ashamed of its nakedness” (Levinas 1969, 75). The Other is above oneself, commanding oneself from beyond being, but also in need. Levinas emphasizes the vulnerability and exposedness of the face of the Other. He refers to the eyes of the Other as “without protection—what is softest and most uncovered” (Levinas 1969, 262). The eyes are a metaphor for frailty, the vulnerability of “the widow, the orphan, the poor,” the Other who commands oneself from a position of height, but who is also always owed a greater obligation than oneself.

Are nonhuman others naked in Levinas’s double sense? Other ani-

mals may not be ashamed of their nakedness, but they certainly are sometimes cold, and often in need. Insects, plants, and other nonhuman others are vulnerable to human violence directly as well as through pollution. Can they not also signify their need? Does the yelp of pain of a kicked dog say “I am hurt?” or is it merely an involuntary instinctual vocalization? If we compare this to a human who yelps in pain, is it still an involuntary instinctual vocalization rather than speech? Why would this expression in either a dog or a human not be a call to ethical action? If we cannot hear the signification of needs by plants, insects, or the ground, air, and water, is that not a marker of our limitations as much as theirs? For those who have the ears to hear, a clear-cut forest is an accusation of greed.

For Levinas, the Other human means something in her/his expression that a dog or tree does not. The human face says of itself—there is “somebody there,” somebody there beyond oneself, beyond the themes one might apply to the other as a thing. According to Levinas, expression differs from the presencing of objects in that it is “straightforward”:

Signification or expression thus contrasts with every intuitive datum precisely because to signify is not to give. Signification is not an ideal essence or a relation open to intellectual intuition. . . . Discourse is not simply a modification of intuition (or of thought), but an original relation with exterior being. . . . It is the production of meaning. Meaning is not produced as an ideal essence; it is said and taught by presence, and teaching is not reducible to sensible or intellectual intuition, which is the thought of the same. (Levinas 1969, 66)

The Other teaches oneself in speaking, because the Other is other than oneself. The Other can surprise oneself by teaching something new, something other than more of “the same.” The words of the Other express a meaning beyond oneself. The Other can interrupt oneself, challenging one’s perceptions and interpretations of the world, teaching oneself to see more.

#### LANGUAGE

For Levinas, the ability of the Other to talk about the world is essential to language, which is essential to ethics. “Signification,” he says, “arises from the other stating or understanding the world” (Levinas 1969, 97). Furthermore, signification “is in the absolute surplus of the

other with respect to the same . . . who welcomes the other across themes which the other proposes to him or receives from him, without absenting himself from the signs thus given” (Levinas 1969, 97). Only in language, Levinas suggests, is there an abundant enough source of surplus meaning to overcome the urge toward totality of being at home with itself. In Levinas’s view, the words of the Other, thematizing the world, are necessary for ethics, because it is those words which force oneself to see the world beyond one’s own restricted vision of it in being at home with itself. The Other gives a world in common through speaking, an ethical gesture. In his words, “Language does not exteriorize a representation preexisting in me: it puts in common a world hitherto mine” (Levinas 1969, 174).

According to Levinas, the Other challenges one’s view of the world in a way that nonhumans and mere things cannot. In his opinion, things appear as mere phenomena, in Kant’s sense, whereas Others who speak manifest themselves directly. Levinas makes a distinction between perception in seeing and language, in that seeing remains within phenomenal perception, mediated, not the straightforward relation of the face to face that requires language (Levinas 1969, 193–194). Language, conversely, as signification, breaks oneself out of one’s preoccupation with oneself by offering another view of the world (Levinas 1969, 96). For Levinas, the difference between things, including living things, and others is that the Other faces oneself and signifies the world, whereas a thing cannot. Others can thematize, while things, as objects, are only thematized. Levinas explains:

The sign does not signify the signifier as it signifies the signified. The signified is never a complete presence; always a sign in its turn, it does not come in a straightforward frankness. The signifier, he who emits the sign, faces, despite the interposition of the sign, without proposing himself as a theme. He can, to be sure, speak of himself—but then he would announce himself as signified and consequently as a sign in his turn. The Other, the signifier, manifests himself in speech by speaking of the world and not of himself; he manifests himself by proposing the world, by *thematizing* it. (Levinas 1969, 96)

Yet, I wonder, why should the ability to thematize, entailing a capacity to deny Others as Other and posit them as objects, be a marker of who can be said to have a face? The themes we apply to nonhuman Others all too often reduce them to mere objects or things for human use. In ethical

relations, the expression of the face of the Other breaks through the masks imposed on it by thematization. In unethical relations, the Other is masked to appear as an object for use. It is not only things that we mask in thematization; our preconceptions about Others and the world are like a mask that orders our perception of other humans, and nonhuman others.

Our humanity is a mask that we wear over our faces, through which we perceive the world, and through which we express ourselves. We can learn to meet Others face to face, if we learn to see their faces through not only their masks, but our own. The face is not essentially human, but naked, without a skin.<sup>9</sup> Just as it is not the words of the Other that express the Other's meaning, it is not the skin of the face of the Other that communicates the Other's need. The expressivity of the Other is deeper than the skin. Nonhuman Others may not express themselves exactly as humans, but they do communicate, and we can understand their meanings much as we understand human Others' meanings in "the curve of a shoulder" or the "eyes that shine." Communication between nonhumans may actually be more direct because it does not involve thematization. Alphonso Lingis suggests that the evolution of human verbal language has made our communication less direct than in other primates, so that we are no longer sure what other humans mean even if they seem to speak clearly (Lingis 2003, 176).

When we thematize nonhuman Others, we mask their faces rather than catch their meaning. In ethical relations, one does not distinguish the Other from oneself on the basis of properties of the Other, or categories applied to the Other, that is, on thematization. In Levinas's words, "These differences between the Other and me do not depend on different 'properties' that would be inherent in the 'I,' on the one hand, and, on the other hand, in the Other . . . They are due to the I-Other conjuncture, to the inevitable *orientation* of being 'starting from oneself' toward 'the Other' " (Levinas 1969, 215). The properties of the face are irrelevant to the ethical relation. The Other commands me before being thematized, and this includes the thematization of whether or not the Other can be said to have an actual face.

Levinas says that "The neighbor concerns me before all assumption, all commitment consented to or refused. . . . He orders me before being recognized" (Levinas 1998, 87).<sup>10</sup> Levinas explains that "This is a modal-



ity not of a knowing, but of an obsession, a shuddering of the human quite different from cognition. . . . In an approach I am first a servant of a neighbor, already late and guilty for being late. I am as it were ordered from the outside, traumatically commanded, without interiorizing by representation and concepts the authority that commands me” (Levinas 1998, 87). A human face is recognized through thematization, through applying the theme of human/nonhuman. But ethics arise before this thematization, before asking oneself whether or not this Other should be able to order me. If I hear a call outside my window in the night, I am obligated to get up and find out what is going on, to answer the call of the Other, before I know whether it is a human who is being attacked, or some other animal.

I do not have time to first apply themes to the Other, and then decide whether or not I am obligated. As Levinas says, “The extreme urgency of the assignation jostles the ‘presence of mind’ necessary for the reception of a given and the identification of the diverse, in which, as noema of a noesis, a phenomenon appears. Extreme urgency is the modality of obsession—which is known but is not a knowing. I do not have time to face it” (Levinas 1998, 87–88). One does not have time to thematize the Other before being obligated. It is irrelevant whether the Other is human or otherwise than human, for “determining” who can call oneself to responsibility. Anyone can call oneself to responsibility, if one hears the call before masking it with one’s own categories of interpretation.

To approach the Other ethically, for Levinas, requires recognizing a face rather than a mask that totalizes the Other into an object. However, it is the face of the Other that breaks through one’s thematizations—one does not cease to apply themes, but is instead interrupted by the Other. According to Levinas, there is something about the human face that resists thematization that nonhuman Others and things do not, interrupting oneself. But we are obligated to apply non-reducing themes to nonhuman others. I see this is part of what it means to be “late and already guilty for being late.” We are obligated to seek to know our obligations to the Other before we are aware of those obligations, to invite the Other into relationship, in Anthony Weston’s sense of active invitation.<sup>11</sup>

Our obligations in this regard are perhaps greater with nonhuman Others, because their faces do not appear so readily to us in Western cul-

ture. Our thematizing of nonhuman Others reduces them, masks not only their properties and capacities with human prejudice, but masks their faces, their ability to interrupt our all too human discourses on the nature of things. Active invitation can help us to direct our thematization of Others to help them reveal themselves as Others who obligate us, to enable us to hear the call to ethics that sounds before thematization. Cultural conditioning too often drowns out the call of nonhuman others, so that their interruption goes unheard. We tell ourselves, surely I am only projecting a sense of need into that “thirsty” plant, ignoring its call even in satisfying its need. Our culturally conditioned perceptions mask nonhuman Others. As Weston argues, if we do not first approach others ethically, we will not recognize them; humans in Western culture are prone to what he calls self-validating reduction.

Both of Weston’s concepts of reduction and invitation are self-validating, the former creating a vicious, the latter a virtuous, hermeneutic circle. In self-validating reduction, the Other is reduced to something less than an Other deserving of moral consideration, a thing to be bought or sold, or an object to be studied: land becomes real estate,<sup>12</sup> a monkey becomes evidence of a non-social species. Weston compares the reductive methods of objective science with the active invitation of Jim Nollman in interaction with howler monkeys:

Visiting a rain-forest station at which howler monkeys were being studied, Jim Nollman was assured that the monkeys were fundamentally unsociable, retreating to the forest canopy whenever humans were around. They had demonstrably done so for years. Then Nollman learned that the zoologists studied the monkeys by attaching radio transmitters to their necks. To attach the transmitters they had to tranquilize the monkeys. To tranquilize the monkeys they shot them with tranquilizer guns, dropping them out of the canopy a hundred or more feet to the forest floor. The zoologists considered this technique unproblematic, ‘objective,’ purely scientific, and they treated Nollman, a musician who tried to use music to create a shared space between humans and animals, as just a sentimental and unscientific meddler.

Nollman, for his part, took out his flute and sat under a tree, playing for the monkeys and inviting them to join. Eventually they did. As Nollman puts it, ‘The entire family howled in response to the deep resonant notes . . . Then slowly the mood shifted. One animal started to fill in the spaces between the staggered notes of the flute while the rest listened in silence. One howl and then one note; two notes and so two.

This fundamental form of incipient conversation—this dialogue—lasted for about an hour until the approaching darkness forced me to leave.’ The next day the monkeys climbed right down the tree and examined Nollman close up, even with a film crew also present. (Weston 1998, 283–84)

When the Other is approached in active invitation, one’s judgement of the capacities of the Other is suspended, putting ethics before categorizing the Other. While thematization, the applying of categories, cannot be completely suspended since all our perceptions are culturally conditioned, apprehending the Other through multiple themes of interpretation can help one encounter an Other rather than an object. If we do not just inquire if monkeys can speak or not, or learn to use sign language or some other human means of communication, but become open to what we might learn in an unforced encounter with the monkeys, through trying different approaches to invite the Other into relationship, such as music like Jim Nollman uses, we might find an Other that calls us to ethical action. As Jim Cheney and Anthony Weston (1999) argue, in parallel with Levinas, ethics must come first, before knowledge of the other(s). Cheney and Weston argue that the value of nonhuman others should not be based on known facts about their capacities. Rather, as a matter of basic courtesy, humans should begin by assuming that every other they meet is an other who deserves moral consideration. In this argument, Cheney and Weston approach a Levinasian understanding of ethics, apparently without knowledge of Levinas’ work.<sup>13</sup> They, like Levinas,<sup>14</sup> argue that “Ethics must come *first*” (Cheney and Weston 1999, 118). Cheney and Weston advocate “an ethics-based epistemology, rather than an epistemology-based ethics” (Cheney and Weston 1999, 115). The ethical command arises before thematization, but in order to hear that command, we must invite Others into relation with us, using additional themes of interpretation.

Nonhuman Others can interrupt us, and teach us something new, if we invite them to do so. The teaching of the Other depends not only on the Other’s expressivity, but on one’s openness to it, one’s welcoming of it. Levinas indicates that “To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to *receive* from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea

of infinity. But this also means: to be taught” (Levinas 1969, 51). Conversation with the Other that is welcomed, as when one is open to learning from the Other, is a teaching.

Humans can learn from nonhuman entities, if they are open to being taught by them. Cheney, for example, speaks of learning from stones. Stones can teach us things, if we learn how to listen to them. As he says, “What rocks teach us is experientially bound up with (is the other face of) what we come to understand to be our ethical relationships to rocks. As these relationships deepen, so do the teachings” (Cheney 1998, 276). Cheney’s understanding of the teaching of rocks resonates with the sentiments of Levinas’s interhuman ethics: if one welcomes the Other, the Other’s expression can become a teaching.

Perhaps you will think I stretch Levinas’s meaning too far in saying that stones can teach. Yet, in other philosophical systems, stones and rocks are recognized as teachers. Cheney cites examples from the Anishnabai, Lakota, and Sioux (Cheney 1998, 273–74). Is this merely metaphorically a teaching? Do the rocks really teach us, or do we find only our own same ideas about rocks? This depends on oneself. For Cheney, and myself, these metaphors are not empty. As he says,

Rocks are ancient, enduring presences, the oldest of beings. They are, perhaps, ‘watchful.’ (Here I start using scare quotes. But the use of metaphor here and in what follows is not careless writing. Knowledge moves by metaphor. We must, of course, be careful, critical, and attentive in our use of metaphors—that they may reach *insightfully* into mystery.) An important aspect of any learning situation is mindful presence. Rocks, in their enduring presence, their watchfulness, may be our first and most profound teachers of the most fundamental aspect of moral presence in and to this world . . . (Cheney 1998, 274–5).

Rocks and other nonhuman entities can speak, and teach, if we are able to listen and learn.

### SOLICITATION

Nonhuman Others can also call oneself to responsibility, soliciting oneself in ethics. In Levinas’ terms, the Other commands me before being recognized, saying “thou shalt not murder.” The Other commands me, creating an anarchic obligation, prior to any system, beyond reason. The Other solicits oneself from “above and beyond” (Levinas 1969, 200). The

Other solicits ethics in oneself through a “gaze that supplicates and demands, that can supplicate only because it demands, deprived of everything because entitled to everything, and which one recognizes in giving” (Levinas 1969, 75).

The restriction of solicitation to human speech in Levinas’s work presents a significant limitation in terms of the possibility of ethics beyond the interhuman. However, it is the “call” as solicitation that is important for ethics, not the ability to speak with one’s mouth, or to thematize. The face of the Other calls me into question, questioning my right to possession: “The presence of the Other is equivalent to this calling into question of my joyous possession of the world” (Levinas 1969, 75–76). Is it not our possession of the world in a very literal sense that is called into question by nonhuman others? Our possession, control, pollution, and usurpation of the whole planet is called into question by the expressions of nonhuman others, such as the dull eyes of whale carcasses classed as toxic waste.<sup>15</sup>

It is not the capacities of the Other that matter in ethics, but that the Other can provoke oneself—the Other provokes feelings of obligation in me when I perceive the Other’s need. What matters in ethics is who or what can interrupt oneself and provoke a sense of obligation, not what criteria can be applied to the Other, such as whether or not they literally have faces and eyes. As Levinas says, “The primordial essence of expression and discourse does not reside in the information they would supply concerning an interior and hidden world . . . but a solicitation that concerns me by its destitution and its Height” (Levinas 1969, 200). What is significant about the nakedness of the Others is their need of something from oneself, their solicitation of oneself. The eyes of the hungry ask one to feed them.

A wilting plant expresses its need of water quite as much as the eyes of a man might express his hunger. Nonhuman Others not only call humans to responsibility, but such inter-species relations approach Levinas’ ideas on substitution more concretely than is often found in interhuman ethics. Consider Julia “Butterfly” Hill living in Luna, a threatened redwood tree, in effect a hostage for the tree for two years (Hill 2000).<sup>16</sup> Other animals can provoke ethics in humans, which has led to the formation of groups like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Plants and bod-

ies of water also move people to pursue ethical action through conservation and preservation. The provocation of solicitation does not depend on a literal face or voice but on environmentalists and Others amplifying or translating their voices, to provoke ethics in others.

Llewelyn suggests that poetic speech, whether in poetry or poetic prose, can help humans hear the call of nonhuman Others. Solicitation can be amplified, because poetry can be evocative, can teach one to recognize more in Others. To evoke is to call, to inspire. Poetic speech and writing can, Llewelyn says, inspire one to ethics as does the Other. He finds that Levinas, in his later writings on aesthetics, says that a poem can actively engage a person. A poem can be a “handshake,” that is, it can reach out and give of itself. Llewelyn characterizes the evocation of poetry as a human speaking for the others. However, I see it as a translation and amplification of Others who express themselves directly, giving of themselves in expression. A dog can inspire me because another human has spoken on his behalf, but he also expresses himself.<sup>17</sup> We are obligated in justice to speak on behalf of Others, but we are first obligated in ethics to meet them face to face.

Llewelyn argues that it is enough that we can recognize the needs of others for us to hear their calling of us to ethics, that they need not articulate their needs, or be aware of them. It is the need of the Other that solicits oneself, rather than an expression of that need (Llewelyn 1991, 194). Their needs obligate us, he says, regardless if those needs are “experienced, unexperienced or unexperiencable, articulated, unarticulated or unarticulable” (Llewelyn 1991, 195–96). Llewelyn does not follow Levinas’ requirement that the Other be capable of expression. For Levinas, need is not enough for humans to be called to ethics, rather, it is only Desire that enables humans to be called to ethics.<sup>18</sup>

I agree with Levinas that for ethics to come to pass communication is necessary, but not in words. Ethics do arise in the face of the Other, but not only human faces. Ethics arise when I meet the Other as a person before allowing the themes I might apply to them to totalize the Other into something that cannot speak or be said to have a face. If the capacities of the Other are irrelevant to my being inspired to ethical action, the ability of the Other to speak, or their possession of a literal face, cannot be required for ethics to come to pass between us. If ethics do not come before epistemology, before thematization, they may not arise at all, leaving us stuck in an anthropocentric view of the world in which trees do not

speaking, snakes do not have faces, stones do not teach us anything, water is a commodity, and the land is reduced to real estate. I would rather live in a world in which cicadas tell me it is hot out, otters tell me how to have fun, bears teach me how to respect them, and water teaches me about conservation.

#### NOTES

1. I hesitate to use A. Irving Hallowell's term "other than human persons" because it is often taken to mean something more like "spirit" or "supernatural being." While I include such others in my ethics, here I am discussing more obviously tangible beings like otters, trees, and lakes. This may be perceived as a "religious" point of view, but is not necessarily more religious than views that restrict the idea of persons to human beings. My perspective does have much in common with what some call "the new animism" (Bouissac 1989; Bird-David 1999; Harvey 2004).
2. See in particular John Llewelyn's *Middle Voice of Ecological Conscience* (1991), David Clarke's essay "On Being 'The Last Kantian in Nazi Germany' in *Dwelling with Animals after Levinas*," *Animal Acts*, and Cary Wolfe's collection *Zoontologies* (2003).
3. Llewelyn disputes Levinas' interpretation of Heidegger's understanding of being in terms of Dasein as a living being that struggles for life (Llewelyn 1991, 67).
4. Bruno Latour (2004) suggests this view is endemic to Western thought. He describes it as a view in which humans live in "the Cave" and nature is essentially unknowable except by experts (philosopher-kings, or Scientists) who by some mysterious means manage to cross the boundary between the certainty of natural facts and debateable opinion.
5. I discuss Levinas' understanding of transcendence in relation to environmental ethics in more detail in "Being at Home in Nature," in *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 7 (2): 157–72.
6. I discuss the difference between ethics and justice, and develop an extension of Levinasian justice beyond the interhuman in detail in "Ethics and Justice in Daki Menan," *Topia: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 15, 5–25.
7. Wolfe cites Derrida's 1997 lecture series at Cerisy-la Salle "L'animal autobiographique," a portion of which is published as "And Say the Animal Responded" in *Zoontologies*, and Derrida's interview "'Eating Well' or the Calculation of the Subject," published in *Who Comes after the Subject* (Cary 2003).
8. That humans do find the eyes a most expressive feature is well illustrated in the images on the campaigns page on PETA's site. Chickens, a cow, rabbits, and an elephant, are featured (PETA no date). In citing this, I do not mean to imply that I endorse PETA's campaigns or tactics.

9. The Dene note that grizzly bears look much like humans when the skin is removed. To put on the skin, or a mask of another species, in ritual is to become that other. The Dene tell a number of stories that present nonhuman others as living their lives in community like humans, but as “salmon people” or “bear people.” In these stories, nonhuman others have a sense of themselves and their society as humans do—not in the same way as humans do, but presenting it this way teaches that animals and plants have their own being, their own ways of living that proceed apart from human society and human understanding. One of the more well known of these stories is “The Woman Who Married A Bear.” Catherine McClellan (1970) has recorded several versions of this story.
10. For the purposes of this essay I am not differentiating between the Other and the neighbour. I do not mean to indicate that these categories are the same in Levinas’ work, but the differences are not important to my current project.
11. Where Weston (1994, 1998) advocates active invitation in approaching the other ethically, Levinas advocates a passivity more passive than all passivity. Levinas’ and Weston’s terms reflect different aspects of what might be characterized as middle voiced interactions (as described in Llewelyn 1991).
12. “One of the most striking but also least-noticed representations of nature is in the real estate listings. The message: land is something for possession, and comes in ‘pieces.’ That message is so familiar that students actually need help seeing it. Yet the very idea of a ‘piece’ of land helps to break down its wholeness, making it instead a series of checkers or counters in economic transactions, suggesting that what happens in one place is not essentially related to what happens anywhere else, on someone else’s ‘piece.’ And consequently the land is broken into pieces; hence it *becomes* no more than ‘pieces.’ The economic view becomes self-validating.” (Weston 1994, 103)
13. Weston does cite Levinas indirectly, through John Llewelyn’s essay “Am I Obsessed by Bobby?,” a revised version of which appears in Llewelyn 1991, in a discussion about dogs (Weston 1994, 17). However, he shows no further knowledge of the broader implications of Levinasian theory or how it might relate to his own and Cheney’s.
14. In his essay “Ethics as First Philosophy,” Levinas argues that ethics must precede not only epistemology, but also ontology. Ethics are prior to being and knowledge (Levinas 1989, 75– 87). For Levinas, first philosophy is the questioning of one’s own right to be, that is, ethics.
15. The endangered population of the St. Lawrence River’s beluga whales suffers from bioaccumulation of at least 24 contaminants, due to industrial pollution in the river. Levels of PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) are so high in the whales the chemicals kill, that according to Canadian federal



- law the bodies must be disposed of as toxic waste (Marine Mammal Center 2002).
16. She does not present herself as a hostage, but can be interpreted as such in Levinasian terms. She voluntarily put herself in a situation of suffering on behalf of a redwood tree, to prevent its suffering being cut.
  17. I say “his” and “himself” because I am thinking of a specific dog, who happens to be male.
  18. Levinas does not address the question of whether or not hearing the need of another is enough to stimulate that Desire.

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