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Analysis of Otherness in Damien Hirst's Works from the Perspective of Emmanuel Levinas's Worldview (Case Study of Three Works by Damien Hirst)

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The protection of the environment and animals, due to their relentless exploitation, has today become a matter of concern for many thinkers in this field. In this regard, we face challenges in ethical theory. The main objective of this research is to examine how the human, in the position of the "self," places the animal in the position of the "other." The present study has been conducted using a descriptive–analytical method, with data collection carried out through library resources and by employing a case study of a set of Damien Hirst's works centered on animal bodies. Considering that Levinas's issue is the right to life for the "other," his views have been utilized to explore this matter. One of the most important topics in Levinas's philosophy is the issue of the "other," which pertains to the domain of practical philosophy and ethics, encompassing everything beyond the "self." The researcher, based on Levinas's views, has explained and elaborated on the problem, and the findings indicate that through a phenomenological reading of Levinas, the disturbing otherness can be examined and analyzed in Damien Hirst's works.

Keywords: *Damien Hirst, other, animal, self, Levinas*

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1. Introduction

In his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant divides philosophy into two parts: practical and theoretical; the theoretical part is the philosophy of nature, and the practical part is the philosophy of ethics (Kant, 2007). Moral philosophy is not merely a theory but is filled with practical significance. Descartes introduces the issue of the subject and object in philosophy, meaning that everything in the world is apprehended by the subject and becomes the objects of its cognition. However, in existentialist philosophy, the issue shifts toward the recognition of one subject by another subject. That is, when two cognizing agents become aware of their own existence as "self," they also become directed toward the awareness of the "other." This creates intersubjective knowledge and raises the concept of the "other" in philosophy. The subject realizes that the "other" also exists in the world, and this awareness of presence brings limitation and responsibility for the "self." It compels the cognizing agent to understand that choices

not only affect the self but also impact the "other" (Sartre, 2016).

Levinas is one of the philosophers who engages deeply with the concept of the "other." From his perspective, the "self" is not only responsible for the "other" but must also prioritize the "other" (Levinas, 1961, 1974). Levinas critiques earlier philosophers for their disregard of the "other" and their preoccupation with the "self" (Bergo, 2014; Davis, 2007).

Among philosophers, there has historically been a form of neglect toward the rights of animals. The roots of this neglect can be traced in Western philosophy, especially in the theories of Aristotle, Descartes, and Kant. From Kant's perspective, animals are automatons without soul or feeling, incapable of experiencing pain (Behniafar, 2018; Omani Samani, 2013).

Throughout the history of art, from cave paintings to contemporary art, animals have always been present in various forms. Damien Hirst, a British artist, has used animal carcasses in his collections to depict the concept of death. In his exhibitions, the audience frequently encounters the lifeless bodies of animals such as sharks, cows, and whales, whose presence conveys a sense of distress and melancholy to viewers (Bloomberg, 2012; Lucy-Smith, 2007). Today, in industrial societies, animals are often regarded as consumable commodities devoid of life, and encountering animal carcasses as food is an undeniable aspect of daily existence. Yet, when the artist uses the same carcasses in his works, the viewer experiences melancholy, for art possesses the capacity to reveal. Consciousness is a communicative (phenomenological) process that emerges in the viewer through the observation of a work of art. In this setting, the animal as the "other" loudly asserts its presence in the exhibition, while on a plate of food, the carcass of a being goes unnoticed and fails to evoke compassion or responsibility. The present study aims to analyze the concept of otherness in Damien Hirst's works through the philosophy of Levinas (Safian, 2014; Schneider, 2005).

In recent years, some studies have been conducted analyzing Damien Hirst's works alongside Levinas's philosophy. For instance, Mansouri and Mokhtabad (2018) concluded in their article *"Levinas's Other and the Face of Emerging Art"* that emerging art seeks to represent critical issues such as freedom, environment, nuclear dangers, and mass killings of world wars in the framework of an "ethical" relationship between "self" and "other" (Ghasemi, 2019). Similarly, Zadmehr and Mohammadi Vakil (2018), in their article *"A Comparative Study of the Uncertainty Feature in the Works of Two Contemporary Artists, Damien Hirst and Michael Borremans, in the Postmodern Era,"* argue that uncertainty in postmodern art is a language for questioning truth, representing that certainty no longer exists, and highlighting that laws are set aside as artists challenge existence with their questions (Tashakkori, 2012).

In another article, *"The Concealment of Art; A Review of Emmanuel Levinas's Philosophy and Ethics and His Views on Art,"* Sabaghian concludes that Levinas ascribes little value to artistic expression. The form of art he values is that which considers the "other," as for him art can embody an ethical theme. Unlike these prior studies, the present research avoids reiterating such theories and instead focuses on a core issue not addressed in earlier works: the attention to animals as representations of the "other" (Aliya, 2009; Levinas & Nemo, 2008).

The present research employs a descriptive–analytical method, with data collected through library sources and applied to a case study of Damien Hirst's works focusing on animal bodies. It adopts a theoretical approach grounded in the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, a 20th-century French philosopher. This approach is chosen because the form of art valued by Levinas is that which pays attention to the "other." From his perspective, art can embody an ethical theme, and the central axis of his thought is the priority of the "other" over the "self". Thus, the present study examines the representation of the "other" in Damien Hirst's works.

2. The Other in the History of Thought

Throughout history, humankind has often encountered the "other" through relations of domination and coercion. God, nature, and different races have all been framed as manifestations of the "other," while the cognizing subject has only felt responsibility toward the "self," and at the same time, has been able to subjugate the "other" to the service of the "self" (Ghasemi, 2019).

The recognition of "self" and "other" has always been accompanied by pain, servitude, slavery, and domination. Strangers, monsters, giants, demons, and gods throughout history have been figures of otherness in human life, with each stranger's strangeness or

monster's monstrosity symbolizing the insecurity of the "self" in relation to the "other." These images have appeared in various forms within human thought. The subject has often considered the "self" as pure, elevated, and separate from the "other," while defining the "other" as impure and defiled, thereby using this fear to create social unity. In this way, the "other" is frequently sacrificed for the benefit of the "self." At both the individual and social levels, the issue of "belonging" becomes significant. The "self" belongs to a group, and this belonging disrupts the equation between "self" and "other," for "non-belonging" reduces our capacity for social life. Human existence in tribal societies required acceptance within a group, as exclusion meant losing group privileges and facing existential danger. Thus, the sense of "belonging" carries great importance because it positions the self in contrast with the "other" (Jirani, 2011).

In ancient civilizations, humans were often understood as beings embedded in nature. With the advancement of technology and new discoveries, however, humans asserted their "self" as masters over nature—beings capable of domination and lordship over it. In the Western world, with modernity came the project of discovery and conquest of the globe, whereby Western man sought to impose civilization and transform indigenous peoples such as the Aztecs and Native Americans, while exploiting natural and human resources. Yet philosophers like Heidegger criticized modernity, insisting that we must allow beings to exist in their own way (Hegel, 2010).

Hegel, in his dialectic of master and slave, addresses the issue of the "other" after the recognition of the subject by the "self." According to him, once the subject becomes aware of its existence in the world, it also becomes conscious of the presence of the "other." In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel traces the origins of conflict between master and slave back to the question of self-consciousness and the "other." What defines humanity as an existent is recognition by another person (Hegel, 2010).

Thus, society has always imagined itself in relation to another society: one family against another family, one world against another world, one culture against another. The "other," while an ontological reality, also functions as an abstract category that enables us to speak of race, symbols, religion, language, and culture, and to draw distinctions among them. Hence, the "other" may be a different race, a different language, or a different skin color (Aliya, 2009).

Levinas argued in 1961 that he was developing a new "first philosophy." Yet this first philosophy is neither of the traditional logical nor physical kinds, but rather an interpretive and phenomenological description of the emergence and repetition of face-to-face encounters, or intersubjective relations at their pre-cognitive core—in other words, being called by the "other" and being responsible to what is not oneself (Bergo, 2014; Levinas, 1961).

For Levinas, ethics must ground itself in an experience that cannot be assimilated into logics of control, prediction, or manipulation. Rational activity—whether in Husserl's phenomenology as the conscious harmony between subject and object, or in Hegel's dialectical unity of mind and being—can never become "celestial," since it cannot escape the system-building logic of metaphysics without presupposing or reinstating it (Bergo, 2014; Levinas, 1949). Levinas reinterprets labor, not merely as mastery over nature and its humanization, but as the creation of a storehouse of goods with which one may welcome and host the "other." By virtue of enjoying life and creating a home, the human being can offer hospitality and open his space to the other. First, the intrusion of the other weakens freedom of will and directs the "self" toward goodness. Second, the subject approached by the other enters the initial act of justification through dialogue. Speech arises from here: the opening of discourse carries traces of ethical delegation and self-justification, and it can transform into teaching. Yet with the expansion of discourse, the traces of encounter with the other diminish, raising the question of justice: is the essence of justice the repair of wrongs, impartial equality, or the advantage of the powerful? (Dillon, 2015; Levinas, 1974).

3. The Priority of the Other over the Self in Levinas's Philosophy

Levinas is one of the most important philosophers to have addressed the "other" and otherness. He gives priority to ethics over ontology (Levinas, 1974). Levinas's philosophical project can be regarded as constructivist, offering a phenomenological description and a hermeneutics of lived experience in the world, disclosing levels of experience not described by either

Husserl or Heidegger. These layers of experience relate to encounters with the world and with another human being. Levinas's phenomenology is grounded in intersubjective responsibility and differs from both Husserl and Heidegger (Bergo, 2014). From Levinas's perspective, the "I" finds its existence in the world, experiencing both pleasure and suffering and engaging in activity. Yet none of these natural, social, or economic activities affect the "I" as profoundly as the emotional rupture that arises in the encounter with the "other." Levinas stresses the notion of being summoned by the other, asserting that "language is always a response, a response to the other, that is, to the other's summons" (Levinas, 1961; Schneider, 2005).

Levinas declared in 1961 that he was developing a kind of "first philosophy." Yet this first philosophy was neither traditional logic nor metaphysics, but an interpretive and phenomenological description of the emergence and repetition of face-to-face encounters, or intersubjective relations at their pre-cognitive core—in other words, being summoned by the other and being responsible to what is not oneself (Levinas, 1961). Like Husserl's phenomenology, Levinas's first philosophy brackets empirical prejudices about subjects and objects, peeling away layers of conceptualization to reveal experience as it appears. Yet it results in an ethics: the "I" becomes aware of the details of the "self" precisely when chosen by the gaze of the other (Levinas, 1949).

For Levinas, the "other" has priority over the cognizing subject. To describe the "other," he employs evocative metaphors such as "widow," "orphan," and "stranger," which recall the absence of necessities and evoke anxiety. The absence of essential elements like homeland, spouse, or parents exposes the "other" to profound hardship and simultaneously demands something from us. This summons awakens emotions such as shame in the "self," limits freedom, and positions the "self" before the "other." By fulfilling its own needs, the "self" in fact narrows the world of the other, while ignoring this summons makes transcending the "self" fraught with pain and conflict. Thus, the "I" becomes chosen by the "other," escaping the dominance of the "I" itself (Levinas, 1972; Safian, 2014).

Levinas persistently emphasizes the right to life of the "other," affirming the priority of the ontology of the "other" over that of the subject—that is, the primacy of heterology over self-knowledge. In his view, subject-centered philosophy has always led to the deprivation and condemnation of the "other." He describes the "other" as a transcendent being who stands before the existence of the "I," making the "I" responsible not only to answer but also to prioritize the "other." Levinas echoes Pascal in asserting: "I must give my place in the sun to the other," even though this place feels uniquely mine (Levinas, 1963). Unlike Sartre, who emphasized radical freedom, Levinas regarded freedom as difficult, since ideology limits the other and defines its existence (Sartre, 2016). Ethics, on the other hand, turns toward the "other" and situates both the ontological and ethical status of the "self" in relation to that "other." Where the other exists, the self also exists—or better, the other is the self, insofar as the self recognizes the other as "other." In other words, the self's awareness of itself is conditioned by the existence of the other (Dillon, 2015).

Like Heidegger, Levinas critiques the history of Western philosophy, which since Plato has taken an egological (self-centered) orientation. By contrast, Levinas's concern is not the being of the self in the world, but the relation of the self in the world with the "other." Derrida pointed out in 1967 that "Levinas intends to put forward ethical laws and rules… his work writes ethics as ethics" (Bergo, 2014). For Levinas, ethics means investigating the conditions that make any interest in life or good action possible. Accordingly, it can be said that Levinas does not write ethics in the conventional sense, but rather explores the meaning of intersubjectivity and immediacy of lived experience in light of three themes: "transcendence," "existence," and the human "other" (Aliya, 2009).

Levinas held that Western culture and thought are indebted to two great traditions: the Hebrew-Semitic and the Greek. The Hebrew tradition, which emphasizes the distinction between the finite and the infinite, is based on transcendence and on human attention to the "other." Here the "other" refers to the great "Other," or the transcendent God of Judaism, distanced from the earthly. This tradition inclines human beings to move "beyond the self." By contrast, the Greek tradition inclines toward "the same," focusing on being (*physis*) rather than transcendence. This leads to an immanent ontology in which the relation between human and world is defined entirely within an inward system with no outward orientation (Hegel, 2010; Levinas, 1947).

In *Existence and Existents*, Levinas addresses what he calls the "there is" (*il y a*), a vague and impersonal sense of being. For him, "there is" represents a kind of occurrence of being, experienced with dread. Levinas insists this dread is distinct from psychological fear or emotional anxiety; it is a unique perception of existence itself. This understanding of being opens the way to his conception of the "other" and otherness, which emerges through our experience of existence, of another person, of language, and of God (Levinas, 1947; Levinas & Nemo, 2008). He argues that such an encounter should be expressed fully within ordinary language as an affective event, without reducing it to rational concepts (Schneider, 2005).

4. Encounter with Animals as the Other

In ancient civilizations, humans were often understood as beings situated within nature. With the advancement of technology and new discoveries, however, humanity began to perceive its "self" in the world as standing over and above nature—as a being capable of mastering and dominating it (Hegel, 2010).

When discussing animal rights, it is crucial to remember that we are not speaking of fictional characters such as Mickey Mouse or Winnie the Pooh, but of real creatures that live alongside us on this planet and breathe the same air we do. The scope of evil and suffering that encompasses these beings is vast. The notion of animals as automatons devoid of life was articulated by Descartes. His view of animals and plants is inseparable from his broader view of the material world. In his thought, animals are (1) parts of the material world, subject to the laws of extended matter; (2) composed of smaller material parts engaged in complex interactions with one another and their environment; and (3) despite this complexity, their interactions are mechanical and machinic, lacking any rational or vital source of life. Animals, therefore, are nothing more than material machines. This Cartesian stance became known as the *animal-machine theory*, which held that animals (and indeed other parts of nature) are entirely devoid of thought (Behniafar, 2018; Omani Samani, 2013).

In the 18th century, the English philosopher Thomas Taylor satirically equated animal rights with women's rights, arguing mockingly that if animals could be granted rights, then women too might be entitled to civil rights. Nearly a century later, Joseph Rickaby denied animals any moral standing, likening them to "stones and wood." Remarkably, in the past thirty years, more literature on animal rights has been produced than in the previous three millennia (Ghasemi, 2019).

Today, the question of whether animals have rights has become a serious and contentious philosophical issue. There are varied positions: some grant rights to humans but deny them to animals, while others extend rights to both. Tom Regan addressed the relationship between moral philosophy and human motivation, highlighting that humans frequently cause animals intense physical pain. Animals are typically bred by force, confined in deplorable conditions, and in most cases, killed without the opportunity to fulfill even their most basic desires (Bergo, 2014).

Exploitation of animals occurs in numerous ways:

- As food, through the appalling conditions of industrial livestock farming, forced and excessive reproduction, and separation of newborns from mothers for milk and meat production.
- As clothing, through the fur industry and poor maintenance practices that induce unnatural behaviors such as cannibalism among foxes.
- Through trapping, where animals are cruelly captured in their habitats and must endure excruciating pain and broken bones.
- As tools, in procedures such as the LD50 test, where lethal doses of drugs, cosmetics, and other products are administered to animals.
- Through medical experiments involving the induction of diseases and surgical procedures.
- In automobile crash testing, where baboons have been used, leading to their deaths.

Tom Regan, a prominent animal rights philosopher, opposed Descartes's mechanistic view. For him, mature and natural mammals not only possess feelings but also have mental capacities such as emotions, memory, desires, intentional actions, and to some degree, self-awareness. Consequently, beings with such capacities are moral agents and, therefore, possess intrinsic value beyond the instrumental value assigned to them by others (Aliya, 2009).

The exploitation of animals has become so extensive that theorists in this field often compare their daily suffering to forced labor camps or concentration camps. Images of slaughterhouses are frequently likened to photographs

of Auschwitz during World War II. The difference, however, is that in these images, the victims are not humans but animals. The slaughter, butchery, sexual violations, and killing of offspring are so prevalent that approximately eight billion animals are killed worldwide each year for food and other purposes (Miller, 2016; Safian, 2014).

5. Analysis of Damien Hirst's Works

By presenting terrifying and controversial works, Damien Hirst became one of the best-known British artists. His most famous creations are a series of dead animals (including sharks, sheep, and cows) preserved in the chemical formaldehyde (Bloomberg, 2012; Lucy-Smith, 2007).

"A Thousand Years" was Hirst's first work, in which an arrangement of elements is enclosed in glass. Within this bounded space, a cycle of life unfolds. Insects emerge from a small white box, transform into flies, then feed on the severed head of a cow at the bottom of the vitrine. Above, the flies circle within the closed space. Many are caught and killed as prey, while others survive to continue the cycle. Hirst takes the practice of bringing real objects into the gallery one step further, literally creating birth, death, and decay. While the glass vitrine alludes to the clean geometry of minimalism, it is filled with the chaotic vitality and mortality of organic matter. This work is a creative reconstruction of a world where the viewer witnesses a cycle from birth to death.

The central axis of the work is the severed head of a cow, isolated in a glass container, while insects, as living creatures, must feed on the remains of the dead animal to survive. In this miniature reconstruction of the natural world, the viewer sees not only the slain animal but also the insects as victims, with no agency over their presence. The artwork confronts us with a group of victims—living and dead. What is highlighted here is the instrumental use of non-human beings. Humanity, in the position of the "self," and the animal, in the position of the "other," create a scene that shocks and disgusts (Miller, 2016; Safian, 2014).

In 1991, Hirst began working with formaldehyde. The following year, in the exhibition of the Young British Artists at the Saatchi Gallery, he displayed *"The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living"*: a large glass tank filled with formaldehyde containing a 4.3-meter tiger shark purchased from an Australian fisherman. This work became one of the most iconic pieces of modern art and British popular culture in the 1990s. The work is strangely captivating—you cannot help but look at it. Yet when reflecting on it, the unsettling question arises: what compels humans to see a dead animal as art? This certainly illustrates the human desire to control the "other," particularly a powerful predator in nature, by placing it in a vulnerable position as an object. The sight of such a large, dangerous creature suspended in this way clearly strips it of its power, reconstructing the idea that no matter how strong it was in its own domain, humans as "self" assert dominance over nature. Alongside its violence and horror, the piece ironically mocks the dead animal, and by displaying it in this way, awakens compassion in the viewer. Here, we face two contradictory feelings: horror and pity (Bergo, 2014).

In cinema and documentaries, sharks are always depicted as wild animals capable of harming humans. Hirst's work, however, gives the viewer the opportunity to confront this predator up close, in a posture resembling an attack. Catharsis is precisely what occurs here: an experience of both fear and pleasure. Simultaneously, we feel compassion for the fate of this dead creature, displaced from its natural habitat. According to Levinas, the other as "face" undermines the freedom of the will and directs the "I" toward goodness. The subject approached by the other enters the initial act of justification through dialogue. Speech, which arises from this, carries traces of ethical delegation and justification, eventually becoming conversation and instruction. Yet as discourse expands, the trace of the face-to-face encounter diminishes, raising the question of justice: is it the repair of wrongs, impartial equality, or the advantage of the strong? (Dillon, 2015; Levinas, 1961).

Hirst continued to disrupt conventional rules of the art world in the 1993 Venice Biennale, the renowned international art exhibition. There he presented the installation *"Mother and Child Divided"*, featuring a cow and calf each cut in half and suspended in formaldehyde across four vitrines. The audience cannot ethically remain indifferent to the fate of the mother and child. This mirrors a process that occurs daily in ordinary life—the indifference toward the lifeless bodies of animals that form part of our diet. Yet presented in the form of

art, this reality is unveiled as a truth we ignore in daily existence (Tashakkori, 2012).

Command and demand emanate from the face. Its nakedness and defenselessness declare: "Do not kill me." This vulnerability is a passive resistance against the will of my freedom. Every instance of the face embodies this combination of resistance and defenselessness. Levinas identifies the face of the other as the "widow," the "orphan," or the "stranger." These figures are allegorical, each lacking something essential for existence—spouse, parents, or homeland—and thus summoning us with an ethical demand (Levinas, 1972, 1974).

6. Discussion and Conclusion

One of the important aspects of Hirst's works, which allows us to analyze them through Levinas's approach, is the dislocation of the subject and its placement as an object in a space to which it does not belong. Although Levinas assigned little value to artistic representation, the art he respected was that which attends to the "other," and for him, art can carry an ethical dimension (Levinas, 1963; Levinas & Nemo, 2008).

As Heidegger argued, "Every cultural work traverses the whole of being but leaves it intact. Being, for Heidegger, emerges from concealment and the unspoken, which poets and philosophers bring into expression without ever fully saying it. All the forms in which being has historically been expressed are true, because truth is inseparable from its historical manifestation. Without its expression, thought cannot think anything" (Bergo, 2014).

The intersubjective experience, as it appears, results in ethics: the "I" discovers the details of itself when chosen by the commanding gaze of the other. This gaze, both questioning and demanding, says, "Do not kill," and pleads with me, even though it may lack propositional content. Hirst's violent exploitation of animal corpses—slaughtered and mutilated—presents to the audience an image of crime and victimhood against living beings. The freedom and right to display such violence against non-human creatures situates them as "other" and reflects the body as a vulnerable domain (Aliya, 2009; Safian, 2014).

In analyzing Hirst's works, we must assume that art is not in search of a happy ending but seeks to represent truth. A work of art does not conceal truth but unveils it. Levinas redefined labor, not as mastery over nature or its humanization, but as the creation of a stock of goods through which one may welcome and host the other. By enjoying life and building a home, humanity is able to offer, to open space, and to receive the other (Levinas, 1947, 1968).

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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