

HELL IS OTTER PEOPLE: LOCATING ANIMALS IN SARTRE'S ONTOLOGY

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INTRODUCTION

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre outlines his well-known ontology of the for-itself and the in-itself. While an in-itself is a mere nonconscious object, a for-itself is a conscious subject with transcendence (projection towards possibilities) which projects itself on the basis of facticity (the facts of what one is and has been). Transcendence involves a nihilation or surpassing of facticity. Closely connected to transcendence and facticity is being-for-others. An Other is a being who objectifies me, grounding me in my facticity. To an Other, my transcendence is considered as a bare fact, becoming a transcendence-transcended by the Other. In turn, I may do the same to them. This is the basis of being-for-others. The Other is revealed to me through the Look and my affective responses to being looked at – fear, shame, and pride. The Look is the realization of being seen as an object and therefore of being an object, and these emotions are predicated on anxiety in the face of my objectification by the Other (Sartre, 1956).

From Sartre's complex description of Others and being-for-others, it is clear that he has humans solely in mind. We may infer also that Sartre's conception of the Other demands a being with mental faculties that are considered typical or consonant with my own. If a person had limited mental faculties that prevents me from seeing them as objectifying me, it does not seem that they are an Other in Sartre's explanation. This gives rise to a significant concern: if such a being is not an Other, then they must be an in-itself: a mere object. On Sartre's account, there appears to be no middle ground, only me and Others (for-themselves) and objects (in-themselves). This concern is even more pronounced when considering animals, another group that does not seem to be Other, but perhaps something close. I will call members of such groups Near-Others. Even if we do not give Near-Others the same status as a neurotypical adult human, surely these groups cannot be simple objects. Animals as objects not only is unintuitive, but also has troubling ethical implications. There must be, it seems, a significant difference between kicking a table and kicking a person suffering severe delusions or kicking a dog. If not, then abuse of animals and people with certain disabilities cannot be made sense of any more than table abuse can.

Can Sartre account for this difference? At first blush, it seems that he cannot. He does not take time in his account of the Other to address this issue, as glaring as it seems. The question is if this was a principled exclusion or an unprincipled lack of interest. If this is the former, then so much the worse for Sartre. It must follow that on his view animals are mere objects and deserve no ethical consideration, which is a highly unintuitive stance. This is Florence Burgat's position in "Facing the Animal in Sartre and Levinas", where she criticizes Sartre's concept of the Other and Emmanuel Levinas' concept of the face. Since these philosophies cannot offer an account of Near-Others, they represent "...a backward step with regard to the ethics of compassion that, intrinsically, is inscribed in the perspective of an infinite responsibility toward sentient beings in general. Why does the concept of the face ultimately protect so little? Why is it so narrow, so humano-centric?" (2015, p. 15).

While Burgat takes this criticism to be damning, I find that her statement reflects precisely why Sartre's view should be "rehabilitated", so to speak. The phenomenological approach to ethics, resting primarily on affective experience, can be a gateway to an intuitive ethic. Starting from a phenomenological, first-person perspective when reckoning with the natures of Others to produce a form of ethics is compelling in a way more detached perspectives are not. Investigating how and to

what extent animals feel pain and reason is a worthy endeavor, but this is not the sort of investigation that Sartre focuses on; he is conducting a phenomenological investigation (though such an investigation could result in an affective restructuring that changes our phenomenological experience of animals, which is discussed in the context of the Assimilation view later in this paper). If Sartre can account for animals-as-Others, then his view accounts for the intuitive reasons that humans care for animals. After all, many do not come to care for an animal after being told that they pass a mirror self-recognition test, but because they intuit that animals are beings to be cared for.

An important note for moving forward is that, when it comes to animals, I have the clearer cases in mind, such as dogs, apes, and elephants. The gradation of mental faculties in the animal kingdom as well as which faculties we wish to focus on constitutes a large gray area. This gray area spans from dogs to clams. While a clam is living and has some sort of response to humans bothering it, defending that it is a consciousness would be harder to argue than defending the consciousness of dogs, particularly when the defense is based on affective response. There is a gradation of living, sensitive, and sentient creatures. I hope to bring certain animals out of the status of object, but it would be difficult to bring out a clam, and likely impossible to bring out a bacterium. I do not wish to draw a line that results in an ontology as rigid as Sartre's, only modified to include dogs. I wish to illustrate that the human (for-itself) and object (in-itself) divide needs to be loosened to account for the varied ways in which we understand other living things. I want to argue that ambiguity is ambiguous.

A useful starting point for bringing animals out of object-status is with Sartre's statement that, "I can neither apprehend nor conceive of a consciousness which does not apprehend me" (1956, p. 284). He contrasts his conception of a consciousness with what we can call an essentially oblivious consciousness, a consciousness that does not respond to or register my presence. Animals that are consciousnesses register our presence with something like the Look, whereas other animals, such as clams, do not, as they merely seem to mechanically respond to stimuli. Even if I assumed that the clam really was a consciousness, not only would I have no way of discovering this fact, but such a consciousness would be impossible for me to make sense of. This means that, from this Sartrean perspective, the only animals that we can know to be conscious are those animals that I can apprehend as apprehending me. This analysis lines up very well with our commonplace understanding of animals. Animals such as bivalves, that do not seem to apprehend me, that seem to treat my movement as no different than that of a swaying branch, are not the ones we have a strong sense of obligation to. This could well be for the reason Sartre provides: I cannot make sense of this animal as a consciousness because it does not appear to apprehend me. Of note, this passage seems to entail that anything that does apprehend me is a consciousness. This is precisely the foothold needed to bring animals out of the in-itself category; it allows for some animals being consciousnesses.

Moving beyond *Being and Nothingness*, we can find Sartre's explicit acknowledgement of animal consciousness. Contrary to how Burgat reads him, Sartre did not believe animals to be objects. This indicates that his views are amenable to modification. He stated in an interview:

I know that animals have consciousness, because I can understand their attitude only if I admit a consciousness. What is their consciousness? What is a consciousness that has no language? I have no idea. Perhaps we will be able to determine that later on, but more will have to be known about consciousness. (Schlipp, 1991, p. 28)

This admission could explain Sartre's lack of attention toward animals in *Being and Nothingness*; there is a fundamental lack of accessibility to animal consciousness without language. To further understand this, we must investigate Sartre thoughts on language.

LANGUAGE

Sartre puts great stock in what language means in our being-for-others, as seen here:

Language is not a phenomenon added on to being-for-others. It *is* originally being-for-others; that is, it is the fact that a subjectivity experiences itself as an object for the Other. (Sartre, 1956, p. 372)

Even without full-fledged language, humans have a natural Other-directed expressiveness (as all expressiveness must be). As Sartre states, “Of course by language we mean all the phenomena of expression and not the articulated word, which is a derived and secondary mode whose appearance can be made the object of an historical study” (Sartre, 1956, p. 373). The same can be said for animals. They are legible to one another and to us; when we hear a dog yelp, we understand that it is likely in pain. Other people’s responsiveness to our own wincing teaches us what pain is. We respond to a woman wincing and a dog yelping in much the same way, registering both as instances of pain. Furthermore, animals gesture to us. A dog may growl when angry, a cat can cry when hungry, seemingly with the aim to be understood by humans.

Importantly, the idea of a “...consciousness that has no language...” from the interview with Sartre might hinge on a different understanding of language (Schlipp, 1991, p. 28). In the interview, he seems to be referring to the “...derived and secondary mode...” of language, such as French or German (Sartre, 1956, p. 373). Otherwise, his saying dogs do not have language makes little sense; they quite obviously have natural expressiveness. This reframes his previous statement as distinguishing consciousness with mere expressiveness from consciousness with full-fledged human language. The presence of language, even if it is mere expressiveness, in animals is key to understanding them as Near-Others. As language “...*is* originally being-for-others...”, the ability to communicate with animals on some level implicates a being-for-animals (Sartre, 1956, p. 373).

This also ties into the aforementioned quote: “I know that animals have consciousness, because I can understand their attitude only if I admit a consciousness” (Schlipp, 1991, p. 28). Based on their expressiveness and other characteristics, the animal only makes sense to me as far as I admit that they are a consciousness. It is easier to understand the dog barking at me as trying to express something, while it is more difficult to understand it as simply making a noise.

It seems that animals gesture to humans, but how do humans gesture towards them? We should ask if this communication is similar to Sartre’s description of gestures towards humans:

I can not even conceive what effect my gestures and attitudes will have since they will always be taken up and founded by a freedom which will surpass them and since they can have a meaning only if this freedom confers one on them. Thus the ‘meaning’ of my expressions always escapes me. (Sartre, 1956, p. 373)

The mysteriousness of the meaning given to our gestures is, I think, present in our communication with animals. We worry that our pets will misunderstand us, we worry that they will think us cruel in taking them to the vet. As this mysteriousness is an element of communication with humans, the presence of it in the animal case bolsters the idea that animals are some sort of Other. Our gestures will be taken up and given meaning by a classmate and by a cat. This also addresses the concern of differentiating dogs from clams, as mysterious communication seems to be at play with the former and not the latter.

This attempted human-animal communication is most clear in the case of a dog. Sartre, in *The Family Idiot*, considers the state of a domesticated dog as a special case among animals:

Language is their major frustration: they have a crude understanding of its function but cannot use it; it is enough for them to be the *objects of speech* – they are spoken to, they are spoken about, they know it. This manifest verbal power which is denied to them cuts through them, settles within them as the limit of their powers... (Sartre, 1981, p. 137)

This firmly places dogs as non-objects, reinforcing Sartre's statement in the interview. However, the exact nature of the dog is less clear, as it brings to mind questions of what the nature of a non-oblivious consciousness that lacks language is. Dogs seem to be some sort of Near-Other but are also marked out as a special case among animals. This special status is due to dog consciousness being infected by culture, as explained in the following:

...peaceful immanence is changed into self-consciousness. The transformation is never complete, it is pure movement... His boredom is life tasted as the impossibility of becoming man and as the perpetual collapsing of the desire to transcend the self in the direction of the human. (Sartre, 1981, p. 138)

The idea of non-domesticated animals being a "peaceful immanence" indicates that wild animals are not objects on Sartre's view. Referring to an animal with the term "immanence" implies that they are indeed a consciousness, as it is not a term used with respect to beings that are in-themselves. Their being "peaceful" could refer to a lack of anguish among animals, as it might be that they have no other way to be. A mountain lion can only be a mountain lion. It could also be that animal anguish is less acutely felt, making them peaceful.

FEAR

Of the three emotions Sartre mentions as reactions to objectification – fear, shame, and pride – fear seems the most likely to apply in our interactions with animals. Sartre presents fear as a confronting of your object-state. He states, "Fear in fact implies that I appear to myself as threatened by virtue of my being a presence in the world, not in my capacity as a For-itself which causes a world to exist." (1956, p. 288). Humans can certainly feel fearful before an animal, but we can also feel fear towards mere objects (a rolling boulder, for example). The more pertinent line of inquiry here is if and how animals feel fear and how we attribute fear to animals. Attributing fear to animals is commonplace. Further, along the lines of Sartre's statement in the interview, it seems that we cannot make sense of some things that an animal does without attributing fear to it. The wild look in a horse's eyes or the flattened ears of a cat are quite apparent as instantiations of fear. As previously discussed with language, signs of fear from animals are among the building blocks of our concept of fear. The apprehension of an animal as afraid is pre-theoretical; theorizing is not needed to prove to ourselves that the animal is afraid. Rather, it seems that, to pull ourselves out of thinking that the animal is afraid, we theorize. Ideas of low pain sensitivity or of purely instinctual behavior are used to conceptualize fear in a way to prove to ourselves that the animal really does not feel fear. Even if this can be done, it still may be that making sense of the dog's yelp can only be done by using the notion of fear.

We must inquire as to how an animal manifests fear. On Sartre's view, fear is a realization of my state as an object. As a transcendence, I feel my possibilities, but when afraid I am firmly brought down to my status as an object with limits. I can be hurt, I can lose control, I can die. Do animals feel this? This question would be very difficult, perhaps impossible, to answer without being able to speak with the animal in question. However, even if it is not clear that the animal has a robust concept of being something-to-be-killed, it at least seems to have a sense of its vulnerability. Falling short of full Sartrean fear of objectification is not a problem; to get some animals into the Near-Other category,

they only need something close to fear.

SADISM

Animal fear provides insight into animal consciousness, and human sadism illuminates our understanding of animals. For Sartre, sadism is a paradigm attitude that we can have towards Others and is central to our being-for-others. He describes the goal of the sadist in the following:

His goal, like that of desire, is to seize and to make use of the Other not only as the Other-as-object but as a pure incarnated transcendence. But in sadism the emphasis is put on the instrumental appropriation of the incarnated-Other... (1956, p. 399)

A sadist tries to make the Other an object, confining their transcendence. Sadism "is born from anxiety in the face of the Other" and is an attempt to overcome the Other's encroaching subjectivity (1956, p. 403). We should wonder what sadism towards animals means. It is intelligible that someone can be sadistic towards animals, but not towards a table. Sadism, as Sartre identifies, requires a subject on the receiving end. Breaking apart a table does not seem to satisfy the sadist's desires like harming a rabbit can. The sadist wants the rabbit to feel pain and to make the facts about it reduce to being in pain. The fact that the phenomenon of sadism towards animals exists and is sometimes seen as a precursor to sadism towards humans indicates that such sadists have a grasp of animal subjectivity. The fact that non-sadistic people can make sense of the sadist's torturing a rabbit as different from slamming a door reveals that they too understand animals as subjects. As for sadism exhibited by animals, we can look to dolphins killing porpoises for apparently no other purpose than amusement.

INDIFFERENCE

As with sadism, the attitude of indifference towards Others is, according to Sartre, a response to the Look. Again, his description rings true in relation to animals in a way that it does not with objects. He describes indifference in the following:

...I can choose myself as looking at the Other's look and can build my subjectivity upon the collapse of the subjectivity of the Other. It is this attitude which we shall call indifference toward others. Then we are dealing with a kind of blindness with respect to others. (1956, p. 380)

The attitude of indifference makes sense directed towards animals and does not when directed towards objects. In regards to a table, I may be indifferent in some sense, as when I neglect to dust it, but what Sartrean indifference involves is a blindness towards another subject and treating them as an object. I cannot be indifferent towards a table in this way, while I can be towards a cat (and the cat will likely reciprocate). It is possible that the attitude of indifference towards animals is so pervasive that it is the cause of our skepticism regarding animal consciousness. When someone blithely states, "all humans are just sacks of meat being propelled along by electrical impulses", it is very similar to "animals are just meat machines". I have been surprised by the seeming depth of understanding shown by animals, even after having read reports of animal intelligence. Why then, when I know what animals are capable of, am I so quick to assume they know so little? Sartre might provide an answer for this: "...my constant concern is to contain the Other within his objectivity, and my relations with the Other-as-object are essentially made up of ruses designed to make him remain an object" (1956, p. 297). It could be the case that our indifference towards animals is not just easier, but also defensive. Our profound

indifference towards animals could work to protect our status as for-itself. When I contend with the animal in front of me, the object that it makes me is more inaccessible than the object I am for another human, due to their lack of language. Along with this, I remember how I have objectified other humans in the past, but I have no idea how an animal thinks.

OTHER STRUCTURES

There is a case for certain structures of our being-for-others being present with animals, including language, sadism, and indifference, but what of Sartrean love, masochism, desire, and hate? Sartre's complex descriptions of desire and its erotic elements seem downright strange to apply to animal-human or animal-animal relations. A simple, and I think inadequate, answer to this difficulty is that these attitudes will not appear in every relation with an Other. Never feeling Sartrean desire towards your friend's grandma does not suggest that she is not an Other. However, it is puzzling that we would lack these attitudes towards the entire class of animal-Others. This, I think, is due to animals' Near-Other status. All Sartrean attitudes manifest differently when animals are involved, and some seem much more distant from the human-directed version than others. Unlike language, sadism, and indifference, animal-directed love, masochism, desire, and hate are much less like their human-directed counterparts. A description of animal desire must encompass a near or complete lack of eroticism. A dog can mate, but it would be odd to say that it has a sex life. There is a fundamental lack of eroticism concerning dogs, so their desire, if it exists, is very different than Sartrean desire. So, if a person feels desire towards an animal, it is not the type that Sartre describes, but perhaps a desire to be relied on to the point that the Other's freedom is under your control. Love between an owner and dog is simpler, where the goal may not be possession of an alienated freedom. Human masochism in the face of animals manifests in treks through dangerous wilderness, where it may be just as easy to become fascinated with your object state as it is in the face of humans. Hate towards an animal may be less strong because Near-Others do not make us feel our being-as-object-for-others as acutely Others do. The two attitudes that animals seem to lack entirely are masochism and hatred. Perhaps animals feel their object-state peacefully, and do not become overly fixated upon it through masochism or attempt to overcome it through hatred. Or, perhaps they have no sense of being an object. Regardless, we can see how attitudes take a far different form in animals.

The key affects of fear, shame, and pride can be considered along a similar vein. Shame and pride are harder to attribute to an animal than fear. So, do animals ever feel shame or pride? With a well-trained dog, it certainly appears so. They react to praise and blame in very distinct ways understandable to humans. These reactions even seem to serve a similar purpose in dogs as in humans: pride to indicate status and shame to dispel punishment. A similar case can be made for cats and other intelligent creatures that spend a significant amount of time with humans.

TWO OPTIONS

From here, we have two ways of understanding our being-for-near-others. One is that it is exactly like being-for-others, but it is merely obscured by our indifference towards animals. This we can call the Assimilation view. This view is similar to what Burgat describes as "...the ethics of compassion that, intrinsically, is inscribed in the perspective of an infinite responsibility toward sentient beings in general" (2015, p. 15). Arguing for this view hinges on thinking that we have been so inattentive to our relationships with animals that we fundamentally misunderstand them. Our experiences of animals are flawed, so when attempting to understand them, we produce a phenomenology of distorted experiences. The Assimilation view supporter would bet that once we become more attentive to our relationships to animals, we will produce a phenomenology of proper

experiences, and find that our being-for-near-others is being-for-others. The distance we commonly feel towards animals is entirely due to our quick dismissal of feelings of shame towards them. If we linger in that shame, the characteristics of the Other would appear with animals as they do with humans. I find this line of thinking rather implausible. It also does not feel satisfying, as it amounts to saying, “wait for a while, then you’ll see that I’m right”. However, this may seem promising because it does not fundamentally alter Sartre’s rigid for-itself and in-itself distinction. Our intuitions about animal ethics do not require an amending of his ontology; all that is required is to apply it more broadly to bring some animals into the status of for-itself. However, this is my first issue with this approach. Perhaps dogs and chimps are now included as Others, but the bee could remain an in-itself. This also seems to follow from Burgat’s sentience requirement. I find that a better view would account for a spectrum of types of being for animals, rather than only having two ways of understanding something (as a for-itself or in-itself). Further, we should consider what ethical demands follow from this view. An animal Other would have to be treated no differently than a human. This does not seem ideal for humans or animals. We would have to attend to an ape’s medical problems as if they were human. The ape would have to maintain the freedom of Others, whatever that project entails.

The second option is maintaining that our being-for-near-others is distinct from being-for-others. This we can call the Differentiation view. In this paper, I have explored how affects and attitudes of animals and directed towards animals differ from those of humans and directed towards humans. On the Differentiation view, these differences do not reflect a sort of proto-being-for-near-others that will change in time, as they do on the Assimilation view. These distinct affects and attitudes truly constitute our being-for-near-others. The primary worry here is that this clutters Sartre’s ontology. It is, after all, quite neatly divided into for-themselves and in-themselves. However, if adding being-for-near-others captures an important part of our phenomenology, why would we exclude it? The structures of being-for-others and being-for-near-others are quite dissimilar as the presence of a Near-Other does not raise the same issues as the presence of an Other. I think that the difference in mutuality in the human-animal relationship illustrates this dissimilarity, particularly in language and shame.

A key difference between an Other and a Near-Other is the use of language. A Near-Other and I can use language in a primitive way, but the extent that I can understand their expressiveness and the extent to which it seems that they understand mine is limited. Due to issues in our communication, I have a difficult time objectifying Near-Others, and vice versa. I previously established that the shame a Near-Other imparts on me is not as strong as shame from an Other. The claim that I have difficulty objectifying and imparting shame on animals is more contentious. It seems that I can objectify animals and use them as my instruments very easily. On the other hand, animals are often impenetrable to a human observer. I think we are not often ashamed of animals, likely because it is very difficult for a human to decide how an animal should behave. I have a tough time saying that the cat should be less voyeuristic. The mutual difficulty that I and the Near-Other (presumably) face in imparting shame and pride on each other is perhaps why the structure of my being-for-near-others is so different from my being-for-others. As I have only a vague grasp on subjective animal experience, I have a similarly loose notion of my obligations towards them. This looseness is captured in the Differentiation view, but not in the Assimilation view. This view of being-for-near-others opens up a space for animal ethics in Sartre’s view while avoiding the issues with the Assimilation view.

ETHICS

There are quite a few ways to conceive of animals as consciousnesses through Sartre’s phenomenological approach. While this approach does not provide clear categorization of animals, it

opens up space in between the category of for-itself and in-itself for animals. What might this mean for Sartrean ethics? We can turn first to Simone de Beauvoir's account of Sartrean ethics. Near-Others do not square well with de Beauvoir's view in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. She very heavily relies on full-fledged human freedom to motivate ethical demands and does not make space for non-humans (1948). It seems that de Beauvoir's view is even less hospitable to Near-Others than Sartre's initially appeared to be.

In fleshing out a new Sartrean ethics in light of the Near-Others category we can consider the ethics of Alice Crary. Crary argues that understanding behavior is ethically charged and that this understanding is the basis of moral facts. Every member of a species has things that are important to them according to what is important to their species and these things need to be attended to in order to understand their behavior. She states:

...human beings belong to the kind 'human being' and that in order to do justice to a human being's expressive behavior it is necessary to look at her in the light of a conception of what is important in human life. (2016, p. 135)

She argues the same for animal kinds. This could provide an interesting basis for a Near-Other Sartrean ethics; as indicated by our affective response to animals, animals exist on a spectrum with different needs, a reality that produces varied obligations. Understanding what matters for certain animal kinds could lead to understanding of the sort of freedom those animal kinds have.

Though we have ways to parse our obligations to animals in accordance with a Sartrean Near-Other, what of animals' obligations to us? It seems that any animal obligations are inaccessible. We cannot know if they could understand human freedom as something to be maintained; if they did, I would be quite surprised. This leaves us with a fundamentally asymmetrical human-animal ethics. This fits well with the concept of the Other and Near-Other relation as lacking symmetry in affective responses of fear, shame, and pride and in attitudes like indifference and sadism.

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