

## Response to “The Problem of the Question About Animal Ethics” by Michal Piekarski

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**Abstract** In this brief article we reply to Michal Piekarski’s response to our article ‘Facing Animals’ published previously in this journal. In our article we criticized the properties approach to defining the moral standing of animals, and in its place proposed a relational and other-oriented concept that is based on a transcendental and phenomenological perspective, mainly inspired by Heidegger, Levinas, and Derrida. In this reply we question and problematize Piekarski’s interpretation of our essay and critically evaluate “the ethics of commitment” that he offers as an alternative.

**Keywords** Animal ethics · Moral standing · Other · Moral language · Virtue ethics · Transcendental methodology · Essentialism · Heidegger · Levinas

We thank Michal Piekarski for his thoughtful review and response to our article ‘Facing Animals’ (Coeckelbergh and Gunkel 2014), which will likely stimulate further discussion about the moral standing of animals and related issues. However, in spite of the positioning of his article as a polemic and as being in disagreement with ours, we believe that the arguments made are similar and that Piekarski shares our critique of the properties approach to deciding the question of moral standing and our interest in questioning the hegemony of this procedure and the anthropocentric forms of ethics it has informed and enabled. If there is any

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substantial disagreement between us at all, it is partly based on a misreading/misunderstanding of our position and partly based on one's choice of a different (and according to us problematic) route towards achieving the same critical intervention in moral philosophy. Let us elaborate on this point by taking up and responding to the main questions raised by Michal Piekarski.

Piekarski stresses the importance of a transcendental mode of questioning, that is inspired by Kant and is focused on the 'conditions of possibility' for moral standing. But so do we in the analysis presented in our article, and so does Coeckelbergh in his book *Growing Moral Relations* (2012), which, in the second part, explicitly proposes a transcendental turn away from the standard properties approach. Consequently the proposed transcendental mode of questioning is neither new nor different from the approach that is already deployed by and operative in our essay.

To unpack this, let us respond to Piekarski's accusation that we take an ontic or empirical approach. We disagree. This would be the case if and only if we continued to advocate for a properties approach, which always turns attention to the empirical evidence provided by the entities before us. But this is precisely what we target and criticize. Our approach is distinctly non-ontic and perhaps even non-empirical in the sense that we are not interested in perpetuating that kind of empirical/scientific investigation that endeavors to decide what faculties or properties a particular animal or class of animals would possess. Our approach is strictly phenomenological, and it is phenomenological in the way that Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger characterize this term. In other words, we are interested in the way—the conditions of possibility—that the animal is encountered as being something other. This would be, in Heidegger's terminology "ontological" and not ontic. If our approach is empirical at all, it is empirical in the sense that it invites phenomenological investigations of the conditions of possibility for how the animal appears and how we, in the face of this, ascribe moral standing (or, what is perhaps more common, withhold it). This may lead, for instance, to considering how technological practices constitute such conditions. The idea is that as long as we keep on doing technological practices *x* and *y*, we keep thinking/talking in certain way. Technological practices, therefore, are not neutral; they constitute the conditions of possibility for thinking/talking about things. So the stress might be on language, but that does dispense with the underlying need for a transcendental approach.

Moreover, our article can be interpreted as attempting to adhere strictly to the transcendental method by following the innovations provided by Heidegger, Levinas, Kant, and others. Our approach is no longer connected with the human as such, with something absolute within the human being, nor with speech as something unique to the human. Instead we operationalize the transcendental approach in a relative or relational way that maintains an openness to other beings and that also attends to the material, technological, and concrete practices by which the other is experienced, and not to abstractions like 'the human' and 'speech' as presented by the Michal Piekarski.

This does not mean that we think language is unimportant in animal ethics or moral philosophy, quite the contrary. For instance, in *Growing Moral Relations* (2012) Coeckelbergh has identified language as a crucial condition of possibility for moral status ascription, and in *The Machine Question* (2012) Gunkel has suggested

that moral exclusions, especially as applied to animals and machines, depend on the use of (Cartesian) terminology and language. Following Heidegger, we find language to be a crucial element in our intervention in moral philosophy. But we have a different understanding of (the role of) language than Piekarski. He seems to think that what we mean by ‘language’ is ‘the ability to speak (and reason).’ And this is, as he correctly recognizes, connected to the very definition of the human being as *zoon logon echon*, the ‘rational animal’ or more precisely (as Heidegger reminds us) the animal having *logos* (speech, logic, reason, thought). But this is precisely not our concern. Looking at language in this way is to consider it as a property (the defining property of the human as such), and this is precisely what we contest in our analysis.

For our purposes, language is understood in a more performative and political way, as the power, that we have to name the animals (traditionally understood something supposedly bestowed on us by God, when he commanded Adam to name all of creation) or to give our animals (like a pet dog) a proper name. This activity of naming, frames animals in different ways (or to put it in phenomenological terms “is the condition of possibility for an animal to appear to us in such a fashion”). In Piekarski’s terminology, this is precisely the mechanism of ‘close-far.’ By naming animals we bring some closer and push others farther away. The dog gets a name and therefore is closer to us by that very operation. The pig is denied a proper name. It is therefore made into raw materials (Heidegger’s *Bestand* or ‘standing reserve’) that we can then exploit for food or other purposes. In other words, in our essay, language is not operationalized as a property of the human animal—the power of speech or *zoon logon echon*. We understand and use “language” in much the same way that Heidegger does in his later writings. Language reveals beings in their Beingness. Our understanding of language, therefore, is not as an ontic property but as involved in the work of ontology. So again, we are moving in the same direction; there is simply a disagreement about terminology.

Yet the choice of terminology is never neutral, and in Piekarski’s case it is problematic since it invites the objection of essentialism. By emphasizing the human essence and the capacity for speech as something essentially human, Piekarski actually takes us back to the ontic, not the ontological; it is about essential properties of the human as opposed to other beings. In other words the author returns to and redeploys those essential dimensions of the philosophical tradition we wanted to challenge and critique in the first place. If we need a humanism, it is not this kind of humanism. This *is* a point of disagreement.

Finally, we believe Piekarski’s turn to an ‘ethics of commitment’, which is proposed as an alternative solution, is no longer other-oriented but is a kind of virtue ethics in which what counts is my moral character. This formulation of ethics is not incorrect. It just needs to be complemented with, enriched through, and even challenged by an ethics that is oriented otherwise. Thus, here we have another point of (substantial) disagreement. Let us further explain.

Here is how Michal Piekarski characterizes his proposed solution: ‘The kind of ethics I mean should be founded on this internal commitment which is expressed in the following attitude: I am committed to the Other because I am committed to myself. In the ethics of commitment, it is not important who the Other is. It does not

matter whether it is a “human” or a “non-human” animal. I respect you, I care for you and do not abuse you because I want or feel the need to be a better person—more open, unprejudiced or just good.’ While we certainly sympathize with the virtues of respect and care, our article proposes an entirely different mode of thinking, one that follows the moral innovations of Levinas.

For us, the ethics that Piekarski describes, that is, an ethics that is ‘committed to the Other because I am committed to myself’ or ‘an ethics that respects the Other because I want to be a better person’ is still too metaphysical and anthropocentric. In other words, Piekarski’s ethics of commitment (at least in the way that it is described in the text of his response) is still what Levinas would call “an ethics of the Same.” My commitment to the other is based upon and derived from a prior commitment to myself. What Levinas argues, on the contrary, is that a commitment to the other is always moving from and motivated by the other’s challenge to one’s commitment to oneself. Ethics, therefore, is not the product of a *commitment to others* but a challenge that calls for a *committed response* in the face of others. The movement does not proceed from the inside to the outside, but instead proceeds from the place of extreme exteriority.

So Michal Piekarski is entirely correct, when he writes “it does not matter who or what is other.” This ontological aspect, i.e. deciding ‘what the other is,’ always follows from and is subsequent to the moral commitment to the other, which is primary. Ethics is, as Levinas argues, first philosophy. But the ‘care’ I have for the other is not an individual virtue, interpreted as a property and as focused on the self. If this is the understanding, we are definitely and quite deliberately *not* formulating a virtue ethics. We are, on the contrary, using and developing an other-oriented approach. The care for others is necessitated by the other, who obliges me to make an appropriate response. It is not the case that I first make an internal commitment to myself, which is the Cartesian metaphysical gesture par excellence, and then proceed to treat others one way or another. It is the exact opposite. The other first interrupts my solitude and obligates me. I am committed to the other because of the interruption imposed upon me by the intrusion of the face of the other. Consequently, ethics—the confrontation with and in the face of others—precedes my individual commitment to myself. Commitment, in other words, is not a virtue (a kind of property) that we possess; it is a response to and responsibility for others.

It is also noteworthy that virtue ethics, at least in its traditional formulations, has always been an anthropocentric ethics. For this reason, a significant part of what we propose is a kind of philosophical blasphemy, to the extent that we deliberately use the innovations of Levinas and Heidegger against themselves. Both thinkers were, in differing ways and to different extents also and (we would add) unfortunately anthropocentric. But we think that the core principles of their thinking helps us challenge and go beyond the limitations of anthropocentrism, if we use the transcendental approach to question our thinking/language about animals and if we open up the semantic field of ‘other’ to non-humans, or at least *consider* this possibility, which Heidegger and Levinas fail to do. We regret that Piekarski’s proposals seem to return us to an anthropocentric form of thinking.

It may, we suspect, be possible to develop a different and richer interpretation of virtue ethics than that offered by Michal Piekarski, one that is not based on a prior

individual commitment to oneself nor primarily interested in efforts at self-improvement. It may, in other words, still be possible to develop a virtue ethics view that is more in line with the other-oriented ethics we develop in our essay. An examination of the points of contact between virtue ethics and other-oriented ethics is an interesting point for further discussion. But in its current form, the moral perspective advocated by Piekarski seems incompatible with our approach.

To conclude, we think that the ‘polemical’ nature of Piekarski’s article rests on an unfortunate misreading/misunderstanding of our position and argument. For the most part, Piekarski shares the same approach and objectives that were initially developed in our essay. We differ only when it comes to essentialism and anthropocentrism (both of which we reject) and his proposal to use an ethics of commitment rather than an other-oriented ethics. Although Piekarski’s response essay seeks to achieve an objective that is similar to our own, the means of achieving these objectives not only differ from our efforts but have some significant philosophical problems that, we think, work against these shared interests. Despite these points of disagreement, the thoughtful response provided by Michal Piekarski raises important questions that deserve further discussion in animal ethics, moral philosophy, philosophy of technology, and elsewhere.

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