ARTICLES

Facing Animals: A Relational, Other-Oriented Approach to Moral Standing

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Abstract   In this essay we reflect critically on how animal ethics, and in particular thinking about moral standing, is currently configured. Starting from the work of two influential "analytic" thinkers in this field, Peter Singer and Tom Regan, we examine some basic assumptions shared by these positions and demonstrate their conceptual failings—ones that have, despite efforts to the contrary, the general effect of marginalizing and excluding others. Inspired by the so-called "continental" philosophical tradition (in particular Emmanuel Levinas, Martin Heidegger, and Jacques Derrida), we then argue that what is needed is a change in the rules of the game, a change of the question. We alter the (pre-) normative question from "What properties does the animal have?" to "What are the conditions under which an entity becomes a moral subject?" This leads us to consider the role of language, personal relations, and material-technological contexts. What is needed then in response to the moral standing problem, is not more of the same—yet another, more refined criterion and argumentation concerning moral standing, or a "final" rational argumentation that would be able to settle the animal question once and for all—but a turning or transformation in both our thinking about and our relations to animals, through language, through technology, and through the various place-ordering practices in which we participate.

Keywords   Animal ethics · Moral standing · Levinas · Moral language · Technology · Place

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Introduction

Our practices of ascribing moral standing to animals are rather puzzling, if not inconsistent and unreasonable, when analyzed from a philosophical point of view. On the one hand, most people who have been thinking and writing about this matter believe that the moral standing of animals should be based on their intrinsic properties. For example, it is generally believed that animals that are more human-like (i.e. can feel pain as we feel pain, exhibit sentience or even conscious behavior, etc.), have a higher moral status than those who do not exhibit these properties, and ought to be treated accordingly (i.e. better than other "lower" animals). On the other hand, our actual practices and treatment of animals do not really fit this framework. We kill and eat animals that are very similar to us and that can feel pain, such as pigs, whereas we treat other animals such as dogs and cats like companions, friends, or children for reasons that have little to do with their biological properties.

There are at least two ways to cope with this predicament. One is to reinforce properties based reasoning and claim that whatever we actually think and *do*, we *ought* to think and act differently, i.e. in a consistent and reasonable manner. For example, it is said that we ought not to eat animals that can feel pain or that we should stop anthropomorphizing our pets. Another way to deal with this problem is to defer moral judgment and (first) try to better understand the way we humans ascribe moral standing to animals. This is the route we follow in this essay.

First we will reflect on how animal ethics, and in particular thinking about moral standing, is currently configured. Starting from the work of two influential (analytic) thinkers in this field, Peter Singer and Tom Regan, we will examine some basic assumptions shared by these positions and show how problematic they actually are. Then we will propose and explore a different approach. Inspired by the so-called "continental" philosophical tradition (in particular Emmanuel Levinas, Martin Heidegger, and Jacques Derrida), we will argue that what is needed is a change in the rules of the game, that it is not enough to compare and discuss different answers provided for the animal question but that what is necessary, in the face of animals, is to change *the question*. We will, therefore, argue that if we really want to understand our current thinking and practices with regard to animals and make significant moral progress in this matter, we need to alter the (pre-) normative question from "What properties does the animal have?" to "What are the conditions under which an entity becomes a moral subject?" This leads us to consider the role of language, personal relations, and material-technological contexts. This approach is inspired by Martin Heidegger's critical response to modernity and Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of otherness, but we will also struggle to move beyond their seemingly inescapable anthropocentric assumptions concerning moral decision making in the face of these non-human others. In this sense, then, we inevitably agree with these two thinkers against themselves.

Properties: The Usual Approach to Defining the Moral Standing of Animals

Contemporary philosophical discussions in animal ethics have been (with a few notable exceptions that we will get to shortly) almost exclusively situated under the

purview of analytic philosophy. Two influential factions within this tradition, utilitarianism and deontological ethics, tend to divide up the field. (There are, of course, other theories and traditions, for instance virtue ethics, but here we will limit ourselves to these two.) On the one hand, there is the utilitarian approach of Peter Singer, who takes as his point of departure a crucial statement provided by Jeremy Bentham: "The question is not, 'Can they reason?' nor, 'Can they talk?' but 'Can they suffer?'" (Bentham 1780, p. 283). In *Animal Liberation* (1975) and subsequent writings, Singer argues that any sentient being, and thus any being that can suffer, has an interest in not suffering and deserves to have that interest taken into account. On the other hand, Tom Regan supplies a deontological formulation of "animal rights." In response to the Kantian tradition, he argues that what human beings have in common is not rationality but a life that matters to us. We are, in other words, "subjects-of-a-life" (Regan 1983, p. 243). Following from this, he then argues that many animals (and the kind of animal that qualifies is an important but debated issue in Regan's analysis) have a similar experience, that they are also "subjects-of-a-life": they have wants, preferences, beliefs, feelings, etc. and their welfare matters to them (Regan 1983). Another more recent deontological method of addressing the problem of moral status has been Korsgaard's account, which bases claims about moral concern not only on (our) normative "rational capacities" but also on "natural" capacities: it emphasizes that we also have an "animal" nature apart from a "rational nature", and that we should also value the former in other beings (Korsgaard 2007).

Although there has been a considerable amount of ink spilled on what makes these two approaches different, what is interesting for us is what they—and the philosophical traditions they draw on—necessarily share and hold in common. Both sides, despite their many differences, already endorse and agree that moral status is something that is to be decided on the basis of individual properties, the capacity to suffer in the case of Singer and being a "subject-of-a-life" for Regan or having "animal" needs and desires for Korsgaard. This is simultaneously where both positions draw their argumentative strength, insofar as the properties approach has considerable historical traction, and exhibit their greatest weakness, insofar as this method has a number of philosophical problems.

There is no doubt that in the past decades these philosophers and the traditions they draw on have done much to put concern for animals on the ethical and political agenda. It is also clear that they have had some influence at least on our practices and on moral reasoning within those practices. Singer, following the insight of Jeremy Bentham, has effectively shifted attention away from the traditional approach to deciding moral standing and has already altered the procedure in the sense that the criterion of suffering has become central to practical concerns in the field: today we seriously consider the interests of beings that can suffer (although there is still plenty of debate on the question whether particular animals are able to feel pain, e.g. discussion whether lobsters should be killed before cooking them). Furthermore, the Kantian tradition, though perhaps significantly less influential on actual practices, has successfully captured our contemporary intuition that many animals deserve a lot more respect than they have traditionally received, even if in contrast to animal rights activists many people still hesitate to use the term "rights"

with regard to animals. Thus, the philosophical and (certainly in the case of Singer) societal influence of these contributions to the debate about the moral standing of animals should not be underestimated. However, all positions in this debate still depend on a characterization of the essential ontological properties of the animal and of the one who is, by means of this effort, empowered to ascribe moral standing to others, and this incurs a number of problems.

First, the properties approach proceeds from an often unexamined anthropocentric privilege. In the case of Singer's utilitarianism, it is because human beings experience suffering as both uncomfortable and a moral evil, that it is assumed that the same experience, or at least something substantially similar, in an animal would need to be evaluated and addressed in the same way. For Regan, it is on the assumption that human beings are "subjects-of-a-life" and have wants, preferences, beliefs, feelings and therefore have various rights that we then ask which of the animals possess some kind of human-like sentience, count as "subject-of-a-life", and as a result would need to be extended a similar claim to moral standing. In both cases, "man is made the measure of all things," and moral standing is something that is based on the extent to which other entities are able to achieve or at least approximate human level capabilities and experiences. This is a form of anthropocentrism in the sense that it takes human experience as the starting point of moral inquiry (e.g. the moral standing of other beings), and it risks becoming a variety of what the environmental ethicist Thomas Birch calls "imperial power mongering," (Birch 1993, p. 315) insofar as it evaluates the moral standing of others only to the extent that they are "just like us."

Note that this objection is very different from Singer's point about speciecism. Singer argued that humans and (non-human) animals share the capacity to suffer, and that since similar cases should be treated in a similar way, animals should therefore be given equal consideration to their suffering. The point we are making is different. It criticizes the *procedure* followed here. Namely, Singer, Regan, and Korsgaard start from *human* properties and then construct a bridge to non-human beings. We suggest that the starting point could be very different (see later). Moreover, it could be objected that these arguments are based on science, that studies in animal ethnology and physiology have shown that animals (sometimes) experience the same state of affairs in a similar or even the same way like humans. Now such studies clearly focus on animals. But the assumption of the philosophical argument starts again from humans. It is about similarity to human suffering. Hence even philosophers who use such scientific studies employ the same anthropocentric starting point. Furthermore, the precise significance of such scientific studies should also be examined. Do they really provide *proof* of pain and suffering? This brings us to our second point.

Second, the properties approach inherits epistemological problems. Whether we take Singer's "capacity for suffering" or Regan's "subject-of-a-life" as the deciding factor, each of these are dependent upon internal states or properties belonging to individual entities. Since suffering and sentience, as internal mind states, are not directly observable, we can only make decisions based on externally available behaviors. In the history of science, this procedure comprises what was called "physiognomy," a widely discredited pseudo-science that endeavored to draw

conclusions about internal capabilities from externally observable facial expressions and bodily behaviors. Current scientific research on the capacities of non-human animals does not ascribe to this pseudo-scientific ambition, of course, but since it also bases its conclusions on observable evidence and behavior (either in the form of immediately accessible external signs or by way of sophisticated forms of mediation provided by MIR, fMRI, or other visualization techniques and technologies), its practices cannot avoid the question about how observable phenomena relate to the actual experiences of the animal. What do we really know about the suffering of another being, if we know it suffers at all? In the parlance of contemporary philosophy, this is the problem of other minds, which is stated quite succinctly by Paul Churchland (1999): "How does one determine whether something other than oneself—an alien creature, a sophisticated robot, a socially active computer, or even another human—is really a thinking, feeling, conscious being; rather than, for example, an unconscious automaton whose behavior arises from something other than genuine mental states?" The problem is that there is no definitive way to resolve this question once and for all. Even if, following Steve Torrance's critical insight (2013) that the other minds problem is a matter of degree and has never been a simple black/white or either/or issue, the fact of the matter is we cannot "climb into the heads of others to get the full story from the inside" (Haraway 2008, p. 226) and are therefore limited to drawing inferences and making partial judgments based on evidence that is not entirely beyond critical questioning.

One may object that in practice the question of other minds has not played an important role in the discussions about human moral standing, and that there is no reason to think it should in animal ethics or animal science. We do not necessarily disagree with what this objection indicates regarding humans, but we do question how this claim has been applied to other non-human animals, and we disagree with the claim made about animal ethics and animal science. If it was all that clear that, for example, lobsters are capable of experiencing pain or fish suffer, then the science and the arguments involved here would be entirely uncontroversial (if necessary in the first place). If the question regarding the moral standing of these animals was *that easily* solved, then philosophers and scientists could conclude their work and go home. But the situations is quite different: there is in fact a lot of ambiguity, doubt, and uncertainty in these scientific practices and in the philosophical debates about the meaning of the findings and about what could count as a relevant finding in the first place. For example, if we hear the sound of the lobster when it is cooked alive, then what exactly does it mean? Does it mean that the animal suffers? Or is this a "reflex"? And even if it is a reflex, does that mean we have to discount it morally speaking? Could the question be solved by observing things about the existence of a nervous system? If there is a nervous system, what complexity does it need to have in order to qualify as a condition for the ability to experience pain? Questions like these remain persistently unresolved and debated, e.g. Victoria Braithwaite's *Do Fish Feel Pain?* (2010), and further complicated by recent efforts to extend the debate to include non-animal life, e.g. Matthew Hall's *Plants As Persons* (2011) and Michael Marder's *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (2013). Even before one gets into the various details of these investigations, what is immediately clear is that the properties approach gets increasingly complicated and potentially difficult

to defend, when it comes to the moral epistemology of its procedure. In particular, it involves a range of seemingly unresolvable antinomies that have to do with a typically modern problem—the relation between "inner" and "outer"—which proceeds from that classic Cartesian dichotomy (Descartes 1637).

Third, to "delegate" the problem concerning suffering to science may present the question concerning the moral standing of animals as a question that can be solved in a nearly morally-neutral way. But this procedure has a moral component. In deciding scientifically who or what suffers or is sentient, we effectively decide who or what is to be considered a moral subject. But this decision about suffering or sentience is already a moral act. It effectively decides—literally "makes a cut"—between who is inside the moral community and what remains (on the) outside. As Derrida (2005, p. 80) had pointed out, everything turns on the difference between these two small and seemingly insignificant words, "who" and "what": the problem is to decide *who* is morally significant and *what* is not. Consequently, there is a fundamental moral decision that takes place prior to and outside of what is considered to be the moral situation proper. And because the question of ethics is typically situated after this initial decision, we often miss the moral significance and consequences of distinguishing between "who" and "what." But this *de-cision* is crucial; it has important consequences for those entities who find themselves on the inside (those who achieve the status of "who") and what comes to be excluded from consideration by being regarded as a mere thing.[1]

Finally, these decisions often precede and interpellate us. They are, more often than not, already institutionalized and operative prior to our coming into existence. When we are raised by our parents, we already find ourselves in a particular culture and in a family with particular habits that bear witness to decisions that have been made a priori, cuts that only *afterwards* may confront us and demand from us that we take a position. For example, should I also eat meat, as "one" does in my culture? Should I also live with a pet companion, as "one" does in my family? These questions often supervene only after the fact, that is, after one has already been engaged in a particular set of social norms and practices. Furthermore, there have been historical acts of inclusion and exclusion. In the history of human culture, for instance, decisions have been made by "moral science" (Coeckelbergh 2012) that had (and in some cases continues to have) real material, physical, and concrete consequences for ourselves and others. At one time, for instance, women, children, and slaves were characterized as something less than full human persons and were, for this reason, considered to be expendable property. As Aldo Leopold (1960, p. 201) famously recounts in his classic "The Land Ethic": "When god-like Odysseus returned from the wars in Troy, he hanged all on one rope a dozen slave-

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[1] A recent addition to the FAQ published on the *Chicago Manual of Style* web site addresses this matter in the context of a grammatical question concerning pronouns:

> Q. When referring to a zombie, should I use the relative pronoun *who* (which would refer to a person) or *that* (since, technically, the zombie is no longer living)? Essentially, does a zombie cease to become a "person" in the grammatical sense?
>
> A. Let's assume this is a serious question, in which case you, as the writer, get to decide just how much humanity (if any) and grammatical sense you wish to invest in said zombie. That will guide your choice of *who* or *that* (CMS 2013).

girls of his household whom he suspected of misbehavior during his absence. This hanging involved no question of propriety. The girls were property. The disposal of property was then, as now, a matter of expediency, not of right or wrong." This act of violence (which was not, at that particular time and within the context of a particular culture, considered violence against another person) was supported and justified by a prior decision that had already characterized "slave girls," of whatever origin, as mere objects—something with the status of "what" as opposed to "who."

As long as animal ethics proceeds according to these standards and protocols, it will continue to endorse questionable practices that often serve to reinforce the moral problems it initially sought to contest and correct. In other words, an animal ethics that continues to deploy and endorse a properties approach to moral status ascription will fail to achieve any real moral progress. It might draw new lines of inclusion and exclusion, but the terms and conditions by which these decision come to be made change little or nothing. What we need, then, is not more of the same, but something different. We need to challenge and even change the rules of the game. For this purpose, we propose to draw on the innovative thinking of Emmanuel Levinas and others.

Facing Others: Can Animals Be(come) Other?

The standard approach for addressing the animal question, the method deployed by both Singer and Regan, focuses attention on the properties of individuals. First there are entities with their inherent properties, and then moral and social relations can be established based on the factual presence or absence of a particular property. In the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, by contrast, we find a critical inversion of this seemingly logical procedure. According to Levinas, the sequence is exactly the other way around: the ethical relationship, the exposure to the other, precedes the usual ontological decisions (Levinas 1969). For Levinas, then, it is not a set of predefined ontological properties that makes the difference but the intrusion of the face of the other that interrupts solitude, requires a response, and imposes a fundamental responsibility. Consequently Levinasian philosophy, instead of being derailed by the standard epistemological problem of other minds, immediately affirms and acknowledges it as the basic condition of possibility for ethics. First there is an encounter with an other, then decisions concerning the roles of moral agent and moral patient come to be articulated and assigned.[2] Or as Richard Cohen succinctly describes it in what could be a marketing slogan for Levinasian thought, "not 'other minds,' mind you, but the 'face' of the other, and the faces of all others" (Cohen 2001, p. 336). The shift in emphasis here from "minds" to "face" is significant, because it marks an important alteration in the procedure of moral philosophy, shifting from an interest in determining the status of other minds, which

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[2] The terms "moral agent" and "moral patient" refer to the two components of the ethical relationship—the initiator of moral decision and action and the receiver of such activity. Although the term "moral agent" has considerable acceptance throughout the philosophical tradition, the term "moral patient" is a rather recent formulation. For more on this terminology and its importance in structuring moral thinking, see Luciano Floridi's "Information Ethics" (1999) and David Gunkel's *The Machine Question* (2012).

has been the hallmark of analytical ethics, to a phenomenological experience of "the face of the other." In Levinasian thought, therefore, "we may say that relations are 'prior' to the *relata*" (Coeckelbergh 2012, p. 45). Instead of beginning by making ontological determinations about who or what is a legitimate moral subject, Levinas proposes to see it the other way around: moral and social relations are given. What needs to be explained and what deserves skepticism are the decisions and arguments we make in the face of the other about who is a moral agent, who is (or can be) moral patients, and what comes to be excluded from either category. "The ethical relationship," Levinas (1987, p. 56) writes, "is not grafted on to an antecedent relationship of cognition; it is a foundation and not a superstructure…. It is then more cognitive than cognition itself, and all objectivity must participate in it."

According to Levinas, therefore, the Other always and already obligates me in advance of the customary decisions and debates concerning who or what is and is not a moral subject. "If ethics arises," Matthew Calarco (2008, p. 71) writes, "from an encounter with an Other who is fundamentally irreducible to and unanticipated by my egoistic and cognitive machinations," then identifying the "'who' of the Other" is something that cannot be decided once and for all or with any certitude. This apparent inability or indecision, however, is not necessarily a problem (or rather, it may be a practical problem for society and people who need to confront and relate to animals in their daily lives in order to make concrete decisions, i.e. what to eat?, but not, perhaps, so much a problem for moral theorizing). In fact, in philosophy it is a considerable advantage insofar as it opens ethics not only to the other but to other forms of otherness (i.e. those other entities that are otherwise than another human being). "If this is indeed the case," Calarco concludes, "that is, if it is the case that we do not know where the face begins and ends, where moral considerability begins and ends, then we are obligated to proceed from the possibility that anything might take on a face. And we are further obligated to hold this possibility permanently open" (ibid.). Levinasian philosophy, therefore, does not make prior commitments or decisions about who or what will be considered a legitimate moral subject. For Levinas anything that faces the I and calls its immediate self-involvement (or what Levinas, using a Latin derivative, calls "*ipseity*") into question would be Other and would constitute the site of ethics. It is within or on this site that ethics takes place, and it is at least one of the tasks of moral philosophy (perhaps even one its most important task, given the Socratic duty to persistent questioning) to keep this space open.

However, despite the promise this innovation has for arranging a moral philosophy that is open to others (and other forms of otherness), Levinas's work is not able to escape from the anthropocentric privilege in moral philosophy. Whatever the import of his unique contribution, Other in Levinas is still and unapologetically human. Or better stated, he remained uncertain whether animals, like a snake, could have a face (Levinas 1988, p. 172). Consequently, for all his efforts to the contrary, Levinas is still part of a Cartesian tradition in which there is little or no room for seeing animals as anything other than mere *machines*. As Derrida writes: "The animal remains for Levinas what it will have been for the whole Cartesian-type tradition: a machine that doesn't speak, that doesn't have access to sense" (Derrida 2008, p. 117). Following the direction of this criticism, we argue that the exclusion

of the animal is not necessarily supported by Levinas's view about the face of the other. On the contrary, Levinas's own thinking, despite the limited interpretation he often gave of it, can and does support ethical encounters with all kinds of others. There is, in other words, nothing in the Levinasian view of the ethical relationship that would exclude animals (and animals of all kinds and varieties) a priori. An animal *can* take on a face, that is, particular animals we encounter can supervene in such a way that they face us, take us out of our self-involvement, and demand from us that we respond. If (or when) this happens, then we open ourselves to (or have been exposed to) the animal's otherness. This is not that alterity that Haraway has in mind when she reminds us of "the discursive tie between the colonized, the enslaved, the noncitizen, and the animal—all reduced to type, all Others to rational man, and all essential to his bright constitution—[which] is at the heart of racism and flourishes, lethally, in the entrails of humanism" (Haraway 2008, p. 18). Rather, it is the alterity of a particular, concrete animal other. It is the difference that reveals itself to us within the actual encounter with an other. When, as Derrida (2008, p. 3) writes, the animal looks back at us.

If animals can have face (or perhaps better stated, if *an animal*, that is *a particular animal*, can take on what is called "face" in Levinas), then we must ask a new (pre-)moral question: not "Can they suffer", a question which would bring us back to the properties approach, but instead: "Under what conditions can an animal take on face?" and (in practice) "Does this particular animal have a face?" As we will argue more fully in the next section, one such type of condition has to do with the language we use to address animals (or any other entity for that matter). For instance, the imposition of the singular form "an animal" as opposed to the general singular "the animal" or the plural "animals" is nothing like a mere accident of word usage; it is deliberate and necessary. As Derrida (2008, p. 34) insightfully points out, the term "the animal" denotes "all the living things that man does not recognize as his fellows, neighbors, or his brothers." In other words, the very term "the animal" or "animals" is not morally neutral but already makes a decision about moral status and the face of the animal, or its lack thereof. More precisely, even if the use the word "animal" does not make a decision about the *exact* moral status of animals or indeed of particular animals, it already delineates what kind of moral statuses would be acceptable and what kind would be excluded. The language we use pre-configures the moral playing field, constraining our thinking in one way rather than another.

This insight not only shines critical light on the standard approach, which asks about the properties of animals, but should also make us suspicious of attempts to recover Levinas in a way that neutralizes the critical potential of his thinking. One might ask, after reading Levinas, if animals "have" a face, but this makes it seem as if "having a face" is yet another moral property that needs to be determined and avoids the ethical confrontation—the facing itself. The question, then, is not, Does the animal have a face? The form of this question unfortunately redeploys the properties approach and already arranges a response that would be negative. Instead we need to ask, What does it take for an animal to supervene and be revealed as having face in the Levinasian sense? This question is no longer about "moral standing" in a strict sense, since "standing" suggests that there is an ontological

platform onto which morality is mounted. It is therefore a more "direct" ethical question: under what conditions can an animal—this particular animal that appears here before me—be included in the moral community?

Personal Relations, Names, and Places: The Facing and Defacing of Animals

The Levinasian account sketched here suggests that at least one way animals face us is in personal relationships. One type of relation that seems particularly suitable is that of "companionship." Donna Haraway's studies of these kind of interactions are very helpful to developing an understanding this point. She too sheds the Benthamian question whether animals can suffer. Instead, she proposes to ask other questions such as "Can animals play? Or Work" (Haraway 2008, p. 22) and offers us detailed narratives that show the "embodied mindful encounter" one can have with an animal (p. 23)—a dog for instance. As Haraway describes it, it is the relationship that has precedence, both in terms of temporal sequence and importance: "The partners do not pre-exist their relating; the partners are precisely what come out of the inter- and intra-relating of fleshly, significant, semiotic-material being" (Haraway 2008, p. 165). According to Haraway, a (companion) animal and human beings become who they are "in the dance of relating" (p. 25); there is "embodied communication" (p. 26), there is a "becoming with" (p. 32), and there is mutual constitution (p. 216). She consequently criticizes "turning animals (or people) into dead things, into machines whose *reactions* are of interest but who have no *presence*, no *face*, that demands recognition, caring, and shared pain." (p. 71) Haraway then shares with Levinas the view that ethical questions, problems, or challenges cannot be dealt with by means of rules, principles, and categories. Instead, she thinks we have to cope with moral complexity "not resolved by taxonomic hierarchies" (p. 75) but in the face of the other. Derrida also argues that there neither is nor can there be a prescribed calculus for response. The moral problems we encounter *faced* with animals cannot be reduced to the tricks of philosophical reasoning. If and when an animal takes on a face (i.e. when we face that animal), we are called to respond. We are interpellated into having to make a response. We are, in other words, called to be responsible.

However, in order to arrive at a more comprehensive analysis of the conditions under which animals take on face, we must not limit our inquiry to these kinds of encounters and ask more broadly about what Coeckelbergh (2012) calls the conditions of possibility of moral status ascription. Moral consideration is not only constructed in and by personal and social relations; our personal and social relations are at the same time constituted by other conditions and relations. As mentioned previously, one condition/relation is *language*. The moral facing of a particular entity, like an animal, is partly constituted by the way we talk about it. We already mentioned the term "animal". But consider also, for example, the practice of *naming*, which can be considered one of the primal scenes of human/animal interaction and distinction. For a start, humans have always given names to types/categories of animals, indeed the human has always ordered the non-humans s/he encountered. Western culture, fond of "first", "original", and "foundational" acts,

still bears witness to such acts of naming and categorizing "in the beginning". And from the beginning, at least as it has been narrated in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the first man, Adam, was initially charged with bestowing names upon the animals. "Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name" (Genesis 2:19). Consequently, what distinguished the human entity from all the other animals of creation—what differentiated the human from the animal—was this ability to name others, and it is this power of the word, or *logos*, that eventually, within the Western tradition, becomes the defining characteristic of the human being: *zoon logon echon* or the animal possessing the word. It is by using the word that human beings order, categorize, possess, and reign over non-human things such as animals.

But human beings do not just bestow generic names on the various groups of animals, whether that be in the form of colloquialisms like "dog" and "cat" or the more precise scientific nomenclatures of *Canis lupus familiaris* or *Felis silvestris catus*. We also bestow singular proper names on an individual, and thereby individuated, animal. These speech acts have moral consequences; it is a (usually implicit) way of demarcating the moral community, of deciding whether a particular animal is to be situated inside or outside the moral community. We call this specific dog "Lassie" or that cat "Mister Wiskers." When an animal is named in this fashion, it often takes on face and is protected from abuse and killing. It becomes a "pet", a "family member", etc. rather than an "animal." In fact, it becomes more than "a pet." She or he becomes Lassie or Mister Wiskers and is thereby no longer an "it" at all but an other—no longer *what* may be used and abused without consideration but someone *who* matters. It is for this reason, that children who grow up on farms are often prohibited from naming the baby animals that are intended for slaughter. Once a new born pig, for example, is named "Wilber," he is no longer able to be processed and consumed as meat. Or as Margo DeMello (2012, p. 130) explains, "How is subjectivity removed from an animal? Not naming animals that are to be eaten is one way; for the most part, we do not eat those with whom we have a personal relationship." Naming, then, is one of the mechanisms by which any-thing acquires a face. If it has no name, it can be objectified, used, and even slaughtered since it is withdrawn from the sphere of moral considerability. De-naming (or defacing) makes possible killing that is no longer called murder. This also works and has worked, unfortunately, in the case of other human beings. The Nazis, for instance, replaced the proper names of Jewish concentration camp prisoners by numbers. This was not just a mechanism of efficient camp organization, it was part of a general dehumanizing process that made the abuse, enslavement, and eventually slaughter of detainees possible.

The language we use for animals is indeed a matter of life and death. Which words we use typically depend on individual decisions, but more often the "decision" has already been enacted within the language we employ. How we address animals is dependent on the possibilities that are given to us in and structured by our language, on the moral lines and categories that are already part of our linguistic landscape. As Heidegger knew, we live in language, we dwell in it; he called it "the house of Being" (Heidegger 1998). Hence our relations to animals are

also shaped by the language in which we live and the moral categories and decisions it already provides. Of course it is possible, in principle, to do differently, but this requires active reflection on the language(s) we use and their moral implications—implications for the way we treat particular animals.

Consider for example the fact that the animal on the plate often has a different name than the living animal, e.g. in French *vache* (cow) versus *boeuf* (beef) or in English *pig* versus *pork*. Perhaps the latter works as a kind of moral shield. It is as if we are not supposed to remind ourselves of where the meat comes from, indeed "meat" is already a word that no longer reminds us of the living animal. "Language," as Carol Adams points out, "can make animals absent from a discussion of meat, because the act of slaughtering and butchering have already rendered the animal absent through death and dismemberment. Through language we apply to animals' names the principles we have already enacted on their bodies. When an animal is called a 'meat-bearing animal' we effect a misnomer, as though the meat is not the animal herself, as though the meat can be separated from the animal and the animal would still remain" (2010, p. 98). Consequently, we do things with words, to quote a famous analytic philosopher (Austin, 1962). Thus, as Derrida argues it matters a lot whether we talk about "who" or "what." And Haraway echoes this, applying it directly to the question of the animal other, "animals are not allowed personal pronouns such as *who*, but must be designated by *which, that, or it.*" (Haraway 2008, p. 206).

Additionally, and as already suggested, the word "animal" itself is anything but morally neutral. "The animal," Derrida (2008, p. 23) exclaims, "what a word!" This is because this seemingly simple word already institutes an important moral distinction, drawing a line of demarcation between those *logos* using humans who deploy the word and those entities that are designated by the word, operating as if human beings somehow stood apart and had little or nothing to do with animals either in terms of relations or in matters of biology and genetics. In other words, a crucial decision is instituted in the very use of the phrase "the animal". A cut is made in the fabric of entities that effectively distinguishes us from them, and it is a decision that we give ourselves the right to control and institute. "It is," as Derrida writes, "an appellation that men have instituted, a name they have given themselves the right and authority to give to the living other" (2008, p. 23). Furthermore, talking about "animals" or "the animals", as we have done throughout this paper in order to conform to common usage, suggests that there are no morally relevant differences between various kinds of animals and between animal "individuals". Derrida, in particular, reminds us of the necessary and perhaps unavoidable violence that is done to others by the very attempt to name and give expression to the problem: "There is no Animal in the general singular … We have to envisage the existence of 'living creatures,' whose plurality cannot be assembled within the single figure of an animality that is simply opposed to humanity" (Derrida 2008, p. 47). For this reason, Derrida speaks not of "the animal" or "animals" but of *l'animot* (2008, p. 41) a curious looking word or "monstrous hybrid" that is intentionally designed to call attention to this issue, namely, the way that words both face and deface what has been called "animal."

Finally it is not only in social relations and by words that animals come to be faced and/or defaced, material-technological context and geography are also of crucial importance. For an animal, it matters a great deal *where* it is, in which *place* it is, and what techniques and technologies have been used to position it. For example, a "pet" is in the house. This means it is part of the human domicile, the sphere of the "*who*-s" as opposed to the "*what*-s." This position makes a difference, as Heidegger was well aware:

> Let us consider the case of domestic animals as a striking example. We do not describe them as such simply because they turn up in the house but because they belong to the house, i.e. they serve the house in a certain sense. Yet they do not belong to the house in the way in which the roof belongs to the house as protection against storms. We keep domestic pets in the house with us, they *'live' with us*. But we do not live with them if living means: *being* in an animal kind of way. Yet we *are with* them nonetheless…Through this being with animals we enable them to move within our world (Heidegger 1995, p. 210).

By contrast, the animals that are not allowed to occupy the house (e.g. animals in the barn, in the pasture, etc.) are positioned otherwise. They can be used or put to use for various purposes. They are, in Heidegger's terminology a kind of "standing-reserve" (Heidegger 1977) or, following an influential Cartesian insight, nothing more than mindless mechanisms or mere instruments. Furthermore, the animals that are in the industrial farm or the slaughterhouse are transformed into "meat" not only by means of industrial processes and technologies but also through the terminology that is used to distinguish "livestock" from those domestic animals that are "with us." In the context of a contemporary industrial farm, let alone in an industrial slaughterhouse, it becomes very difficult if not impossible for the farmers working in this context—who have become farm *workers*—to build up any personal relation with an animal (as one does with a pet). Of course a farmer may show more "care" and "responsibility" than suggested here, and there are certainly a wider range of relational possibilities than either "industrial" or "personal": there are, for instance, alternative forms of farming and other kinds of slaughtering. But within an industrial context (that is, as long as farmers and animals come to be situated within that technological complex and context), more "care" in the *management* of animals does not render the relation personal yet, and how "careful" the relation becomes depends on how the entire process, installation, building, etc. is configured. In the current settings of industrial farming at least, personal relations have little chance of developing. Unless the animal is taken out of this context and literally out of this place (either by way of physical location or through the bestowing of a name), the face of this other does not appear. Acts of disclosure are made very difficult, when the names, relations, places, and technologies all "work" together to prevent such exposure. In this way, animals are both subjected to and rendered as a "meat machine." The entire apparatus and practice is set up in such a way that animals are situated as faceless, as being otherwise than "other" or as objects to be bred, managed, and eventually killed. They are, as Descartes had already determined, mere mechanisms that can be used (and abused), or, as Heidegger

([1977](#)) characterized it, nothing more than means to an end, part of a "standing reserve" to be manipulated by us for various purposes.

Note that this analysis of conditions of possibility for relations does not in itself advance a straightforward normative position; it does not say that we *should* treat domesticated farm animals in a more personal way. At the same time, an exposition of this Cartesian or Heideggerian view and of these conditions (especially a more detailed one than the one presented here) can play a supporting role within a larger normative argument, and the situation of pets can serve as a paradigmatic case of personal relations that can be used in such an argument. But this is not our main objective, and the claim that all animal relations should be "personal" neither follows from *our* analysis nor from the view that pets are a paradigmatic case of "good" animal relations and that particular relations should be more personal or less instrumental (again, a view we do not defend here and an argument we do not advance).

Moreover, the solicitation of Heidegger here is not meant to suggest that we should contest or even replace Levinas by Heidegger in order to "save face"—and the face of the animal in particular. Both thinkers are part of the same modern European tradition that tends to deny the possibility that animals can take on face. As Derrida ([2008](#)) writes, "Heidegger's discourse is still Cartesian" (p. 146). The animal is not, essentially, a living being that can "die"; instead, it croaks (p. 154). For Heidegger, in particular, the animal had been characterized as existing in a kind of diminished state of being that is "poor in world" or *weltarm* (Heidegger [1995](#), p. 176). For this reason, Heidegger and Levinas occupy similar positions with regard to the animal question. On the one hand, they each, in their own particular way, open up the possibility of facing animals—Levinas through an ethics of otherness that is fundamentally exposed to others and other forms of otherness and Heidegger by way of an engagement with the tradition of *Lebensphilosophie* and his question concerning technology. On the other hand, however, they each show signs of recoiling in the face of the very radicality that they have made possible. In effect, they each (again in very different, albeit related ways) find themselves looking into the face of the animal and retreating from this monstrous possibility. This means that our task is not a matter of simply choosing sides and following one or the other but of continually and persistently reading the one against the other in an effort to think, as Heidegger often describes it, what has been unthought.

For this purpose, let us say a little more about the history of ideas about animals, which also relates to the role of technology. One reason why the possibility of the appearance of the face of the animal has often been closed is that the history of Western philosophy since at least the time of Descartes has understood animals to be little more than machines. This tradition has always taken a properties approach. Descartes, for instance, writes about animals: "they have no reason at all", no language, "no intelligence at all," and he compared them to a mechanical clock, a machine without a rational soul (Descartes [1637](#), p. 45). Consequently "the animal is," as Haraway ([2008](#), p. 77) characterizes it, "forever positioned on the other side of an unbridgeable gap." According to this Cartesian legacy, Tom Regan writes, animals are considered to be "not aware of anything, neither sights nor sounds, smells nor tastes, heat nor cold; they experience neither hunger nor thirst, fear nor

rage, pleasure nor pain. Animals are, he [Descartes] observes at one point, like clocks: they are able to do some things better than we can, just as a clock can keep better time; but, like a clock, animals are not conscious" (Regan 1983, p. 3). And it is for this reason that animal rights philosophy often begins by both demonizing Descartes and contesting his concept of the *bête-machine*.

Regan, in particular, situates his efforts in direct opposition to Descartes, who he considers the "bad guy" in the story of modern philosophy. "There is," Regan (1983, p. 28) writes, "no one *single* reason for attributing consciousness or a mental life to certain animals. What we have is a *set* of reasons, which when taken together, provides what might be called the *Cumulative Argument for animal consciousness*." The "cumulative argument," as Regan characterizes it, consists in the following five elements: "the commonsense view of the world"; linguistic habits by which conscious mind states often come to be attributed to animals (e.g., Fido is hungry); the critique of human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism that disputes the "strict dichotomy between humans and animals"; animal behavior, which appears to be consciously directed and not generated randomly; and evolutionary theory, which suggests that the difference between animals and humans beings "is one of degree and not of kind" (Regan 1983, pp. 25–28). Despite differing opinions concerning the status of the animal, both sides of the debate employ a properties approach. One side (the Cartesian tradition) excludes animals because they do not possess consciousness or rationality; the other (Regan's animal rights philosophy) includes animals on the ground that they do exhibit these same properties to some degree. What is important, for our purposes, is not what makes these two opposing viewpoints different. What is interesting is what they share and hold in common, namely the assumption that the question of the animal should be addressed and must be resolved by way of a properties approach. What Levinas, Heidegger, and other thinkers, like Derrida and Haraway, who (in one way or another) follow in their footsteps, provide are elements of an alternative approach to thinking and responding to the question of the animal—one that focuses not on individual properties but on relationships, names, and places.

Conclusion/Opening Up

Usually, in normative ethics, the discussion about the moral standing of animals is preoccupied with justifications of the moral standing of (particular) animals and, for this purpose, the defense of a specific criterion/principle that is to determine that moral standing—indeed, moral standing in general. Such proposals are then supposed to have hard and urgent implications for the way we ought to treat (particular) animals (and humans). This essay has had a different purpose and effect. Rather than offering and supporting a claim about a criterion for moral standing, we have called into question the very operation by which this "moral science" works. Instead of focusing on first principles, which then have to be applied to the real, messy world of our practices involving animals, we have used Levinas's work and that of others to put the emphasis back where we think it is and should be located— in the practical and experienced encounters and relations with the animals we face.

Moreover, we have argued that thinking in terms of the properties of animals, as the defining feature of their moral standing, is itself not a morally neutral procedure, but has already opened up the possibility of treating animals as "standing reserve" and has created an unbridgeable conceptual, moral, and practical gap between "us" and "them", between the human and non-human. Our moral thinking and our moral language, which are intrinsically bound up with our practices, technologies, and geographies, turned out to be effective methods for defacing animals and letting them appear not as an other *who* matters but as *what* does not count. What is needed then in response to this problem, is not more of the same—for example yet another, more refined criterion and argumentation concerning moral standing—but a turning or transformation in both our thinking about *and* our relations to animals, through language, through technology, and through the various place-ordering practices in which we participate. Indeed, in order to give animals face and to give them a place, in order to really face them and draw them into our moral "zone", it is not enough and not desirable to rely on ontological principles and reasoning alone. We need words, but we also need to open ourselves up to encounters-in-relation in order to provide space within which animals can appear as an Other.

For example, the Indian government has recently enacted law declaring dolphins to be "non-human persons, whose rights to life and liberty must be respected" (Coelho 2013). Now one way to legitimize this is to refer to animal science: one could say that marine biology shows that dolphins are very intelligent mammals, have a social structure, call each other by "name" (a series of complex whistles), etc. Another way to approach the matter is to point to the social-material processes and conditions that render it possible that dolphins now appear as "intelligent" "persons", the historical development of relations between humans and dolphins in which dolphins have gradually taken on a face, and the social decision and the *declaration* that includes dolphins in the moral community. The latter approach does not start from the properties of dolphins, but from the recognition that what we say about them and how we treat them is the result of relations (or the absence thereof). It recognizes that the moral-epistemic ground for the rights of dolphins is not situated in the "essence" of the dolphin as compared to our human "essence", but is something that comes into being, is gradually revealed and constructed as we get to know dolphins in-relation, as human beings who interact with them, watch them, call them by name, etc.—whether as scientists, philosophers, or as lay persons. In India, by means of this declaration, and by means of processes of construction inside *and* outside science, dolphins have now acquired a face. Their "rights" is a recognition of this process, an outcome of this process, but also a constitutive part of it. By declaring them to be persons and to have rights, their moral standing changes.

In so far as words can make a change, we have to decide what kind of relation to animals we want (or more precise, to which particular animals), which is always also at the same time a decision about the moral "cuts" we make. Facing animals also means facing this responsibility, which speaks to us through and as the animal's "face", emerging from those encounters and relations in which the face of the animal becomes *not a mirror of ourselves* but an other calling upon us to *respond* otherwise. Making new cuts in the moral fabric then also means taking responsibility for

decisions concerning human practices, rethinking not only the privilege of the *logos* but also the material of flesh, and reconfiguring not only "the animal" but also "the human." This requires a kind of "moral courage" to challenge the status quo and bring new ways of thinking and acting into being. However, we must avoid a purely voluntarist, activist, and decisionist reading of this advice. Perhaps the re-naming and re-situating of animals (which implies at the same time a re-naming and re-situating of the human being) is only partly a matter of us deliberately changing and wanting to change our thinking, our relations, and our practices. The moral freedom we have to change things is a bounded, swathed freedom. Is it possible to change our relations to animals radically and fully? And if we assume that it is in our power to do so, how is this any different from the usual moral paternalism whereby the decision of a privileged few is imposed on others, supposedly for their benefit? Can we, in other words, free up the relation "to beings from every living, utilitarian, perspective-making project, from every vital design, such that man himself could 'let the being be'?" (Derrida 2008, p. 160) and achieve towards animals what Heidegger called *Gelassenheit*?

After this essay, it is clear that this will be difficult, since moral change in these matters will depend not only on an expression of moral standards or the formulation of a code of ethics but mainly on the concrete relations we have with animals, the context in which they appear, the moral language we use to talk about them, and the technologies and moral geographies that place them. In other words, what will be decisive is not what we think about animals but what we do in the face of others. Furthermore, we should again be aware of the danger attached to efforts that seek definitive solutions, that attempt to reach closure of the discussion by means of the word (*logos*) and reasoned argument alone. Learning from the thinkers mobilized in this investigation, we must also conclude that, in spite of well-intended efforts to do so, there probably is no "final" rational argumentation that would be able to settle the animal question once and for all (e.g. no "final" account of moral standing that will resolve the problem and put an end to debate). What Haraway says with regard to the debate about killing can be applied to the question concerning the moral standing of animals: "Derrida got it right: There is no rational or natural dividing line that will settle the life-and-death relations between human and nonhuman animals; such lines are alibis if they are imagined to settle the matter 'technically'." (Haraway 2008, p. 297). Similarly, there are no rational or natural dividing lines, no single conceptual framework that will settle *all* moral relations between humans and nonhumans; indeed the human/non-human line is already in itself problematic. We have to recognize the limitations of reasoning here. We need openness and response-ability, not in the abstract but related to the lives you and I live. To quote Haraway again: "*Reasons* were well developed on all sides; *commitments* to very different ways of living and dying were what needed to be examined together, without any god tricks and with consequences." (Haraway 2008, p. 298).

We know the principles, the criteria, the arguments, and the reasonings. We have discussed and we will discuss; we have (dis)agreed and we will (dis)agree. We have reflected on their meaning and we will continue to do so in the future. But now it is time to take up the Socratic task to examine ourselves, that is, to examine our lives and our habits. This does not render the work of academic philosophy and science

obsolete. Further thinking and research can and must help us to understand social, linguistic, material, and geographical processes of facing and defacing. Systematic reasoning and empirical studies can contribute to this effort. If there must be a "moral science" at all, it is this kind of science we need. But we should not only *think about*, at a distance from our own lives, but also explore and experiment with creating more ways in which animals come to face us and can appear. For instance in relation to our food and eating practices (the decision to eat fish as opposed to mammals) or our entertainment practices (the dolphins on display in the zoo) we can and do find different moral possibilities, based on our experience in relations and encounters with others. We need not only to talk about animals but to learn how to respond and what "respond" in the case of an animal might mean. In this sense, change regarding the moral standing of animals is not necessarily about animals. It is about us. Facing animals is about facing ourselves and others.

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