



Sexual Difference, Animal Difference: Derrida and Difference “Worthy of its Name”

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I challenge the age-old binary opposition between human and animal, not as philosophers sometimes do by claiming that humans are also animals, or that animals are capable of suffering or intelligence, but rather by questioning the very category of “the animal” itself. This category groups a nearly infinite variety of living beings into one concept measured in terms of humans—animals are those creatures that are not human. In addition, I argue that the binary opposition between human and animal is intimately linked to the binary opposition between man and woman. Furthermore, I suggest that thinking through animal differences or differences among various living creatures opens up the possibility of thinking beyond the dualist notion of sexual difference and enables thinking toward a multiplicity of sexual differences.

Reading the history of philosophy, feminists have pointed out that “female,” “woman,” and “femininity” often fall on the side of the animal in the human–animal divide, as the frequent generic use of the word “man” suggests. From Plato through Hegel, Freud and beyond, women have been associated with Nature and instincts to procreate, which place them in the vicinity of the animal realm. We could say that since woman’s alliance with the serpent in Genesis, Judeo-Christian traditions have remained suspicious of woman’s proximity to animals.

In this essay, following Derrida’s first posthumously published book *L’animal que donc je suis* (*The Animal That Therefore I Am [More to Follow]*) (Derrida 2006), I want to take a different tack in tracing the origin of what is sometimes called “the war between the sexes.” Rather than try to separate woman from animal and align her with the other side of the divide, whether it is man or

Hypatia vol. 24, no. 2 (Spring, 2009) © by Kelly Oliver

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1 human, I will explore sexual difference from the side of animal difference. In
2 other words, rather than try to introduce sexual difference into the history of
3 philosophy or Western intellectual and cultural traditions by insisting on split-
4 ting man or human into two sexes as some feminist thinkers have done, I will
5 suggest thinking beyond the category “animal” to multitudes of various ani-
6 mals. I question the age-old binary opposition between human and animal, not
7 as philosophers sometimes do by claiming that humans are also animals, or that
8 animals are capable of suffering or intelligence, but rather by questioning the
9 very category of “the animal” itself. This category groups a nearly infinite vari-
10 ety of living beings into one concept measured in terms of humans—animals
11 are those creatures that are not human; other than being self-motivating life-
12 forms, morphologically and behaviorally, they may have little else in common.
13 By exploding the general category “animal” and thereby opening thought to
14 various animals no longer subsumed by this overly general category, we may
15 also explode the other pole of the binary, namely human. If animals are infi-
16 nitely more diverse than the binary opposition human—animal suggests, then
17 perhaps “human” is also more diverse than the binary allows. In this essay, I am
18 particularly concerned with the sexual difference of “man.” By considering the
19 multitudes of animal sexes, sexualities, and reproductive practices, perhaps we
20 can expand our ways of thinking about the sexes, sexualities, and reproductive
21 practices of “man.”

22 This project, then, is a thought experiment of sorts with pedagogical effects
23 that may help us to think beyond the sexual binary man—woman. My argument
24 is based on the following premises: first, the human—animal binary erases differ-
25 ences among vast varieties of living creatures and among vast varieties of
26 human cultures and individuals; second, within Judeo-Christian myths and
27 philosophies the binary opposition between human and animal is intimately
28 linked to the binary opposition between man and woman; third, if we move
29 beyond the overly general concept “animal” to considerations of multiple spe-
30 cies and even individuals, then we might be able to move beyond the concept
31 “human” to considerations of cultural and individual differences; fourth, in
32 terms sexual difference specifically, if we consider various sexes, sexualities, and
33 reproductive practices of animals, we might be able to reconsider sexes, sexu-
34 alities, and reproductive practices of humans beyond the tight binary man—
35 woman or homosexual—heterosexual. My thesis, then, is that the binary oppo-
36 sitions human—animal and man—woman are intimately linked such that
37 exploding the first has consequences for the second. Furthermore, my aim is
38 to open the conceptual landscape onto differences erased by these traditional
39 binary oppositions. To this end, I may invoke examples of the sexual practices
40 of worms or ants or monkeys, not in order to suggest that humans are physically
41 like these creatures or vice versa, but rather to challenge the conceptual frame-
42 work that restricts us to thinking in binary terms that limit concepts to pairs,

1 especially since these pairs so easily become oppositions, hierarchies, or wars.
 2 The argument, then, is that by changing the way that we conceive of one concept
 3 in a traditional binary, we also change the way that we conceive of the
 4 other. So, by changing the way that we conceive of the animal, we change the
 5 way that we conceive of the human; and by changing the way that we conceive
 6 of man, we change the way that we conceive of woman. Furthermore, insofar as
 7 the histories of these binaries are essentially linked, by changing the relation
 8 between the two terms of the first, we change the relations between the two
 9 terms of the second. Indeed, a broader goal of this project is to move beyond
 10 thinking in pairs or in terms of two in order to move to thinking in terms of real
 11 diversity. A true ethics of difference requires moving beyond the couple toward
 12 multitudes of differences.

13 The hope is that thinking through animal differences or differences among
 14 various living creatures opens up the possibility of thinking beyond the dualist
 15 notion of sexual difference so ingrained in our culture and enables thinking
 16 toward a multiplicity of sexual differences. In turn, dismantling the concept of
 17 “animal” not only opens up nearly infinite multitudes of differences among
 18 living creatures, but also opens up differences on the other side of the human-
 19 animal divide to nearly infinite multitudes of differences among human beings.
 20 Differences among animals can help us to see differences among men (sic), not
 21 only obvious cultural differences, but perhaps not so obvious multitudes of sexual
 22 differences. In this sense, then, this is a pedagogical project in which
 23 animals might teach us something about our own possibilities, possibilities for
 24 thinking differently about sex, sexuality, and reproductive practices (and the
 25 relations among them).

26 I have chosen to stage my argument through an engagement with Jacques
 27 Derrida’s first posthumously published book, *L’animal que donc je suis*, for two
 28 reasons. First, Derrida’s analysis of the history of philosophy on the question of
 29 the animal is provocative, insightful, and challenges us to think beyond dual-
 30 isms. Second, my hope is that this essay will be a contribution to Derrida studies
 31 that opens up new ways of reading this work in relation to his earlier work, par-
 32 ticularly in terms of sexual difference. Derrida’s philosophy can help us to
 33 rethink our conceptions of difference in general and sexual difference in particu-
 34 lar. Throughout his work, he is concerned to “deconstruct” binary oppositions
 35 in order to open up philosophy and thought to multiplicity. This is why in his
 36 engagement with various philosophers, he challenges theories and rhetorics that
 37 reduce all difference to one, two, or dialectical relations among three terms.
 38 Finding resources within the history of philosophy itself, he challenges the
 39 philosophical tendency to reduce and fix into manageable systems and categories
 40 that erase or disavow multiple differences. In this regard, the subtle movements
 41 of his thought toward multiplicity and away from dogmatic fixity can benefit this
 42 project of rethinking sexual differences beyond binary oppositions.

1 In addition to arguing that the differences among animals have pedagogical
 2 value for thinking about the differences among “men,” I present a pedagogical
 3 reading of Derrida with an eye to what his writings can teach us about sexual
 4 difference. The hope is that this analysis can shed new light on aspects of Derrida’s
 5 thought that remain cryptic, if suggestive. Moreover, by putting his latest
 6 work in the context of some of his earlier work, an evolution of thought may
 7 emerge. By taking on some of the most problematic aspects of his latest work,
 8 namely his insistence on “pure” concepts (such as hospitality, forgiveness, and
 9 gifts) “worthy of their names,” hopefully this essay can provide a useful inter-
 10 pretation of these notions (*pure, worthy of its name*) that remain puzzling and
 11 unexplained in Derrida’s own work. Finally, by applying Derrida’s theory of the
 12 pure concept worthy of its name to the concept of difference—something that
 13 Derrida never does himself—I attempt to open up the concept of difference
 14 itself onto multiple differences. This is how my reading of Derrida works in the
 15 service of my broader thesis about animal difference(s) and sexual difference(s).

18 DERRIDA’S FLIRTATION WITH PHILOSOPHY ON THE QUESTION OF SEX

20 To set the stage for my investigation into Derrida’s latest work, in which he
 21 identifies a connection between animal and sexual difference, I look back to
 22 some texts where he takes up the question of sexual difference head-on, or as he
 23 might say, “frontally.” The issue of sexual difference is a recurring theme
 24 throughout his work. Notably, Derrida’s “deconstruction” of various philoso-
 25 phers, including Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, often revolve around the
 26 erasure or negation of sexual difference in their writings. For example, in *Glas*,
 27 Derrida challenges Hegel’s dialectical logic, which operates through the famous
 28 triple movement from position to negation to overcoming and preserving the
 29 negative moment in the final synthesis; by demonstrating that when applied to
 30 sexual difference, the dialectical method makes woman the mere negation of
 31 man, a moment necessarily overcome by the final movement of the dialectic,
 32 which reasserts the privilege of man, Derrida calls into question Hegel’s entire
 33 dialectical logic.¹ In his readings of Heidegger, Derrida challenges what he sees
 34 as a second traditional tactic with regard to sexual difference, neutralization or
 35 erasure; *Dasein* is sexually neuter, and as Derrida points out, Heidegger avoids
 36 talking about sexual difference, even when confronted with it in the texts upon
 37 which he comments (for example, Nietzsche’s).² If Hegel negates sexual differ-
 38 ence and turns woman into man’s opposite, Heidegger erases sexual difference
 39 by conceiving of a neutered or neutral *Dasein*. Derrida suggests that the onto-
 40 logical-ontic distinction that grounds Heidegger’s thinking can be maintained
 41 only through the erasure of sexual difference; and once Derrida resexualizes
 42 these texts, they can no longer maintain their centrifugal force.

Derrida's deconstructive method, as it has come to be called, works by using resources from the history of philosophy in order to criticize or challenge that very history; he questions philosophers for erasing or disavowing sexual difference (and other types of differences) at the same time that he finds some resources in philosophy for rethinking sexual difference outside of the oppositional binary man–woman. For example, in Heidegger's privileging of ontological difference over sexual difference, Derrida sees another, subtler stance on the issue of the difference between the sexes. Derrida argues that on close reading, what Heidegger erases is not sexuality or even sexual difference *per se*, but rather sexual difference conceived in terms of opposition (see Derrida 1987, 1991). In other words, what Heidegger rejects is the tradition of turning difference into opposition, precisely the tradition that makes sexual difference into a war between the sexes.

Derrida's project throughout his writings is to imagine difference differently such that this too often deadly dualism explodes into a multiplication of differences, or difference "worthy of its name" that does not settle into two warring opposites.³ Derrida asks: "How did difference get deposited into the two? Or again, if one insisted on consigning difference within dual opposition, how does multiplication get arrested in difference? And in sexual difference?" (1991, 401). Derrida's analysis raises many more questions: Why are other types of difference unremarked? Why is sexual difference marked and then reduced to a binary or primary difference between two? How does difference in general, and sexual difference in particular, become conceived as opposition or war? How can we open the field to multiple differences and unlock the stranglehold of two warring opponents? In the section that follows, I will try to show that Derrida's latest work suggests, at least implicitly, that looking to the binary human–animal may hold answers to some of these questions.

DIFFERENCE "WORTHY OF ITS NAME," OR UNREMARKED DIFFERENCE

Before we turn back to the human–animal opposition, it will be helpful to continue to explore some of Derrida's comments on sexual difference, starting with the relation between marked or remarked difference and what he calls the "gift," which I will explain momentarily. In terms of sexual difference, Derrida insists that ultimately its marking and remarking must remain fluid. In other words, the metaphysical question "what is it?" can be answered always only precariously and provisionally. He argues that in order to challenge the "notion of male firstness" of Western metaphysics, it is necessary to leave open all categories of sexual demarcation (compare Derrida 1991, 445); otherwise, we cannot escape the binary opposition in which either the male or the female must take priority and dominate over the other. The very marking of difference—the answer to the question "what is it?"—must be open to constant

1 remarking, which means that on the level of metaphysics (and therefore also
 2 on the levels of ethics and politics), it remains ultimately “undecidable”; we
 3 cannot know for certain the correct answer to the question “what is it?”; rather
 4 we can always only speculate given the cultural tools available to us.

5 Derrida’s work suggests that considering metaphysical questions ultimately
 6 undecidable has the practical effect of making us continually reevaluate what
 7 we know and how we act. So, while the realms of politics and even ethics may
 8 require that we make decisions based on what we believe or imagine things to
 9 “be,” we must be ready to revise not only those decisions but also what we
 10 believe and imagine. In this way, although undecidability is not synonymous
 11 with multiplicity, making it an operative principle gives rise to multiplicity be-
 12 yond binary oppositions.⁴

13 In his later work, Derrida moves from insisting on undecidability to what he
 14 calls “hyperbolic ethics,” which is motivated by what he calls “pure” concepts
 15 such as the gift, hospitality, forgiveness, and democracy, concepts whose mean-
 16 ing and value are infinitely deferred into some (im)possible future that we
 17 imagine will be better (more ethical) than the past, what Derrida calls “de-
 18 mocracy to come.”⁵ This future meaning is related to past meanings in all of
 19 their heterogeneity, which any careful etymology will help reveal. The differ-
 20 ences at the heart of the word “difference” itself are instructive for how future
 21 conceptions of difference might be informed by multiple meanings that have
 22 been left behind to facilitate fixing difference into binary oppositions. Perhaps
 23 this is why, when discussing the concept of “woman” and “femininity” in
 24 “Choreographies,” Derrida says “Such recognition [of phallogocentrism or the
 25 complicity of Western metaphysics with a notion of male firstness] should not
 26 make of either the truth value or femininity an object of knowledge (at stake
 27 are the norms of knowledge and knowledge as norm); still less should it make of
 28 them a place to inhabit, a home. It should rather permit the invention of an
 29 other inscription, one very old and very new, a displacement of bodies and
 30 places that is quite different” (1991, 445).⁶ Like Heidegger and Nietzsche be-
 31 fore him, Derrida looks to past meanings of words in order to open up
 32 alternative futures for concepts of giving, hospitality, forgiveness, democracy,
 33 and most importantly for my purposes here, difference itself.

34 Although Derrida does not do so explicitly, it will be instructive to apply his
 35 analysis of the gift (hospitality, forgiveness, and so on) to difference, specifically
 36 to sexual difference. Throughout his work, Derrida maintains that the gift—a
 37 true or pure gift—cannot be given out of duty or from expectations; it cannot
 38 be given from a position of sovereignty within an economy of exchange.⁷ As he
 39 describes it, then, what we usually think of as gifts are “contaminated” forms of
 40 true or pure giving, which cannot even be identified as such without falling
 41 into ruin as gift.⁸ He makes the same moves with hospitality and forgiveness. A
 42 *pure* hospitality or a *pure* forgiveness must be given without any expectations

1 for reciprocation, outside of any sort of economy of exchange—monetary, in
 2 kind, psychological, or otherwise—and without being “contaminated” by notions
 3 of sovereignty that turn giving, hospitality, or forgiveness into narcissistic
 4 power-plays—“I am in a position to give this to you,” and so forth. It seems that
 5 Derrida uses the notions of pure gift, hospitality, and forgiveness in order to
 6 invoke the quality of deferral inherent in these notions; in other words, as Levinas
 7 might say, there is always one more gift, invitation, or olive-branch, to
 8 give. In addition to the qualification “pure,” he frequently uses the phrase
 9 “worthy of its name,” as in hospitality or forgiveness “worthy of its name.” This
 10 phrase adds both the dimension of value, dignity, or ethics—worthy—and the
 11 dimension of the name or word itself. Given that Derrida is fond of multiplying
 12 the meaning of words, demonstrating their heterogeneous etymologies, and
 13 exploiting meanings that seem at odds with one another, this idiomatic expression—
 14 “worthy of its name”—casts a strange shadow on his hyperbolic
 15 ethics.⁹

16 Since my interest is in how this hyperbolic ethics of pure concepts “worthy
 17 of their names” plays out in terms of sexual difference, I can only begin to
 18 scratch at the surface of Derrida’s writings on these profound issues. But consider
 19 what it could mean to think along Derridian lines about the concept of
 20 difference itself; what would it mean to imagine a *pure* difference, one *worthy of*
 21 *its name*? This question may seem odd, even out of place, in relation to Derrida’s
 22 project until we consider that the erasure or negation of radical—we could say
 23 *pure*—difference or alterity is precisely the operation that “contaminates” our
 24 everyday forms of gift-giving, hospitality, and forgiveness. In several places
 25 Derrida explicitly discusses sexual difference in terms of the gift. For example,
 26 in “Women in the Beehive,” he says:

27 If the gift is calculated, if you know what you are going to give to
 28 whom, if you know what you want to give, for what reason, to
 29 whom, in view of what, etc. there is no longer any gift. . . .
 30 When we speak here of sexual difference, we must distinguish
 31 between opposition and difference. Opposition is two, opposition
 32 is man/woman. Difference, on the other hand, can be an
 33 indefinite number of sexes and once there is sexual difference in
 34 its classical sense—an opposition of two—the arrangement is
 35 such that the gift is impossible. All that you can call “gift”—
 36 love, *jouissance*—is absolutely forbidden, is forbidden by the
 37 dual opposition. . . . This does not mean that there is the gift
 38 only beyond sexuality but that the gift is beyond sexual duality.
 39 (1990, 123)

40
 41 From this passage, we learn that the gift cannot be calculated, self-conscious,
 42 represented, marked, or remarked. Love and joy, like the gift or as forms of gifts,

are also beyond any economy of exchange, including symbolic exchange or language. Let's leave aside for the moment that this radical ethical "idealism" seems to set up an opposition between two realms, the realm of infinite gift or responsibility, of pure concepts, and the realm of finite exchange, or contaminated actions.¹⁰ Instead, as a thought experiment of sorts, let's follow the Derridian question what is *pure* difference, *worthy of its name*? It would have to be a difference that cannot be calculated, self-conscious, represented, marked, or remarked. In fact, it is the marking of sexual difference as two that leads Derrida to argue that binary or oppositional sexual difference is not true difference, but rather the erasure or negation of one in favor of the other.

Derrida is not taking an Irigarayan path that would insist on the binary, the two, only without the opposition, erasure, or negation.¹¹ Irigaray argues that we have never actually had two because the "second sex" has always been subsumed into the one masculine sex, and therefore the fundamental project of our age is to think sexual difference as two (1985a). Derrida, on the other hand, suggests that once we split sexuality or sex into two, we are already stuck at the level of a fixed binary that does not allow for multiplicity. Indeed, fixing any number of calculable differences would have a similar effect, although binaries more easily turn into oppositions or dialectics of negation, for example, man and not-man. A marked difference becomes a calculable, self-conscious, and exchangeable difference that undermines the possibility of any true encounter with another—what Derrida also calls an event (for example, see Derrida 2005, 148). If this is the case, then it seems that only an unremarked difference leaves open the possibility of the gift, or hospitality or forgiveness, or "pure" difference, "worthy of its name."

Derrida argues as much when speaking of various figures of unconditionality without sovereignty. In *Rogues*, for example, he describes the pure concept worthy of its name: "A gift without calculable exchange, a gift worthy of its name, would not even appear as such to the donor or donee without the risk of reconstituting, through phenomenality and thus through its phenomenology, a circle of economic reappropriation that would just as soon annul its event" (2005, 149). He applies the same analysis to hospitality and forgiveness. If we apply it to difference, the result is that we necessarily imagine a difference that would not appear as such, an unremarked difference.¹² In terms of sexual difference, most obviously this would mean that we cannot reduce sexual difference to anatomical differences or to genitalia; but more than this, it means that physical or phenomenal differences remain unidentified in terms of sexual difference. What makes a difference to sexual difference remains an open question. Moreover, sexual difference necessarily gives rise to sexual differences where any binary identification becomes impossible to maintain. Sexual marks are no longer seen as the property of any individual or group.

1 Rather, as Derrida describes it in “Choreographies,” we have a mobile of non-
 2 identified sexual marks. There, he asks

3
 4 what if we were to reach . . . the area of a relationship to the
 5 other where the code of sexual marks would no longer be dis-
 6 criminating? The relationship would not be a-sexual, far from it,
 7 but would be sexual otherwise: beyond the binary difference
 8 that governs the decorum of all codes, beyond the opposition
 9 feminine-masculine, beyond bi-sexuality as well, beyond homo-
 10 sexuality and heterosexuality, which come to the same thing.
 11 As I dream of saving the chance that this question offers I would
 12 like to believe in the multiplicity of sexually marked voices. I
 13 would like to believe in the masses, this indeterminable number
 14 of blended voices, this mobile of nonidentified sexual marks
 15 whose choreography can carry, divide, multiply the body of
 16 each “individual,” whether he be classified as “man” or
 17 “woman” according to the criteria of usage. (1991, 455)

18 On the practical level, this way of thinking about difference presents us with
 19 twin problems: 1. being able to distinguish one individual or group from an-
 20 other, and 2. being able to identify individuals with one another. Both these
 21 operations—differentiation and identification/generalization—are necessary to
 22 language systems. On the conceptual level, they should leave us wondering
 23 how we distinguish unremarked difference from the erasure, disavowal, or ne-
 24 gation of difference typical of Western philosophy. By insisting on unremarked
 25 or unmarked sexual difference, don't we risk disavowing sexual difference al-
 26 together? It might be helpful to consider that in *Rogues*, Derrida describes his
 27 insistence on the unconditionality of the incalculable as a useful lexicon that
 28 serves a pedagogical purpose in relation to traditional Western thought (2005,
 29 148). There, he also suggests that this lexicon could one day be replaced by
 30 another that will “help us to say better what still remains to be said about these
 31 metonymic figures of the unconditional” (148). He also insists that “only an
 32 unconditional hospitality can give meaning and practical rationality to a con-
 33 cept of hospitality” (149). The notions of the “unconditional,” the “pure,” the
 34 “incalculable,” the concept “worthy of its name,” teach us that our practical
 35 applications are always conditioned by social and political economies that dis-
 36 avow and marginalize even when they embrace differences; in other words, we
 37 cannot always easily distinguish giving from taking. They also teach us that
 38 hyperbolic ethics demands that we continue to measure our everyday practices
 39 in terms of these immeasurable conceptions of gift, hospitality, forgiveness, and
 40 difference. If we do not hold ourselves to this impossible and infinitely deferred
 41 “standard,” we risk the dogmatism and fixity of ideology that often leads to war
 42 and violence. It is this hyperbolic aspect of unconditional ethics that makes it

1 pedagogical; our ethical ideal is like a hyperbola that necessarily remains out of
 2 reach and for this very reason can continue to guide our actions.¹³

3 The implications of what Derrida describes as hyperbolic ethics for conceiv-
 4 ing of an ethics of difference are immense. First, an ethics of difference cannot
 5 be fixed into a set system of discernible characteristics. Rather, what counts as
 6 different or distinct must remain an open question. Second, for this reason, an
 7 ethics of difference cannot begin with the binary, nor can it begin with one or
 8 three, other numbers favored by philosophers. The binary, however, is espe-
 9 cially prone to becoming opposition because it easily leads to giving priority to
 10 one pole of the binary over the other; the history of philosophy bears this out
 11 insofar as dualisms and binaries of all sorts have become hierarchies that priv-
 12 ilege one over the other. In terms of sexual difference, thinking of difference as
 13 an open rather than closed system means imagining the possibilities of multiple
 14 sexes, sexualities, and even multiple reproductive practices.

15 If we begin to ask why one characteristic determines the difference between
 16 beings, and furthermore how that characteristic becomes privileged, the flood-
 17 gate may open onto all sorts of other differences that could come into play in
 18 sexual difference. Certainly, advances in reproductive technologies, along with
 19 research on intersex infants and the regime of male–female binaries in medical
 20 science indicate that our multifarious realities do not easily fit into the model of
 21 the heterosexual couple defined as one man and one woman. In addition, al-
 22 ternative sexualities articulated through transgender and transsexuality
 23 movements suggest that real bodies are already breaking out of the clastro-
 24 phobic categories male–female or man–woman.¹⁴ My argument is that
 25 challenging the human–animal binary from the side of the animal can help to
 26 explode the man–woman binary. Perhaps then our changing conceptual life
 27 can begin to catch up to our changing embodied life as diverse beings living
 28 among infinite variation in multitudes of creatures.

30 ANIMAL PEDAGOGY

31 Although it may not be obvious at first, Derrida’s latest work on *the animal* also
 32 has a pedagogical dimension, particularly in relation to multiplying sexual
 33 differences. One of the central arguments of *L’animal que donc je suis* is that the
 34 concept or name *animal* is an abomination, a “chimera,” because it defines all
 35 living creatures in relation to humans—animals are those creatures that are not
 36 human. In so doing, it erases vast, even infinite, differences among species and
 37 individuals. The concept “animal” operates as the negation of “human” such
 38 that the negation of that negation—we are not mere animals—quickly leads to
 39 the notion that human beings are superior to animals. All animals are defined
 40 by virtue of their relation with humans, who stand opposed to “the animal” as
 41 the superior term of the human–animal binary. Some of those creatures we call
 42

1 animals, however, have more in common with human beings than they do
 2 with other animals; and taken as a whole, what we call the “animal kingdom” is
 3 populated with creatures that overall may have less rather than more in com-
 4 mon. Derrida’s criticisms revolve around various philosophers’ use of “the
 5 animal,” with the definitive article and singular noun that brands or marks
 6 all animals as one, and moreover marks them as opposed to humans. Within
 7 these philosophies, it is against this animal “other” that humans set themselves
 8 apart as human (and against woman that he sets himself apart as man). More-
 9 over, the two binaries human–animal and man–woman are intimately
 10 connected in the history of Judeo-Christian thought; I will return to this claim
 11 momentarily.

12 As we have seen, in remarks on sexual difference in “Choreographies” and
 13 elsewhere, Derrida not only challenges traditional philosophies that negate or
 14 erase the feminine, but also points to places where philosophers open up the
 15 possibility of thinking sexual difference otherwise. It turns out, however, that
 16 their limited attempts to acknowledge sexual difference continues to be based
 17 on an absolute limit between human and animal that perpetuates oppositional
 18 thinking that either negates or erases animal difference(s). When they do not
 19 set up man against woman, they set up man against animal. In other words, if
 20 woman does not serve as man’s other in these myths of origin, then the animal
 21 does. Here again, Derrida uses the resources of philosophy against itself. He
 22 finds in those very philosophers who might be seen to open up philosophy to its
 23 “others” a counter-movement that continually forecloses the very possibilities
 24 for openness. In terms of sexual difference and animal difference, one is played
 25 off against the other such that opening one is premised precisely on closing the
 26 other. In this regard, we might say that philosophy is taking two steps forward
 27 and one step back. So while we may follow its lead up to a point, we must also
 28 be aware that philosophy’s can be a dangerous dance.

29 For example, recall Derrida’s suggestion that Heidegger’s neuter *Dasein* is
 30 presented as an antidote to thinking of sexual difference in oppositional terms.
 31 Heidegger posits that *Dasein* is before any binary opposition; Derrida argues
 32 that he places “an absolute oppositional limit” between *Dasein* and animals,
 33 which, like all oppositions, “effaces the differences and leads back, following
 34 the most resistant metaphysico-dialectic tradition, to the homogeneous”
 35 (1987, 173–74). *Dasein* is not just different from other animals; it is ontolog-
 36 ically different, specifically because it has hands for taking and giving. Derrida
 37 concludes: “Man’s hand then will be a thing apart not as separable organ but
 38 because it is different, dissimilar from all prehensile organs (paws, claws, tal-
 39 ons); man’s hand is far from these in an infinite way through the abyss of being”
 40 (1987, 174). The difference is not a mere ontic difference but rather an onto-
 41 logical one. The very distinction between ontic and ontological, however,
 42 which is foundational to Heidegger’s thought, is presupposed and supported by

beyond the binary logic of man–woman or human–animal such that we can acknowledge multiple differences on both sides of the dash?

NAMING THE ANIMALS, OR THE FALL BEFORE THE FALL

Like Levinas, in *L'animal*, Derrida also returns to the Genesis myth of creation, but his concern is with man's naming the animals. Derrida argues that in the first version of the two creation stories in Genesis, Adam, who is not yet gendered and whose rib is not yet taken to make woman, does not name the animals. It is in the second version of the creation myth that Adam both names the animals and is given woman as his companion. It is noteworthy that Adam needs a companion only because none of the other animals provides him with company or a proper mate—they are not good enough for him.¹⁵ His sovereignty and dominion over the animals leaves him lonely and with no companion worthy of his stature among the animals. Derrida associates both Adam's sovereignty and his loneliness with his "God-given" right to name the animals, through which he lords over them. It is also noteworthy (something Derrida does not point out), that in this second version of the story, Adam names woman *in the same way* that he names other animals; indeed, he names her twice, first he calls her "woman," and after they eat from the tree of knowledge, he calls her "Eve" (see Genesis 2:23 and 3:20). His right to name her is evidence of his dominion over her, akin to his dominion over animals.

Derrida argues that the naming of animals, particularly the word or name *animal* itself, is a type of Fall before the Fall. He calls it a "contretemps," a notion that plays on both a sense of embarrassment and of a time between or before time. He suggests that naming marks and thereby produces both animal difference and sexual difference; the marking and remarking of these differences is precisely the forbidden knowledge that leads to Adam and Eve's expulsion from paradise. If this is the case, however, then there is a kind of Fall before the Fall in that naming marks the knowledge of man's difference, particularly his nakedness, which not only distinguishes him from the animals but also makes him aware of his sex and of his anatomical differences from woman. In other words, it sets up the possibility of the serpent leading both man and woman to the knowledge that they are naked in a way that other animals are not, that to be naked in this way is to be ashamed, and in particular that they are different in terms of their genitalia, which they feel compelled to cover with aprons made from fig leaves (see Genesis 3:7). Both animal and sexual difference arrive at the same time as shame, heralded first by the sovereign operation of naming and next by the serpent. Man learns that unlike other animals, he marks and remarks his territory with words or names. Moreover, an animal, the snake, "teaches" man that he is distinct from other animals and from woman. This knowledge of his difference ushers in everything that we associate with

1 humanity, from clothing and culture to time itself. Thus, within the Judeo-
 2 Christian tradition, animal difference and sexual difference are intimately
 3 associated from the beginning of time.
 4

6 DERRIDA'S PUSSYCAT

7 Derrida exploits the connection between animal difference and sexual differ-
 8 ence throughout *L'animal*, most notably in the scene with his pussycat, which
 9 he remarks is a female cat, and in front of which he is ashamed of being naked.
 10 This scene marks a complicated maneuver within Derrida's thinking about *the*
 11 *animal*. First, he describes a kind of face-to-face encounter with an animal—a
 12 cat—that he says is looking at his naked sex. Next, he inscribes this event with
 13 sexuality and sexual difference, which he claims has been denied to animals.
 14 Not only is he rebuking animal difference, but he is also rebuking sexual differ-
 15 ence (although in the problematic way of attributing it now to a cat rather than
 16 to a woman). He describes the shame he feels in front of his female cat, which
 17 shatters assumptions about the binaries human–animal and man–woman. He
 18 plays on this notion of shame as one distinctive mark of humanity, since only
 19 humans are ashamed of being nude. In this case, though, he is ashamed in front
 20 of a cat, to which he attributes a gaze that not only makes him aware of his
 21 nudity and of his sex (like the snake in Genesis did with Adam), but that also
 22 makes him ashamed of the word *animal* insofar as it separates humans from all
 23 other creatures, whose differences are thereby denied. He further complicates
 24 the issue of sexual difference by calling the cat a “chat-chatte” (for example, in
 25 Derrida 2006, 30); a neologism that is translated as “pussycat” (with its obvious
 26 suggestion of slang names for women's genitals), but which literally means
 27 male-female cat or boy-girl cat. Like Adam before the creation of woman, this
 28 cat's gender is ambiguous or not yet marked as one or the other gender. It is
 29 “a cat of one *or* the other sex, or of one *and* the other sex” (Derrida 2002,
 30 380–81).
 31

32 Derrida insists that his is a real cat and not a metaphorical or figurative cat;
 33 rather it is a being that he can encounter through shared bodily mortal exist-
 34 tence:

35 If I say “it is a real cat” that sees me naked, it is in order to mark
 36 its unsubstitutable singularity. When it responds in its name
 37 [*Quand il répond à son nom* (2006, 26) also can mean when it
 38 responds to its name] (whatever *respond* means, and that will be
 39 our question), it doesn't do so as the exemplar of a species called
 40 cat, even less so of an animal genus or realm. It is true that I
 41 identify it as a male or female cat. But even before that identi-
 42 fication, I see it as *this* irreplaceable living being that one day

1 enters my space, enters this place where it can encounter me,
 2 see me, even see me naked. Nothing can ever take away from
 3 me the certainty that what we have here is an existence that
 4 refuses to be conceptualized. (2002, 378–79)

5 This passage suggests that, although like Heidegger, when push comes to
 6 shove, Derrida makes ontological difference before sexual difference, he resists
 7 deciding which comes first.¹⁶ What he is trying to describe is a “naked” en-
 8 counter with another creature before or beyond concepts and the names that
 9 betoken them, including male or female. He also suggests, however, that this
 10 nakedness may be impossible—how do we encounter each other without
 11 clothing ourselves, even cats, in words? For example, doesn’t the requirement
 12 that an encounter be face-to-face or “frontal” already privilege human interac-
 13 tion (which relies more on sight than smell) over animal interaction? (compare
 14 Derrida 2002, 392). Moreover, Derrida suggests that perhaps nudity, like pure
 15 hospitality or forgiveness, should remain untenable . . . might we say nudity
 16 worthy of its name? (2002, 417; 2006, 76).

17 Throughout his writing, Derrida complicates the connections among onto-
 18 logical difference, animal difference, and sexual difference in ways that do not
 19 allow for identifying logical or chronological primacy. Indeed, he insists on an
 20 intimate association between animal difference and sexual difference that not
 21 only suggests that the human–animal binary and the sex binary are mutually
 22 constitutive, but also suggests that by opening up animal differences to the vast
 23 varieties of animals, we might also open up sexual differences to varieties of
 24 sexes, sexualities, and genders.

25 In *L’animal*, Derrida describes a series of metonymical associations between
 26 sexual difference and animal difference through which hierarchies are main-
 27 tained that privilege human over animal and man over woman. These
 28 metonymies revolve around the notion that humans are distinct from animals
 29 in terms of their upright posture or erect stance, which recalls man’s erection as
 30 what distinguishes him from woman. The metonymy between erect posture
 31 and erect phallus leads Derrida to conclude that the modesty or shame that
 32 separates humans from animals is concentrated on man’s genitals as the dis-
 33 tinctive trait that supposedly gives him the right to dominate animals and
 34 women.¹⁷ His physical up-rightness both in terms of his stance and his sex give
 35 him the moral right to dominate. Derrida argues that this distinctive trait is
 36 inseparable from man’s sovereignty as giving himself the right to lord over an-
 37 imals. He suggests that the metonymy breaks down, however, when we
 38 consider that man’s erection (like the so-called instinctive reactions of ani-
 39 mals) cannot be feigned or dissimulated:

40
 41 My hypothesis is that the criterion itself, the distinctive trait, is
 42 inseparable from the experience of giving itself the right, of the

1 right as erection in general in the process of humanization. To
 2 the interior of a general phenomenon of erection as a passage to
 3 the verticality right [right verticality] of the upright station
 4 which distinguishes man from other mammals, it is necessary
 5 still to distinguish sexual erection from standing erect, and
 6 overall in that, of an alternating rhythm of erection and of
 7 detumescence which the male cannot dissimulate in the face-to-
 8 face of copulation (another trait massively distinctive of the
 9 human accomplishment). That where this difference of desire
 10 cannot be spontaneously feinted or naturally dissimulated, the
 11 modesty (*la pudeur*) carries itself properly, this is to say in stop-
 12 ping or concentrating its metonymy on the phallic zone. (2006,
 13 89–90)

14
 15 The question of whether an animal can pretend or dissimulate is at the center
 16 of Derrida's engagement with Lacan in *L'animal*. Lacan argues that while
 17 animals can pretend (for example, play dead), they cannot cover their tracks or
 18 feint a feint; unlike humans, they can't pretend to pretend or engage in second-
 19 order lying. This is because they are capable only of reactions and not res-
 20 poneses; their pretense is a reaction to their environment. Derrida challenges
 21 the distinction between reaction and response, suggesting that we cannot so
 22 easily distinguish between the two, even in humans. What we take to be hu-
 23 man response also contains elements of reaction. Furthermore, Derrida
 24 indicates that man's erection is just as much a reaction as any animal's in that
 25 it cannot be feinted. However, given the attention on enabling and maintain-
 26 ing erections and the various "artificial" means of doing so, we might wonder
 27 why Derrida holds onto the phallus as the place where man cannot escape his
 28 animal nature. His invocation of the phallic zone as the concentration and end
 29 point of the metonymy between the posture that distinguishes man from ani-
 30 mals and man's sex, however, along with the modesty and shame attached to
 31 the genitals and thereby metonymically to the very distinction between man
 32 and animal, not to mention the slippage between standing upright and moral
 33 rights, blurs the boundaries between nature and culture.

34 Since Freud, the essential distinction between humans and animals turns on
 35 another twist of the phallic zone, namely castration. Within orthodox psycho-
 36 analytic theory, man's psyche is formed through the circuit of desire that
 37 revolves around the Oedipal Complex, where it is the fear of castration that
 38 carries the weight of the law that separates humans from animals; out of fear of
 39 punishment, humans give up their incestuous impulses while animals do not.
 40 Put another way, man is cut off from the source of satisfaction, which must be
 41 continually displaced and deferred. The unfulfillable nature of desire consti-
 42 tutes man as human. On this scenario (which takes us back at least to Hegel if

not all the way back to the ancient Greeks), man's desire makes him distinct from animals, which have instinctual needs but not desires. Thus, man's sense of lack motivates everything that we take to be his unique ability for progress and self-improvement. Paradoxically, then, what the animal lacks that man possesses is lack itself.

Discussing various instantiations of this paradoxical position, Derrida challenges the reasoning through which it is a fault or failing in man, a lack, that gives him the right to dominate animals. He says:

[I]t is paradoxically on the basis of a fault or failing in man that the latter will be made a subject who is master of nature and of the animal. From within the pit of that lack, an eminent lack, a quite different lack from that he assigns to the animal, man installs or claims in a single movement what is proper to him (the peculiarity of a man whose property it is not to have anything that is exclusively his) and his superiority over what is called animal life. This last superiority, infinite and par excellence, has as its property the fact of being at one and the same time unconditional and sacrificial. (2002, 389)

Within this twisted logic, animals are sacrificed both as proof of humans' superiority over them and as penance for humans' fault or lack. Within this way of thinking, humans are unique among animals because only they can sin; only they can be evil; only they can lie; paradoxically, only they can be beastly. According to Derrida, one of humanity's greatest bestialities is the invention and use of the word *animal*, "a word that men have given themselves the right to give" (Derrida 2002, 400). He concludes "this agreement concerning philosophical sense and common sense that allows one to speak blithely of the Animal in the general singular is perhaps one of the greatest, and most symptomatic idiocies [*bêtises*] of those who call themselves humans. . . . One cannot speak—moreover, it has never been done—of the *bêtise* or bestiality of an animal. It would be an anthropomorphic projection of something that remains reserved to man, as the single assurance finally, and the single risk, of what is 'proper to man'" (2002, 409). Derrida argues that philosophers continue to use this nonsensical general singular category to corral all living creatures without regard for the most basic differences, including and most particularly sexual differences; or as Derrida says, the great philosophers continue to use "an animal whose sexuality is as a matter of principle left undifferentiated" (2002, 408).

THE SEX OF INSECTS AND SEX TO COME

Within the history of philosophy, the word *animal* stands in for all living creatures whether they are cats, birds, or barnacles and whether they are male or

I note in passing, almost all these animals are welcomed, in a more and more deliberate manner, on the threshold of sexual difference. More precisely of sexual differences, that is to say what for the most part is kept under wraps in almost all of the grand philosophical-type treatises on the animality of the animal. This opening, on the threshold of sexual differences, was the very track left by the hedgehog or ant, but more than that, in the most recent text, where it is precisely a matter of nakedness, with or without a veil. I was interested in the thinking of what is naked, as it is said, like a worm. (2002, 404)¹⁹

The connection between sexual difference and animals in Derrida's work exploits the age-old association between woman and animal. Rather than suggest that women are like animals, however, Derrida intimates that sexual difference is like animal difference, or more precisely that sexual differences are like animal differences. In other words, a menagerie of animals, with sexualities intact, appears on the threshold of sexual difference in order to show that just as there is a multitude of animals, there is a multitude of sexes and sexualities. This display of animal sex is not intended just to demonstrate that all animals cannot be divided into the binary male–female, but moreover to open our imaginations to the possibility of alternative sexes and sexualities. The appearance of monkeys, hedgehogs, silkworms, and ants on the threshold of sexual difference serves the pedagogical function of allowing us to see and to imagine alternatives to the limited and claustrophobic binary that makes all sexual difference into the difference between two warring sexes.

Returning to the human–animal binary from the side of the animals can “teach” us that just as there are vast varieties of animal species and animal sexes, there are vast varieties of human animals and human sexes. By opening the human–animal binary, we also open the man–woman binary. Further, in the exploration of multitudes of animals and of sexes, we can begin to imagine an ethics of differences that takes us beyond binaries, dualisms, or couples that so easily degenerate into opposition, hierarchy, struggle for recognition, and war. At the same time, however, this “thought experiment” raises the question of the implications for thinking through an ethics of differences, given that by the end of this century, half of all species on earth will be extinct.²⁰ If we can be inspired to think of ethics beyond the face-to-face encounter, beyond two, even beyond the ideal of mutual recognition, and toward an ethics of infinite differences valuable precisely for an irreconcilability that cannot be figured as opposition or negation, then we will have to re-evaluate both sexual differences and animal differences in terms of an ethics of expansion and evolution rather than of reduction and extinction. Perhaps difference “worthy of its name,” then, would designate differences that multiply themselves through

1 innumerable means such that they cannot devolve into opposition or fixity of
 2 any kind. These would be differences that appear as gifts, differences that be-
 3 token sex(es) to come.
 4

5
 6 NOTES

7 1. In her introduction to *Glas*, Peggy Kamuf summarizes Derrida's strategy: "That
 8 is, displacing the familial moment, the point at which sexual difference is determined in
 9 oppositional terms and then reduced, negated, relieved (*aufgehoben*) to permit passage to
 10 the next moment, had to shake up the whole structure. In effect, by reading this moment
 11 as the strangle-point of the vast dialectical architecture, Derrida 'sexualizes' that
 12 structure throughout . . ." (Kamuf 1991, 317). For an insightful analysis of Derrida's
 13 reading of Hegel on the question of woman, see Rawlinson (1997). For a provocative
 14 engagement with Derrida's *Glas*, see Spivak (1977, 2005).

15 2. For provocative discussions of Derrida's criticisms of Heidegger and Levinas, see
 16 Chanter (1997) and Grosz (1997). See also Holland (1997).

17 3. Elizabeth Grosz describes the significance of Derrida's thinking of difference be-
 18 yond binary opposition: "In short, the debate on the status and nature of difference has
 19 tended to see it as a struggle of two entities, two terms, pairs; a struggle to equalize two
 20 terms in one case, and a struggle to render the two terms reciprocally in the second case.
 21 The concept of difference has been historically linked to the functioning of various dual-
 22 isms. It is Derrida who demonstrated that difference exceeds opposition, dichotomy, or
 23 dualism and can never be adequately captured in any notion of identity or diversity (which
 24 is the proliferation of sameness or identity and by no means its overcoming or difference).
 25 Derrida understood that difference is not only at the heart of philosophy . . . but more
 26 significantly, for his work was never simply with texts, terms, or concepts alone, that
 27 difference is the methodology of life and, indeed, of the universe itself" (Grosz 2005, 90).

28 4. In "Dreaming of the Innumerable," John Caputo explores the connection be-
 29 tween undecidability and multiplicity in terms of justice and ethics. There he argues that
 30 "for Derrida, dissemination and undecidability are the conditions, the 'quasi-transcen-
 31 dental' conditions, of justice—for women, for men (for animals, for everybody)—
 32 conditions of the dream of justice, which is also, when it comes to sexual difference, a
 33 dream of the innumerable" (Caputo 1997, 141).

34 5. I problematize Derrida's use of the discourse of purity in this context elsewhere.
 35 See Oliver (2007).

36 6. I discuss the ways that Derrida's insistence that concepts of woman, the femi-
 37 nine, and femininity are undecidable and should not become objects of knowledge
 38 particularly undermine the project of feminism. See Oliver (1995).

39 7. For a helpful discussion of Derrida's notion of the gift, see Cheah (2005).

40 8. I discuss several problems with this discourse of purity and contamination,
 41 particularly as Derrida uses it as an intervention into other discourses of purity and con-
 42 tamination, namely the Holocaust and apartheid with their discourses of ethnic or racial
 43 purity and contamination. See Oliver (2004) (chapter 4 and conclusion) and Oliver
 44 (2007).

9. In this regard, the notion of “purity” and “worthy of its name” might conjure the concept of *différance* from Derrida’s earlier work. If with that notion Derrida wishes to maintain both the sense of deferral and differing in the word “difference,” the qualification “pure” could perform the deferring function, while the idiom “worthy of its name” could perform the differing function. Now, however, both connote the realm of ethics, which the earlier term *différance* did not.

10. Derrida would probably reject my characterization of his position as “radical idealism.” In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida calls his project “radically empiricist” in that it looks to the material of language where “the very concept of empiricism destroys itself” (1974, 162). This passage appears in the same section as Derrida’s famous claim “*There is nothing outside of the text*” (158).

11. Ellen Armour argues that Derrida provides a necessary supplement to Irigaray’s notion of the divine in relation to the feminine. See Armour (1997).

12. Feminist philosopher Lisa Guenther is currently developing a notion of ethical indifference that might be resonant with what I am calling unremarked difference. On her theory, the notion of indifference can prevent difference from becoming oppositional or hierarchical. See Guenther (2005).

13. For a more in-depth discussion of Derrida’s hyperbolic ethics, see Oliver (2004), chapter 4. There I argue that even our ethical ideals must be subject to the vigilant self-interrogation of hyperbolic ethics. See also Oliver (2007).

14. See Judith Butler’s pioneering work reconceptualizing gender in Butler (1990, 2004). See also Fausto-Sterling (1979).

15. Ellen Armour made this point in a presentation at Vanderbilt University in December 2006.

16. For an excellent analysis of Derrida’s “answer” to the question “which comes first, sexual difference or difference in general?,” see Berger (2005).

17. It is interesting to note that the French word *pudeur* can mean both modesty and shame.

18. Derrida’s silkworm puts me in mind of a recent article on ocean worms that have evolved at least eighteen different ways to reproduce: “Some are pinhead-size, while certain ribbon worms stretch nearly 200 feet—the longest animals on Earth. Some filter-feed, some stalk their prey, some eat their kin, and they have evolved at least 18 different ways to reproduce, including breaking into pieces. . . . The spiny ancestors of today’s marine worms were among the first sea animals more than 500 million years ago. Scientists can only guess at the number of species—estimates range from 25,000 to millions” (Holland 2007, 122). Although reproduction and sex are not synonymous, these thousands of worms with their thousands of lifestyles do get the imaginative juices flowing. Derrida’s discussion of animal sex, or animals’ sexes, seems intended to spark imaginings about differences, especially sexual differences, rather than offer a comparative analysis of reproductive behaviors. Another recent *National Geographic* article suggests that damselflies in some areas may be evolving so that they can reproduce without males: “For damselflies the world over, it’s virtually the same old story: Males hang out by the watering hole, defending their territory, waiting to pounce on the first female to fly by. Then came the startling report of an all-female damselfly population in the Azores, which arrived in the wake of a study

on Fijian species in which females appeared to be on the prowl for mates. ‘I thought I knew everything about damselflies,’ says Carleton University biologist Tom Sherratt. ‘No one had ever seen sex-role reversal before’. . . . Instead of a damselfly dominatrix, they found that adult males were just extremely rare . . . Juvenile males are being killed en masse by a fungal parasite, leaving the females to fend for themselves—perhaps the first step to not needing the males at all” (Bourne 2007, 23).

19. Translator David Wills points out that in English we might say “naked as a jay bird.”

20. For a discussion of scientific evidence that by the end of the century half of all life on earth will be extinct, see Whitty (2007). It is telling that progressive discourses revolving around racial and ethnic diversity come at a time of drastically dwindling biodiversity, a coincidence worth further analysis. Within the constraints of this essay, I cannot develop implied connections to issues of biodiversity, extinction, environmentalism, and so-called animal conservation.

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Q5

Q6

Q7

Q8

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