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In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the ethics of our treatment of animals. Philosophers have led the way, and now a range of other scholars have followed from historians to social scientists. From being a marginal issue, animals have become an emerging issue in ethics and in multidisciplinary inquiry. This series will explore the challenges that Animal Ethics poses, both conceptually and practically, to traditional understandings of human-animal relations. Specifically, the Series will:

- provide a range of key introductory and advanced texts that map out ethical positions on animals
- publish pioneering work written by new, as well as accomplished, scholars;
- produce texts from a variety of disciplines that are multidisciplinary in character or have multidisciplinary relevance.

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Damiano Benvegnù

# Animals and Animality in Primo Levi's Work

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## Series Editors' Preface

This is a new book series for a new field of inquiry: Animal Ethics.

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the ethics of our treatment of animals. Philosophers have led the way, and now a range of other scholars have followed from historians to social scientists. From being a marginal issue, animals have become an emerging issue in ethics and in multidisciplinary inquiry.

In addition, a rethink of the status of animals has been fuelled by a range of scientific investigations which have revealed the complexity of animal sentience, cognition and awareness. The ethical implications of this new knowledge have yet to be properly evaluated, but it is becoming clear that the old view that animals are mere things, tools, machines or commodities cannot be sustained ethically.

But it is not only philosophy and science that are putting animals on the agenda. Increasingly, in Europe and the United States, animals are becoming a political issue as political parties vie for the “green” and “animal” vote. In turn, political scientists are beginning to look again at the history of political thought in relation to animals, and historians are beginning to revisit the political history of animal protection.

As animals grow as an issue of importance, so there have been more collaborative academic ventures leading to conference volumes, special journal issues, indeed new academic animal journals as well. Moreover, we have witnessed the growth of academic courses, as well as university

posts, in Animal Ethics, Animal Welfare, Animal Rights, Animal Law, Animals and Philosophy, Human-Animal Studies, Critical Animal Studies, Animals and Society, Animals in Literature, Animals and Religion—tangible signs that a new academic discipline is emerging.

“Animal Ethics” is the new term for the academic exploration of the moral status of the non-human—an exploration that explicitly involves a focus on what we owe animals morally, and which also helps us to understand the influences—social, legal, cultural, religious and political—that legitimate animal abuse. This series explores the challenges that Animal Ethics poses, both conceptually and practically, to traditional understandings of human-animal relations.

The series is needed for three reasons: (i) to provide the texts that will service the new university courses on animals; (ii) to support the increasing number of students studying and academics researching in animal related fields, and (iii) because there is currently no book series that is a focus for multidisciplinary research in the field.

Specifically, the series will

- provide a range of key introductory and advanced texts that map out ethical positions on animals;
- publish pioneering work written by new, as well as accomplished, scholars; and
- produce texts from a variety of disciplines that are multidisciplinary in character or have multidisciplinary relevance.

The new Palgrave Macmillan Series on Animal Ethics is the result of a unique partnership between Palgrave Macmillan and the Ferrater Mora Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics. The series is an integral part of the mission of the Centre to put animals on the intellectual agenda by facilitating academic research and publication. The series is also a natural complement to one of the Centre's other major projects, the *Journal of Animal Ethics*. The Centre is an independent “think tank” for the advancement of progressive thought about animals, and is the first Centre of its kind in the world. It aims to demonstrate rigorous intellectual enquiry and the highest standards of scholarship. It strives to be a world-class centre of academic excellence in its field.

We invite academics to visit the Centre's website [www.oxfordanimaethics.com](http://www.oxfordanimaethics.com) and to contact us with new book proposals for the series.

Oxford, UK  
Villanova, PA, USA

Andrew Linzey  
Priscilla Cohn

## Preface

In their introduction to *Animal Acts: Configuring the Human in Western History*, editors Jennifer Ham and Matthew Senior write that “from the darkest depths of the Holocaust to the comically absurd present, the tale of the twentieth century can be told as an animal act” (6). According to the two scholars, no other time like the last century has so evidently staged—in a tangle of horror and progress, technological advancement and unbearable suffering—the contradictory performances of that peculiar animal we call human. These contradictions seemed to corrode the already challenged idea of the human as the autonomous and coherent center of the universe, who, through the supreme power of reason, masters not only his own history, but also all other creatures. Conversely, with the crisis of such anthropocentric humanism, the other animals became not simply “good to think with”—according to Lévi-Strauss’s famous phrase—but also emergent characters both on the conscious stage of the ecological debate and on the Freudian *anderer Schauplatz* [other stage] of our phantasmal dreams, fears, and desires.<sup>1</sup>

Few other writers have manifested through both their personal experience and their work the contradictory complexity of the twentieth century than Primo Levi. Born in Turin, Italy, in 1919 into a family of liberal and almost completely secular Italian Jews, between December 1943 and October 1945 Levi went through the horror of Auschwitz and returned, after a long difficult journey, to his hometown. Later he embarked on a

double career, both as a professional chemist in the paint industry and as a writer, until his tragic death in 1987.<sup>2</sup> His literary production mirrors the diverse aspects of his life: he wrote, among other things, about his experiences as a prisoner in the concentration camp as well as about his love for chemistry; a novel on a group of Jewish Russian partisans during the Second World War as well as two books of (more or less autobiographical) poetry; several short stories on a wide range of topics and a fundamental volume of theoretical reflections upon the Holocaust and its personal, social, and cultural consequences.<sup>3</sup> He has thus engaged in an impressive number of literary genres, including science fiction and journalistic essays, with a particular predilection for crossing boundaries and giving birth to hybrid literary forms.

Even in this complex variety of experiences, forms, and contents a common theme seems nonetheless to run through all of Levi's works. His whole literature has been in fact read as a celebration of what is human; a celebration that is allegedly already expressed in Levi's first book, *Se questo è un uomo* [If This Is a Man], the testimonial account of his time in Auschwitz. Scholars have thus usually acclaimed Primo Levi as one of the few truly humanist personalities of the last century, capable of preserving his (and the assumption here is "as well as our own") humanity even through the dehumanizing hell of the Holocaust. The recent publication of *The Complete Works of Primo Levi* cannot but confirm such reading, depicting Levi as one of the greatest intellectual figures of the twentieth century, whose language is—according to Toni Morrison—"the deliberate and sustained glorification of the human" (CW, xii). Yet, Levi's first and still most important work sets out—from the studiously incomplete and suspended syntax of its title—a defining and rather divergent objective for (his) testimony: the interrogation of the crisis in the human heralded by the war, Nazi-Fascism, and genocide. As Dalya Sachs has pointed out in her exhaustive examination of the title of *Se questo è un uomo*, Levi's investigation of what is human engages both his literary characters and the readers in a quest that at times appears to be more a "dismantling of human-ness" than its rehabilitation (Sachs, 772).

This book investigates the ethical and aesthetical dimension of this problematic engagement with Levi's question of the human from the perspective of his animal imagery. More precisely, we will explore the

boundaries between human and non-human in Primo Levi's work through a detailed analysis of his literary animals. As we will see, Levi's literature features a pervasive presence of non-human animals, striking for its volume, significance, and variety. Relatively unexamined by scholars, this complex and extensive animal imagery offers new insights into the aesthetical and ethical function of testimony, as well as an original perspective on contemporary debates surrounding human-animal relationships and posthumanism.

There are two main objectives of this project. First, it aims to prove that Levi's literary animals function as problematic devices that replicate the unsettling doubleness required by testimony. Levi's literary animals continue to produce testimonial literature after and beyond Auschwitz, exploring and expressing the limits of our own human comprehension of both what happened in the concentration camps and of what we are. In fact, through his animal images Levi is not just witnessing the nature of humanity in Nazi Germany. He instead expands the inquiry to reflect upon how we traditionally have depicted ourselves as a species, as well as our relationships with all other creatures. This book claims that Levi's entire literary work can be read as the unique manifestation of a new literary genre that challenges readers to reflect upon their reading habits and consequently deconstruct assumed, traditional boundaries between what is human and what is non-human. I would call this genre "animal testimony."

Second, my interpretation of Levi's work alters the conventional picture of him as the direct heir of an anthropocentric tradition that begins with Humanism and continues through the Enlightenment and modernity. My focus on Levi's literary animals shows how the whole of his literature belongs instead to a highly critical more-than-human humanism that forces readers to move beyond the question of the human and face what is now widely called "the question of the animal." *Animals and Animality in Primo Levi's Work* reveals that Levi's literature answers this question of the animal from both a subjective and ethical perspective—a questioning that comes from an animal which faces us, whose gaze seems to question our own existence (including the human-animal [*animale-uomo*] Levi observed in Auschwitz)—and an objective and epistemological perspective—an investigation of the ways in which we narrate both this animal per se and our own relationship with it.

To provide a representative and comprehensive—but inevitably not exhaustive—analysis of Levi’s literary animals, this book begins with an introduction meant to contextualize my research within both Levi’s scholarship and Literary Animal Studies. This first chapter is then followed by three major sections that directly address Levi’s animals. Each of these three sections are divided in two discrete chapters for reading convenience, but they are structured around three intertwined themes, respectively named *suffering*, *techne*, and *creation*. I will explain in the introduction the reasons behind such a progression.

As the title underlines, “Suffering” deals with the issue of animal suffering and compassion. This section begins with an analysis of an article by Levi that ends with an autobiographical note about his encounter with some real squirrels locked in a cage in a scientific laboratory. My reading explores the ambiguity of Levi’s reported attitude toward the suffering of these rodents and compares it to the philosophical debate which recently occurred around Jeremy Bentham’s famous statement on animal suffering. Authors like Peter Singer and Jacques Derrida are examined to clarify Levi’s position, which is however explicitly stated in another article published in 1978 and entitled “Contro il dolore” [Against Pain]. My research shows for the first time how “Contro il dolore,” usually taken by scholars as an autonomous piece, belongs to a debate about animal vivisection happening in the Turinese newspaper *La Stampa* in the second half of the seventies. The attention toward the material suffering of animals as it is expressed in this article drives me to investigate how Levi deals with other manifestations of suffering. Specifically, my focus is on the suffering of those creatures Levi saw in Auschwitz and called with the hyphenated term “animale-uomo” [human-animal]. An attentive and comparative reading of several occurrences of this term and its equivalents reveals how Levi’s concern goes to those creatures completely defenseless and unable to express such suffering. The chapter ends with a double analysis of two moments in which Levi deals with two mute creatures: his comment on the suffering of the donkey in Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli’s poem entitled *Se more* [One dies], and the famous episode of Hurbinek in *La tregua* [The Truce]. My reading stresses how Levi structures his fiction according to a double impossibility of identifying with these mute creatures that, paradoxically, triggers the recognition of a shared vulnerability.

The following section, entitled “Techne,” deals with the system of animal representations Levi uses to reflect upon his own writing, seen both as a specific human technology and as a practice with its definite parameters. As the previous one, “Techne” begins by exploring an article written by Levi, “Una bottiglia di sole” [A Bottle of Sunshine], in which Levi sets the human-animal divide in terms of technological ability. Levi’s position is this time first contextualized within the Turinese and generally Italian cultural *milieu* of his education, and then compared to two philosophers who both dwell upon the issue of human technology, Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger. The uncanny similarities between Heidegger and Levi force me to search in his fiction for different clues about this ambiguous issue. Particularly, a close reading of some passages of *La chiave a stella* challenges the human-animal divide as it was presented in “Una bottiglia di sole.” Yet, the connection between technology and animals is staged explicitly in some of Levi’s short stories. In narratives such as “Angelica farfalla” [Angelic Butterfly], “I costruttori di ponti” [Brigade Builders], and “Quaestio de Centauris” Levi presents to his readers a series of difficult questions about the link between human technology in general, his own writing, and the human-animal divide. The conclusion shows how Levi represents himself as a *homo faber*, but to be such, he needs a hybrid literary strategy, according to which the focus on the human-animal limitrophy (rather than unique divide) displays both the possibilities of this approach and the *hubris* of traditional anthropocentric humanism.

The last section before the conclusion begins from this discovery. Entitled “Creation,” it emphasizes how Levi’s animal representations offer him the opportunity to reverse that regime of “counter-creation” he identifies with Auschwitz. Initially the focus lies on an article, “Romanzi dettati dai grilli,” in which Levi makes a very interesting connection between animals and what he calls “uno scrivere nuovo” [a new writing]. Wondering about the nature of this “new writing” brings me to examine how Levi’s literature seems to replicate a pattern of creation–de-creation–re-creation that belongs to two biblical texts very dear to him, the Book of Genesis and the Book of Job. The former, whose philosophical importance in animal studies is tested by a brief analysis of the two accounts of the creation of man according to Hannah Arendt and Jacques

Derrida, is in some ways recalled by Levi's short story entitled "Il sesto giorno" [The Sixth Day]. The exploration of this story suggests Levi's concern about the almost impossible task of inventing a new animal: a task he undertakes in other stories, included "I figli del vento," in which biblical references are intertwined with the writings of Charles Darwin. My work demonstrates that Levi takes from Darwin not only the theory of the struggle for life, as it is usually assumed, but also a certain anti-anthropocentrism and, more importantly, a new enchantment of the world based on the material reality of what I call the *chaosmos*. This attitude is also apparent in Levi's legacy toward the Book of Job. Although Levi states in his personal anthology, *La ricerca delle radici* [The Search for Roots], that Job is the manifestation of unjust and incomprehensible suffering, my analysis underlines how Job's story also displays an animal imagery that forces him to re-forge his own identity in terms of community, wonder, and limitrophy with the other creatures. This new chaotic cosmos of limitrophy is staged by Levi in the short story entitled "Disfilassi," with which this section ends.

A conclusive chapter gathers all the themes as they have been explored in the previous sections through the analysis of a short story about a kangaroo and Levi's both most explicit and most fictional autobiographical poem.

\* \* \*

Friendship and community are two key concepts in Levi's work which have come to inform how I think about intellectual life and ethics. With this in mind, I'd like to thank a few of the many friends and colleagues who have contributed to this book in one way or another. First, I would like to thank Robert S.C. Gordon who suggested that I write this book instead of the one I originally planned. My gratitude goes to Vittorio Montemaggi, John P. Welle, Ben Heller, Theodore J. Cachey Jr., Joseph A. Buttigieg, and W. Martin Bloomer, with whom I had countless conversations about Primo Levi while I was at Notre Dame. I am also grateful to the *Nanovic Institute for European Studies* and the Albert Ravarino family, whose grants allowed me to travel to Turin and explore Levi's archives at the *Centro Internazionale di Studi Primo Levi*. Once there, I was welcomed by Fabio Levi, Cristina Zuccaro, and Domenico Scarpa to whom

goes my gratitude as well. My thanks go also to Enrico Cesaretti, Serenella Iovino, Elena Past, Monica Seger, Matteo Gilebbi, Massimo Lollini, Sabrina Ferri, Zyg Baranski, and Marco Belpoliti, whose rigorous scholarship has been as important to me as their kindness and intellectual generosity. This book would not have been possible without the generous support of Andrew Linzey, the anonymous referees who reviewed it, and the whole editorial team at Palgrave, with special thanks to April James. I cannot end without offering my sincerest thanks to my friends A. Erik Larsen, Anna Siebach-Larsen, James Martell, Stefano Scanu, Mauro Pandolfino, Chiara Capodici, and Paul Morrow with whom I have discussed some of the ideas behind this book on several occasions. Lastly, but most importantly, none of this would have been conceivable without the constant support, friendship, and love of Hailey J. LaVoy, to whom this book is dedicated.

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## Notes

1. Although this book challenges the traditional divide between the Human and the Animal, only for readability reasons I will keep at times using the terms “humans” and “animals” (and their derivatives) to address and refer respectively to human animals and non-human animals.
2. For an exhaustive but manageable survey of Levi’s life, see the “Cronologia” by Ernesto Ferrero included in Levi 1997. Three massive biographies are available, however: see, in chronological order, Anissimov; Angier 2002; and Thomson 2002.
3. The biblical word *Shoah* (also spelled *Sho’h* and *Shoa*), meaning “calamity”, became the standard Hebrew term for the Holocaust as early as the 1940s, especially in Europe and Israel. Primo Levi himself expressed dissatisfaction toward the term “holocaust” not for its specific reference to paganism and animals, but rather for the general idea of a “sacrifice,” for him unacceptable. However, the term “Holocaust” is commonly used in scholarly studies in the Anglo-American academy and therefore it is used here as well.

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## Note on Abbreviations and Translations

Citations from Levi's works in Italian are mainly drawn from the two-volume 1997 edition of *Opere* edited by Marco Belpoliti. This is referred to throughout as OI and OII, preceded by the abbreviated form of the relevant text, as specified in the following list. Where no abbreviation is used other than the volume number, the citation comes from notes or from texts that have not been published in book form. When necessary, I gave the full reference to some of the very relevant articles I examine in detail.

English translations are provided, drawn from published texts as far as these are available, as listed in the "Works Cited" section, and indicated by their abbreviated form. When no abbreviation is indicated, the translation comes from the published version offered in the first occurrence of the same text. When necessary, I offer in the footnotes alternative translations for passages that have been already translated and published. When instead there is no published translation available, I state it and provide my own. Notice that there is no overlap between some of Levi's books and the English edition, as in the case of the short stories of *Lilit*, spread among different volumes.

Individual works by Primo Levi, and the English translations, are abbreviated as follows (the dates here always refer to the first edition of the book. Important following editions are acknowledged in the “Works Cited” section.):

<i>Se questo è un uomo</i> (1947)	SQU
<i>La tregua</i> (1963)	LT
<i>Storie naturali</i> (1966)	SN
<i>Vizio di forma</i> (1971)	VF
<i>Il sistema periodico</i> (1975)	SP
<i>La chiave a stella</i> (1978)	CS
<i>Lilít e altri racconti</i> (1981)	L
<i>La ricerca delle radici</i> (1981)	RdR
<i>Ad ora incerta</i> (1984)	AOI
<i>L'altrui mestiere</i> (1985)	AM
<i>I sommersi e i salvati</i> (1986)	SeS
<i>Racconti e Saggi</i> (1986)	RS
<i>Conversazioni e interviste</i> (1997)	SI
<i>L'ultimo Natale di guerra</i> (2000)	UNG
<hr/>	
<i>If This Is a Man</i>	ITIM
<i>The Truce</i>	T
<i>Survival in Auschwitz</i>	SA
<i>The Sixth Day</i>	SD
<i>The Periodic Table</i>	PT
<i>The Wrench</i>	W
<i>Moments of Reprieve</i>	MR
<i>A Tranquil Star</i>	TS
<i>The Search for Roots</i>	SR
<i>Collected Poems</i>	CP
<i>Other People's Trades</i>	OPT
<i>The Drowned and the Saved</i>	DS
<i>The Mirror Maker</i>	MM
<i>The Black Hole of Auschwitz</i>	BHA
<i>The Voice of Memory</i>	VM
<i>The Complete Works of Primo Levi</i>	CW