Towards an Ethics of Empathy

Morality and the Recognition of Otherness

by

Roberto Marchesini

Towards an Ethics of Empathy: Morality and the Recognition of Otherness

by Roberto Marchesini

2025

Ethics International Press, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (Hardback): 978-1-83711-175-6
ISBN (Ebook): 978-1-83711-176-3

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Cosetta Veronese for her valuable work on the translation, and to Sabrina Golfetto for her crucial editorial contribution.

Table of Contents

Foreword

One of the focal points of contemporary bioethics is the growing attention to the interests and possible rights of nonhuman species. This discipline explores the moral issues raised by scientific findings in ethology and neurophysiology concerning the affective and cognitive characteristics of nonhuman entities. This is not about falling into the *naturalistic fallacy*. We should not define a framework of values based solely on what we have observed and described of other species' expressive abilities. Rather, we should reflect on the moral significance of their existential dimensions and, above all, on how these intersect with our moral conduct. Bioethics, in fact, compels us to face the challenges that techno-scientific research poses to our relationship with the living world, in light of its rapidly advancing investigative and operational practices.

Just as an empathic approach is now standard practice in human medical care, interest in the animal condition is also becoming a crucial focus in the veterinary profession – both in clinical settings and in the prevention of behavioural problems. The assessment of animal welfare – a state that ensures an animal's full physiological and psychological expression – requires veterinary oversight even in livestock farming. However, animal welfare cannot be understood solely through a welfarist framework based on the five freedoms of the *Brambell Report* (1965), which drew on Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Nor can it be mediated by the anthropo-morphic lens of sympathy. Greater attention to diversity and an ethics of empathy are necessary.

This reflection concerns not only scientific aspects but also the realm of values by which science itself is influenced. An example of this is the study of animal interests. When viewed through an anthropocentric lens, animal interests risk being equated with human interests (a fallacy of conflation) or being reduced merely to the animals' liberation from suffering (an underestimation). Equally, animals risk being considered as *minus habentes* – without intrinsic orientation or agency. As the philosopher Luisella Battaglia argues in *Un'etica per il mondo vivente* (2011), this is not about conferring generic, anthropomorphic rights to those who are different, but rather about acknowledging different rights. Two obstacles hinder the development of a line of thought that is revolutionary in the nature of the questions it raises: i) a view of Otherness that overlooks species-specific interests while focusing on emancipation, namely, the expansion of the community of rights-holders to include Otherness; and ii) the ethics of sympathy not as a starting point but as an endpoint, which ultimately collapses into anthropomorphism.

Regarding the first point, I want to draw attention to a fundamental need of all living creatures: their need to express their nature. In the Brambell Report this is only briefly mentioned – it remains largely unaddressed. The situation becomes even more tragic if we consent to the hierarchy of needs, which places self-expression at the higher, less important level of the pyramid. Being able to express one's nature thus becomes merely a secondary need. No such hierarchy of needs exists in ethology. Needs are phasic and cyclical – different needs prevail at different times. Accordingly, priorities constantly shift. As a consequence, the pyramid should be dismantled and rendered more fluid, with interests shifting according to the situation. Today, we know that,

regardless of the attention given to their welfare, most problems affecting so-called "companion animals" stem from the fact that they cannot express their nature. Welfare, therefore, should be assessed in terms of *well-being*, i.e., congruence between animals' nature and the life they live.

Therefore, I believe it is important to distinguish between an ethics of sympathy, which risks slipping into anthropomorphism and welfarism, and an ethics of empathy, which instead focuses on species-specific differences. In sympathy, moral engagement arises from identifying with the Other and perceiving an elective affinity with them. In empathy, it is prompted by recognizing in the Other qualities that pose an ethical challenge. The concept of "next of kin" also differs significantly between the two perspectives. i) In sympathy, moral significance is based on common predicates, i.e., ontological affinity. This confines moral consideration to beings with whom I share the same characteristics, making the recipient a *moral patient* who passively receives moral attribution. ii) In empathy, moral significance arises from the ethical challenge posed by the recipient's species-specific qualities, which may not be shared. This is based on an *ontological recognition* independent of shared traits and makes the recipient a *moral claimant* with a distinct sphere of interests.

Another key difference is that while sympathy implies a primarily affective response, empathy has a more complex nature: it implies recognizing that the Other's existential perspective may differ from mine and may raise a moral problem. According to Martin Hoffman's theory, empathy encompasses several components, which develop sequentially during childhood, and involve three basic aspects: i) emotional, the tendency to emotionally participate

in and be affected by another's condition; ii) cognitive, the ability to understand someone else's perspective; and iii) motivational, a compelling call to take care of and help the Other. For Hoffmann, empathy is an essential skill in interpersonal relationships as well as a prerequisite for moral behaviour. Other studies underline the importance of an empathic approach in caregiving relationships. Unlike sympathy, empathy preserves a distinction between doctor and patient, which is essential for clinical assessment. The doctor can understand the patient's feelings and suffering without being overwhelmed by them but by integrating them into the caregiving relationship (Choi-Kain *et al*., 2008).

At the heart of an ethics of empathy is the concept of Otherness, which deserves to be explored further. In an ethics of sympathy, the recognition of our "next of kin" is based on affinity – identifying with the Other – while in an ethics of empathy, the *Other-than-me* is a next of kin because their traits and characteristics pose a challenge to my conduct. However, ethical prescriptions do not directly derive from descriptive predicates. In fact, a *problematic relationship* emerges when I realize that my conduct crosses the interests of Otherness. Others' qualities are not morally significant in themselves but become so because they challenge my conduct. This is why an antelope does not have the right not to be eaten by a lion, yet it does pose a moral problem for humans, who, as reflective entities, can question their own actions. The moral problem arises from the relationship between the moral agent and the claimant of interests, rather than from a unique and universal criterion of moral significance, such as the capacity to experience suffering. The claimant acquires moral value. There is no common denominator of moral value, nor a hierarchy of moral needs.

Rather, we should think in terms of *family resemblance* – in Wittgenstein's sense (1953) – a diverse set of moral demands.

The concept of Otherness proposed here must firstly be understood ontologically and only subsequently in terms of its ethical implications for individual conduct with regard to narrow morality (limitations and constraints) and broad morality (the call to moral action). Let us begin with the reflections of Emmanuel Lévinas in his essay *Totality and infinity* (1969) and *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence* (1998). In Lévinas, the Other as a "next of kin" is identified primarily in ontological terms: Otherness resists all forms of appropriation, it cannot become a commodity or a projection. In this sense, the face of the Other already poses an ethical demand: in encountering the Other, the individual feels personally addressed, involved and responsible. We could argue that encountering the Other creates a moral obligation: to go beyond one's self-interests.

In Lévinas's perspective Otherness manifests itself through the Other's face. This opening, however, is only partial; it is limited to the recognition that we share the human condition. While Lévinas challenges traditional ontology based on being and thought, its applicability remains, as it were, confined to this side of the Rubicon – the inter-human – a boundary that cannot be crossed. My proposal, instead, will seek to define an ethics of Otherness that extends to ontological entities within the broad realm of the nonhuman, such as animal and other forms of Otherness. In this case, recognisability does not refer to the face or to phenomenological predicates, but to metapredicative qualities. While these can be inferred rather than merely described, they still challenge individual conduct and appeal to our sense of responsibility.

Indeed, in examining different forms of animal life, we realize that every species not only manifests itself through distinct qualities but also has its own distinct demands.

To simplify extremely, a dog and a cat have different needs and pose different challenges to our conduct. They are both Otherness, yet their predicates are not identical. However, they do share metapredicates that refer to their common animal condition, including subjectivity, sensitivity, the need for an environment suitable for survival, inherent proactivity, and agency. These metapredicates, however, are expressed in different ways by the different species. Otherness is therefore recognizable in two ways: i) through a shared metapredicative condition – when an animal, as an unspecific entity, addresses me and invokes my moral responsibility; and ii) through the knowledge of its specific needs, those particular traits that define the precise challenges a given Otherness poses to my conduct. Recognizing the condition of Otherness means drawing on Lévinas's idea of being addressed by the Other. Yet moving beyond the limitation of the face and grounding recognition in metapredicates that pose a moral problem changes the terms of the relationship. Therefore, the definition of moral claimant and moral agent must be reformulated accordingly.

With a view to developing an ethics of empathy as a virtue that contributes to the full realization of the human potential, this book draws on various sources of moral thought. First of all, it aims to define the profile of a moral agent capable of engaging empathically with Otherness. Moral approaches based on sympathy, notably David Hume's (1978) conception of human nature and Mary Midgley's (2003) holistic thought, will help direct

focus on the participatory and social experience. According to Geoffrey Miller in *The Mating Mind* (2000), empathy evolved in humans due to social interaction. He argues that it also underpins particular attitudes, such as animism. In examining the motivational aspect of empathy, we will explore the human inclination towards care, which has been emphasized throughout the philosophical tradition from Plato to Heidegger. Finally, we will consider virtue ethics, from Aristotle to MacIntyre, and show how this capacity can be fostered.

An ethics of empathy also transforms how we view the recipient of moral action, who shifts from being a *moral patient* to being a *moral claimant*. This shift emphasizes the claimant's active role: as in Lévinas, the latter addresses the interlocutor, rather than passively experiencing or receiving their conduct. The moral claimant presents itself in epiphanic terms rather than merely as an objective phenomenological entity. If we consider the motivational aspect, the moral claimant is someone who elicits care through *et-epimelesis* – i.e., through requests for help, aid, and compassion. Significantly, Hoffman refers to a sense of guilt in a moral agent who chooses not to comfort the Other. Offering and providing assistance, on the other hand, ignite a sense of fulfilment. Moving towards an ethics of empathy means fostering a sentimental education, understood as a process of *shared feeling.* It is a process that transcends individuality: we feel part of something beyond ourselves. In this sense, the definition of moral demand presents some affinities with the capability approach of Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen (1993), in which capability does not refer to what an entity *can do* but to what it *can demand*.

Chapter 1
Different Levels of Ethical Behaviour

Abstract

Ethics imposes prescriptive directions that either involve restraints on conduct (narrow morality) or appeals to action (broad morality). Its criteriology spans from the analysis of the consequences of the different options to deontology. When considering Otherness, it is essential to understand what is to be safeguarded. This requires a descriptive analysis of the specific qualities of Otherness. We cannot derive ethical prescriptions from the description of an entity; we must determine how certain predicates carry moral significance. Scientific research does not directly yield ethical prescriptions. It first defines an entity's qualities and then challenges ethics to reflect on their moral significance. Based on this, prescriptions may be issued. This chapter investigates the foundations for developing an ethics of empathy.

Introduction

Moral interest in nonhuman Otherness has a long tradition, dating back to the beginnings of Western philosophy, with thinkers such as Porphyry and Plutarch. In the twentieth century, in the wake of the Darwinian revolution, of new discoveries in ethology, and of the research conducted in neurophysiology, this interest became pressing. These fields posed an increasing challenge to traditional anthropocentrism with its ontological, ethical, and epistemological

barrier between humans and other species. The new studies emphasized how other species also possess traits of sensitivity and subjectivity, and raised urgent questions about human conduct. From the 1950s onwards, the industrialization of the agro-livestock sector began to address rising food demands in the post-war period and to follow a logic of economic transformation that drastically reduced the number of workers in the field. At the same time, however, it also began to disclose the dramatic consequences this had for nature and animals, as demonstrated by two landmark books: *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson (1962) and *Animal Machine* by Ruth Harrison (1964).

Meanwhile, in an increasingly urbanized society with fewer opportunities to interact with the natural world, sensitivity towards animals had started to change. The change was favoured by the rise of Disney culture, the emerging concept of the *pet*, and the transformation of cats and dogs into family members. This cultural shift clashed sharply with images of animals confined in livestock farms, subjected to animal testing, and bred for fur – a reality exemplified by the character of Cruella de Vil in *One Hundred and One Dalmatians*. The book by Harrison elicited a response from scholars of animal welfare: in 1965, they drafted the *Brambell Report*, which outlined five essential rights for the welfare of farmed animals: the right to have basic physiological needs met, to live in an adequate environment, to be free from pain and disease, to be relieved of fear and distress, and to express species-specific behaviours. Had these basic freedoms been genuinely respected, intensive farming would have had to cease immediately. As a matter of fact, the report's directives remained largely ineffective.

Riding on the impact of Hans Ruesch's *The Naked Empress: The Great Medical Fraud* (1986) on the anti-vivisection movement and following shifts in *metaethics* (the principles underlying moral reflection), the subsequent decade became pivotal in the moral reflection on human relationships with other species. While ethical anthropocentrism maintained a certain symmetry between rights and values, moral agents and patients, universalism and individuality, and science and ethics, the collapse of anthropocentrism challenges all these distinctions and dichotomies, making it difficult to navigate the labyrinth of ambivalence and circular reasoning. People begin to interrogate themselves about the semantics of moral expressions, explanatory models for moral claims (a sort of ethical epistemology), the nature of ethical attitudes (are they cognitive-rational or affective-conative?), and the metaphysics of moral properties. For example, John Leslie Mackie's *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (1977) adopts a moral sceptical approach, arguing that objective values do not exist and that moral judgment must be examined before ethical norms can be addressed.

The relationship between science and ethics – long overshadowed by the risk of committing the naturalistic fallacy – comes to the foreground with the rise of ethical concerns about environmental protection and the respect for animal Otherness. To bridge biology and ethics, American biochemist Van Rensselaer Potter introduced the term *bioethics* in 1970, even though the word had actually existed since the 1920s when it was coined by the German theologian Fritz Jahr (1927). Potter emphasized that human behaviour in biomedical and ecological contexts be subject to ethical reflection. His aim was to connect science with ethics. Due to Hume's *is-ought* problem these two fields had traditionally been

considered parallel: descriptive propositions (stating what *is*) were to be kept distinct from prescriptive propositions (stating what *ought to be*). In essence, Hume's law asserts that values cannot be derived directly from facts and that the two fields of inquiry must remain separate. Potter's project essentially challenges this principle.

With the advent of bioethics in the 1980s, another principle is also disrupted: the symmetry between moral agents and moral patients. It was traditionally assumed that only those who were capable of moral action could be considered moral agents. Potter's bioethics produced a significant conceptual shift: both the environment and future generations – neither of which can reciprocate – are recognized as moral patients. Arguably, newborns or people with severe cognitive impairments also lack moral agency. Yet their status as moral patients had never been questioned. As members of the human species, they were considered potentially capable of moral agency, thereby maintaining the symmetry between agent and patient.

1970 was the year when, in an Oxford publication, British psychologist Richard Ryder coined the term *speciesism* to describe the moral discrimination exercised by humans against other species solely on the basis of their nonhuman status (Ryder, 1970). A statement such as: "regardless of their physical or cognitive condition, human beings must be considered moral patients because they are human" is evidently tautological. Moreover, it is unsustainable, since any arbitrary discrimination – whether racist or sexist – ultimately relies on circular reasoning. If there are no morally significant predicates present in all humans and absent in all nonhumans, then any discrimination is arbitrary and therefore

ethically unjustified. Based on this principle, Australian philosopher Peter Singer published *Animal Liberation* (1975), a landmark in the animal rights debate. For the first time, animal interests were regarded through the strict logic of inherent predicates rather than through human emotionality – such as their capacity to suffer, which Bentham had already emphasized.

Singer's utilitarianism weighs the trivial human interest in eating meat against the immense suffering endured by animals. What they experience in factory farms, during transport, and at the time of slaughter leads Singer to argue that vegetarianism is an ethical necessity. From the very title of his book – *Animal Liberation* (1975) – Singer advocates for an emancipation movement aimed at securing rights for animals. This claim became even stronger in *The Case for Animal Rights* (1983) by American philosopher Tom Regan. Regan argued that many animals are *subjects-of-a-life*, and, accordingly, have intrinsic value (i.e., value in themselves rather than for others). In Kantian terms, we could argue that they are ends rather than means. This natural-rights perspective is even more radical than Singer's utilitarianism, leading to the conclusion that, regardless of the purpose, any practice that uses animals as means is morally unacceptable. The animal rights movement that characterized the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (later termed the anti-speciesist movement), had a significant influence on cultural attitudes.

From the 1980s onwards, in response to the rapid development of biotechnologies, bioethical research expanded further through: i) genetic engineering and the advent of transgenic animals, such as Harvard's *OncoMouse*; ii) reproductive technologies producing mosaic and chimeric animals; and iii) cloning, e.g., Dolly the sheep.

These developments gave rise to a very simple question: is everything that is technically possible also ethically permissible? While the question is deliberately rhetorical, the debate surrounding the relationship between descriptive and prescriptive statements remains unresolved and continues to persist in bioethics. As a result, recognizing animals as sentient beings does not automatically grant them rights. This remains a major limitation of anti-speciesist ethics to date. The latter has sought to resolve metaethical issues by continuing to rely on humans as the term of reference, while ignoring the issue of animal diversity and their different interests.

The challenge lies not in granting rights to the different, but in recognizing their *different* rights. There are also other aspects to consider: i) the predominantly restrictive ethical view of both Singer and Regan (what actions should be avoided) has little to say about expanded morality (what proactive actions must be taken); as a consequence, it encourages negligence towards today's pressing issue of biodiversity loss; and ii) its predominantly rational, logic, and deontological attitude overlooks the fact that our relationship with other species is grounded on affectivity. This leads us to anthropomorphize certain animals while completely forgetting about others. Instead, the attribution of values must be based on our capacity to recognize the existence of species-specific characteristics.

1.1 The Relationship Between Science and Ethics

In 1979, the German philosopher Hans Jonas published the book *The Imperative of Responsibility* (1984), emphasizing the need to link every single human action to its consequences. For Jonas it was

urgent to restore ethics to concreteness, demonstrating how the decisions made by human communities inevitably affect the lives and destinies of humankind. His perspective is grounded in a morality that is future-oriented and in an ontological ethics that seeks to preserve humanity. The imperative formulated in this work can be summarized as follows: "Act in such a way that the effects of your action are compatible with the continuation of a life that is authentically human". The German philosopher is preoccupied with the development of technology to the point of arguing that distrust and fear should be the heuristic principle guiding human conduct. Responsibility, however, remains the moral foundation of Jonas' reflection: through responsibility human beings become aware of and accept the potential consequences of their decisions. The convergence between facts and morality, as identified by Jonas, lies here: every technological advancement increases human operational capabilities and, accordingly, their responsibilities. Responsibility, therefore, inextricably binds science with ethics.

Jonas also rethinks the concept of nature. He views it as an entity endowed with an intrinsic purpose: being an end in itself constitutes both the essence of nature and its ontological foundation. Therefore, the value that ethics must pursue is the preservation of this good. We bear the metaphysical responsibility of safeguarding the Earth in all its vitality. Jonas speaks of a technological exaggeration, a real myth that leads to our dominion over nature, conceived as something we can manipulate as we please. He considers the *deontology of fear*, a path towards establishing a cosmic ethics that might prevent the catastrophic consequences of human actions. These actions have failed to account for the major risks looming over our future, including the

ecological crises, overpopulation, depletion of natural resources, and energy problems.

Yet, Jonas holds on to a metaphysical framework which cannot derive ethics from a neutral description of the entity. This creates a problematic relationship between ethics and praxis, whereas this relationship should aim to enable us to take care of nature and of the planet's future. For Jonas an asymmetry exists; yet, not in the sense that humans have more rights, but that, due to their unique capabilities, they have more duties.

On the other hand, technoscience does not merely provide operational tools; it also develops techniques that enable us to study the sensitivity, affectivity, cognition, and awareness of animals. Research methods derived from cognitive sciences include the *False Belief Test*, which explores whether animals possess a *theory of mind*, and the *Violation-of-Expectation Test*, which examines what nonhuman subjects know and what inferences they can make. Other methodologies include: perception tests to determine whether an animal can understand the permanence of an object hidden behind an occluder; a wide range of problem-solving tasks to study cognitive abilities; research techniques on memory, deductive skills, the facial recognition of emotions, and tests on empathic skills – to name just a few.

Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) allows researchers to see what animals are experiencing during a test, and even what they dream. Over the past fifty years, so many visualization tools have been developed – both through experimental tests and through neural imaging techniques – that it is no longer possible to consider the mind a "black box" or to consider the inner

experiences of other species as unknowable, as Thomas Nagel (1974) once suggested.

This research has provided a radically different picture of animal Otherness from that presented in humanistic debates, which hold on to traditional a-priori reductionism. Traditional philosophical discourse adopts modern terminology only to continue revolving around the old Cartesian idea that animals are automatons, demonstrating a profound lack of awareness of ethological, cognitive, and neurophysiological research. It resists scientific descriptions, and persists in portraying the non human as an entity opposed to the human. The animal-human opposition, however, is a construct. No uniform set of traits exists in other species that may be contrasted with human qualities. While a *species* is a phenomenological entity – observable and categorizable within a range of individuals – the concept of *animality* is merely inferential. What we observe are taxonomic classifications (e.g., dog, dolphin, spider, and earthworm). We can call a species a *predicative* entity that can be objectively observed. The animal dimension, on the other hand, is *metapredicative* – it is a higher categorical level than the species. Comparing "humans" to "animals" is therefore wrong because they belong to a different categorical dimension; humans can only be compared to other *species*.

These metaphysical considerations demand a reconceptualization of the notion of animality and of its relationship to the human condition. Rather than seeing animals as opposites, we should view the human as just one of many possible expressions of animality. This leads us to an ontological question: what does it mean to be an animal from a metapredicative perspective? To overcome mechanistic views of animality we must avoid simplistic

anthropomorphism and other reductionist approaches. We must consider what it means 'to exist within a specific predicative dimension' in terms of both moral significance and the ethical obligations it imposes on our conduct. This is impossible without taking into account descriptive findings about animal Otherness. This is how we can address the problem of the relationship between science and ethics while avoiding the trap of the *naturalistic fallacy*.

Can we keep on ignoring the scientific evidence that conflicts with the anthropocentric view of animals we have devised to please our egos? I don't think so – unless we wish to hide behind the childish statement made by the German physiologist Emil Du Bois-Reymond in 1872: *ignoramus et ignorabimus* (*we do not know and will not know*). The expression seems purposefully crafted to reinforce the assumption that we will never understand a bat. If we understand why an ethics that does not take account of its subjects' characteristics fails its primary mandate, we must also agree that the term *moral claimants* is preferable to *moral patients*. Of course, moral demands cannot be arbitrary but must rely on precise qualities that require descriptive analysis. How can we build the bridge between science and ethics that Potter anticipated but left unexplained? The path suggested by Jonas might offer some insights.

By emphasizing the intrinsic value of life and the deontological principle of fear, Jonas creates a problematic relationship between the descriptive and the prescriptive – an intersection between two parallel lines. While it is incorrect to derive the prescriptive from the descriptive (since values cannot directly descend from facts, and vice versa), claiming that a distinct separation between the two

exists is also wrong. The error consists in mistaking non-descendance for the intersection. While values cannot derive from facts, this does not mean that scientific discoveries and technological advancements have no impact on ethical thinking. If we return to the principle of *moral demand*, closely linked to the ethics of empathy, we realise that an evaluation of the morally significant traits along with the principles of justice to be applied must be based on a description of the entity and its circumstances. Science reveals problems that elicit ethical reflection. While values cannot be derived from facts, values and facts problematically intersect. Let us consider two issues that call for ethical reflection: i) why should humans place limits on their behaviour when other species do not? This question raises the problem of *ethical asymmetry*, which might seem to reinstall anthropocentrism, as it creates a distinction between what is required from humans and what is required from Otherness; and ii) how can we assess moral demands without getting lost in a maze of possibilities, which may also conflict with their applicability (since life itself always occurs at the expense of Others)? This question addresses the recognizability of the claimant, and the compatibility of the moral act when attributed within a framework that inevitably raises issues of demarcation. Even though it should be disconnected from the heuristic of fear, which risks inducing *freezing* rather than moral action, Jonas's approach is useful. It becomes valuable when we consider that our increased operational capabilities – enabled by technology – imply an increase in our moral responsibility. Unlike cheetahs, humans have moved further and further away from their phylogenetic origins through technology and culture. In fact, every increase in human operational capacities raises the bar of moral responsibility.

A proportional relationship between operational capacity and moral responsibility means, for example, that humanity as a whole cannot be held equally accountable for the ongoing ecological crises. Some peoples have a very low impact on the biosphere, while others contribute over 80% of the current environmental problems. A proportional relationship between operational capacity and moral responsibility also means that the greater an individual's economic resources and level of knowledge, the stronger their moral obligation. Consistent with this principle of proportionality, a wealthy person faces greater ethical constraints than a poor person, just as an intellectual has greater obligations than someone with a more modest educational background. Linking ethical obligation to responsibility, and responsibility to moral agency, implies assigning value to the ability to intervene in different situations, following a logic of correlative justice in which those who have more bear greater moral obligations than those who have less.

Let us now consider the perspective of the moral claimant. While it is true that values do not derive directly from facts, they are also not entirely separate. When science provides evidence of characteristics in nonhuman animals such as sentience, reflective capacity, or intentionality, to name a few, ethical questions about the moral significance of these traits inevitably arise. If a particular characteristic is morally significant (such as the capacity to feel pain), then it also demands ethical consideration, requiring us to develop appropriate responses in terms of conduct. General behavioural guidelines can be derived from the intersection between the morally significant traits in the moral claimant and the degree of moral agency of the moral agent. This helps prevent a

kind of ethical nominalism while also overcoming the dichotomy between science and ethics and eschewing the naturalistic fallacy.

1.2 Expanded Morality and Restricted Morality

An ethics that seeks to embrace the concept of empathy – grounded in the recognition of Otherness and participation in its perspective – needs to shift from the concept of moral patient to that of moral claimant. This shift avoids the projection that underpins the principle of the universalism of interests. The role of the moral agent also changes accordingly: moral agents are now required to cultivate their moral capacities. They cannot simply follow general precepts, as in a deontological vision, nor rely on a moral scale that measures the consequences of their actions. Moral agents are required to make both a cognitive and emotional effort, as both cognition and emotions are components of empathy. Following a set of behavioural rules based mainly on abstention is not enough to ensure ethically acceptable conduct. Empathy demands moral action. The moral agent is not idle but seeks fulfillment, i.e., a condition of *eudaimonia*. Empathy can be seen as a human potential, a virtual condition that requires the development of a moral character. It needs to be cultivated and educated to overcome egocentrism, narcissism, projection, exclusivity, instrumentalization, affective detachment, or apathy.

Addressing ethical action towards a subject requires a process of active recognition (*cognitive empathy*), along with emotional involvement and the ability to feel together (*affective empathy*). Empathy demands effort, or rather a set of *moral capabilities*, which, according to Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum (1993), humans ought to develop harmoniously. On the other hand, moral demand

rests on the ontological recognition of Otherness – the acknowledgment that Otherness bears intrinsic interests (a *For-the-Self*) and detains agency (an *In-the-Self*). Agency is not merely sentience, nor should it be understood as a hierarchy of pre-established interests, as in Abraham Maslow's pyramid (Maslow, 1943). An ontology of Otherness demands recognition of the singularity of interests and a shift from a condition of *welfare* (based on a static and uniform hierarchy of interests) to one of *well-being* (which prioritizes the realization of the Other's ontological perspective). These considerations expose the limitations of anti-speciesism as long as it remains confined within ontological anthropocentrism. Instead of valuing diversity (i.e., recognizing interests beyond the human horizon), it assigns ethical value solely to a common denominator (*the capacity to suffer*). As long as the human remains the sole standard of measure, anti-speciesism will be trapped in contradictions, using ontological anthropocentrism to combat or overcome ethical anthropocentrism. This explains why contemporary animal advocacy remains ambivalent.

We cannot fully come to terms with Otherness as long as: i) nonhuman subjects are regarded as moral patients, stripped of their species-specific characteristics and reduced to human approximations (*minus habentes*) because they cannot claim recognition of their diversity; and ii) moral agents do not feel called upon to undertake personal development and improve their empathic qualities but are only required to respect precepts that, in broad terms, define a framework for universal moral praxis. These two trends have privileged a *restricted* moral perspective – one that views moral action mainly as abstention (i.e., discontinuing certain actions or lifestyles). In empathy, however, the proactive dimension of ethical behaviour is enhanced. If we

assume that nonhuman Otherness is primarily interested in "not suffering", we naturally tend to prioritize abstention (i.e., *not acting*) rather than establish a prescriptive ethical framework. This approach, however, is risky. On the one hand, it could lead to a kind of neo-Catharism that amplifies the distance between humans and other species, undermining the affective dimension of empathy. On the other, it risks conflating *interest* with *welfare* – a profoundly speciesist perspective that ignores the ontological dimension of Otherness.

The cornerstone of anti-speciesist discourse is the other animals' *capacity to feel pain*, i.e., sentience. This tenet, which revolves around the principle of suffering, fails to consider that animals' interests may also be directed elsewhere, i.e., towards self-expression. By privileging common traits and reinstating human parameters, traditional anti-speciesism ultimately reinforces ontological anthropocentrism. What it overlooks – often in good faith – is that even when disguised as a concession, anthropomorphism remains a form of anthropocentrism.

1.2.1 The Ethics of Care

We now know that only through empathy can we claim that Otherness has the right to advance moral demands. Let us therefore explore some of the paths in line with the broader ethical framework required for the development of a moral agent. An interesting approach comes from the ethics of care. The ethics of care is grounded in a natural human characteristic – *epimelesis* (from the ancient Greek *epimeleomai*, meaning "to take care of") – and recognizes that Others' interests and needs are both different and specific. These two aspects partly resonate with our initial aim:

first, the moral agent is expected not simply to abstain from harm but also to assume responsibility for care, thereby taking an active role; and, second, Otherness and their distinctive interests take centre stage. A fundamental contribution to understanding the principle behind the ethics of care comes from Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* (1982). The author emphasizes how the ethics of care foregrounds difference, a trait largely overlooked by traditional moral philosophy in defining the concept of the good life. Care is essential to moral action because it is the basis of relationships. Therefore, it should be regarded as the basis of human coexistence. The ethics of care can manifest in various ways: i) from recognizing vulnerability as an intrinsic condition of life, which invites a benevolent disposition towards Otherness (akin to Christian compassion), to the need for self-care (*epimeleia heautou*, in the Socratic sense), understood as cultivating inner goodness; and ii) from Jonas' principle of responsibility in caring for the world – as interpreted by scholars Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher – to the Abrahamic notion of healing the world explored in Emil Fackenheim's essay *To Mend the World* (1994).

Care for the world is one of the most distinctive features of humans. For Martin Heidegger (1995), care is our major ontological characteristic. The human is always projected forward, in a continuous relationship with the world. We feel close to the things of the world because we care for them and actively engage in pursuing self-fulfillment. The Latin pantheon includes a minor deity named Cura. The myth of Cura, to which Heidegger refers in *Being and Time* (1962), is foundational to the human species. In the mythographic manual *Fabulae*, transmitted by Gaius Julius Hyginus (64 BCE – 17 CE), Cura shapes with clay the human body into which Jupiter will later breathe life. The myth suggests that

the human essence relates to this caring attitude, a genetic legacy inherited from the deity. Significantly, the term "medicine" may originate from the Latin *medeor*, meaning "to take care" or "to find a remedy". Alternatively, in his essay Le parole della cura [Le parole della cura in italics] (2017), Umberto Curi suggests that it may derive from the Greek *medon*, meaning "guardian". The Greek principle of *epimeleia* holds a central place in the Platonic dialogues. In the *Apology,* it refers to the educational practice, or self-care; in the *Phaedrus,* it is considered an essential trait that also characterizes divinity; and in *Alcibiades I*, it refers to the care of the soul. For Socrates *epimeleia* means attention to nurturing the individual in order to make it flourish. In *The Republic, epimeleia* is the ultimate political disposition: caring for the city, that is, the art of good government. Care also enters the medical realm with the term "therapy", referring not only to the act of healing but also to an overall attentiveness towards the person.

In Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, the concept of *epimeleia* throws emphasis on the relational nature of humans, depicting our life not as a solipsistic event, but as an intrinsically interconnected one. As Luigina Mortari emphasizes in *Filosofia della cura* (2015, p. 35), "For the human being, to live always means to co-exist, since no one can alone fully realize the project of existence". Sara Brotto's *Etica della cura* (2013) is an insightful book that maps out this ethical framework and considers other approaches, such as those of Nel Noddings, Sara Ruddick, Virginia Held, and Eva Feder Kittay. In Edith Stein's (1989) perspective, the relationship of care becomes an act of hospitality towards the Other – making space within oneself transforms into an act of giving. For the German philosopher, care essentially means being on the side of the Other, it means contact and sharing, it is the experience of *Einfühlung* – an

empathic condition that fosters reciprocity. In this sense, care arises from the affective response elicited by the encounter with Otherness, what Emmanuel Lévinas (2005) considers the appeal exerted by the Other's face. Heidegger (1995) views care as a tension, a movement towards something, the realization of one's potential, a striving for what is not yet there. This enhances the proactive element of care; the fact that, as suggested by Hannah Arendt (2019), *epimeleia* is active life. Care is, therefore, a movement beyond oneself; it implies becoming responsible for Otherness, but also self-emergence, self-education and flourishing (*educere*). Significantly, as Mortari (2015, p. 107) observes, the verb *epimeleomai* is linked to the verb *meletao*, which also means "to practice". Therefore, care implies an openness to the world that requires dedication, diligence, responsibility, and consideration. Care becomes a universal principle of sharing that enhances the relational nature of *Being*. This is evident in the contributions of scholars such as Judith Butler (2004), Carol Gilligan (1982), Joan Tronto (1995), and Jean-Luc Nancy (2002), who emphasize the fragility and needs of the Other.

As Elena Pulcini reminds us in *La cura del mondo* (2009), care is also profoundly linked to the principle of responsibility. It means both *pre-occupying oneself* (as a forward-looking concern for possible futures) and *actively taking care* of something. The etymology of the term "care", therefore, combines the meanings of both apprehension and solicitude. The affective – hence motivational – dimension of care is underlined by Michael Slote in *The Ethics of Care and Empathy* (2008). He emphasizes how, in developing ethics, it is important to account for moral emotions. The reflections of Josephine Donovan and Carol J. Adams (1995) have convincingly refuted the idea that an ethics of care is limited to human

relationships. They argue for the existence of a profound connection between an attitude of caring and the acknowledgement of the interests of *Otherness*. The very concept of care implies moving beyond self-interest or the interests of those to whom we are emotionally bonded. If ethical consideration were limited solely to one's own interests or those of our beloved ones, we would be justified in neglecting the majority of humanity.

1.2.2. Virtue Ethics

Elaborated by scholars such as Elizabeth Anscombe (1958), Iris Murdoch (2001), Philippa Foot (2001), and Alasdair MacIntyre (1981), virtue ethics is another compelling approach related to the ethics of empathy, in which the moral agent is capable of recognizing Otherness and engaging with its interests. Virtue ethics assumes that the moral character of the agent develops through virtues essential for moral action, such as generosity, altruism, fairness, prudence, courage, and sensitivity. This approach draws on the Aristotelian concept of virtue from the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Here, virtues are robust and persistent traits (*thick concepts*) that replace less substantial moral concepts (*thin concepts*), which provide mere behavioural guidelines. Practically, virtues prepare the moral agent for navigating the complexity of problematic situations that demand ethical responses. As argued by Daniel Dombrowski (1984) and Nathan Nobis (2002), virtue ethics implies the cultivation of a solid moral character. This enables an individual to act virtuously regardless of the circumstances, or of the subject to whom our moral action is directed. In *After Virtue* (1981), MacIntyre emphasized that humans must fulfill their ultimate purpose – *telos* – by developing