

## CHAPTER 10

### What Is the Trace of the Original Face?

#### Levinas, Buddhism, and the Mystery of Animality

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The paradox of the Zen *kōan*<sup>1</sup> resists in a significantly different way what Emmanuel Levinas identifies as the totalizing “way of the same” (*TI*, 38–39). Zen Buddhism provides a critical insight into faciality that goes beyond Levinas’s fundamentally anthropocentric view and undercuts his refusal of “paganism,” thereby providing the ground for a deeper realization of the ethical relationship between humans and animals. The question at hand is whether there exists a fundamental experience of the “original face” (Jp. *honrai no memmoku*)<sup>2</sup> of the animal, which is possible only by way of a direct face-to-face encounter.<sup>3</sup> After making initial observations regarding the relation between the face of the animal and Buddha-nature, I explore what is often an overlooked aspect of Levinas’s philosophy when it comes to applying his philosophy to environmental ethics, namely, the status of the trace (*la trace*) and its relation to ethical transcendence. After a brief reflection on the difference between asymmetry and symmetry, and the relation of this difference to ethical transcendence, I contrast Levinas’s position with the paganism that he critiques. Considering Buddhism as somewhat analogous to paganism, the tension between those perspectives highlights what is at stake in understanding our relation to the nonhuman animal in order to think the metaphysical-ontological dimension of the ethics of that relationship. I conclude by taking up the concept of mystery and consider how this standpoint possibly serves as a way to address the relation between ethical responsibility and transcendence that avoids the fundamentally anthropocentric dimension of the Levinasian interpretation of the trace. Rather than castigating the concept

of mystery, as Levinas does, I propose that mystery is a necessary and fundamental dimension of establishing an ethical relationship with the nonhuman animal. It is at this juncture that Levinas and Zen Buddhism are brought into proximity through their respective understanding of the role that teaching plays in the self-other relationship.

### Animal Faces and Buddha-Nature

There is a famous Zen *kōan* usually stated as the following question: "What was your original face before your parents were born?"<sup>4</sup> Here a distinction is posed between the original and the phenomenal face. A typically Western prejudice would be to construe this in terms of a transhistorical or metaphysical reality as opposed to a historical or phenomenal one. This misses, however, the point of the *kōan*. Buddhism eschews such metaphysical speculation and dualistic frameworks as ultimately meaningless. From its standpoint, emptiness (Sk. *śūnyatā*; Jp. *kū*)<sup>5</sup> and phenomenality (Sk. *tathātā*) indicate a state of originary interdependence or dependent origination (Sk. *pratityasamutpāda*).<sup>6</sup> In other words, something simply is before it is identified as being this or that. There is nothing that arises in existence independently and stands alone. All beings and *dharma*s (or things) are interconnected. Realizing this fundamental nature of existence constitutes wisdom (Sk. *prajñā*) and allows compassion (Sk. *karuṇā*) to emerge. This is the two-pillared heart of Buddhist ethics.

Zen Buddhism has maintained since the time when the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama or Śākyamuni,<sup>7</sup> silently passed along his teaching to his follower and immediate successor, Kāshyapa, that the "face-to-face" relationship is the locus of Dharma<sup>8</sup> transmission. Similarly, according to Levinas, the face-to-face-relationship is the modality of intersubjective existence that conveys the absolute passive demand of the ethical relation, which is a teaching that goes forth from the Other (*Autrui*),<sup>9</sup> as though from a height (*hauteur*), to the self. Levinas's interpretation of the face-to-face relationship parallels the Zen recognition of the necessity of the master in transmitting the Buddha-dharma to the student. The thirteenth-century Japanese Zen master Eihei Dōgen writes: "Masters and disciples always see one another when transmitting and inheriting the Dharma. This is the realization of the way, face-to-face transmission of the ancestral source. . . . Even without knowing one word or understanding half a phrase, the teacher sees the student within himself, and the student lowers the top of his head; this is the correct face-to-face transmission."<sup>10</sup>

Is this true also of the relationship between humans and animals? Is Dharma transmission possible between humans and animals? Another well-known *kōan*, which is the first case in the *Wumenkuan* (Jp. *Mumonkan*), asks, "Does a dog

have Buddha-nature?" to which the Chan (Zen) master Zhaozhou (Jp. Jōshū) responds with an emphatic "No!" (Ch. *wu*; Jp. *mu*). Although one might at first think that this simple answer would have closed the matter, it actually inspired considerable commentary through the ages. However, the matter is made even more complicated by the fact that there are several versions of this *kōan*. In one of those, Zhaozhou gives conflicting answers.

A monk asked Chao-chou [Zhaozhou]: "Does a dog have the Buddha-nature or not?" Chao-chou said: "Yes." The monk said, "If it does, then why does the Buddha-nature push into such a (lowly) bag of skin?" Chao-chou said: "Because it does it knowingly, deliberating transgressing." Then another monk asked: "Does a dog have the Buddha-nature?" Chao-chou said: "No." The monk said: "All sentient beings without exception have the Buddha-nature. For what reason then does a dog not have it?" Chao-chou said: "Because it exists in karmic consciousness."<sup>11</sup>

Zhaozhou's answer goes beyond mere ambivalence or paradox. The term *wu/mu* means "no," but it also signifies "not," "nothing," "non-being," or "have not." It is the opposite in meaning of *u*, which means "yes," but also "is," "being," or "have." In the everyday context, *mu* and *u* are relative terms. Zhaozhou's *wu/mu*, however, was not a relative answer but rather an absolute reply. The inquiring monk was not only asking about the particular dog but whether all sentient beings possess Buddha-nature. Zhaozhou's response was an attempt to sever all attachment the monk had to the very concept of Buddha-nature.

To say that Buddha-nature is either this or that, or neither this nor that, is to adopt a standpoint that invariably falls into either a substantializing or essentializing ontology, or what Levinas refers to as the totalizing logic of *theōria*, the imperialistic way of the same. Zhaozhou understood that all attempts logically to construe the meaning of Buddha-nature invariably fall into paradoxical absurdity. The absolute *wu* or *u* indicates the impossibility of all intellection to thoroughly comprehend the Dharma-nature of reality. Buddha-nature must be *experienced*. Only after the experience is it perhaps possible to render linguistically its meaning, but such language will be nonsensical to those who are not personally experienced, that is, who have not at least partially awakened to the truth of the karmically interdependent character of Buddha-nature.

To ask whether a dog has Buddha-nature is tantamount to asking whether all animals have Buddha-nature. Before that question can be *philosophically* answered, one needs also to inquire about the nature of Buddha-nature. To even make that very inquiry is to risk ontologizing Buddha-nature, that is, rendering it either as a conceptual object or something that exists. Buddha-nature is

neither. And yet Śākyamuni Buddha himself speaks of Buddha-nature as that which must be affirmed. But if Buddha-nature is beyond predication, then how can it possibly be affirmed? Here Buddhism and Levinas stand in close proximity. The Other is affirmed as other, and conversely the absolutely other is affirmed as the Other, precisely by refusing to associate affirmation with an ultimate naming, identification, or classification. In other words, by not totalizing otherness under the hegemony of self-same Reason.

If we try to unpack the meaning of the *kōan* further, we engage the Buddhist concept of *karma*, which means literally act or deed, but also conveys the interconnectedness of all beings as well as the idea that Buddha-nature is, in some sense, only actual if it is realized in consciousness. Here, this does not refer to whether a dog (or any other nonhuman animal) is cognizant or not of Buddha-nature, but rather whether we are capable of moving beyond an anthropocentric standpoint such that we can simultaneously affirm both the presence and nonpresence of Buddha-nature in the nonhuman animal. In other words, this signifies a movement beyond a simple dualistic standpoint and points toward a realization that Buddha-nature is fundamentally ineffable and, moreover, to use Levinas's language, "otherwise than"—not being or essence—what can be known absolutely by rational thinking. This is the breakthrough that the *kōan* points toward, but which is only fully realized when one truly lets go of such thinking and experiences the emptiness—not nothingness—of all things, human and nonhuman, which is to say, the fundamental interconnectedness of impermanent beings and things. According to Dōgen, the "face-to-face" relationship is the locus of Dharma transmission in the Zen tradition.<sup>12</sup> "If you can understand the real movement," he states, "you will understand true enlightenment and awakening. If we can understand 'Buddha,' we can understand 'nature,' since they penetrate each other."<sup>13</sup> Here one begins to have a glimpse of insight into what the "original face" of Buddha-nature really is. Transmission of what the Buddha terms the "treasury of the true Dharma eye" refers to when the fundamental unity between the seer and the seen, Buddha and nature, human and nonhuman, is established. This is "going beyond Buddha, [which] is neither causality nor fruition. However, there is realization-through-the-body and complete attainment of 'you don't hear it' at the moment of talking."<sup>14</sup> The significance of the face resonates throughout one's being, both body and mind, leading one to identify-in-difference-all-beings. This is the basis of an ethical relationship with animals in Zen Buddhist thought.

"One cannot entirely refuse the face of the dog," writes Levinas. "It is in terms of the face [that one understands] the dog. . . . The parentage of this phenomenon of the face is not at all in the dog. . . . It is not because you recognize the human face that you see the face of the dog" (*AI*, 3). Perhaps

this is a vital clue for determining whether animals possess Buddha-nature, and whether that realization is transmittable. If the Buddha-face can be "brought forth," as Dōgen claims, it is because it is already "there," that is, originally existing. Dependent origination precludes the possibility of something arising out of nothing, since such a thing would be independent. The original face is the Buddha-face, which is to say, Buddha-nature. Yet there is a relational priority that exists in terms of realizing this. For Levinas, "the human face is completely different and only afterwards do we discover the face of an animal."<sup>15</sup> The face of one who is awakened is different from that of one who is not. So it is with the relationship between master and disciple, teacher and student. The Buddha-nature of the animal is what makes possible the realization of the interconnectedness between the human and the nonhuman animal. This is only recognized by one who has seen the "face" of the other being in a *nondual* perspective. Grasping the relation between Buddha-nature and animality necessitates a fundamental experience of the original face of the animal, which in turn is possible only by way of a direct face-to-face encounter. Buddha-nature is not something that can be cognitively known; it must be *actualized*, which is to say, transmitted between two beings fully present and aware of each other in the moment of transmission.

One of the defining features of Zen that distinguishes it from other approaches in Buddhism is that awakening is understood as a simultaneously occurring activity between the one who attains realization and the one who acknowledges it. While the relationship between the disciple and the master in this regard is unquestioned in the Zen Buddhist tradition, it also occurs, though admittedly far less frequently, in the relationship between humans and animals. Buddhism extends the teaching relationship that for Levinas constitutes the essence of the ethical beyond the merely human face to face to include the animal. Stated otherwise, animals are also teachers of the Dharma, and therefore beings worthy of full ethical consideration.<sup>16</sup>

Although not the principal focus of the present essay, I would be remiss not to address, however briefly, the relation between the full ethical consideration of animals and the practice of eating meat. This is not a consideration for Levinas, whose own tradition allows for the consumption of meat, albeit in its strictest form under *kasbrut*, the set of Jewish dietary laws. Buddhism, on the other hand, has since its inception held a different perspective. Although the concept of "law" is foreign to it, Buddhism does adhere to "precepts," that is, to general guidelines to help regulate both thought and action. Theravāda, or early, Buddhism formulated numerous precepts for those following the monastic path, but at the top of the list for both monastics and laity is the precept against taking the life of other living beings, both human and nonhuman. This prohibition

was also adopted by the later Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna forms of Buddhism and stands as the first of the essential or great precepts. Levinas establishes the commandment against murder as the first word that inaugurates the ethical relationship. Buddhism, along with Hinduism and Jainism, extends this notion of killing to include the animal, founding it on the general ethical principal of doing no injury or harm (Sk. *ahimsā*) to others. Some forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism, which includes Zen, with its expanded focus on the bodhisattva<sup>17</sup> as the highest ideal, developed what are sometimes referred to as the three pure precepts—to do no evil, to do good, and to liberate all beings—which go hand in hand with the practice of *ahimsā* and a plant-based diet. Seen from this perspective (the Christian sacrament of Eucharist aside), the practice of devouring one's Dharma teacher would indeed seem strange if not repulsive.

### Transcendence and the Trace

Levinas associates the elemental and the pagan with the concepts of immanence, mystery, and enchantment, which he rejects on the grounds of their coercive, violent tendency to render the subject susceptible both to domination and to exercising the power of dominating. Yet most attempts to derive a nonhuman ethics from Levinas's philosophy basically try to paganize his distinctively Jewish-based philosophy. In doing so, they arguably commit a violence against Levinas's own text since all violence on the field of ethical relationships occurs first in thought, according to Levinas. A critical dimension that is often overlooked when considering the application of Levinas's conception of ethics to nonhuman animals is the notion of the *trace*.<sup>18</sup> In Levinas's hermeneutic, the trace is a disturbance, a disruption that produces interiority by causing the same to recognize and respond, even if negatively or apathetically, to the exteriority of the other. The face of the Other is the trace of the passing of a remote, never present, immemorial, heteronomous past;<sup>19</sup> a "*signification without a context*" (TI, 23), the "already said" (OB, 183). It is not simply because the Other is other than the self that the Other has an ethical priority. According to Levinas, the first ethical teaching of the Other—the prohibition against murder—is found in the "face" (*visage*) of the Other, which is the trace of what is "otherwise than being," an absolute, infinite other that Levinas does not hesitate to name repeatedly in both his philosophical and religious, or confessional, writings as "God." The height that both summons and commands is for Levinas nothing other than divinity, the source of all signification and the locus of all ethical movement revealed in the trace. And yet, the trace of the absolutely other, revealed in and as the face of the other person, exposes the meaning of transcendence as

*sociality*, as the interpersonal relationship with the Other: "The absolutely other is the Other" (TI, 39). Levinasian transcendence is ethical because it *is* ethics.

A primary approach of many who have tried to employ Levinas in the service of constructing an animal ethics has been either to extend the concept of the face to include those of the nonhuman other, sentient or nonsentient (for example, the face of a mountain), or to ignore altogether the distinctive metaphysical dimension of transcendence, subsequently effecting a reduction to an ontological transcendence, a critical difference posed primarily in *Totality and Infinity*. "Transcendence," writes Levinas,

designates a relation with a reality infinitely distant from my own reality, yet without this distance destroying this relation and without this relation destroying this distance, as would happen with relations within the same. . . . We have called this relation metaphysical. . . . It is prior to the negative or affirmative proposition; it first institutes language, where neither the no nor the yes is the first word. (TI, 41–42)

In this passage, Levinas is both removed from and yet close to the Zen understanding of the Buddha-dharma. Unlike the Levinasian understanding of the infinite distance between the same and the other, Buddha-nature collapses this difference into what it would consider to be a nontotalizing unity or whole while at the same time, like Levinas, maintaining that the Buddha-nature is beyond positive or negative proposition.

Despite Levinas's own retention and subsequent redefinition of the term *transcendence*, at least in his earlier work, this is a discussion also occurring in some circles of Levinas scholarship, centered on the question of whether Levinas is principally a secular or a religious thinker. It seems, to me at any rate, that the majority of those who want to extend Levinas's thinking into the domain of environmental ethics tend to situate him in the former category. Yet, despite his turn toward a deeper consideration of immanence, or at least of those aspects of being generally associated with immanence, Levinas's interpretation of the ethical is predicated on the possibility of being able to leave the Earth—that is, to break the hold of the totality of being—in order to be exposed to the transcendence of the radically other, in other words, to that which is otherwise than being.

An interesting and innovative approach is to take recourse to a deconstructive move that locates an element of undecidability that opens ethical transcendence to the nonhuman dimension; however, this falls short in its assertive assumption that transcendence necessarily signifies ethics. A case in point rests

with an example that is often cited by those wishing to read Levinas with an eye toward a nonhuman conception of ethics. In his essay titled "The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights," Levinas remarks, after considering the biblical passage in Exodus that notes the role dogs played in liberating Israel during the slaying of the firstborn by the Egyptians, "a transcendence in the animal!" (DF, 152). He then describes his experience with a dog while he was a prisoner of war, ironically referring to the dog as "the last Kantian in Nazi Germany" (DF, 153). This is a significant passage for those who want to argue that the basis for an ethical relation with animals exists in the framework of Levinas's philosophy. This rather idiosyncratic account disrupts the coherency of Levinas's otherwise consistent position regarding ethics as a matter solely concerning the interhuman relationship. Because the dog represents an interruption in Levinas's thinking about ethics, it could be argued that this allows for a space to extend the concept of transcendence to include the ethical relation to the nonhuman animal. An interruption, however, is not necessarily an ethical signal, nor is the desire to incorporate certain terminology a justification for reading into Levinas a dimension that simply is not present in his thinking, and not present for very strong and committed religious reasons.

Why should the other be granted some higher ethical status than the self? All animal and environmental ethics entail a sense of obligation to nature, even if the precise ground or nature of this obligation is contestable. Yet it is indeed the very ground of ethical responsibility that Levinas insists on. Levinasian ethics centers on the concern about and sense of responsibility for the Other in her or his exposure and vulnerability. The face of the other human is prioritized by Levinas because of its capacity for speech and appeal. Whether it is possible to extend this dimension to include the nonhuman animal face is the crux of the matter. From one perspective, animals are certainly vulnerable and many species, such as dogs, display what can easily be construed as emotion and needs, and are able to communicate these feelings accordingly. From another perspective, the vulnerability and relative weakness of animals, compared to the technologically superior human being, serves as the basis for an argument against any feeling of ethical responsibility toward the nonhuman and instead suggest rather a relation of domination by the human over the animal. This latter view is certainly not shared by Buddhist thinking, nor is it supported by Levinas's philosophy, even if he does draw a distinction between the human and nonhuman in terms of the extent of responsibility.

The status of ethical responsibility in Levinas is inseparable from the origin of responsibility. A difficulty for many readers of Levinas is that the relation between responsibility and the trace invariably forces one to address the question of God. In his philosophical (as opposed to his confessional) writings, Levinas

draws inspiration and support for his use of the terms *transcendence* and *God* most notably from Plato's idea of the Good as *epekeina tēs ousias* and Descartes's *idée de l'infini*, elucidated in his "Third Meditation," as the thought that is overflowed by its *ideatum*. Yet this does not mean that Levinas affirms the Cartesian conception of the subject as the inheritance of the medieval concept of substance. While this may indeed be true for Descartes, this is decidedly not Levinas's conception of God, since it reduces God (even understood as infinite substance, as it is for Descartes) to being. The force of Levinas's argument regarding the ethical primacy of the Other and the irreversibility of the self's responsibility, not only for itself but for the other as well, rests precisely on the inability of thought to conceive God, thereby signaling our incapacity to approach the Other as simply another self. This question of God is important because God is the "wholly otherwise,"<sup>20</sup> signified in the trace that is present as an absolute passivity in the face of the Other. It is to the face as the trace of the absolutely other that the self responds in the ethical relationship; that is, to the realization that the other always stands outside comprehension, or to put it otherwise, outside the ontological scope of theory or philosophy. In this sense, ethics precedes ontology.

The Other is ethically significant because the face of the other (*l'autre*) is the trace of an absolute alterity, a movement that indicates what is otherwise than being. The concept of the trace, which Levinas expressly connects in numerous places in his writing to the thought of God, is precisely what needs to be addressed, if one is to avoid merely falling back into the simplistic claim that there is an inherent or intrinsic value to nature that ultimately must be acknowledged and respected. Would this not ground, however, a Levinasian animal and environmental ethics in some sense not of the sacred (*sacré*) but instead of the holy (*saint*)?<sup>21</sup> Levinas would of course reject this move, as would many others for understandable and philosophically justifiable reasons, even if they do not follow Levinas here. It is incumbent on them, however, to explain why the notion of the trace, which is so fundamental to Levinas's project, can or should be ignored or transformed, and if so then what supplies the content to the formalism of the ethical relation between the self and the Other.

### Asymmetry and Symmetry

The notion of the trace refers back to the radical difference of the other (human and nonhuman), and the asymmetrical, nonreciprocal demand or obligation of responsibility that the other imposes on the self. This is the crucial dimension of Levinas's thinking on which his entire conception of ethics is based. If the face is considered without reference to the trace, as is often the case in numerous

nonreligious interpretations of Levinas, the ethical is stripped of its very force. But is it possible to retain a sense of ethical transcendence that is not predicated on a radical asymmetry? From a Buddhist perspective, it is.

David Wood is a pioneering voice in the area of environmental philosophy and animal ethics. Although not a Buddhist, he offers a similar analysis that supports a symmetrical conception of the ethical relation. Wood is also a thinker of immanence, and in this respect he shares similar ground with Buddhist thinking. He takes up the challenge that Levinas poses regarding the relation between the ethical and the ontological, but what is noticeably absent in his analysis of Levinas is the importance of the role of transcendence. While I am not prone to follow Wood to the point of declaring "Where Levinas Went Wrong" (I might phrase it "Where Levinas Goes Otherwise"), the title of the third chapter of his *The Step Back*, I am sympathetic to the concerns he raises, particularly with regard to his charge that Levinas's construal of the history of metaphysics as ontology and his, at least early, opposition of ethics and ontology, is problematic in its reductionism. For Wood, this opposition of ethics and ontology reveals itself principally in what he terms the "dangerous" opposition between the asymmetrical and the symmetrical. He writes,

If we understand the ethical relation to the other as purely asymmetrical, we are establishing this relation on the same grounds, with a reversed valence, as those that allow the greatest violence. Asymmetry is just what characterizes the relation between overwhelming power and victimhood. And what worries me here is that focusing on the relation of asymmetry will distract us from thinking about those *complex forms of mutual dependency and interaction* that would block a simple reversal of the valency of the relation . . . how the asymmetrical relation of obligation can be productively conjoined with symmetrical relations (of friendship, cooperation, negotiation, etc.).<sup>22</sup>

Wood's reading rests on the question of whether it is possible, much less meaningful, to separate ontology from ethics, since for him the actualization of ethics, as well as social and political relations, "demands of us . . . that we focus on the theoretical and practical tasks . . . that open up ever more complex symmetries, and mixed forms of symmetry and asymmetry."<sup>23</sup> What is implied in asymmetry is not only the notion of height, to which Wood correctly directs our attention elsewhere in his book, but equally the irreversibility, to which he alludes in the passage cited above, of the ethical relation that obligates the self to assume an infinite responsibility for the Other without expectation of reciprocity. Indeed, this is the heart of the ethical relation, namely, the face-to-face relationship, which is always and primordially dyadic in character. This

is precisely where Levinas is most problematic for many philosophers, as this is where he leaves the climate of philosophy, despite his declared identity as a phenomenologist with regard to method, and moves to the dimension of religion, albeit understood as the relation with the other person and not with a transcendent God per se. As Wood adroitly draws to our attention though, the question of God cannot be simply ignored or bypassed. It is here that one may contest Wood's reading, which suggests that Levinas remains confined to the strictures of ontotheology or traditional metaphysics.

Wood's concerns might perhaps be addressed by reading Levinas alongside of Jean-Luc Nancy. One finds expressed in Nancy a conception of community that not only allows for difference but is also predicated on it, "the inoperative community" (*la communauté désœuvrée*)<sup>24</sup> that neither opposes universality and difference nor collapses them into an ontologically comprehensible unity. Such a conception of community inverts Levinas's stance on separated being as that which makes being-in-common possible, an inversion that subsequently radicalizes the idea of transcendence as a fully *immanent* transcendence. Nancy's notion of transcendence parallels Levinas's, insofar as it is also primarily a movement toward the other, though not compelled by a metaphysical desire (either *désir* or *Begierde*).<sup>25</sup> And while for Nancy "community is the community of others,"<sup>26</sup> transcendence is radical exposure to the limit of existence, which is finitude itself. In this shared space of finite being, singularities are able to form community though their mutual exposure, producing perhaps the very event that Wood calls for and that Buddhism identifies as dependent origination.

Dōgen provides helpful insight here. He affirms that the "mountains, rivers, and the great earth are all the ocean of Buddha-nature" insofar as they "all depend on Buddha-nature."<sup>27</sup> This dependency surpasses all understanding, yet it is all around us. "If this is so, to see mountains and rivers is to see Buddha-nature."<sup>28</sup> By extension, to see animals is also to see Buddha-nature, and when this occurs we also see into our own true nature. In a radical move, Dōgen rejects the limitation of those positions to only sentient beings and expands the concept of Buddha-nature, in accordance with his expansion of the concept of mind, to include both sentient and nonsentient beings, as well as ever-changing phenomena and states of consciousness. "Buddha-nature is always *whole being*."<sup>29</sup> In other words, Buddha-nature is self-creating and this self-creation is a perpetual re-creation, which is the meaning of dependent origination.

### Paganism and Mystery

Despite numerous provocative and interesting attempts to assign ethical significance to the elemental or *il y a*, or to broaden the concept of the face to include

the natural world and nonhuman others, Levinas's own treatment of the ethical is delimited, due to the very nature of its approach, by the question of the interpersonal face-to-face relationship. Certainly, there are indicators in his work that seem not to preclude entirely the possibility of broadening his conception of ethics to include at least some dimension of our relation with nonhuman entities, such as animals. Nevertheless, the task of formulating a Levinasian ground for an environmental or animal ethics is problematic, especially when considering his interpretation of paganism and by extension the natural world.

Levinas's construal of paganism is determined largely by his Judaic background and his reaction to the *Blut und Boden* ideology of Nazism. Via a polemic against Hegel, Heidegger, and practically the entire history of Western ontology, including Christianity, he associates the elemental with a retention and promotion of the concept of mystery. "Here we have," he writes, "the eternal seduction of paganism, beyond the infantilism of idolatry, which long ago was surpassed. *The sacred filtering into the world*—Judaism is perhaps no more than the negation of all that. To destroy the sacred groves—we understand now the purity of this apparent vandalism. The mystery of things is the source of cruelty towards [humankind]" (*DF*, 232). Elsewhere, in a discussion on the image, Levinas castigates the "mystery of being" (*CPP*, 3) (and by extension paganism) along the same lines as "magic, song, music, and poetry" (*CPP*, 7), because they enchant, that is, indicate "a hold over us" (*CPP*, 3), thus rendering us susceptible to domination. Conversely, a subject capable of being so dominated is a subject capable of domination. According to Levinas, the natural enjoyment of the elemental can easily slide into or lend itself to a perspective that is either blind to or refuses the dimension of transcendence that makes all ethical sensibility possible. In other words, in this natural enjoyment (*jouissance*), the absolute alterity of goodness is eschewed in favor of the elemental anonymity of the earth, wherein all ethical subjectivity is mysteriously dissolved into the *ekstasis* of a primordial feeling of unity or wholeness, and the critical conjunction of human freedom and ethical responsibility subjugated or subsumed by a sense of destiny. Here the concept of power comes to the fore, not only as the elemental powers of nature, but also with respect to the powers of technology, through which the world itself and its very meaning is shaped.

Good modernist that he is at times, Levinas rejects all semblances of mystery on the grounds of its coercive, tyrannical, violent possibilities, and also because mystery is inseparable from paganism, which is to say, radical immanence or the purely elemental. Does Levinas's interpretation of paganism, however, constitute a sufficient ground for rejecting the element of mystery as constitutive for an ethical conception of the Earth, and for our purposes here, of an ethical relationship to the nonhuman animal? Stated differently, is mystery a

necessary aspect to formulating an ethical relation to the Earth and to all its inhabitants? And is the dimension of mystery retained, even if unacknowledged as such, in Levinas's own construal of alterity as the element of *surprise* that resists the totalizing tendency of a purely rational consciousness to completely comprehend the world and thus the other—the very mark of intersubjective violence, according to him?

Buddhism arguably retains a dimension of mystery in the idea of Buddha-nature. This is part of what is expressed in the very nonlogical structure of the *kōan*. The face-to-face transmission of the Buddha-dharma is both a transcendence and a mystery, while at the same time being a wholly ordinary event, just as the phenomenal encounter with the face of the Other is for Levinas. And what is the trace if not a mystery, even if it is not tied to a pagan conception? Surely, for many the "otherwise than being" that the trace signifies or points toward is indeed mysterious!

Levinas wants to avoid either divinizing the natural world or romanticizing nature, which is why, for him, a nonhuman ethics is perhaps an impossibility. It is, of course, possible to extend certain ideas, such as the face, speculatively to include the elemental or nature, but such a move necessarily invokes a certain type of paganism and marks a significant departure from Levinas's Judaic ground. For Levinas, the Other is ethically meaningful not simply because the Other is other or different, but rather because the face is the trace of absolute alterity, of *illeity*, which for Levinas refers to the otherness of God arising from a conception of the beyond expressed in terms of the third (*le tiers*). There is a similar logic at play in the different but proximate notion of the third person (*la troisième personne*) wherein the self's relation to others occurs insofar as the self stands in relation to the Other whose face is the trace of *illeity*. This is what preserves transcendence and refuses the full immanence of community. "*Beyond being is a third person*," claims Levinas, emphasizing these words, "which is not definable by the oneself, by ipseity. . . . The *illeity* of the third person is the condition for the irreversibility."<sup>30</sup> Elsewhere he writes: "The presence of the face, the infinity of the other, is a destituteness, a presence of the third party (that is, of the whole of humanity that looks at us)" (*TI*, 213). The meaning of the trace, in Levinas's reformulation of it, is ethical, and ethics is transcendence actualized.

The status of the multiple third to which *illeity* points is the crux of the matter. By grounding community in the neutrality of divinity or God (that is, in the *il* of *illeity*), animals, mountains, rivers, the elemental forces of wind, fire, and rain, for Levinas, do not present a face in the same manner as another person, precisely because they are not faces that "speak." Yet, while such natural phenomena express and give meaning to the self, do they necessarily invoke or

produce the idea of infinity and the correlative ideas of difference and distance in the same qualitative sense as does the human other? And if not, is the transcendence that many associate with such phenomena necessarily ethical? It seems to me that this is precisely the tipping point of trying to apply the formal framework of Levinasian ethics, which is undeniably an interhuman ethics, to environmental and animal ethics. Can one do this if the crucial concept of the *trace* is not fully taken into account? And if it is not, then what is the basis for Levinas's claim that the face, the presence, of the Other calls the freedom of the self-same into question and thereby marks the asymmetry of the ethical relationship? Is a Levinasian ground for a nonhuman ethics able fully to escape or evade the aspect of mystery, which paganism knows as transcendence in immanence, if this grounding follows Levinas's distinction between the other and the elemental?

Let us imagine another scenario framed not by assertions of what is real, true, commanding, or sacred, but rather by a series of questions addressing the general concern of how to think the concept of ethical transcendence with respect to the Earth: Why not assert rather the mystery of the Earth as that which stands over and against the onslaught of technological ravage that has produced much of the current environmental crisis and the almost unimaginable slaughter of countless animals? Why not this other difference, a difference other than that of the Other, as that which prevents us from assuming a sovereign stance based on some rational identification with the Earth? Can we think of having an ethical relation with the Earth itself and *all* its nonhuman inhabitants, or must that relation always and necessarily be political because the Earth is always the third for us? Is the concept of mystery, understood as transcendence, a necessary standpoint to formulate an ethical relation to the Earth? Does Levinas's own construal of alterity border on such a standpoint insofar as it is the destabilizing dimension of surprise that resists the totalizing tendency of a sovereign human, all too human, consciousness?

The principal difference here between the philosophies of Levinas and Zen Buddhism concerns the status of the *beyond*. Both recognize that the attempt to comprehend the other rationally—whether it is the other person, the absolutely other, or Buddha-nature—invariably results in misunderstanding the ethical relationship, and promotes violence and delusion. Levinas's own inability to answer whether an ethical relationship is possible with animals finds company with Zhaozhou's conflicting response about whether a dog has Buddha-nature. Both Levinas and Zen affirm the primacy of the face-to-face relationship and the teaching that is conveyed through it. It is perhaps impossible to determine absolutely whether an animal ethics stands on the same ground as interpersonal ethics, but Buddhism's metaphysics of a nondual whole that refuses to take a

firm position regarding transcendence, in the sense of relating to an otherwise than being, bypasses epistemological problems and potentially coercive tendencies that haunt Levinas's conception of ethics. The nonhuman animal has always been a mystery to the human animal, and its very difference from the human has more often than not been used to justify its cruel and inhumane treatment. The view that all sentient and nonsentient beings are Buddha-nature calls the individual self and its freedom into question in just as powerful a way as does the Levinasian Other.

Levinas teaches that the revelation of the face in its very nudity and defenselessness is the appeal of the Other to the self to respond, to assume responsibility not only for itself, but for all others as well. This impossible infinite demand is the primordial teaching, in which "in its non-violent transitivity the very epiphany of the face is produced" (TI, 51). It opens the possibility of discourse and therefore the possibility of forming new relationships and new bridges of understanding. The face of the animal conveys that very same vulnerability, and perhaps even more so because it cannot participate at the same level of communication. Despite Levinas's ambivalence about this, even a snake has a face and deserves the dignity of life. Levinas tells us that the Other "is manifested in a Mastery that does not conquer, but teaches" and that "this voice coming from another shore teaches transcendence itself" (TI, 171). Buddhism also teaches that there is an "other shore," but here it is not a Mastery but rather a Mystery that teaches. Yet this is a mystery devoid of magic or sorcery, a mystery in which the distinction that Levinas draws between the pagan "sacred" and the ethical or religious "holy" collapses, or "falls away," as various Zen masters have described what happens to the dual structure of mind/body in the moment of awakening or enlightenment (Jp. *satori*). This is the *prajñāpāramitā*, the "perfection of wisdom" in which all dualisms are revealed as "empty" (Sk. *śūnya*) and without "form." This "mystery" calls on the self to relinquish its sovereign conception of ego-identity and see that all beings and things are interconnected without hierarchy.

#### Notes

1. *Kōan* is a Japanese term for a narrative, question, or statement that challenges conventional thinking because of its generally paradoxical nature. It is used in Zen practice to help the practitioner break through the strictures of purely rational thinking in order to free the mind of conceptual attachments. It helps to produce what in Zen is referred to as the Great Doubt, which is a stage toward reaching enlightenment or awakening.

2. The following abbreviations will be used to designate the etymological origin of various important Asian terms: Ch. = Chinese, Jp. = Japanese, Sk. = Sanskrit.



3. I have developed this position elsewhere, bringing into dialogue Levinas and the Japanese philosopher Eihei Dōgen. See my "Zen Eye Hunter, Zen Eye Hunted: Revealing the Animal Face of Buddha-Nature," in David Jones, ed., *Buddha Nature and Animality* (San Francisco: Jain Publishers, 2007), 149–63.

4. This question is a transformation of the question asked by the sixth Chan ancestor Huineng (Jp. Eno) in case 23 of the famous collection of *kōans* titled the *Wumenkuan* (Jp. *Mumonkan*), or *The Gateless Barrier*. "Think neither of good nor evil. At such a moment, what is the true self [original self] of monk Myo?" See Zenkei Shibayama, *The Gateless Barrier: Zen Comments on the Mumonkan*, trans. Sumiko Kudo (Boston: Shambhala, 2000), 23; translation modified. The term *original face* (or "original nature") is first found in the writings of Huang Po. See Huang Po, "The Wan Ling Record," in *The Teaching of Huang Po: On the Transmission of Mind*, trans. John Blofeld (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 129.

5. This is a key Mahāyāna, especially Mādhyamika, Buddhist term. The various forms of Buddhism that flowered in East Asia, particularly Chan/Zen, in large measure resulted from interaction between Indian Mahayana and Chinese Daoism. The standpoint of absolute nothingness reflects the movement of *Dao*: "doing non-doing" or "acting non-acting" (Ch. *wei wuwei*), the spontaneous, unconditioned way of natural existence. The simultaneous unity and difference of all entities, absolute nothingness or emptiness, does not mean "nonbeing" in the sense of the conceptual opposite of "being." There is neither a temporal nor spatial disjunction expressed in the difference between absolute nothingness and being, nor between absolute nothingness and the relative nothingness of nonbeing.

6. Dependent origination is a fundamental metaphysical concept common to all schools of Buddhism. Along with the concept of *karma*, it forms the Buddhist conception of causality, stating that all phenomena arise together in a mutually interdependent nexus of cause and effect. Because all phenomena are thus conditioned and transient or impermanent, they have no real independent identity and thus no permanent, substantial existence, even if to the ordinary mind this is not apparent. All phenomena are therefore fundamentally empty or boundless.

7. Literally, "Sage of the Śākya clan."

8. In the Buddhist context, *Dharma* means something akin to a cosmic law and order and also to the teachings of the Buddha as found in the sutras and commentaries. In the Zen of Dōgen, its meaning is extended to include the teaching that can be found in the natural world of phenomena (which is also an early meaning of the term).

9. The convention established, with Levinas's approval, in translating *autrui/Autrui* (the personal other/s) as "Other" with a capitalized "O" and *autrel/Autre* (otherness in general; alterity) as "other" will be followed.

10. Dōgen, "Face-to-Face Transmission," trans. Reb Anderson and Kazuaki Tanahashi, in *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye: Zen Master Dogen's Shobo Genzo*, vol. 2, ed. Kazuaki Tanahashi (Boston and London: Shambhala, 2010), 572.

11. Cited in "Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō Buddha-nature* (Part 3)," trans. Norman Waddell and Abe Masao, *The Eastern Buddhist* New Series IX, no. 2 (October 1976): 80.

12. See esp. Dōgen, "Face-to-Face Transmission," in *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*, 569–78.

13. Dōgen Zenji, "Buddha-nature," in *Shōbōgenzō: The Eye and Treasury of the True Law*, vol. 4, trans. Kōsen Nishiyama and John Stevens (Tokyo: Nakayama Shobo, 1983), 122.

14. See Dōgen, "Going beyond Buddha," trans. Mel Weitsman and Kazuaki Tanahashi, in *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*, 315.

15. *Ibid.*, 172.

16. I address this teaching dimension in Levinas's philosophy in my "Breaking the Closed Circle: Levinas and Platonic *Paideia*," *Dialogue and Universalism* 8, no. 10 (1998): 97–106; reprinted in Claire Katz and Lara Trout, eds., *Emmanuel Levinas: Critical Assessments*, vol. II: *Levinas and the History of Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 285–95; see also my "There's More than Meets the Eye: A Glance at Casey and Levinas," *The Pluralist* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 98–103. With regard to the relation between the animal and teaching, see my "Zen Eye Hunter, Zen Eye Hunted: Revealing the Animal Face of Buddha-Nature."

17. Meaning literally from the Sanskrit "enlightened (*bodhi*) existence (*sattva*)," this term refers to an awakened being (*buddha*) that compassionately refuses to enter *nirvāna* in order to continue to assist with the awakening or enlightenment of other beings.

18. The notion of the trace is pivotal for Levinas and recurs throughout his writings. For a sustained discussion, see Emmanuel Levinas, "The Trace of the Other," trans. Alphonso Lingis, in Mark C. Taylor, ed., *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 345–59; Emmanuel Levinas, "Meaning and Sense," in *CPP*, 102–7. For secondary sources see Robert Bernasconi, "The Trace of Levinas in Derrida," in David Wood and Robert Bernasconi, eds., *Derrida and Difference* (Coventry: Parousia Press, 1985), 17–44; and Edward S. Casey, "Levinas on Memory and the Trace," in John Sallis, Giuseppina Moneta, and Jacques Taminiaux, eds., *The Collegium Phaenomenologicum* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989), 241–55.

19. See Emmanuel Levinas, "Diachrony and Representation," in *TO*, 111–14. Put differently, the "subordination" of the ethical Saying (*le Dire*) to the ontological Said (*le Dit*) is a reduction whereby the Saying goes beyond the Said, being prior to the Said, and is yet paradoxically "absorbed and died in the Said [*s'absorbait et mourait dans le Dit*]" (*OB*, 36).

20. See Emmanuel Levinas, "Wholly Otherwise," trans. Simon Critchley, in Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, eds., *Re-Reading Levinas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 3–10.

21. The distinction between the sacred and the holy is fundamental for Levinas. The former denotes an elevation of the natural or earthly to the level of divinity based on the epistemic limitation of comprehending the divine. Although eschewing mystery, the holy signifies the incomprehensibility of divinity and the Other that opens up the reception of transcendence in the ethical relationship. Levinas writes: "The comprehension of God taken as participation in his sacred life, an allegedly direct comprehension, is impossible, because participation is a denial of the divine, and because nothing is

more direct than the face to face, which is straightforwardness" (TI, 78). For a view that interprets Levinas as rejecting only a particular metaphysical view of the sacred, see N. H. Smith, "Levinas's Modern Sacred," *Law Text Culture* 5 (2000) [http://ro.uow.edu.au/ltc/vol5/iss1/8].

22. David Wood, *The Step Back: Ethics and Politics after Deconstruction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 67–68.

23. *Ibid.*, 68.

24. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

25. On the relation between Levinas and Nancy on transcendence, see my "Politics and Transcendence," in Marinos Diamantides, ed., *Levinas, Law, Politics* (London: Routledge Cavendish, 2007), 127–41.

26. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, trans. Brian Holmes (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 155.

27. Dōgen, "Buddha-nature," in *Shōbōgenzō*, 123.

28. *Ibid.* For a developed treatment of this understanding of Buddha-nature in Dōgen, see my "Walking in Wild Emptiness: A Zen Phenomenology," in Ron Scapp and Brian Seitz, eds., *Philosophy, Place, and Travel: Being in Transit* (New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

29. Dōgen quoted in Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism: A History*, vol. 2: Japan, trans. James W. Heisig and Paul Knitter (New York and London: Macmillan Publishing, 1990), 81.

30. Levinas, "The Trace of the Other," 356.

## CHAPTER 11

### "Now We're Talking Pedagogy"

#### Levinas, Animal Ethics, and Jewish Education

TAMRA WRIGHT

What is the difference between humans and other animals, according to Levinas's thought? In "The Animal Interview," the discussion is framed mainly by the question of whether nonhuman animals have faces in the Levinasian sense, and hence whether people have ethical obligations toward them. Additionally, Levinas presents the key teaching of his philosophy as the claim that what distinguishes humanity from the rest of nature is the capacity to value the life of another person above one's own.

However, with the appearance of the human—here is my entire philosophy—that is, with man, there is something more important than my life, and that is the life of the other. That is unreasonable. Man is an unreasonable animal. (AI, 5)

Critics of Levinas, including contributors to this volume, have taken issue with Levinas's anthropocentric stance on both these points, arguing that his refusal to acknowledge ethically significant alterity in the faces of nonhuman animals is decidedly un-Levinasian, and that the claim that morally significant self-sacrifice is a uniquely human capacity is unfounded. In what follows, I will largely steer clear of these debates and focus on a different set of questions: To what extent is Levinas's approach to animal ethics consistent with, and possibly influenced by, Jewish tradition, and what scope is there, within this approach, for improvement to the treatment of animals?