

# Beyond the Humanist Ethics of Vegetarianism: The Carno-Phallogocentric Kernel of Animal Rights Discourses

Swayamdipta Das

Currently an M.Phil Research Scholar in English Literature at the University of Calcutta. ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8551-5518>. Email: [swayamdiptadas22@gmail.com](mailto:swayamdiptadas22@gmail.com).

Received May 31, 2016; Revised July 20, 2016; Accepted July 30, 2016; Published August 18, 2016

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## Abstract

The paper would attempt to dwell into the wider philosophical and ontological implications of vegetarianism and in the process offer a deconstructive critique of the more physicalist currency of vegetarianism advocated by many animal rights activists, philosophers and writers like J.M. Coetzee. Taking up Jacques Derrida's notion of Anthropocentric "Carno-Phallogocentrism", the paper would argue how any parochial notion of vegetarianism (including those by J.M. Coetzee in *Elizabeth Costello*) actually reserves the kernel of a certain anthropomorphic Enlightenment humanism and thus partakes in a kind of epistemic violence upon the animal "other" even while it poses to speak on behalf of them. The trajectory of this paper would take up post-humanist thinkers like Heidegger and Emmanuel Levinas to trace the kernel of anthropocentric humanism even in the positing of the post-cartesian subject and attempt to locate an etymological anthropocentric inheritance of the same in the differential humanism of animal philosophers like J.M. Coetzee.

**Keywords:** Cultural Vegetarianism, Carno-Phallogocentrism, Conditional ethicality, animal rights, post-humanism.

## The Humanist Kernel in the Post-Humanist Ethics of Heidegger and Levinas

The disruption of classical humanism anticipated by Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* (1979) is further critiqued and questioned by Derrida who maintains that although Levinas substituted the ontological primacy of "be-ing", he, along with Heidegger, albeit in different ways, retained the kernel of a differential "humanism" while talking about the primacy of ethics over ontology and Dasein as ex-sistence respectively. In his interview with Jean Luc Nancy, titled "Eating Well" (1991), he says, "Discourses as original as those of Heidegger and Levinas disrupt, of course, a certain traditional humanism. In spite of the differences separating them, they nonetheless remain profound humanisms to the extent that they do not sacrifice" (p.98). The unwillingness to sacrifice "sacrifice" itself might refer to the ethical matrices of Levinas which extends only to the face-to-face encounter with the "other" human as the only ethical relationship possible and viable and the "thou shall not kill" ethical injunction restricted to the realm of the inter-human. It thus exhausts the grounds for a re-thinking of both humanism and ethicality beyond the kernel of an anthropocized site of a differential humanism. Derrida (1991) explains the anthropocentrism in Levinasian ethicality in the following terms, "the 'Thou shalt not kill' is

addressed to the other and presupposes him [*s'adresse `a lui et le suppose*]. It is destined to the very thing that it institutes, the other as man (. . .) The 'thou shalt not kill' – with all of its consequences, which are limitless – has never been understood within the Judeo-Christian tradition, nor apparently by Levinas, as a 'Thou shalt not put to death the living in general' (. . .)The other, such as this can be thought according to the imperative of ethical transcendence, is indeed the other man: man as other, the other as man" (p.99). However, a further complication would ensue with the intervention of the third other or the *le tier* in Levinasian terms as it would engage the realm of the ethico-political and the question of "animal rights" which would only further essentialize the domain of the animal "other" and read the ethico-ontological space of their be-longing only in terms of a constative epistemic discourse on "natural rights" that are already predicated within the contours of the Post-Enlightenment humanist categories. If the Levinasian ethical responsivity is to be located at the level of sensibility, unmediated and prior to ideas about suffering, any apriori category of "animal" suffering must be deconstructed and a sacrificial gesture intended towards un-doing all such epistemic categories.

### **Animality and the Space of Cultural Vegetarianism**

The ethico-political ground for the contestation of the rights of animals as advocated by various social agencies and ethical philosophers necessarily refers back to this kernel of humanist categories and includes and appropriates the animality of the animal to serve the contours of its own parochial counter-politics. The plea for Vegetarianism, arising out of a similar ethico-political milieu remains confined to this kernel of humanist foreplay and refuses to engage in the (im)possible ethical relationship with the "otherness" of the animal-being-in-itself. The following sections of this paper will engage with the relationship of Derridean deconstructive philosophy and the issue of "vegetarianism" and attempt to understand how even the pseudo-ethical gesture of not eating animals remains confined within the parochial contours of anthropocentrism or more precisely what Derrida would call "Carno-phallogocentrism". A parallel reading of J.M. Coetzee's notion of "sentient beings" and the animal philosophy advocated in his book *Elizabeth Costello*(2009) which posit similar socio-political gesturing and self-fashioning would also further elaborate on the aporias that an such animal ethics must contend with.

According to Heidegger, the distinguishing feature of the "humanitas" of the human is that it is directed away from the "anima" or "animalitas" of the human as "animal rationale". He attempts to reconstruct the philosophical etymology that constitutes the human along the contours of the "anima", precisely as "animal rationale" by insisting on the human Da-sein as distinctive from the zoological tradition of the "animal rationale". In "Letter on Humanism" (1977) he says, "The first humanism, Roman humanism, and every kind that has emerged from that time to the present, has pre-supposed the most universal 'essence' of man to be obvious. Man is considered to be an 'animal rationale'. This definition is not simply the Latin translation of the Greek 'zoon logon echon', but rather a metaphysical interpretation of it. This essential definition of man is not false. But it is conditioned by metaphysics" (p.226). The Heideggerean departure from the ground of metaphysical tradition of philosophical humanism is affected by his insistence on "ex-sistence" meaning "standing out into the truth of Being" as the essence of man. "Ekstatis" in Greek means literally stepping forth and thus ex-sistence or Dasein would refer to being as always, already referring to an external kernel of coming-into-being. The differential kernel of Dasein which posits being in terms of an exteriority still remains susceptible to Derrida as another form of subdued anthropocentrism despite its radical departure from classical enlightenment humanist ontologies. In "Eating Well" Derrida (1991) remarks that Heidegger's differential

humanism “ which transfers the specifically human from man’s interior to his hand, the boundary between human and animal still remains something which is impossible to call into question. It is not a traditional humanism, but a determination of the location—the place (Dasein) where meaning can be received (...) Only man has hands, says Heidegger, and, through the hand, he has access to a world of meaningful action. The ape, however, possesses only ‘Greifsorgane’ (organs for grasping) and is therefore excluded from the realm of the human. This distinction between hand and organ for grasping is not something Heidegger arrived at by studying apes in the Black Forest, but rather has a purely stipulative character. Here, as always, humanism rests on the sacrifice of the animal, on the implicit swallowing up of the animal”(p.102 ). The topology of the departure from classical humanism to a certain ethos of anti-humanism as envisioned by Heidegger and later by Levinas who posits ethicality in relation to the otherness of the other as prior to ontology and thus ,like Heidegger himself, displaces the centrality of the inward ‘being’ in terms of a differential kernel of exteriority, still retain the marked distinction between the “animot” and the human and retroactively posit this differential humanism in terms of a more originary epistemic and ontological violence upon the “animal”. Although both the radical variations of humanism insist upon a kernel of exteriority to define being and ethical-ontology, they are only subtle variations on a more primordial metonymic act of eating and consumption, a kind of appropriation of the “otherness” of the animal to retroactively reinstate the inner subjective space of a differential kernel of humanism. The philosophical contours of such a reading which deconstructs the gesture of eating and consumption to suggest a certain socio-political-ontological appropriation of the “other” also problematizes any parochial ethico-political discourse that reads the act of physically consuming certain “others” as unethical while failing to understand the wider philosophical implications of “eating”, “consumption” and “digestion”. The failure to engage in such hermeneutics also poses the danger of reiterating the epistemic violences of the sovereign agential human “self” over the animal “other” and thus merely posing the issue of vegetarianism and animal ethics mere as a tokenistic foreplay that is myopic in its socio-political implications.

### **Carno-Phallogocentrism and Re-thinking Ethicality**

At the Cerisy conference in the summer of 1993 Derrida famously remarked that “I am a vegetarian in my soul”. Commenting on the curious inversion that takes place here and the deep ethico-philosophical ramifications that such a statement attests to , David Wood in his essay titled “Comment ne pas manger – Deconstruction and humanism” (1999) says that , “Carnophallogocentrism is not a dispensation of Being toward which resistance is futile; it is a mutually reinforcing network of powers, schemata of domination, and investments that has to reproduce itself to stay in existence. Vegetarianism is not just about substituting beans for beef; it is –at least potentially—a site of proliferating resistance to that reproduction”(pp. 32–33). The ethico-political values invested in the schemata of marking our animal “other(s)” as sentient beings whose lives matter only within the teleological contours of our shared humanist ideals must thereby be rendered problematic as this amounts to another cultural investment in the schemata of hegemonic “carnophallogocentrism”. A more radical intervention even within the politics of the possible would require a more self-reflexive deconstructive form of vegetarianism, one that re-thinks ethicality by critiquing the very Symbolic<sup>2</sup> constatives invested in notions of “eating”, “sacrifice” and “nourishment”.

### **Sentience as a the Ideological Space of Imaginary Identification**

The repertoire of J.M. Coetzee's vast works on ethics and the limits of representation make him a problematic figure who can never be easily located within any of the posthumanist schools of thinking which calls for a return to ethics beyond the moral imperatives of the Enlightenment ethos. The figure of the animal has a muted and yet significant presence in many of his works, including *Disgrace* (1999) in which animality is equated with the ground zero of ethical thinking. Lucy makes this unsettling metonymic shift in our value system when she remarks, "To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity (...) Like a dog"( p.205 ). In Coetzee's moral universe the site of animality is invested with a ground zero of ethical thinking which exhausts the entire field of signifierial representation and attempts to localize ethics in a space where our categories of representation have to be re-thought in terms of this radical and forever un-locatable animal "other" . However, the problematic with such a politico-ontological ethical investment in the animal "other" is that it again reiterates the "otherness of the other" in terms of its differential space and gestures towards a more radical notion of humanist ethicality which must re-define itself against this neutrally rendered absolute ground zero of the ethical space invested in the animal. Thus the posthumanist return to ethicality is again sustained by a humanist kernel that must forever "consume" and "appropriate" the meontological <sup>3</sup> kernels of non-being in order to posit its be-coming in a radical futurity. J.M. Coetzee's later work *Elizabeth Costello* (2009) is yet another gesture at a differential ethicality which takes up the issue of animal rights and vegetarianism more directly but ultimately fails to engage in a hermeneutics that could actually speak for an animal ethics based on a more nuanced and deconstructive kernel of "vegetarianism".

In *Elizabeth Costello* (2009) J.M. Coetzee advocates the rights of animals by envisioning a community of sentient beings. Coetzee questions the borders of social inclusivity by making sentience rather than utilitarian enlightenment reasoning as the most important criterion for communal inclusion. At the very beginning of the chapter titled "The Lives of Animals", Coetzee (2009) draws an intentional comparison with the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps and the violence committed upon countless animals in slaughterhouses , " They went like sheep to the slaughter. They died like animals.The Nazi butchers killed them. Denunciation of the camps reverberates so fully with the language of the stockyard and slaughterhouse that it is barely necessary for me to prepare the ground for the comparison I am about to make. The crime of the Third Reich, says the voice of accusation, was to treat people like animals"(p.29). The comparison intended to extend the notion of sentience that , upon common grounds , can bridge the ontological and psychological gap between man and animals ,only reiterates the epistemic violence already committed upon animals by locating the ontology of pain in a collective pocket of traumatic memory that is deeply human in its rootedness and can thus re-write the ethics of pain and suffering only by referring to signifiers belonging to an always,already politicized anthropocentric "event of the 'Real' "<sup>4</sup>. There is a certain epistemic violence inflicted upon the question of the animal at the very outset, its own field of subjective "otherness" is overwritten with cognizable fields of anthropocentric registers which renders "sentience" only in terms of its own Imaginary<sup>5</sup> "self". Derrida (2008) critiques such covert forms of "violence" which bear the vraisemblance of an anti-discourse against animal exploitation but themselves carry the traces of hegemonic violence against animal "others": "this domination is exercised as much through an infinite violence, indeed, through the boundless wrong that we inflict on animals, as through the

forms of protest that at bottom share the axioms and founding concepts in whose name the violence is exercised, even when such forms of protest are channeled toward a Declaration of animal rights or an ecological or vegetarian culture”(p.89).

The apology for a fairer treatment towards animals as sentient beings is validated through a counter-intuitive critique against the faculty of rationality in man, which Coetzee argues, becomes the sovereign yardstick to otherize the beastliness of the beast. Citing a wide range of continental philosophers, he argues that “The universe is built upon reason. God is a God of reason. The fact that through the application of reason we can come to understand the rules by which the universe works proves that reason and the universe are of the same being. And the fact that animals, lacking reason, cannot understand the universe but have simply to follow its rules blindly, proves that, unlike man, they are part of it but not part of its being: that man is godlike, animals thinglike”( 2009, p.30). The counter-intuitive attack against rationality or the Cartesian cogitation which defines itself against the animal-machine is followed by a superseding counter-structure that valorizes intuitive sympathy to form the truce of a community of sentient beings among humans and their animal “others”. Resorting to the quilting structure of the holocaust narratives, he says that “I return to the death camps (...)The horror is that the killers refused to think themselves into the place of their victims, as did everyone else (...)In other words, they closed their hearts. The heart is the seat of a faculty, sympathy that allows us to share at times the being of another. Sympathy has everything to do with the subject and little to do with the object, the ‘another’, as we see at once when we think of the object not as a bat (“Can I share the being of a bat?”) but as another human being” (2009, p.35). The imaginary identification that Coetzee believes can supplant the ethical aporias inherent in the sovereign hermeneutic structure of rational cogitation is in itself a problematic and perhaps partakes in the very culture of “Carno-phallogocentrism” that Derrida critiques as the inherent violence implicit in all humanist discourses that uphold “vegetarianism”. Any imaginary identification with the “other” that presupposes a kernel of responsive agency is always, already conditioned by ideological matrices. In other words the Imaginary projection of the self onto the “other” is retroactively marked by the Symbolic registers of language and ideology. Slavoj Žižek in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989) makes the crucial critical insight: “imaginary identification is always identification on behalf of a certain gaze in the Other . So, apropos of every imitation of a model-image, apropos of every 'playing a role', the question to ask is: for whom is the subject enacting this role? Which [ideological] gaze is considered when the subject identifies himself with a certain image” (p.117-118). Thus, there is always a privileged Symbolic and ideological vantage point, a pre-conditioned gaze, from which any Imaginary identification with the “other” takes place. Coetzee’s anti-rationalist advocacy of a certain trans-ideological imaginary identification with the “sentient” animal others, is thus rendered problematic as any such Imaginary identification is always, already an effect of the retroversion of the ideological gaze which in itself is deeply embedded in humanist structures of conditional empathy, agential self-affirmation and patronizing morality. Coetzee’s discourse on vegetarianism therefore partakes in a more covert form of “consumption” and “appropriation” of the otherness of the animal “other” and denies itself the opening to a more radical alterity that would gesture towards a hospitality of “eating” that by acknowledging the very aporetic knot inherent in any physicalist / ontological discourse on absolute vegetarianism can truly aspire towards the messianic<sup>6</sup> (im)possibility in our ethical relation with animality. The only ethical act per se is that which takes into account this experience of aporia; it is the moment of aporetic undecidability that can only lead to the radical passage to pure ethicality by traversing the spectres of the totalizing contours that drive our anthropo-logocentric conceptualities of the radical animal “other”. Derrida in *Limited Inc* (1988) speaks of the ethical knot in the undecidable

thus, “this particular undecidable opens the field of decision or of decidability. It calls for decision in the order of ethical-political responsibility. It is even its necessary condition. A decision can only come into being in a space that exceeds the calculable program that would destroy all responsibility by transforming it into a programmable effect of determinate causes. There can be no moral or political responsibility without this trial and this passage by way of the undecidable” (p.116).

### **Aporetic Undecidability and the Moment of (Im)Possible Ethics**

Simon Critchley in *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (2014) elaborates how the moment of aporetic undecidability is neither a negation of positivist agency nor a denial of the politics of the possible but a more affirmative gesture towards the messianic kernel of (im)possible ethical dimensions : “the ethical moment that motivates deconstruction is this Yes-saying to the unnameable, a moment or unconditional affirmation or a categorical imperative that is addressed to an alterity that can neither be excluded from nor included within logocentric conceptuality but rather which renders undecidable the limit of logocentrism” (p.41). The affirmative response to the call of the radical “other” outside the matrices of “carno-phallogocentrism” perhaps corresponds to the culture of ethical vegetarianism which even while indulging in acts of conditional consumption , retains an excretory ethical excess which disrupts the totalizing frameworks that appropriate the animal “other” as the “same” of its sovereign self. The excretory ethical excess that results from the fissures of the aporetic kernel of critical self-reflexivity, thus partakes in an economy of ethical consumption which, though complicit in the act of metonymic consumption, never fully appropriates the “otherness of the other” and instead metaleptically produces/ excretes a heteroglossic excess. Just as in Levinas, the “Saying” is the ethical excess which is induced in the constative registers of the Symbolic “Said” by constantly referring to the latter’s limits of enunciation, an ethics of consumption too would forever refer to the liminal limits of any cultural forms of “carno-phallogocentrism” in order to disseminate that excretory excess of ethical heteroglossia. Coetzee’s plea for dietary vegetarianism premised on the basis of a community of sentient beings where the lives of animals should be imaginarily identified with the lives of fellow beings , is thus limited by its own inability to thematize beyond a certain constrictive and parochial notion of consumption, appropriation and excretion. Moreover it covertly serves as an ideological smokescreen for the epistemic violences committed upon the animal “others” in the form of rights discourses and politico-legal technicities aimed at addressing cruelties against animals, which are deeply indebted to proto-humanist Enlightenment discursive models.

The very modes of our subjective being are always,already founded on a site of sacrificial appropriation of the “other” and therefore traversing this ethical impasse would lie not in the formulation of a transcendental subject<sup>7</sup> but rather in knowing how to eat well and be nourished by “difference” :“The ethical question revolves, then, around the question of how to eat well, about the most proper, respectful and giving way of eating, speaking, interiorizing the other in general. Finally, since every culture establishes its own legal and illegal sacrifices, there are ‘several infinitely different modes of the conception-appropriation-assimilation of the other’: If the limit between the living and the nonliving now seems to be as unsure, at least as an oppositional limit, as that between ‘man’ and ‘animal’, and if, in the (symbolic or real) experience of the ‘eat-speak-interiorize’, the ethical frontier no longer rigorously passes between the ‘Thou Shalt not kill’ (man, thy neighbor) and the ‘Thou Shalt not put to death the living in general’, but rather between several infinitely different modes of the conception-appropriation-assimilation of the other, then, as concerns the ‘Good’ [Bien] of every morality, the question will come back to

determining the best, most respectful, most grateful, and also most giving way of relating to the other and of relating the other to the self" (Derrida,1991, p.114).

### End Notes

- 1) Animot – Derrida in his book *The animal that therefore I am* uses the term to denote a singular, living being that cannot be subsumed under any species concept and thus can be located beyond the essentialistic kernel of the “animal”.
- 2) Symbolic- In Lacanian terminology the Symbolic denotes the realm of language and signifiers. It also denotes the violence committed by logocentrism and language which somehow denies us the access to the “Real” which lies beyond the Symbolic.
- 3) Meontology- A term used by Levinas in to describe a differential ontological kernel which he describes as “otherwise-than-beings”.
- 4) Event of the Real- A term used by Slavoj Žižek to describe traumatic events like the Holocaust and 9/11 attacks which escape language and the contours of the symbolic. A retroactive description is prone to be interpellated within the contours of essentialism embedded in logocentric language itself.
- 5) Imaginary- A term used by Jacques Lacan to refer to the mirror stage wherein subjectivity is founded by the imaginary relation to an “other” which provides the subject with an illusion of its wholeness.
- 6) Messianic- Derrida in his essay “Of Hospitality” uses the term to refer to a kernel of infinite possibilities projected into futurity. The impossibility of its actual arrival becomes the very threshold for a politics of the possible.
- 7) Transcendental subject- A term often used by Žižek and other Poststructuralists to refer to kernels of subjectivity which are posited as trans-ideological and in terms of other such neutral signifiers in order to avoid confronting its ideological origins.

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