Contrary to what one might expect from a philosopher whose fame rests on his philosophical defence of “the widow, the orphan, and the stranger,” in short, of whoever appeals to us for help or respect, “human dignity” is not an expression that often flows from Levinas’ pen.¹ This is all the more surprising since it is in a sense the centerpiece around which he came to build his ethics. That ethics is not about moral rules. Its main question is what it means that there is something like morality, and the answer it gives turns around a notion of the Good that Levinas believes to be absent from being and out of the reach of what ontology can describe. To be, for Levinas, is to be the subject of one’s being, to conjugate it in the first person singular. As soon as one is, one cannot do otherwise; whatever one does is a way to be one’s own being, a being to which one is stuck and from which one cannot break loose. Whether one likes it or not, one is the center of one’s own being, the pole to whom everything appears and is related.

This involuntary egocentrism—Heideggerian Jemeinigkeit—is what troubles Levinas and motivates him to look for a Good beyond being, a Good “otherwise than being.” Such a good would not be good-for-me; it would break with the law of being and sever the ties that bind me to my being by providing me with an orientation that stands perpendicular to the one operative in my being—the struggle for my own existence, my own survival, in other words, my effort to be, my conatus essendi.² The concrete way in which the Good announces itself to me is through what Levinas calls the “face of the other.” That other is the bearer of a dignity more important than my own. He or she demands my respect, and by that demand, lifts me out of nature and quite

¹ See the entry for dignité in Cristian Ciocan and Georges Hansel, eds., Levinas Concordance (Dordrecht, 2005), pp. 213–14. Most passages turn out to refer to “philosophical dignity,” “dignity of the concept,” and so forth. The few that actually speak of “human dignity” rarely, if ever, do more than merely mention it.

² Spinoza says of the conatus essendi that “everything, in so far as it is in itself, endeavours to persist in its being.” Baruch Spinoza, The Ethics, trans. R. H. M. Elwes (New York: Dover, 1955), 3.6. This is also the sense in which Levinas uses the term.
literally humanizes me. The other’s appeal somehow seems to have the power to detach me from my being and to interrupt my conatus.

I shall explain in detail the line of reasoning that Levinas is building up here—it is much more rigid and coherent than it may strike one at first sight. At this point, what little I have said helps to explain why the few texts in which he broaches the topic all were written in the context of human rights and why they all restrict their plea for such rights to the rights of the other. However one determines the foundation and content of human rights, one should, Levinas reasons, prevent that “the coexistence and the very multiplicity of the ‘holders of rights,’ who, all ‘unique and free’” and minimally granted “the right to being-there or to live,” would ultimately lead to the paradoxical result of a Hobbesian “war of all against all.” This is precisely what he believes must follow if, rather than taking the other’s rights as a starting point, one would simply determine human rights as “the right to free will” and distribute them equally over all humans. The latter notion would then boil down to all those belonging to the human race and leave out the question that Levinas wants to raise: what does it mean to be human? Does it suffice to be the bearer of a series of characteristics that make up the generic specifications of the particular species that we call ‘human’?

This question touches directly on the problem of human dignity, and if one fails to answer it, one risks to become immediately drawn into a similar kind of battle as the so-called antispeciesists have with human rights. Indeed, if to be human means to have certain characteristics, like intelligence or the ability to suffer, then why not extend these rights to at least those animals whose relevant capacities approach the bottom range in humans or even cross it, since these rights are also given to severely mentally handicapped or demented people? Similarly, restricting dignity to human beings for the sole reason that they are supposed to have what animals do not would be proof of an arbitrary

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4 Ibid., p. 147.

5 Ibid., p. 146.

6 Ibid., p. 147.

7 Speciesism, in arbitrarily excluding animals from the rights granted to all members of the human species, is thought by Peter Singer and others to express a similar bias as the one underlying racism. See Singer’s epoch-making Animal Liberation (New York, 1975).