



Derrida's Cat (Who Am I?)

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Abstract

What is it to be seen (naked) by one's cat? In "L'animal que donc je suis" (2006), the first of several lectures that he presented at a conference on the "autobiographical animal," Jacques Derrida tells of his discomfort when, emerging from his shower one day, he found himself being looked at by his cat. The experience leads him, by way of reflections on the question of the animal, to what is arguably *the* question of his philosophy: *Who am I?* It is not so much that Derrida wants to answer this question as to be free of it. His task here is to determine the sense of it—where it leads, for example, when it comes to the nature of the difference between himself and his cat. Unlike animal rights activists (and unlike philosophers Martha Nussbaum and Cora Diamond, who have recently addressed this issue), Derrida does not want to erase this difference but wants to multiply it in order (among other things) to affirm the absolute alterity or singularity of his cat, which cannot be subsumed by any category (such as *the* animal). His cat is an Other in a way that no human being (supposing there to be such a thing, which Derrida is not prepared to grant) could ever be. And here is where "the question *who?*" leads as well, namely, to a path of escape from absorption into any identity-machine. As Derrida puts it in *A Taste for the Secret*: Who am I when I am not one of you? In a hospitable world one would be free not to answer.

Keywords

animal, who, autobiography, nonidentity, freedom, Derrida

I would say that for me the great question is always the question *who*. Call it biographical, autobiographical or existential, the form of the question *who* is what matters to me, be it in, say, its Kierkegaardian, Nietzschean, or Heideggerian form. *Who? Who asks the question who? Where? How? When? Who arrives?* It is always the most difficult question, the irreducibility of *who* to *what*, or the place where between *who* and *what* the limit trembles, in some way. It is clear that the *who* withdraws from or provokes the displacement of the categories in which biography, autobiography, and memoirs are thought.

Derrida, *A Taste for the Secret*

1. The Naked Animal

How exactly does Jacques Derrida address “the question *who*,” and what does he make of it? This is what I would like to determine in this essay. My concern here is with a late but characteristically exorbitant and playful text, “L’animal que donc je suis” (*LAN* 15–79/*ANT* 369–418), the first of several lectures that Derrida presented at a conference on the “autobiographical animal” held at Cérisy-la-Salle in 1997, in which he tells of his discomfort when, emerging from his shower one day, he found himself being looked at by his cat.¹ What sort of event is this? We’ve been told what it is to be seen by someone else—this, says Sartre, is how we know there are other *subjects*, and it is also how we know what it is to be an object, which means feeling the debasement of being a mere thing. More precisely (says Sartre), it means that suddenly my consciousness, which so far had been intentional and unreflective—that is, of the world and of things in it—is now inhabited by a *self*. But becoming a *self* in this way is, paradoxically, a form of alienation. Being seen by another, I fall out of the world that heretofore had been mine: “If there is an Other, whatever or whoever he may be, whatever may be his relations with me, and without his acting upon me in any way except by the pure upsurge of his being—then I have an outside, I have a *nature*. My original fall is the existence of the Other. Shame—like pride—is the apprehension of myself as a nature although that very nature escapes me and is unknowable as such” (*BN* 344–53). So what am I? Or, more exactly, since my nature “escapes me and is unknowable as such,” *Who* am I?

This is the regulating question of “L’animal que donc je suis” and of my effort at a commentary on this text. The interesting question, as we shall see, is whether, for Derrida, the question “Who am I?” has any sort of answer. I will try to settle this problem in the last section of this essay. But before that we need to know what “L’animal que donc je suis” is about.

As Herman Rapaport has suggested (*LD* 100), Derrida’s experience of the gaze of his cat is a kind of parody of Sartre’s story of the look. Derrida writes:

¹ Papers for the entire conference were published under the title, *L’animal autobiographique: autour de Jacques Derrida* (Paris: Galilée; 1999). Derrida’s lectures (nearly ten hours’ worth) consist of, among other things, close readings of philosophical texts on “the animal” from Aristotle, Descartes, and Kant to Heidegger, Levinas, and Lacan. See Cary Wolfe’s discussion of Derrida on the animal in *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory*, 44–97. See appended lists for complete citations of referenced works and abbreviations.

I often ask myself, just to see, *who I am* [qui je suis]—and who I am (following) at the moment [*et qui je suis au moment*] when, caught naked, in silence, by the gaze of an animal, for example the eyes of a cat, I have trouble, yes, a bad time overcoming my embarrassment.

Whence this malaise [*ce mal*]?

I have trouble repressing a reflex dictated by immodesty. Trouble keeping silent within me a protest against the indecency. Against the impropriety that comes of finding oneself naked, one's sex exposed, stark naked before a cat that looks at you without moving, just to see. The impropriety [*malséance*] of a certain animal nude before the other animal, from that point on one might call it a kind of *animalséance*: the single, incomparable and original experience of the impropriety that would come from appearing in truth naked, in front of the insistent gaze of the animal, a benevolent or pitiless gaze, surprised or cognizant. The gaze of a seer, visionary, or extra-lucid blind person. It is as if I were ashamed, therefore, naked in front of this cat, but also ashamed for being ashamed. A reflected shame, the mirror of a shame ashamed of itself, a shame that is at the same time specular, unjustifiable, and unable to be admitted to. At the optical center of this reflection would appear this thing—and in my eyes the focus of this incomparable experience—that is called nudity. And about which it is believed that it is proper to man, that is to say, foreign to the animals, naked as they are, or so it is thought, without the slightest inkling of being so. (*LAN 18/ANT 372–73*)

Derrida in this moment is caught by surprise—surprised, not just by his cat, but by his embarrassment, the unexpected shame of his nudity before the cat (as if the cat could care!). Someone, not wanting to embarrass a naked human being, would perhaps look away, pretending not to see; a lover, for whom nudity could have its attractions, might look him or her in the eye, or up and down. But what can a cat know—or, for all of that, what can we know about a cat? Anyway Derrida's sense of shame is doubled: imagine anyone, much less a philosopher (that sealed-off guardian of rationality), being embarrassed by a cat. Hence Derrida's question: *Who am I* at this moment? *Who am I* that I should experience myself (and my cat) in this way?

Of course, what Derrida experiences is, first of all, just his own flesh, being in the flesh, “naked as an animal [*bête*]” (*LAN 19/ANT 373*), but also *more* naked, since an animal cannot (or so we are told) experience its own nudity, or animality: “In principle [but not in fact?], with the exception of man, no animal has ever thought to dress itself. Clothing would be proper to man, one of the ‘properties’ of man. Dressing oneself would be inseparable from all the other forms of what is proper to man, even if one talks about it less than speech or reason, the *logos*, history, laughing, mourning, burial, the gift, and so on” (*LAN 19/ANT 373*). To which Derrida adds a parentheses: (“The list of properties unique to man always forms a configuration, from the first moment. For that reason, it can never be limited to a single trait and it is never

closed” [LAN 19/ANT 373]). That is, there is no one thing that sets us apart from animals, unless perhaps it is our occasional *bestiality*, just as there is no such thing as the *animal as such*: this is one of Derrida’s major theses in this text—as it has been elsewhere, in different forms, as in the various elucidations of *différance*, where the idea is not so much to clarify (or obscure) differences as to diversify them. The many (you and me, for example) are others of each other, but not of any One.

To be sure: “There is no nudity ‘in nature’” (LAN 19/ANT 374). There is flesh and the experience of flesh (cold, pain, hunger, desire) but not embarrassment or shame, that is (presumably), no experience of being naked. If so, of course, the joke is that if the cat had not looked at the naked Derrida, he (Derrida) would have remained (like) an animal, unaware of his nudity. The gaze of the cat is what makes him human—a point on which Derrida ruminates (and to which he will implicitly return later in this text in his reading of Genesis): “Before the cat that looks at me naked, would I be ashamed *like* an animal that no longer has the sense of nudity? Or on the contrary, *like* a man who retains the sense of his nudity? Who am I therefore? [*Qui suis-je alors?*] Who is it that I am (following)? [*Qui est-ce que je suis?*]” (LAN 20/ANT 374).

Who am I? What is the sense of this question? Derrida does not say (here), but for him, *the* “autobiographical animal,” obsessed (as he confesses) with memory, “*Who am I?*” is perhaps *the* question of his philosophy or at all events of his elusive way of thinking—or of his elusive way of thinking of himself, as when he says, in *A Taste for the Secret*, “I am not one of the family”: “I am not one of the family’ means: do not consider me ‘one of you,’ ‘don’t count me in,’ I want to keep my freedom, always: this, for me, is the condition not only for being singular and other, but also for entering into relation with the singularity and alterity of others” (TS 27). Perhaps even the singularity and alterity of his cat.

2. The Other Cat (*l’autre absolu*)

Who am I (if I am not one of you, whoever you are)? Framed this way, it appears that, at the very least, the question *who* aims to overturn the rule of identity or the rule of the concept. Derrida’s wide-ranging (digressive) reflections on his cat, on his relation with the animal-other, and on the way this relation alters his self-relation (including the whole business of being called “human,” or of being an “I”) are his way of allowing this question to do its unsettling work. For a start we should notice that Derrida asks pointedly

about a *who*, not a *what* (EW 96–119). In the same spirit he says: “I must make it clear from the start, the cat I am talking about is a real cat, truly, believe me, a *little* cat. It isn’t the *figure* of a cat. It doesn’t silently enter the room as an allegory for all the cats on earth, the felines that traverse myths and religions, literature and fables. There are so many of them. The cat I am talking about does not belong to Kafka’s vast zoopoetics, something that nevertheless solicits attention, endlessly and from a novel perspective” (*LAN* 20/*ANT* 374). No beast-fable homonizations. The cat in question is a *singular* cat, Derrida’s cat, not a stand-in and interpreter from a philosopher’s point of view, not a *literary* cat like one of Baudelaire’s or Rilke’s—although, by way of comparison or contrast, Rilke’s famous “Schwarz Katze” would have been worth a moment’s reflection. Recall how she lies there, indifferent to your look, until:

—auf einmal kehrt sie, wie geweckt,
ihr Gesicht und mitten in das deine:
und da triffst du deinen Blick im geelen
Amber ihrer runden Augenstein
unerwartet wieder: eingeschlossen
wie ein ausgestorbenes Insekt.

[—all at once
as if awakened, she turns her face to yours;
and with a shock, you see yourself, tiny,
inside the golden amber of her eyeballs
suspended, like a prehistoric insect.] (*SP* 64–65)

But there is no metaphor in the *look* of Derrida’s cat, no embodiment of sinister felinity. Derrida’s cat, like the naked philosopher himself, is a *who*, not a *what*—one wonders why Derrida does not tell us his cat’s name, but only that it is a *little* cat. Perhaps the reason is that they encounter one another at the level of the singular and irreducible, not as man and animal, nor even at the level of the proper name, but face-to-face.

But can one’s cat (any cat) really enter into such a relation? “How can an animal look you in the face?” Derrida asks (*LAN* 24/*ANT* 377). After all, according to psychoanalytic theory, an animal cannot even look itself in the face, since when it looks in a mirror (presumably we know this from experience), there is no experience of recognition, which is to say no formation of a subject.² Likewise Heidegger in *What is Called Thinking?* says: “man is the

² See Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Phase as Formative of the Function of the I,” in *Ecrits: A Selection*, 1. In contrast to the human infant, a monkey, according to Lacan, takes no interest in its

animal that confronts face-to-face. A mere animal, such as a dog, never confronts anything, it can never confront anything *to its face*; to do so, the animal would have to perceive *itself*” (WI 61).³ As if, like Dracula, an animal were invisible to mirrors. The orthodox thesis is, as Derrida says, that the animal is able to *react*, but not to *respond*, to what it sees. But it is just this thesis that, by way of the “unsubstitutable singularity” of his cat (LAN 26/ANT 378), Derrida wants to contest, and he does so by mapping onto his cat-encounter (something like) the ethical relation described by Emmanuel Levinas. (I say, *something like*, because, as Matthew Calarco reminds us [DI 182], Levinas does not really think animals have faces, either.)

No doubt, says Derrida, I am in advance of my cat, following or succeeding it on the scale of creation or evolution, superior to it in every respect (except perhaps its imperturbability), but here and now my relation to this cat is one of *proximity*, which is what the term face-to-face means: not an objective relation of cognition and representation, but a relation of touching and being-touched, a relation of responsiveness and responsibility, which for Levinas is very much a relation of skin-to-skin. So one can say that Derrida, standing there naked, is in a Levinasian (that is, accusative) situation *vis-à-vis* his cat. As he says, “[my cat] can look at me. It has its point of view regarding me. The point of view of the absolute other, and nothing will have ever done more to make me think through this absolute alterity of the neighbor than these moments when I see myself seen naked under the gaze of a cat” (LAN 28/

image, which is to say no self-image ever forms. In other words, an animal cannot become a subject—cannot traverse the boundary between the imaginary and symbolic order, and therefore cannot disembody, which would mean taking an other into account. The animal cannot respond to (or as) an other (see EC 86). In “And Say the Animal Responded?”, Derrida calls attention to the “fragility” of the oppositions on which this thesis depends, “beginning with that between the symbolic and imaginary which underwrites finally this whole anthropocentric reinstitution of the superiority of the human order over the animal order” (LAN 186/AS 138).

³ See also WI 16: “The hand is a peculiar thing. In the common view, the hand is part of our bodily organism. But the hand’s essence can never be determined, or explained, by its being an organ which can grasp. Apes, too, have organs that can grasp, but they do not have hands. The hand is infinitely different from all grasping organs—paws, claws, or fangs—different by an abyss of essence. Only a being who can speak, that is, think, can have hands and can be handy in achieving works of handicraft.” See Derrida, GII 161–96. See Stuart Elden, HA 273–91, esp. 278: “The animal is different from the human, who is the *zoon logon échon*. It is for [this reason] that animals do not dwell or abide; neither do they look [*blicken*], but rather they peer, glare, gawk or gape, because there is not a ‘self-disclosure of being,’ nothing is disclosed to it . . . ; equally the pet dog does not really ‘eat,’ and does not really comport itself to the table it lies under or the stairs it runs up.”

ANT 180). Derrida's cat is an other like no other: *l'autre absolu*—transcendent with respect to his (Derrida's) superior powers of speech and reason, and above all imposing on Derrida a philosophical and, more strictly, an ethical demand ("nothing will have ever done more to make me think through this absolute alterity of the neighbor..."). Interestingly, Derrida does not introduce the term *Autrui* to identify his cat, but he does ascribe to the cat "a point of view," which means that between himself and his cat there is a reversal of subjectivity in which Derrida is no longer himself (that is, no longer self-possessed, able to say "I" without *malséance*).

But how can a cat be an *Other*? Levinas says that "it is only man who could be absolutely foreign to me—refractory to every typology, to every genus, to every characterology, to every classification" (*DF* 73). To which Maurice Blanchot responded by saying that, if this is what alterity means (namely, outside every horizon), then "the Other man who is '*autrui*' also risks being always Other than man, close to what cannot be close to me: close to death, close to the night, and certainly as repulsive as anything that comes to me from these regions without a horizon" (*IC* 72). In "And Say the Animal Responded?", Derrida sides with Blanchot by proposing the hypothesis of the "animal-*other*" in order to locate "a place of alterity that is radical enough to break with every identification of an image of self, with every fellow living creature, and so with every fraternity or human proximity, with all humanity" (*LAN* 181/AS 134). We are always on the plane of resemblance with respect to other human beings. For Derrida (as radical as ever) the animal-*other* alone compels the question, *Who am I?* What response is there to this question? Or, more exactly, what meaning or consequence does Derrida's response entail?

3. The "Abyssal Limit" of the Human

Of course, on Levinas' theory, the alterity of Derrida's cat entails his responsibility for it, that is, his responsibility for the good of his cat (who no doubt just wants to be let out), but also his ability to respond to it as in fact he *does* respond when he experiences his nakedness in his cat's (unfathomable) eyes. This is not an experience of himself as a subject, a *cogito*; it is an experience of his passivity (his flesh), which Derrida immediately names or renames "*the passion of the animal*": "seeing oneself seen naked under a gaze that is vacant to the extent of being bottomless, at the same time innocent and cruel perhaps, perhaps sensitive and impassive, good and bad, uninterpretable, unreadable, undecidable, abyssal and secret" (*LAN* 29/ANT 381). In which case

Derrida's experience is not just an ethical event in Levinas' sense but is also, at the same time, what Maurice Blanchot (following Georges Bataille) calls a "limit-experience," that is, the limit of subjectivity, as in an experience of fatigue, waiting, affliction, dying, but also of the passivity of the child.⁴ Here is how Derrida describes it:

As with every bottomless gaze, as with the eyes of the other, the gaze called animal offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human: the inhuman or the ahuman, the ends of man, that is to say the bordercrossing from which vantage man dares to announce himself to himself, thereby calling himself by the name that he believes he gives himself. And in these moments of nakedness, under the gaze of the animal, everything can happen to me, I am like a child ready for the apocalypse, *I am (following) the apocalypse itself* [je suis l'apocalypse même], that is to say the ultimate and first event of the end, the unveiling and the verdict. (LAN 31/ANT 381)

So here we are at a *bordercrossing*: the anomalous space-between in which no one is anything, neither human nor nonhuman but *ahuman*, that is, without horizons or markers of any kind. Recall Giorgio Agamben's region of "bare life," the "zone of indistinction," in which the outcast is neither one thing nor another, like a werewolf (*HS* 104–11). The border is in any case aporetic, a limit that leaves him (Derrida) like a child on the brink, "ready for the apocalypse" or whatever is to come, rather like Bataille's ecstatic child in *Inner Experience*, left alone at night, "naked in the depths of the woods," enjoying or suffering an ecstasy of anguish (*IE* 54); or like Blanchot's child in *The Writing of the Disaster*, exposed to the "primal scene" of an absolute exteriority that fills him with "devastation and joy," leaving him henceforward "to live withdrawn from any interest in [him]self, disinterested, thinned out to a state of utter calmness, expecting nothing" (in short, a kind of Blanchot [*WD* 114–46]).

The presence of the child at these extreme limits is worth a moment's attention. The child, like the animal, is a figure of bare life, inevitably invisible behind the well-fed subject of *enunciation* whom philosophers christen *Man as such*. Meanwhile for Giorgio Agamben infancy is the "Ur-limit" of

⁴ See Blanchot, *IC* 202–11, esp. 207:

[It] must be understood that possibility is not the sole dimension of our experience, and it is perhaps given to us to "live" each of the events that is ours by way of a double relation. We live it one time as something we comprehend, grasp, bear, and master . . . ; we live it another time as something that escapes all employ and all end, and more, as that which escapes our very capacity to undergo it, but whose trial we cannot escape.

language, that is, the source or condition of its possibility insofar as it is a pure experience of language (an *experimentum linguae*), that is, not a *use* of language but a submersion in the materiality that makes voice (and, indeed, writing) possible (IH 4–7). The infant is, like the animal, *within* language (*langue*) but on the hither side of speech (*parole*), in the semiotic or protosemantic world of babble (or Babel):

It is not language in general that marks out the human form from other living beings—according to the Western metaphysical tradition that sees man as a *zoon logon êchon* (an animal endowed with speech)—but the split between language and speech, between semiotic and semantic (in Benveniste’s sense), between sign system and discourse. Animals are not in fact denied language; on the contrary, they are always and totally language. In them *la voix sacrée de la terre ingénue* (the sacred voice of the unknowing earth)—which Mallarmé, hearing the chirp of a cricket, sets against the human voice as *une* and *non-décomposée* (one and indivisible)—knows no breaks or interruptions. Animals do not enter language, they are already inside it. Man, instead, by having an infancy, by preceding speech, splits this single language and, in order to speak, has to constitute itself as the subject of language—he has to say *I*. Thus, if language is truly man’s nature. . . then man’s nature is split at its source, for infancy brings it discontinuity and the difference between language and discourse. (IH 59)⁵

So, on this theory, Derrida’s cat is not without language (its sounds and voices), but like the child, it splits the difference between the brute materiality of language and the intentionality of speech—and in the bargain it restores the *nondiscursive* region of language that philosophers of Derrida’s generation were anxious to explore, often in the name of poetry or literature, as well as by way of their own baroque experiments in writing.⁶

Perhaps no one’s writing is as baroque as Derrida’s, which has never proceeded (and can never be followed) in a straightforward manner but moves unpredictably through amplifications and digressions punctuated by puns and neologisms without ever really terminating in a position. Arguably, this “style”

⁵ See Derrida’s discussion of the conundrum of the child who “speaks before knowing how to speak” in *Of Grammatology*, 247–48.

⁶ See Michel Foucault, *OT* 65: in literature “language . . . exists in its raw and primitive being [*être brut et primitive*], in the simple, material form of writing, a stigma upon things, a mark imprinted across the world which is part of its most ineffaceable forms.” Foucault’s idea is that in the nineteenth century (that is, with the beginning of modernism) literature “ceased to belong to the order of discourse and became the manifestation of language in its thickness” (from an interview with Raymond Bellours [*AME* 65]). See also, in this same volume, “A Preface to Transgression,” on “the extreme forms of language in which Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, and Pierre Klossowski have made their home” (*AME* 76). See also Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *PTL* 80.

is not just obscurantism but is a protosemantic exploration of language on the hither side of the propositional style of discursive reason.⁷ In his interview with Jean-Luc Nancy, “Eating Well,” Derrida writes:

if one defines language in such a way that it is reserved for man, what is there to say? But if one reinscribes language in a network of possibilities that do not merely encompass it but mark it irreducibly from the inside, everything changes. I am thinking in particular of the mark in general, of the trace, of iterability, of *différance*. These possibilities or necessities, without which there would be no language, *are themselves not only human*. It is not a question of covering up ruptures and heterogeneities. I would simply contest that they give rise to a single, linear, indivisible, oppositional limit, to a binary opposition between the human and the infrahuman. And what I am proposing here should allow us to take into account scientific information about the complexity of “animal languages,” genetic coding, all forms of marking within which so-called human language, as original as it might be, does not allow us to “cut” once and for all where we would in general like to cut. As you can see, in spite of appearances, I am speaking here of very “concrete” and very “current” problems: the ethics and the politics of the living. (EW 116–17)

There is no one thing that can be called language, nor any one thing that can be called speech—which means no one thing of which animals, for example, can be said to be deprived, or humans endowed: no one line, in other words, that can separate ourselves from the other.⁸

4. *L'Animot*

Regarding the rule of the concept, we should take care not to miss the critical intervention that Derrida undertakes in “L’animal que donc je suis.” His complaint here is that philosophers and poets have traditionally engaged animals dogmatically by way of appellations from above rather than on the basis of ethological evidence that comes from *being with* animals in an extended and

⁷ In *A Taste for the Secret* Derrida writes: “my own experience of writing leads me to think that one does not always write with a desire to be understood—that there is a paradoxical desire not to be understood. It’s not simple, but there is a certain ‘I hope that not everyone understands everything about this text,’ because if such a transparency of intelligibility were ensured it would destroy the text” (TS 30).

⁸ Here it would be useful to consult the texts gathered together in *The Great Apes Project: Equality Beyond Humanity*, especially Francine Patterson and Wendy Gordon, “The Case for the Personhood of Gorillas” (GAP 58–77), with its description of Koko, who uses sign language to initiate conversations with humans, who recognizes herself in the mirror and enjoys making faces at herself, who can lie, and who understands what it is to die.

systematic way. Already in Genesis the aboriginal encounter with other living things gets covered over or elided by a narrative of naming, which is itself aporetic, however, since it is (as Derrida reads it) about the contingency of a God who allows man to name the animals simply “in order to see” what he will call them, what names will be chosen, as if the genesis of being and time were a kind of animal experiment (*LAN* 35–36/*ANT* 386). Derrida writes: “This powerful yet deprived ‘in order to see’ that is God’s, the first stroke of time, before time, God’s exposure to surprise, to the event of what is going to occur between man and animal, this time before time has always made me dizzy” (*LAN* 36/*ANT* 387). As does the gaze of his cat.

What would it be for man and animal to encounter one another on the hither side of speech, as if before the naming of the animal and all that this has implied in terms of the long-sanctioned, unquestioned subjection of animals to human authority and control? Certainly this is the import of Derrida’s encounter with his cat (an experience of difference without definition or corresponding identity that provokes the question, “*Who am I?*”). For Derrida, the question of *being-with* animals is not just hypothetical, given the fate of “the animal” since the beginnings of modernity, with its unprecedented “reduction of the animal not only to production and overproduction (hormones, genetic crossbreeding, cloning, and so on) of meat for the consumption but also of all sorts of other end products, and all of that in the service of a certain being and the so-called well-being of man” (*LAN* 46/*ANT* 394). Derrida does not hesitate to speak of genocide: “No one can deny seriously, or for very long, that men do all they can in order to dissimulate this cruelty or hide it from themselves, in order to organize on a global scale the forgetting or misunderstanding of this violence that some would compare to the worst cases of genocide (there are also animal genocides: the number of species endangered because of man takes one’s breath away)” (*LAN* 46/*ANT* 394). Here is the context in which utilitarians cite, as Derrida does, Jeremy Bentham’s famous line: the question of the animal is not whether it can think or speak but whether it can *suffer* (*LAN* 50/*ANT* 396).

It is in the context of this subjection of the animal to the violence of modernity, Derrida says, that we need to consider (or maybe discover for the first time) *the animal that looks at us* (and so makes a claim on us). In part this means starting philosophy (or even Genesis) all over again, rethinking how we figure the border that separates us from other living creatures, which means inventing new words to use when we speak about animals, not to say how we comport ourselves with respect to them.

Here perhaps is where many will grow impatient with Derrida, who seems (at first sight) more interested in how to think than in how to act. For exam-

ple, in contrast to so many animal rights activists, Derrida's idea is not to erase the line that separates us from other living things (as if there were no such things as *differences*) but rather to multiply its dimensions—“*Limitrophy*” Derrida says, “is my subject” (*LAN* 51/*ANT* 397): literally, the *growth* or *pluralization* of limits, as well as of the creatures that are contained in them. The question of the animal, Derrida says, “becomes interesting once, instead of asking whether or not there is a discontinuous limit, one attempts to think what a limit becomes once it is abyssal, once the frontier no longer forms a single indivisible line but more than one internally divided line, once, as a result, it can no longer be traced, objectified, or counted as single and indivisible” (*LAN* 52–53/*ANT* 399). The border is not fixed; it is not formal or logical. Above all, it is not generic but historical, local, and variable and therefore open to exploration and experimentation, which is basically what the word “abyssal” implies.

And this means, first of all (for Derrida at any rate), breaking with the word “Animal,” that is, breaking with the philosophical tradition from Aristotle to Lacan that speaks of the animal in general as a category meant to include “all the living things that man does not recognize as his fellows, his neighbors, or his brothers” (*LAN* 56/*ANT* 402). As a way of crossing out the “Animal” (the way he had once crossed out “Being,” which is what he has always wanted to do with “Man”), Derrida coins the term *l'animot* (with its pun on *l'animaux*)—“a chimerical word that sounded as though it contravened the laws of the French language” (*LAN* 65/*ANT* 409). In the spirit of this neologism Derrida refers us to his “*zootobiography*,” recalling all the many and varied animals that have appeared in his writings, including the lowly silkworm (“I... admit to my old obsession with a personal and somewhat paradisaic bestiary. It came to the fore very early on: the crazy project of constituting everything I have thought or written within a zoosphere, the dream of an absolute hospitality and an infinite appropriation. How to welcome or liberate so many animal-words (*animots*) chez moi?” [*LAN* 60/*ANT* 405]).⁹ Derrida's work is nothing if not *chimerical* in the multiplicity of its animals, and this multiplicity—this invocation of his *philosophical bestiary* to replace a general category—is one of the principal themes of his address (cf. SO 3–65):

[It] is a matter of taking into account a multiplicity of structures and limits. Among non-humans and separate from nonhumans there is an immense multiplicity of other living things that cannot in any way be homogenized, except by means of violence and willful

⁹ See, for example, SO 3–65.

ignorance, within the category of the animal or animality in general. From the outset there are animals and, let's say, *l'animot*. The confusion of all nonhuman living creatures within the general and common category of the animal is not simply a sin against rigorous thinking, vigilance, lucidity, or empirical authority; it is also a crime. Not a crime against animality precisely, but a crime of the first order against the animals, against animals. (*LAN* 73/*ANT* 416)

A “multiplicity of structures and limits”: recall that in “The Ends of Man” Derrida says that, when it comes to *man*, “one must speak several languages and produce several texts at once” (EM 135). The same principle holds when it comes to animals. What Derrida wants is an approach that would preserve the animal-*other* from its incorporation into an anthropocentric homogeneity, but even more particularly, one that would protect it from a reduction to the “animal machine” that Descartes constructed and that continues to inhabit (or to operate in) the writings of Kant and Heidegger, Levinas and Lacan, for each of whom the animal (in general) is consistently defined by its *incapacities*—its inability to do what humans do (speak, reason, mourn, laugh, cry, deceive). The animal, Lacan says, can react (like a computer) but not respond (as a subject). But what does it mean to respond?

Here it is worth noticing how Derrida differs from Martha Nussbaum and her “capabilities approach” to the question of the animal. Aristotle had argued that human beings are endowed with capacities that should be allowed to flourish; it is wrong to prevent people from living lives of which they are capable. The same principle, Nussbaum argues, should be applied to animals: “if [like Aristotle] we feel wonder looking at a complex organism, that wonder at least suggests the idea that it is good for that being to flourish as the kind of thing it is. And this idea is next door to the ethical judgment that it is wrong when the flourishing of a creature is blocked by the harmful agency of another” (BC 306; an expanded version of this essay appears in *FJ* 325–405).

But this leaves open the question of how we are with these creatures. In an essay on “Eating Meat and Eating People,” the philosopher Cora Diamond wonders whether it is enough to figure our relations with other living things in terms of their capacities, whether for suffering or flourishing. Instead, she asks (in a way that seems symmetrical with Derrida's inquiry) what it is for us to single out living things as “fellow creatures.” A “fellow creature,” Diamond emphasizes, is not a biological concept, that is, it cannot be clarified by appealing to *what* a creature is or how it resembles or differs from us, but only by attending to the multifarious ways in which we interact with other creatures, human and otherwise, in our various forms of life (*RS* 328–30). Feeding birds

and squirrels in winter is a recognition of birds and squirrels as fellow creatures; the fattening of turkeys is another matter. The deer hunter who gives his quarry a sporting chance rather than simply poisoning or trapping it like a mouse relates to it as a fellow creature, whatever we may think about hunting. The complexity of the relation appears when we realize that, like the hunter (as opposed to the pest exterminator), we *do* frequently eat our fellow creatures, although we usually do not eat those with whom we live as companions, which is perhaps also the reason we do not, except perhaps under ritual experiences, eat other people. A cow is for eating in a way that a pet dog is not, even as a calf raised by a member of a 4-H club is a different creature from the calf in the stockyard, however biologically the same they may well be. Whatever its ultimate fate, a calf is not regarded as something to eat when it is addressed by name. It seems to me that Derrida is trying to get at this sort plurality and complexity of differences (differences inaccessible to concepts and categories) when he rejects the idea that we are separated from “the animal” by “a single, indivisible, linear, oppositional limit.” In fact we are most concretely joined to animals on occasions that defeat our concepts—occasions on which animals are most uniquely themselves, like Derrida’s “unsubstitutable cat.” And this brings us back to our regulating question.

5. “Who?”

At one point in “L’animal que donc je suis,” Derrida recalls the famous anecdote of the dog in one of the essays in Emmanuel Levinas’ *Difficult Freedom*—the one that concerns the dogs in various texts of Exodus, particularly those dogs of Egypt in 11:7 who, “with neither ethics nor *logos*,” refuse to growl or bark, and so permit the escape of the Israelites from slavery (*DF* 152). As a gloss on this text, Levinas remembers his time in a prisoner-of-war camp during World War II:

There were seventy of us in a forestry commando unit for Jewish prisoners of war in Nazi Germany. An extraordinary coincidence was the fact that the camp bore the number 1492, the year of the expulsion of Jews from Spain under the Catholic Ferdinand V. The French uniform still protected us from Hitlerian violence. But the other men, called free, who had dealings with us or gave us work or orders or even a smile—and the children and women who passed by and sometimes raised their eyes—stripped us of our human skin. We were subhuman, a gang of apes. A small inner murmur, the strength and wretchedness of persecuted people, reminded us of our essence as thinking creatures, but we were no longer part of the world. Our comings and goings, our sorrow and laughter, illnesses and distractions, the work of our hands and the anguish of our eyes, the letters we received from France and

those accepted for our families—all that passed in parentheses. We were beings entrapped in their species, despite all their vocabulary, beings without language. Racism is not a biological concept; anti-Semitism is the archetype of all internment. Social aggression, itself, merely imitates this model. It shuts people away in a class, deprives them of expression and condemns them to being “signifiers without a signified” and from there to violence and fighting. How can we deliver a message about our humanity which, from behind the bars of quotation marks, will come across as anything other than monkey talk?

And then, about halfway through our long captivity, for a few short weeks before sentinels chased him away, a wandering dog entered our lives. One day he came to meet this rabble as we returned under guard from work. He survived in some wild patch in the region of the camp. But we called him Bobby, an exotic name, as one does with a cherished dog. He would appear at morning assembly and was waiting for us as we returned, jumping up and down and barking with delight. For him, there was no doubt that we were human. (*DF* 152–53)

How could one distinguish between *reaction* and *response* in Bobby’s barking? What Derrida likes about this anecdote is that it subverts the fact that Levinas describes Bobby in terms of his deprivations (*LAN* 159–60). “This dog was,” Levinas says, “the last Kantian in Nazi Germany, without the brain needed to universalize maxims and drives” (*DF* 153), that is, someone who, not knowing any better, is ethical in spite of himself (let us say “himself,” since he has been given a proper name). But on what could one base this judgment of the short-fall of Bobby’s brain, his lack of “ethics and *logos*,” especially since, after all, the point of the anecdote is to show how Bobby is more responsive, more *humane*—more ethical if not more human—than the nearby population for whom the prisoners are only so many apes?

Here is the problem Derrida wants us to consider:

It is less a matter of asking whether one has the right to refuse the animal such and such a power (speech, reason, experience of death, mourning, culture, institution, technics, clothing, lie, pretense of pretense, covering of tracks, gift, laughter, tears, respect, and so on—the list is necessarily without limit, and the most powerful philosophical tradition within which we live has refused the “animal” all those things) than of asking whether what calls itself human has the right to rigorously attribute to man, which means therefore to attribute to himself, what he refuses the animal, and whether he can ever possess the *pure, rigorous, indivisible* concept, as such, of that attribute. (*LAN* 185–86/*ANT* 137–38)

In other words, Levinas’ anecdote of the dog, like Derrida’s story of his cat, raises the question, not of “the animal,” but of *who I am* in the moment of my encounter with the animal-*other* (or, for all of that, with myself). *Who am I*, under these circumstances, to attribute abilities (much less an identity) to myself that I refuse to animal-*other*? Indeed, by what right, that is, on what basis do I attribute to myself this or that capacity at all, whether I deny them

to others or not? Can I give a philosophical account—develop a “*pure, rigorous, indivisible*” concept—of *any* of the capabilities, strengths, virtues, or distinctively human features (or identity) that I confer upon myself? (Can I say what *man* is?) Here, of course, we recognize the Derrida who spent his philosophical career questioning and often satirizing the very idea of “*pure, rigorous, indivisible*” concepts, categories, distinctions, or substances of any kind. How else did he become (as indeed he posthumously remains) the Beelzebub that visits analytic philosophers whenever they hear his name?

But, more to the point at hand, what finally *is* the sense of the question, *Who am I?* Recall Blanchot on “the unknown and slippery being of an indefinite ‘Who?’”¹⁰ The *who* is, after all, an *interrogative* pronoun: it presupposes a deficiency, an absence of definition. *Who is it? Who are you? Who, me?* In contrast to the “givenness” of the “I” (the indubitably intrepid *cogito*), the mode of existence of the *who* is just that of being in doubt or in question, being addressed, accused, or called to account. The *who* is at the farthest remove from the grammar and context of the assertion, except perhaps to call it into question (*Who says that animals have no language?*). Likewise, in contrast to the “I,” the *who* is precisely what cannot be conceptualized, that is, made the subject of a theory of the subject. The *who* is the elusive biographic quarry, as if what were *conceptually* irreducible (without identity: I=I) could be captured in a narrative (although in practice mostly under a type: here is what I am like). The *who* is the unknown, the fugitive figure (as in the genre of the *whodunit*, except without promise of resolution). Dumb or stuttering is how I am apt to be struck by the question, “*Who are you?*” There is no ready answer. A response would have to be improvised to fit the circumstances of the demand, not to mention the various emphases and implications that each word of the demand

¹⁰ See Blanchot’s *L’Amitie* (on the peculiar “personless presence” of Bataille’s use of the personal pronoun “I”): “And when we ask ourselves the question, ‘Who was the subject of this experience?’ this question is perhaps already an answer if, even to him who lived it, the experience asserted itself in this interrogative form, by substituting the openness of a ‘Who?’ without answer for the closed and singular ‘I’; not that this means that he had simply to ask himself ‘What is this I that I am?’ but much more radically to recover himself without reprieve, no longer as ‘I’ but as a ‘Who?’, the unknown and slippery being of an indefinite ‘Who?’” This is taken from the essay, “Friendship” in *FR* 291. The question “*Who?*” is “without answer,” Blanchot says, and in his comment on this line in “Eating Well,” Derrida adds that it should remain so: “Something of the call of the other must remain nonreappropriable, nonsubjectivable, and in a certain way non-identifiable, a sheer supposition, so as to remain *other*, a *singular* call to response or responsibility. This is why the determination of the singular “*Who?*”—or at least its determination as subject—still remains problematic. And it *should* remain so. This obligation to protect the other’s otherness is not merely a theoretical imperative” (EW 110–11).

can support: “*Who are you?*” “*Who are you, anyway?*” “*Who do you think you are?*” It is not surprising that question of *who?* is often (frequently) charged with hostility. Not for nothing, Blanchot thought that being forced to speak—to answer—is worse than being kept silent (*IC* 42–43, on the relation of speech and torture).

Likewise in *A Taste for the Secret* Derrida affirms the absolute right not to answer, which is perhaps related to the law of hospitality, which holds that the stranger who arrives at your door is not to be treated with hostility but is to be welcomed without having to meet any conditions of identity—in other words, without having to answer: “Who are you?” (*TS* 26–27; compare Derrida, “Passions,” *ON* 17). Under conditions of hospitality, the deficiency of the *who* does not have to be made up, perhaps not even by the confession of one’s proper name (*HOS* 7–8). For Derrida this deficiency should not and, indeed, cannot be made up in any case (this seems to be the gist of the epigraph to this essay: “It is clear that the *who* withdraws from or provokes the displacement of the categories in which biography, autobiography, and memoirs are thought.”). To the question “Who am I?” there is no answer, for the simple reason that I am as much an other to myself as I am to my neighbor or to my host or, for all of that, to my cat. This in fact seems to be the regulating theme of Derrida’s autobiographical writings, *Circonfession* and *Monolinguisism of the Other*, which concern his own precarious or disordered “identity” as an Algerian Jew or Franco-Maghrebian whose love of the French language cannot conceal the fact that French is not his language, that he has no language, and that he is therefore in no position to say “I,” except perhaps by way of a complex evasion that would be impossible for anyone to follow:

If, for example, I dream of writing an anamnesis of what enabled me to identify myself or say *I* from the depths of amnesia and aphasia, I know, by the same token, that I can do it only by opening up an impossible path, leaving the road, escaping, giving myself the slip, inventing a language different enough to disallow its own *reappropriation* within the norms, the body, and the law of the given language—or by all the normative schemas constituted by programs of a grammar, a lexicon, a semantics, a rhetoric, speech genres or literary forms, stereotypes or cultural clichés (the most authoritarian of which remain mechanisms of avant-gardist reproducibility, and the indefatigable regeneration of the literary superego). (*MO* 66)

“Who am I?” Derrida asks himself this question, in the face of his cat, “just to see” if there might be an answer—or, more accurately, “just to see” what might come of it, for the question “*who?*” does not so much ask for an answer as propose the itinerary of an “impossible path,” an escape (“giving myself the

slip”) that would avoid absorption into an identity-machine, and so perhaps relieve that original *malséance* of his self-relation (an amnesia of a kind) provoked by the eyes or mirror of his cat.

A final word on giving oneself the slip: the deficiency of the *who* is not a negative—not a deprivation but a kind of privacy that it is always criminal to invade or expose and whose preferred figure of speech would be circumlocution (*circonfession*). Imagine the *who* as a singularity that cannot be captured by “the norms, the body, and the law of a given,” including that of the signature, whose proper name is an appropriation of the sort that Derrida wants precisely to elude. Derrida has always inhabited Maurice Blanchot’s neighborhood, where anonymity and discretion allow one to keep one’s distance (that is, maintain one’s freedom). In any event, whether in search or in flight, one is always “after” the *who*, including no doubt the *who* of one’s cat. One can perhaps understand now why Derrida did not tell us his cat’s name.

Abbreviations

- AME Michel Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley et al., vol. 2 of *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984* (New York: The New Press, 1998).
- ANT Jacques Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am,” trans. David Wills, *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 4 (2002): 369–418.
- AS ———. “And Say the Animal Responded?,” trans. David Wills in *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal*, ed. Cary Wolfe (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 121–46.
- BC Martha Nussbaum, “Beyond Compassion and Humanity: Justice for Non-Human Animals,” in *Animal Rights: Current Debates and New Directions*, ed. Martha Nussbaum and Cass Sunstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 299–324.
- BN Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966).
- DF Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).
- DI Matthew Calarco, “Deconstruction Is Not Vegetarianism: Humanism, Subjectivity, and Animal Ethics,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 37, no. 2 (2004): 175–201.
- EC Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977). Originally published as *Ecrits I* and *Ecrits II* (Paris: Les Editions du Seuil, 1971).

- EM Jacques Derrida, “The Ends of Man,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).
- EW ———. “‘Eating Well,’ or the Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida,” in *Who Comes After the Subject?*, ed. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, Jean-Luc Nancy (London: Routledge, 1991), 96–119.
- FJ Martha Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, and Species Membership* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).
- FR Jacques Derrida, *Friendship*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).
- GAP *The Great Apes Project: Equality Beyond Humanity*, ed. Paola Cavalieri and Peter Singer (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1993).
- GII Jacques Derrida, “*Geschlecht* II: Heidegger’s Hand,” trans. John P. Leavey, in *Deconstruction and Philosophy*, ed. John Sallis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 161–96.
- HA Stuart Elden, “Heidegger’s Animals,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 39 (2006): 273–91.
- HOS Jacques Derrida, “Hostipitality,” trans. Barry Stocker and Forbes Morlock, *Angelaki* 5, no. 3 (2000): 3–18.
- HS Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).
- IC Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
- IE Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998).
- IH Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron. (London: Verso, 1993).
- LAN Jacques Derrida, *L’animal que donc je suis*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet (Paris: Galilée, 2006).
- LD Herman Rapaport, *The Later Derrida: Reading the Recent Work* (London: Routledge, 2003).
- MO Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other; Or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).
- ON ———. *On the Name*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).
- OT Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970).

- PTL Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Philosophy Through the Looking Glass: Language, Nonsense, Desire* (LaSalle: Open Court Press, 1985).
- RS Cora Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).
- SO Jacques Derrida, “A Silkworm of One’s Own,” trans. Geoffrey Bennington, *Oxford Literary Review* 18, nos. 1–2 (1997): 3–65.
- SP Rainer-Maria Rilke, *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage Books, 1982).
- TS Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*, trans. Giacomo Donis (London: Polity Press, 2001).
- WD Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).
- WT Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper & Row, 1968).

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- . *Of Hospitality*. Translated by Rachel Bowlby. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000.
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