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## ***Le flair animal: Levinas and the Possibility of Animal Friendship***

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If a man urge me to tell wherefore I loved him, I feel it cannot be expressed, but by answering; Because it was he, because it was myself. (Montaigne, "On Friendship")

Levinas wrote almost nothing about friendship. For him, the ethical subject is a host for the Other, a hostage, a maternal body; one is commanded by the Other, called to responsibility, and drawn by the third into a political process of negotiation and calculation for the sake of justice. The subject is a lover, a father, a brother among brothers. But is he a friend? Is there a place between ethics and politics, or beyond them, where friendship would become possible for Levinas? And if there is no such place, what might be missing from his account of ethical and political life?

I raise this question in the midst of a growing discussion within continental philosophy about the relation between animals and human beings. In a recent essay, Derrida ties the sufficiency of Levinas' ethics to the problem of breaking with a philosophical tradition which subordinates animals to human beings on the basis of their apparent lack of language and their consequent inability to respond. Derrida asks: "Would an ethics be sufficient, as Levinas maintains, to remind the subject of its being-subject, its being-guest, host or hostage, that is to say its being-subjected-to-the-other, to the Wholly Other or to every single other [*tout autre*]?" He answers his own question: "I don't think so. It takes more than that to break with the

Cartesian tradition of the animal-machine that exists without language and without the ability to respond” (121). Levinas’ “humanism of the other” may displace the centrality of the subject in favour of its infinite responsibility for the absolute Other. But is this enough to remind us of our subjection to “*tout autre*”: not just to the Wholly Other but to *every single other*? Derrida doesn’t think so.

Levinas himself did not seem to consider the ethical response of or to animals a serious question, but when pressed he would say something like this:

I cannot say at what moment you have the right to be called "face." The human face is completely different and only afterwards do we discover the face of an animal. I don't know if a snake has a face... I do not know at what moment the human appears, but what I want to emphasize is that the human breaks with pure being, which is always a persistence in being . . . . [W]ith the appearance of the human—and this is my entire philosophy—there is something more important than my life, and that is the life of the other. (“Paradox of Morality” 171-2)

For Levinas, the animal is to be understood on the basis of the human, and responsibility extended to them accordingly; but it is not likely that animals themselves are capable of responsibility. How could they, when they are not even able to speak or respond? In a short essay called “The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights,” Levinas makes a possible exception for a dog named Bobby who befriended Levinas and his fellow prisoners in a labour camp during World War II. In the brutal, dehumanizing situation of the camp, this dog was the only being to refrain from treating human beings as means to an end, “the last Kantian in Nazi Germany” (153). And yet, Levinas immediately limits his compliment to Bobby; for as an animal “without the brain needed to universalize maxims and drives” (153), the dog is ultimately just a dog, deprived of language and reason, incapable of truly responding to others. Bobby’s genius was to bear witness to the human at a time when other human beings regularly failed to do so; but his ethical life does not go beyond this affirmation of the human as such.

I will return to Bobby later, considering him alongside another dog who appears in Levinas' oeuvre: Argos, from Homer's *Odyssey*. But for the moment I wish to clarify my approach to the question raised by Derrida about the sufficiency of Levinas' ethics for reminding the subject of its subjection to *tout autre*, and breaking with the tradition of subordinating animals to humans and denying their capacity for response. My intention is not to argue that animals really are capable of provoking and/or giving an ethical response in the sense that Levinas describes.<sup>1</sup> Rather, I wish to take up Derrida's challenge to the sufficiency of Levinas' ethics from a different direction. It may seem preposterous to ask whether infinite responsibility for the Other is "enough" to account for ethical life, but this is precisely the question I would like to pursue. My suggestion is that ethical life involves something both more and less than infinite responsibility, and I would like to call this "something" friendship. My question, then, is not whether the animal can respond, but rather how we can become better friends with animals; and my intuition is that this involves a mutual exposure at the level of sensible, and potentially nonsensical, life.

### **I. An Ethics of Friendship**

My friend is neither a stranger facing me, nor a brother at my side, nor a child whom I bear, nor a lover with whom I form an exclusive couple. This is not to say that strangers, brothers, children and lovers cannot also be my friends; but friendship is not merely a sub-species of these other relations. To venture a preliminary definition, a friend is someone whose company I enjoy, someone with whom I like to spend time. This mutual enjoyment can take many different forms, but ultimately Montaigne is right: I like my friend not because she possesses this or that specific quality, but rather because she is she and I am I. We like each other

in our singularity, and we would not want to replace one friend with another simply because they share similar characteristics. For this reason, it is difficult to say why someone is my friend; and the demand to produce such an explanation is more a betrayal of friendship than its proof.<sup>2</sup> The singularity of friendship is not of the sort that would exclude other, equally singular and irreplaceable friends; rather, it thrives amidst plurality, such that friends become friendly with each other's friends, and so on. The exchange between friends both presupposes a certain asymmetry—such that I will never make friends without being willing to extend my hand first, without any guarantee of reciprocity—but it also forbids one-sidedness, to the point where friendship usually dies without mutual giving and receiving.

If this is the case, then one might begin to understand Levinas' silence on friendship as a possible reticence towards relations that trouble the line between asymmetry and reciprocity, alterity and intimacy, responsibility and enjoyment. Another such troubling relation is eros, particularly as Levinas describes it in *Totality and Infinity*. The erotic couple, precisely as a couple, threatens to close into a society of two which is neither ethical nor political, and which prefers to shut out the command of the Other or the claims of the third. Luce Irigaray has questioned Levinas's ambivalence towards eros in her essay, "The Fecundity of the Caress." While Levinas subordinates voluptuousness to fecundity, such that the erotic pleasure enjoyed with the feminine Other is corrected or redeemed by the birth of a son, Irigaray argues that the mutual enjoyment of lovers already generates an ethical significance which is not acknowledged in Levinas' ethics of responsibility (nor, I would add, in his politics of justice).<sup>3</sup> Irigaray develops an ethics of eros based on mutual rebirth, regeneration, and flourishing with the Other, which sits rather uneasily alongside Levinas's ethics of responsibility. I wish to make a similar move with respect to friendship, arguing that it involves a mutual enjoyment *with* the Other that is

irreducible to either self-interest or responsibility, and is not even situated on a continuum between these two points. The mutual enjoyment of friends would not be at odds with ethical responsibility; rather, I wish to locate it in the very nexus of sensible enjoyment and exposure which for Levinas forms a condition for ethical life. Furthermore, I wish to argue that this mutual but asymmetrical exposure of friendship implies a certain indifference to the hierarchy between animal and human: an interval where these terms are no longer opposed, but also not conflated. My argument involves a close reading of sensibility for Levinas, and of what he calls the non-sense at the core of sensibility, its ambivalent exposure to meaningless pain and enjoyment.

## **II. Feeling like an Animal**

In each of his books, Levinas is careful to show how the responsible self is also an embodied being that enjoys its life and nourishes itself from the world. In this sense, it is not far-fetched to say that he provides an account of the ethical animal; but he also wants to show that, for the human animal in particular, the command to give is more fundamental than the enjoyment that giving presupposes. Levinas's account of sensibility in *Otherwise than Being* turns on the ambiguity of the flesh as the site of both egoist enjoyment and ethical generosity. The self who devours its bread in blissful ignorance of the Other's hunger also tears this bread from its own mouth, in the midst of enjoyment, to feed someone else. By carefully imbricating enjoyment and generosity, Levinas avoids an opposition between the bad body and the good soul; he seeks to articulate ethics *at the level of sensibility*, and not in the renunciation of sensible life.

While Levinas uses many different words to designate the self in *Otherwise than Being* (including subject, psychism, oneself [*soi-meme*], and so forth), he introduces sensibility through reference to an ego, *le moi*, which becomes itself by complacently turning in on itself in naïve

self-absorption. Levinas explains this complacency in phrases that echo the very movement they describe: “Satisfaction satisfies itself with satisfaction,” “enjoyment is an enjoying of enjoyment” (OB 73). The egoism of enjoyment refers not to a transcendental ego which would be the same in all instances, but rather to a singular animal with its own particular, unsharable hungers and satisfactions, its own way of living a life and absorbing the nourishments of a world. More primordial than the powers of representation, “enjoyment is the singularization of an ego in its coiling back upon itself” (73). The ego does not first exist, and then enjoy itself; rather, it materializes *as* an ego, “becomes a volume,” in and through enjoyment (73). Nor does the world possess a materiality that could be known or put to use prior to enjoyment; matter itself “‘materializes’ in the satisfaction, which fills an emptiness before putting itself into a form and presenting itself to the knowing of this materiality” (73).

The singular enjoyment of oneself as a living being in the material world occupies an ambiguous place between selfishness and generosity. As an ego coiling over itself in enjoyment, I am absorbed in my pleasure, oblivious to the needs or desires of others. For Levinas, the movement of enjoyment and nourishment involves absorption and assimilation, even to the point of “assimilating the other [*l’autre*] in its identity” (OB 73). But the involuted movement of enjoyment is not simply egoist; it can also be uncoiled for an Other whose appeal is more primordial than the egoism it interrupts. On one hand, sensibility is the “condition” of ethical generosity because the responsible self gives not only heartfelt wishes, but something concrete: the bread torn from its own mouth, in the midst of its own enjoyment.<sup>4</sup> But on the other hand, already in sensibility there is an exposure to the Other who commands the inversion of enjoyment into generosity. This ethical exposure is not merely added onto sensibility, but remains an absolute reference point for the radical passivity which distinguishes sensibility from

the intentionality of a consciousness. In this sense, “I am bound to others *before* being tied to my body” (76, my emphasis).

What might seem like a contradiction here (ethical exposure antecedes sensible enjoyment, but enjoyment is also the condition of ethical exposure) follows the logic of what Levinas calls anarchy. The word *arche* in ancient Greek means both “origin” and “principle;” thus *anarche* refers both to a time before the origin, and to an interruption of the principle which this origin establishes. The logic of anarchy allows Levinas to argue both that the Other disrupts an enjoyment already underway, and that the appeal of the Other antecedes enjoyment, such that I have always already been commanded to give bread. In this sense, even the most naïve and complacent egoism is not innocent; my inward coiling is already a turning-away from the Other for whom I am responsible. To restate this argument in simpler terms: The self must be an animal, singularized in its enjoyment of life, in order to be responsible for the Other in a way that *matters*, in the literal sense of the word. However—and everything turns on this “however” for Levinas—animality is never the ground for ethical responsibility, and the human animal only resists its own egoism thanks to the Other who commands it to give the bread that it eats and enjoys.

But this is not the whole story. There is a further ambiguity within Levinas’s account of enjoyment, which troubles the distinction between the signifying human being and the animal deprived of language, response, and responsibility. On one hand, as we have already seen, enjoyment involves an egoist self-absorption, where my pleasure here and now blocks out the rest of the world, as if it no longer mattered. But on the other hand, enjoyment also involves an openness to the world, a feeling of being drawn into the very stuff of life and even losing myself in enjoyment.<sup>5</sup> This feeling of absorption *in* enjoyment, or abandoning myself to enjoyment, is at

least as strong as the possibility of absorbing otherness *through* enjoyment. The dark side of this abandonment opens onto the seductive anonymity of what Levinas calls the *il y a*, which manifests itself in the narcotic pleasure which haunts enjoyment and tempts me away from responsibility. This temptation heightens the ambivalence of enjoyment for Levinas: just as the egoism of enjoyment may be put in question and uncoiled for the Other, it may also unravel itself *in* pleasure, not in a way that is for the Other and not even in heightened selfishness, but in losing oneself, being absorbed in absorption, letting the ego be annihilated along with its egoism. This latter possibility plays a role in Levinas' ambivalence towards erotic pleasure in *Totality and Infinity*; my enjoyment of the Other involves the risk of absorbing her alterity, but also the risk of losing my self, unraveling my identity, forgetting my responsibilities along with myself. For Levinas, only an *I* can be *for the Other*, despite itself while remaining itself; the point is to put the ego in question and unwind its resources for an Other, not to destroy the self altogether. And yet, the risk posed by this ambivalence plays an important role in distinguishing between sensation as the raw material for consciousness, and sensibility as a condition for ethical responsibility. To appreciate this importance, we need to take a closer look at the relation between sensibility and the non-sense of suffering.

### III. Sensibility and Non-sense

For Levinas, enjoyment does not find (nor does it necessarily need to find) a significance beyond itself: "To bite on the bread is the very meaning [*significance*] of tasting" (OB 73). Suffering, however, is more complicated:

Without egoism, complacent in itself, suffering would not have any sense [*sens*], as it would lose the passivity of patience, if it were not at every moment an overflowing of sense by non-sense. Enjoyment and the singularization of

sensibility in a 'me', take from the supreme passivity of sensibility—from its vulnerability—from its exposure to the other—the anonymity of the non-signifying passivity of the inert; the possibility of the suffering [according to which one can] 'suffer for nothing', prevents passivity from turning back into an Action. (OB 73-4, translation modified<sup>6</sup>)

Without egoism, suffering would have no sense. I take this to mean that, without the enjoyment through which I materialize or become a volume, I would not feel suffering; I would not *feel* at all. But suffering does not *make sense*, or acquire signification, in relation to enjoyment alone. In "Useless Suffering," Levinas argues that suffering becomes meaningful only on an ethical level, as suffering for an Other. To find a meaning, explanation or justification for suffering without this reference to an Other would be an affront to the sheer aversiveness of suffering, the capacity of pain to disintegrate meaning in the world.<sup>7</sup>

In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas understands suffering in relation to enjoyment—as an aspect of the body's sensible life, a risk involved in its flesh-and-blood exposure to the world—which is to say that he thinks hunger starting from satisfaction and nourishment, rather than the other way around. But the passivity of sense in nourishment would lose its passivity, and gravitate towards the intentionality of a consciousness actively reaching toward objects, if it were not for this exposure to the senselessness of suffering right at the level of enjoyment. Sensible life, in its openness to both enjoyment and suffering, involves "at every moment an overflowing of sense by non-sense" (OB 73), a meaninglessness which skips under the radar of intentionality. In other words, sensibility can be distinguished from the adventures of consciousness, not because of this or that meaningful difference, but rather thanks to a meaningless non-sense at the heart of sensible life. At this level of extreme passivity and exposure, I exist less as a human being endowed with the capacity for speech and reason than as an animal, a living thing submerged in "the anonymity of the meaningless passivity of the inert."

At this level, one might wonder if there is any relevant difference between the suffering of a philosopher and the suffering of a dog. Who is to say that, as sensible beings, we are not all exposed to the nonsense of suffering in exactly the same way, and “at every moment”? In any case, the hierarchy between man and animal is no longer relevant at the point of meaningless suffering; and yet this is precisely the point that helps Levinas distinguish the exposedness of ethical subjectivity from the closed circularity of intentional consciousness. If this is the case, then the most relevant distinction for an ethics of exposure would not be between human and animal, but rather between the sensible animal (human or otherwise) and a certain (characteristically human) denial of sensible animality. The ethical challenge would not be to rise above one’s animal self-interest, but rather to resist closing off one’s animal-human exposure for the sake of a safer, more protected and self-possessed model of consciousness.

Levinas resists these implications; for him, there is something more at stake in the passivity of human sensibility than the exposure to nonsense. Human passivity is radical not only because sensibility overflows with non-sense, but because already in the midst of sensibility’s pleasures and pains, there is also an exposure which is more passive than any passivity, absolutely inconvertible into any intention. This passivity responds to a singular Other who gives nothing to be seen or represented, but rather something to be heard: a command to responsibility which gives ethical significance both to the idiotic complacency of enjoyment and to the aversive non-sense of suffering. Levinas situates the ethical transcendence of the Other at a maximal distance from the immanent, anonymous, indifferent non-sense of the *il y a*. But to what extent is it possible to sustain these oppositions (up/down, transcendence/immanence, alterity/indifference) in the face of meaningless, nonsensical affect?<sup>8</sup> The blank spot of suffering opens Levinas’s account of sensibility to a possibility not already developed within it: the

possibility of an exposure, right at the level of sensible life, to another living thing whose contact affects me and even alters my being, in a way that is irreducible to either the adventures of intentional consciousness or the ethical exposure which commands responsibility.

To explore this possibility further, I look to another passage in Levinas's discussion of sensibility, in which he briefly considers an encounter between man and dog. The passage reads as follows:

The subjectivity of sensibility, taken as incarnation, is an abandon without return, a body suffering for another, the body as passivity and renouncement, a pure undergoing. There is indeed an insurmountable ambiguity there: the incarnate ego, the ego of flesh and blood, can lose its signification, be affirmed as an animal in its *conatus* and its joy. It is a dog that recognizes as its own Ulysses coming to take possession of his goods. But this ambiguity is the condition of vulnerability itself, that is, of sensibility as signification. (OB 79-80)

It is only as living beings of flesh and blood that we respond to the Other *materially* rather than simply with high hopes and good intentions; and yet, precisely as flesh and blood, we are also animals who enjoy our existence and want to persist in existing. Levinas equates the *conatus* with a self-interested desire to remain within the circle of being, and he contrasts this with the dis-interested non-indifference of responding for the Other in an "abandon without return." To use a shorthand which is undoubtedly too quick, the *conatus* is Odyssean (and animal, and ontological, and ethically insignificant), while sensibility is Abrahamic (and human, and ethical, and significant). To the extent that the ambiguity of the body both coils inward in self-interested enjoyment and uncoils itself for the Other, the body is both animal and human for Levinas. As animals, we experience an odyssey of departure and return; as humans, we undergo a departure without return, an exposure to alterity without a recapture or recognition of the other as familiar.

But even if one decides to define the animal starting with the human, rather than the other way around, humans are nevertheless also animals, and this animality remains the "condition" of

our ethical life in the sense explained above. My question for Levinas is: Given the ambiguity of the body as a site of enjoyment and suffering, of sensibility and nonsense, can the opposition between human and animal (or even, for that matter, between Abraham and Odysseus) be rigorously maintained? Or is the ethical significance of the body richer and more manifold than Levinas admits, such that the animal's delight in living—"its *conatus* and its joy"—remains distinct from its self-interested commitment to being, without thereby turning into a responsibility of the sort that Levinas describes in terms of a "humanism of the other [man]"? If so, then this is the sort of between-space where I would like to locate friendship as a relation to Others which is vital for ethical life, and not merely an accessory to responsibility.

#### **IV. Friendship and Com-passion**

One way of articulating the ethical significance of friendship would be through reference to com-passion as a suffering-with and/or enjoying-with the Other which exposes friends to one another on a sensible level without erasing the difference which friendship, as a relation, presupposes. I am distinguishing com-passion from the emotion of pity, emphasizing instead its etymological significance as a *passion*, or passive undergoing, *with* someone or something. Compassion involves an exposure to the Other which is not necessarily shared reciprocally; I can suffer/enjoy with someone who is so absorbed in her own suffering or enjoyment that she doesn't even notice me, let alone return my compassion. But I would regard this as a deficient mode of compassion which, even in its deficiency, still leaves open the possibility of a double asymmetry, an undergoing-with the Other who undergoes-with me. The word "with" functions here not as a conjunction—not a synonym for the word "and"—but rather as a chiasm, twisting together two sides which remain distinct in their intertwining. When friendship works well, both

friends are patient enough to suffer a certain lack or delay of compassion on the part of the other. For this reason, friendship is always open to the risk that I might be suffering for nothing, that my friend could withhold her compassion, that she has grown impatient with my suffering, bored with my enjoyment, indifferent to my singularity. If friendship were not exposed to this possibility of pain and loss, then there would be little to suggest that it involves a double asymmetry rather than a simple conjunction. Friends would be those who feel the same way about the same thing at the same time, in which case we wouldn't refer to them in the plural, but rather as a single unit or compound.

The double asymmetry of friendship is not simply a multiplication of the radical asymmetry to which Levinas refers in his account of ethical substitution, whereby I become host and hostage to the Other, responsible even for the pain which the Other inflicts on me. Suffering-with is not a variation on suffering-for, nor vice versa. The distinction between friendship and responsibility involves, at least in part, different ways of being interpellated or called forth. I cannot justify turning away from the face of the Other who commands me to responsibility (and *every* Other commands me to responsibility); like it or not, I have always already been commanded to respond, to give hospitality, to bear the stranger like a maternal body. But I cannot be *commanded* to friendship. Either I like her or I don't, or I grow to like her, or I tolerate her because she's a friend of a friend... but in any case, my friendly compassion for an Other arises more in response to an invitation or greeting than to a command. I regard responsibility and friendship as two distinct, but not incompatible, responses to the singular, embodied, sensible Other. Will I enjoy her enjoyment, or suffer with her suffering? It's not entirely up to me to decide, but in any case no one can expect me to justify whether I do or do not feel compassion in each case. Friendship can be fickle in a way that responsibility must not be—

which is why ethics cannot be based on compassion alone. And yet, perhaps what sustains and supports my infinite responsibility for the Other is the feeling that, even while I suffer alone as a hostage, expiating for a persecution which I did not undertake, I also suffer and enjoy *with* friends who suffer and enjoy *with* me. A fuller account of the ethical significance of friendship might help to resist the (false) interpretation of Levinas as a philosopher of sacrifice and self-abnegation; but for that, we need to think more concretely about how friendship works.

In the passage from *Otherwise than Being* that I cited above, Levinas refers to Ulysses' dog, Argos, to illustrate the difference between the body's ethical sensibility and its self-interested, animal-like "conatus and joy." Ulysses returns to Ithaca after almost twenty years of wandering, and the first being to recognize him is the family dog. For Levinas, this recognition has nothing to do with Ulysses as a singular Other, a stranger in rags seeking hospitality; rather, it is as one territorial animal to another that man and dog recognize each other, presumably on the basis of their common assumptions about rank, mastery and property. However, when we look at Homer's narration of the encounter between Ulysses and Argos, another reading becomes possible, one which suggests inter-species friendship and compassion rather than a simple identification of the same.

#### **V. Levinas and Homer on "Man's Best Friend"**

In Levinas' work, Ulysses has come to stand for everything the responsible self is not. His wandering is not open-ended, but brings him full circle back to the seat of his power, ready to reclaim his possessions. And yet, it is important to remember that Ulysses returns as a stranger in his own home, disguised as a filthy beggar and treated poorly by nearly everyone he encounters. To be sure, Ulysses has disguised himself this way in order to slip into the palace

unawares, kill the suitors, and re-assert himself as the master of the house. But in the moment when he first approaches this house, the outcome of his adventure is not at all certain. The goatherd Melanthios has just insulted and threatened him, and in a moment he will go begging from the rude and unwelcome suitors, one of whom will throw a footstool at his shoulder rather than offering the slightest bit of compassion. In short, Ulysses is treated like a dog by most men, and the only being who responds to him *as Ulysses* (not just as a human being, but as *himself*) is the old dog, Argos, lying on a dungheap at the threshold of the palace. Argos hears Ulysses' voice as he stands conversing with the swineherd Eumaios by the gate, and in response to this old but familiar voice he raises his head, wags his tail, and flattens his ears (XVII. 290-303). Ulysses, watching from a distance, instantly recognizes him but is unable to approach any closer for fear of giving away his disguise. He "secretly wipe[s] away a tear" (305) and turns to Eumaios saying, "[T]his is amazing, this dog that lies on the dunghill..." (306). Unable to approach the dog to greet him properly, Ulysses must content himself with speaking about him with another. In spite of their close proximity, the two friends never make direct contact; Argos dies as the men pass into the great hall of the palace to beg for food. And yet an affective response has passed between them, a moment of suffering-with which is irreducible to the mutual recognition of two self-interested beings fixed in their territory and wanting to persist in their being. More than a simple return to the familiarity of the same, a mutual compassion springs up between Argos and Ulysses, a double asymmetry of suffering-with another living being and enjoying their presence, however fleeting.

To be sure, this compassion is complicated by other, less inspiring asymmetries between man and dog, master and pet; after all, one could just as well argue that Ulysses is moved by the sight of Argos because it reminds him of how close he is to home, and how much things have

changed in his absence, how much of his former life and property he has lost by being away. One could argue that Argos is moved by the sight of Ulysses because he was once treated well by this master, and since his departure he has been neglected and left to die on a dungheap. We do not know the secret of Ulysses' wiped-away tear or the motivation behind Argos' flattened ears. But the very ambiguity of these wordless gestures, their opacity to us and to each other (and possibly even to themselves), suggests a double asymmetry which at least opens the possibility of friendship, and destabilizes the opposition between ethical men and non-ethical animals, which Levinas explicitly maintains.

Recall the ambiguity within sensibility that Levinas elaborates. On one hand, sensibility is the site (and possibly even the "condition") of responsibility; on the other hand, it is the site of our self-interest and egoism. But in his quick reading of the interaction between Argos and Ulysses, Levinas collapses a plausible distinction between animal sensibility (our "conatus and joy") and egoist self-interest (understood as the desire of consciousness to return and take possession of itself, a movement which arguably only human beings have the capacity to undertake).<sup>9</sup> If we carve up the distinctions differently, allowing for the possibility that animal enjoyment and suffering are ethically significant in a way that invites compassion and friendship, then another reading of this scene is possible, where the gestures of man and dog would articulate neither a movement of consciousness nor a command to responsibility, but the mutual, asymmetrical exposure of compassionate friendship. This exposure would not be strictly ethical in the sense that Levinas describes; it would not necessarily involve an absolute alterity that commands me to infinite, radically asymmetrical responsibility. And yet, it would nevertheless suggest a displacement of the conscious subject whose aim is to take possession of its own property by endlessly circling back to itself, excluding any radical exposure to the Other. Perhaps

it even suggests a model of being-subjected-to-the-other which breaks more definitively with the Cartesian tradition by exposing the subject to “*tout autre*,” to the Wholly Other and to every single other. This exposure *to* and *of* the sensible, animal, suffering-enjoying Other may not command me to responsibility; but it nevertheless involves a vulnerability which the command to responsibility presupposes, and which it does not leave behind. I want to locate in animal sensibility an ethical potential which does not need to be “reduced” in its conatus and joy, but which indicates an exposure of which the exposure to a commanding Other is one possibility, but not the only one.

Levinas’ discussion of proximity and contact concludes with the following words: Self-consciousness is a return path. But the Odyssey has also been an adventure, a history of innumerable encounters. In his native land Ulysses returns dissimulated under false exteriors. The coherent discussions which he knows how to keep up dissimulate an identity that is distinct from them, but whose signifyingness escapes the animal flair [i.e., its sense of smell]. (OB 81)

On Levinas’s reading, Ulysses’ dog would never be able to “sniff out” the ethical significance of the Other in his absolute alterity. Even if the dog shares with human beings a certain embodied sensibility, he does not have the brain or the language capacity necessary to grasp the signifyingness of sensibility, and so he could never respond properly to Ulysses in his singularity. If anything, he only catches a whiff of the familiar master, the one who owns this place and has finally come back to reclaim his territory. But even in the midst of this return, is there not another surprise, irreducible to the adventures of consciousness? The exposure to another animal, a flesh-and-blood intimacy that speaks neither of identity nor of alterity, surprises the opposition between animal and human, and even between ethics and ontology. This animal exposure is as impossible to avoid as it is impossible to eliminate my scent, cover my tracks, erase all traces of my life on earth. It is as a smelly animal that Ulysses emerges as

*himself*, perceived by at least one other animal as this particular man, with this unique, unmistakable smell, this singular materialization as a living being. There is no other animal exactly like Ulysses, and even if this animality makes him “the same” as other animals, it does not make him identical to any of them, nor even to himself. This singular life as an animal remains as a non-sensical, but sensible condition for enjoying and suffering with Others as friends, and not only as hosts or hostages.

In closing, I wish to consider one other moment when this scene from *The Odyssey* comes up in Levinas’ work: in his essay on Bobby, “The Name of a Dog.” Levinas praises Bobby for bearing witness to the human at a time when even the civilian women and children passing by reduced him and his fellow prisoners to “a gang of apes” and “stripped [them] of human skin” (ND 153). He connects Bobby to the dogs in Exodus 11:7 who bore witness to the human in another way, not with their “friendly growling” (ND 153) but with their silence. God has promised to send a plague to kill all the firstborn sons of Egypt, in order to convince Pharaoh to release the Israelites from slavery. Moses prophesies that on that night, all of Egypt will wail in sorrow; but “among the Israelites, not a dog will bark at any man or animal” (Ex 11:7). For Levinas, this silence attests to the ethical importance of the moment when the Israelites regained their freedom and humanity, setting out on the adventure of ethical humanism. Levinas comments: “At the supreme hour of his institution [i.e., the institution of this free man who remembers his servitude in solidarity with all the enslaved]—and with neither ethics nor logos—the dog will attest to the dignity of the person. This is what the friend of man means. A transcendence in the animal!” (ND 152; translation modified<sup>10</sup>). Again, Levinas ties transcendence in the animal to a capacity to bear witness to the humanity of the human.

But it is not clear to me that this is what “the friend of man” means. In the final passage of this essay, Levinas considers whether Argos might also be connected to these Egyptian dogs who bore witness to the human: “Perhaps the dog that recognized Ulysses beneath his disguise on his return from the Odyssey was a forebear of our own. But no, no! There, they were in Ithaca and the Fatherland. Here, we are nowhere” (ND 153). Clearly, there is an insurmountable difference between Ulysses returning home and Levinas imprisoned in a Nazi work camp; these situations cannot even be meaningfully compared, and it is not my wish to do so. Rather than attempting to trace the lineage of Argos back to the dogs who silently bore witness to the humanity of the human, I would argue that both Argos and Bobby invite us, in different ways, to bear witness to the *sensible animality of the human*, and to the compassionate friendship that this sensibility makes possible. The exposure to nonsense at the heart of suffering, which Levinas so movingly describes in *Otherwise than Being*, opens the possibility of a “nowhere” everywhere, even at the center of the fatherland. If this were not the case, there would be little or no hope for a displacement or disintegration of concepts like fatherland.

Regardless of my name or my species or the complexity of my consciousness, I am exposed to other living things who, like me, are exposed to the nonsense of suffering as singular but anonymous animals. This suffering invites a compassion which is different from the command to responsibility; but it may nevertheless point a way through the abysmal gap that opens when human beings, in their cruelty worse than beasts, turn their backs on the Other man’s command. From this perspective, the passers-by who reduced Levinas and his fellow prisoners to a “gang of apes” not only degraded their humanity; they also betrayed their sensible animality. Perhaps Bobby didn’t need to be a Kantian in order to be good. It was enough simply to be a friend, and to greet other animals in their everyday departure and return. This claim might seem

to underestimate the complexity of a human life, which certainly needs more than a wagging tail to give it justice. But I am not suggesting that the ethics of friendship briefly outlined here should replace Levinas' ethics of responsibility. Rather, I seek to flesh out a dimension of ethical life *as life* in a way that is not yet articulated in the command not to murder, but also does not silence this command. It may be true that Bobby fails to teach us the infinity of ethical transcendence; but perhaps there are other lessons to be learned from barking dogs.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See John Llewelyn's work on Levinas and animals for an admirable example of such an approach (*The Middle Voice of Ecological Conscience*, "Am I Obsessed by Bobby?").

<sup>2</sup> Blanchot makes this point beautifully: "Friendship, this relation without dependence, without episode, yet into which all the simplicity of life enters, passes by way of the recognition of the common strangeness that does not allow us to speak of our friends but only to speak to them, not to makes them a topic of conversations (or essays), but the movement of understanding in which, speaking to us, they reserve, even on the most familiar terms, an infinite distance, the fundamental separation on the basis of which what separates becomes relation" (*Friendship* 291). See William Large's insightful discussion of friendship in *Emmanuel Levinas and Maurice Blanchot: Ethics and the Ambiguity of Writing* (79-102). Large writes: "To be intimate with someone is not to know someone, but to be in relation to that which they do not know about themselves, and equally in that relation, to relate to that which you do not know about yourself... It is only those who do not affect me, whose presence I am wholly indifferent to, that I know. I cannot say who my friend is, or even who I am in this friendship" (89). I will follow up this impossibility of knowing and explaining friendship through Levinas' insight into the asignifying "non-sense" at the heart of sensibility.

<sup>3</sup> Irigaray writes: "The aspect of fecundity that is only witnessed in the son obliterates the secret of difference. As the lover's means of return to himself outside himself, the son closes the circle. The path of a solitary ethics that will have encountered for its own needs, without nuptial fulfillment, the irresponsible woman, the loved one" ("Fecundity" 245). Rather than presenting eros as the *condition* for fecundity, Irigaray argues that the mutual caressing of lovers is already fecund: "Prior to and following any positioning of the subject, this touch binds and unbinds two others in flesh that is still, and always, untouched by mastery. Dressing the one and the other within-without, in a garment that neither evokes, invokes, nor takes pleasure in the perversity of the naked but contemplates and adorns it, always for the first time, with in-finite, un-finished flesh. Covering it, uncovering it, again and again, like an amorous impregnation that seeks out

and affirms otherness, while protecting it” (232). See Tina Chanter’s book, *Ethics of Eros* (170-224), for a fuller discussion of Irigaray’s reading of Levinas.

<sup>4</sup> Along these lines, Levinas writes: “Thus, the for-the-other both thwarts the subject and affects it in its inwardness; through pain. Enjoyment in its ability to be complacent in itself, exempt from dialectical tensions, is the *condition* of the for-the-other involved in sensibility, and in its vulnerability as an exposure to the Other [*l’Autrui*]... Sensibility can be a vulnerability, an exposedness to the other or a saying *only because* it is an enjoyment (OB 74, my emphasis). I am hesitant to interpret these phrases as an indication that Levinas regards enjoyment as a transcendental condition for the possibility of ethics. Given the logic of anarchy, it seems better to think of this as a quasi-transcendental, indispensable for ethics but not for this reason belonging to a more fundamental plane. We might think of the word “condition” in terms of a locus or surrounding circumstance, as in “the driving conditions” or even “the human condition”.

<sup>5</sup> Levinas’ account of enjoyment in *Time and the Other* emphasizes this aspect to a much greater extent: “The subject is absorbed in the object it absorbs, and nevertheless keeps a distance with regard to that object. All enjoyment is also sensation—that is, knowledge and light. It is not just the disappearance of the self, but self-forgetfulness, as a first abnegation” (67; see also 58-66).

<sup>6</sup> “Sans l’ égoïsme se complaisant en lui-même la souffrance n’aurait pas de sens, comme elle perdrait la passivité de la patience, si elle n’était pas à tout moment un débordement du sens par le non-sens. La jouissance et la singularisation de la sensibilité en un moi, enlèvent à la passivité suprême de la sensibilité — à sa vulnérabilité — à son exposition à l’autre — l’anonymat de la passivité insignifiante de l’inerte, la possibilité dans la souffrance de <<souffrir pour rien>>, empêche qu’en elle la passivité retourne en Acte” (AE 93). Thank you to Bettina Bergo for her help with this translation.

<sup>7</sup> To find utility in suffering—especially in the suffering of others—would be perverse. William Edelglass has written insightfully on the significance of suffering in Levinas’ work in “Levinas on Suffering and Compassion.”

<sup>8</sup> Dennis King Keenan challenges the purity of the opposition between God and the *il y a* in his book, *Death and Responsibility: The “Work” of Levinas*. Keenan’s argument informs and underscores the point that I am making here. See in particular pp 14-18, 20-22, 31.

<sup>9</sup> Note that the passage about Ulysses and his dog begins with a discussion of Hegel: “Hegel in the *Phenomenology of Mind* sought to conceive of substance as subject, to reduce the model of an entity... to a movement: a mediated recovering of the immediate after the negation of this immediate. But in this way a recapture of oneself, a reconquest, a for-oneself still animates the subjectivity caught sight of at the bottom of the substance: essence does not leave its *conatus*... {t}he incarnate ego, the ego of flesh and blood, can lose its signification, be affirmed as an animal in its *conatus* and its joy. It is a dog that recognizes as its own Ulysses coming to take possession of his goods...” (OB 79-80). The implication seems to be that the *Phenomenology* bases its account of consciousness on an implicit reduction of the human to the animal.

<sup>10</sup> “A l’heure suprême de son instauration — et sans éthique et sans logos — la chien va attester la dignité de la personne. L’ami de l’homme — c’est cela. Une transcendance dans l’animal!” (DL 201).

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