

The Trace of Different Others of Others in a Box, Murdering the Circle

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1. Bare Life, or Others Who Could Never Become Others

Emmanuel Levinas pinpoints the intention or directivity of the ‘not me’ in the act of seeking the truth, of changing an object as desire, and of appreciating everyday life while eating, drinking, and enjoying oneself. It demonstrates the intention to alter the world according to one’s wishes. However, there are objects for which this does not work: a romantic partner who may drift apart and get separated along the line by thinking only of themselves, a child who rebels against parental dominance, and death – which suddenly attacks when least expected. But the thing that struck Levinas the most was the neighbors with ‘suffering faces.’ Since they have a place in one’s heart, their painful faces draw the heart in. People try to approach them and know their pain and its causes, yet it is difficult to fully understand the suffering of others, no matter how much you realize them. That is why he refers to the suffering face as the “Other.”

Others are those who are estranged from the feelings of the subject and whose actions are not within the subject’s control. But, in order to approach it, there are attempts to go beyond what one knows, what wants to do, and how sees the world. Levinas calls this “transcendence,” saying that it is the starting point making ‘ethics’ possible in human society and is the primary thing in philosophy.

It is clear that the concept of the Other provided an important turning point in Western philosophy, which considered the subject’s reason, spirit, or human labor as the axis of thought. Although compassion for the suffering of Others is taken as the fundamental starting point, the Other here has paradoxically been limited to beings whose pain can be recognized on their face. How many beings are there whose suffering is not acknowledged, but can never be said to be painless? This is the case with rats in a laboratory or animals caged in a zoo.

In early-20th-century Europe, gorillas held in newly established zoos for commercial purposes tended to die within only three days. After that, as other gorillas continued to die, zoologists at the time asserted that the gorillas that used to live in open spaces in the wild died from stress due to the stifling environment in a cage. Yet, many people then, such as Descartes who refuted the idea that dogs have souls, criticized this contention as a mere ‘personification’ that projected human psychology onto gorillas. If multiple gorillas, rather than a single gorilla, repeatedly died, could it be assumed that they did not feel pain under the conditions that caused their deaths? That’s right, the pain of non-human beings is imperceptible both in death and in destruction. Thus, they could not

even become Levinas' "Others."

People who live with companion animals will contradict the claim that dogs or cats feel no pain. As dogs and cats are close 'neighbors' to them, they see a 'suffering face.' It is relieving that the idea that animals feel pain - an idea that has arisen from such relationships - is now widespread and that the Animal Protection Act has been enacted. Yet can the people living with companion animals feel the same way about the suffering of wild rats and even proceed to think about the necessity of laws to protect them? Or what about cockroaches?

Some of the scientists who administer the material to experimental rats to study how harmful it is for humans probably know their pain. Was it due to the burden of dealing with their dead bodies? Thanks to this, there are restrictions and regulations on animal testing these days. On the other hand, there are also companies making and patenting 'oncemouse' that were born with cancer cells to simplify the experiment, and selling 'prepared' rats genetically engineered to have various diseases including mental illness. Considering that scientists can no longer conduct experiments without these, it is not easy to find those who worry about the suffering of rats. These beings born to die in a laboratory can be described as the irony or paradox of life science, in that the field justifies everything when research for human life is the aim.

What about in the case of an experiment in which no harmful materials are administered? Would a behavioral psychologist's laboratory be any better, if their experiments around animal responses to set stimuli to shed light on human psychology and behavioral patterns? Not many people have recognized the mice's pain in the small laboratory known as the Skinner Box, by looking at their faces. To the psychologists engaged in this practice, isn't the rat a mere kind of 'machine' which reacts to a certain stimulus? It would also be unreasonable for them to talk about machine-animals' suffering, just as machine's suffering is disregarded. Scientists from that era may have scoffed, ridiculing the idea that they were giving pain to the machine-animals. However, the artificial intelligence cited in Hana Yoo's artwork *Bare Life* underlines the pain suffered by the rats in the box, even by those undergoing anesthesia surgery without any harmful substances. That is, the machine was able to sense the pain of mice that humans could not perceive. Are they closer to rats than they are to humans? In this case, should not we ask the question of what is a machine? A little later I will return to this question.

Philosopher Peter Singer, who contributed to the animal rights movement, criticizes speciesism in alignment with racism. According to him, as humans should not be discriminated against based on skin color, dogs or cats should not be discriminated against just because they are not human. He takes the same position when it comes to mice in the laboratory. His belief that animals should not undergo unnecessary suffering relates intriguingly to the theory of utilitarianism of suffering. However, to pose a similar question to the previous one: what about flies and cockroaches? I have never heard of animal rights activists paying attention to the lives and pain of cockroaches yet. Are they still not considered 'animals' enough?

Then what about in the case of plants? Peter Singer explicitly denies the idea that plants have a sense of pain, and this is because otherwise the ethics of vegetarianism have no foundation. However, interestingly, the idea that plants have no senses has been proven in the laboratory to be an absurd human bias. The human eye has five photoreceptors that detect light, yet *Arabidopsis thaliana* which is often utilized in laboratories for its 'usability' has eleven photoreceptors. Now we can only speculate as to which might have a more sensitive vision. The field-

dodder parasitic on the tomato tree stretches its vines precisely in search of ‘perfume’ with tomato scents. Boquila, a South American winder, makes its own leaves by accurately mimicking the shape of the leaves it binds. How could this process take place without some form of vision? In 2007, researchers at McMaster University in Canada demonstrated that the American searocket distinguishes between those belonging to the same maternal line (seeds from the same singleton) and those belonging to a different maternal line. It suggests that plants do also recognize their relatives. Multiple types of plants release phenolic gas that repels insects when they gnaw leaves, and the same gas is emitted by sensing other leaves of different trees nearby. With this evidence in mind, isn’t the idea that plants have no sense of pain an assertion to be scientifically proven? Considering that pain is a sense that a living organism has evolved to protect its own body, there is nothing contrary to the nature of life as thinking that other beings are not capable of experiencing pain. There is only a difference in degree and aspect.

Defining the Others through the suffering face, that is, the presentation of suffering, does not consider the Others hidden behind this layered veil. It is only to see Others who are close to humans. Things that are further from humans are not even able to become Others because their suffering is not perceived. The presentation of suffering even otherizes the Others. The fact that the North Korean defector woman in *Bare Life* is juxtaposed with a rat in a laboratory without a face or a gun aimed at a mouse, helps to visualize the pain of a faceless animal and being that cannot be detected without analogy with human suffering.

The title *Bare Life*, reminiscent of Giorgio Agamben’s book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, is intended to demonstrate that the plight of ‘the one who may be murdered with impunity (*Homo Sacer*)’ is not limited to just humans. Agamben does not widen his consideration to excess animal deaths whilst denouncing the treatment of humans who are in the same position. By presupposing a fundamental severance between human and animal life, the criticism of modern biopolitics, which lowered *bios* (human life) to *zoe* (animal life/survival) may divide the heaven of *bios* and the hell of *zoe*. It is for this reason that Hana Yoo’s *Bare Life* should not be regarded as an analogy of Agamben’s political philosophy, but rather as a criticism of it.