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...
human, I will explore sexual difference from the side of animal difference. In other words, rather than try to introduce sexual difference into the history of philosophy or Western intellectual and cultural traditions by insisting on splitting man or human into two sexes as some feminist thinkers have done, I will suggest thinking beyond the category “animal” to multitudes of various animals. I question 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; other than being self-motivating life-forms, morphologically and behaviorally, they may have little else in common. By exploding the general category “animal” and thereby opening thought to various animals no longer subsumed by this overly general category, we may also explode the other pole of the binary, namely human. If animals are infinitely more diverse than the binary opposition human–animal suggests, then perhaps “human” is also more diverse than the binary allows. In this essay, I am particularly concerned with the sexual difference of “man.” By considering the multitudes of animal sexes, sexualities, and reproductive practices, perhaps we can expand our ways of thinking about the sexes, sexualities, and reproductive practices of “man.”

This project, then, is a thought experiment of sorts with pedagogical effects that may help us to think beyond the sexual binary man–woman. My argument is based on the following premises: first, the human–animal binary erases differences among vast varieties of living creatures and among vast varieties of human cultures and individuals; second, within Judeo-Christian myths and philosophies the binary opposition between human and animal is intimately linked to the binary opposition between man and woman; third, if we move beyond the overly general concept “animal” to considerations of multiple species and even individuals, then we might be able to move beyond the concept “human” to considerations of cultural and individual differences; fourth, in terms sexual difference specifically, if we consider various sexes, sexualities, and reproductive practices of animals, we might be able to reconsider sexes, sexualities, and reproductive practices of humans beyond the tight binary man–woman or homosexual–heterosexual. My thesis, then, is that the binary oppositions human–animal and man–woman are intimately linked such that exploding the first has consequences for the second. Furthermore, my aim is to open the conceptual landscape onto differences erased by these traditional binary oppositions. To this end, I may invoke examples of the sexual practices of worms or ants or monkeys, not in order to suggest that humans are physically like these creatures or vice versa, but rather to challenge the conceptual framework that restricts us to thinking in binary terms that limit concepts to pairs,
especially since these pairs so easily become oppositions, hierarchies, or wars.
The argument, then, is that by changing the way that we conceive of one con-
cept in a traditional binary, we also change the way that we conceive of the
other. So, by changing the way that we conceive of the animal, we change the
way that we conceive of the human; and by changing the way that we conceive
of man, we change the way that we conceive of woman. Furthermore, insofar as
the histories of these binaries are essentially linked, by changing the relation
between the two terms of the first, we change the relations between the two
terms of the second. Indeed, a broader goal of this project is to move beyond
thinking in pairs or in terms of two in order to move to thinking in terms of real
diversity. A true ethics of difference requires moving beyond the couple toward
multitudes of differences.

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

I have chosen to stage my argument through an engagement with Jacques
Derrida's first posthumously published book, *L'animal que donc je suis*, for two
reasons. First, Derrida's analysis of the history of philosophy on the question of
the animal is provocative, insightful, and challenges us to think beyond dual-
isms. Second, my hope is that this essay will be a contribution to Derrida studies
that opens up new ways of reading this work in relation to his earlier work, par-
ticularly in terms of sexual difference. Derrida's philosophy can help us to
rethink our conceptions of difference in general and sexual difference in partic-
ular. Throughout his work, he is concerned to "deconstruct" binary oppositions
in order to open up philosophy and thought to multiplicity. This is why in his
engagement with various philosophers, he challenges theories and rhetorics that
reduce all difference to one, two, or dialectical relations among three terms.
Finding resources within the history of philosophy itself, he challenges the
philosophical tendency to reduce and fix into manageable systems and categories
that erase or disavow multiple differences. In this regard, the subtle movements
of his thought toward multiplicity and away from dogmatic fixity can benefit this
project of rethinking sexual differences beyond binary oppositions.
In addition to arguing that the differences among animals have pedagogical value for thinking about the differences among “men,” I present a pedagogical reading of Derrida with an eye to what his writings can teach us about sexual difference. The hope is that this analysis can shed new light on aspects of Derrida’s thought that remain cryptic, if suggestive. Moreover, by putting his latest work in the context of some of his earlier work, an evolution of thought may emerge. By taking on some of the most problematic aspects of his latest work, namely his insistence on “pure” concepts (such as hospitality, forgiveness, and gifts) “worthy of their names,” hopefully this essay can provide a useful interpretation of these notions (pure, worthy of its name) that remain puzzling and unexplained in Derrida’s own work. Finally, by applying Derrida’s theory of the pure concept worthy of its name to the concept of difference—something that Derrida never does himself—I attempt to open up the concept of difference itself onto multiple differences. This is how my reading of Derrida works in the service of my broader thesis about animal difference(s) and sexual difference(s).

DERRIDA’S FLIRTATION WITH PHILOSOPHY ON THE QUESTION OF SEX

To set the stage for my investigation into Derrida’s latest work, in which he identifies a connection between animal and sexual difference, I look back to some texts where he takes up the question of sexual difference head-on, or as he might say, “frontally.” The issue of sexual difference is a recurring theme throughout his work. Notably, Derrida’s “deconstruction” of various philosophers, including Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, often revolve around the erasure or negation of sexual difference in their writings. For example, in Glas, Derrida challenges Hegel’s dialectical logic, which operates through the famous triple movement from position to negation to overcoming and preserving the negative moment in the final synthesis; by demonstrating that when applied to sexual difference, the dialectical method makes woman the mere negation of man, a moment necessarily overcome by the final movement of the dialectic, which reasserts the privilege of man, Derrida calls into question Hegel’s entire dialectical logic.¹ In his readings of Heidegger, Derrida challenges what he sees as a second traditional tactic with regard to sexual difference, neutralization or erasure; Dasein is sexually neuter, and as Derrida points out, Heidegger avoids talking about sexual difference, even when confronted with it in the texts upon which he comments (for example, Nietzsche’s).² If Hegel negates sexual difference and turns woman into man’s opposite, Heidegger erases sexual difference by conceiving of a neutered or neutral Dasein. Derrida suggests that the ontological-ontic distinction that grounds Heidegger’s thinking can be maintained only through the erasure of sexual difference; and once Derrida resexualizes 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. 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
remarking, which means that on the level of metaphysics (and therefore also on the levels of ethics and politics), it remains ultimately “undecidable”; we cannot know for certain the correct answer to the question “what is it?”; rather we can always only speculate given the cultural tools available to us.

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

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

Although Derrida does not do so explicitly, it will be instructive to apply his analysis of the gift (hospitality, forgiveness, and so on) to difference, specifically to sexual difference. Throughout his work, Derrida maintains that the gift—a true or pure gift—cannot be given out of duty or from expectations; it cannot be given from a position of sovereignty within an economy of exchange.7 As he describes it, then, what we usually think of as gifts are “contaminated” forms of true or pure giving, which cannot even be identified as such without falling into ruin as gift.8 He makes the same moves with hospitality and forgiveness. A pure hospitality or a pure forgiveness must be given without any expectations.
for reciprocation, outside of any sort of economy of exchange—monetary, in kind, psychological, or otherwise—and without being “contaminated” by notions of sovereignty that turn giving, hospitality, or forgiveness into narcissistic power-plays—“I am in a position to give this to you,” and so forth. It seems that Derrida uses the notions of pure gift, hospitality, and forgiveness in order to invoke the quality of deferral inherent in these notions; in other words, as Levinas might say, there is always one more gift, invitation, or olive-branch, to give. In addition to the qualification “pure,” he frequently uses the phrase “worthy of its name,” as in hospitality or forgiveness “worthy of its name.” This phrase adds both the dimension of value, dignity, or ethics—worthy—and the dimension of the name or word itself. Given that Derrida is fond of multiplying the meaning of words, demonstrating their heterogeneous etymologies, and exploiting meanings that seem at odds with one another, this idiomatic expression—“worthy of its name”—casts a strange shadow on his hyperbolic ethics.

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

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

From this passage, we learn that the gift cannot be calculated, self-conscious, 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.
Rather, as Derrida describes it in “Choreographies,” we have a mobile of non-identified sexual marks. There, he asks

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

On the practical level, this way of thinking about difference presents us with twin problems: 1. being able to distinguish one individual or group from another, and 2. being able to identify individuals with one another. Both these operations—differentiation and identification/generalization—are necessary to language systems. On the conceptual level, they should leave us wondering how we distinguish unremarked difference from the erasure, disavowal, or negation of difference typical of Western philosophy. By insisting on unremarked or unmarked sexual difference, don’t we risk disavowing sexual difference altogether? It might be helpful to consider that in Rogues, Derrida describes his insistence on the unconditionality of the incalculable as a useful lexicon that serves a pedagogical purpose in relation to traditional Western thought (2005, 148). There, he also suggests that this lexicon could one day be replaced by another that will “help us to say better what still remains to be said about these metonymic figures of the unconditional” (148). He also insists that “only an unconditional hospitality can give meaning and practical rationality to a concept of hospitality” (149). The notions of the “unconditional,” the “pure,” the “incalculable,” the concept “worthy of its name,” teach us that our practical applications are always conditioned by social and political economies that disavow and marginalize even when they embrace differences; in other words, we cannot always easily distinguish giving from taking. They also teach us that hyperbolic ethics demands that we continue to measure our everyday practices in terms of these immeasurable conceptions of gift, hospitality, forgiveness, and difference. If we do not hold ourselves to this impossible and infinitely deferred “standard,” we risk the dogmatism and fixity of ideology that often leads to war and violence. It is this hyperbolic aspect of unconditional ethics that makes it
pedagogical; our ethical ideal is like a hyperbola that necessarily remains out of reach and for this very reason can continue to guide our actions.¹³

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

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

**ANIMAL PEDAGOGY**

Although it may not be obvious at first, Derrida’s latest work on the *animal* also has a pedagogical dimension, particularly in relation to multiplying sexual differences. One of the central arguments of *L’animal que donc je suis* is that the concept or name *animal* is an abomination, a “chimera,” because it defines all living creatures in relation to humans—animals are those creatures that are not human. In so doing, it erases vast, even infinite, differences among species and individuals. The concept “animal” operates as the negation of “human” such that the negation of that negation—we are not mere animals—quickly leads to the notion that human beings are superior to animals. All animals are defined by virtue of their relation with humans, who stand opposed to “the animal” as the superior term of the human–animal binary. Some of those creatures we call
animals, however, have more in common with human beings than they do
with other animals; and taken as a whole, what we call the “animal kingdom” is
populated with creatures that overall may have less rather than more in com-
mon. Derrida’s criticisms revolve around various philosophers’ use of “the
animal,” with the definitive article and singular noun that brands or marks all
animals as one, and moreover marks them as opposed to humans. Within
these philosophies, it is against this animal “other” that humans set themselves
apart as human (and against woman that he sets himself apart as man). More-
over, the two binaries human–animal and man–woman are intimately
connected in the history of Judeo-Christian thought; I will return to this claim
momentarily.

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

For example, recall Derrida’s suggestion that Heidegger’s neuter Dasein is
presented as an antidote to thinking of sexual difference in oppositional terms.
Heidegger posits that Dasein is before any binary opposition; Derrida argues
that he places “an absolute oppositional limit” between Dasein and animals,
which, like all oppositions, “effaces the differences and leads back, following
the most resistant metaphysico-dialectic tradition, to the homogeneous”
(1987, 173–74). Dasein is not just different from other animals; it is ontologi-
ally different, specifically because it has hands for taking and giving. Derrida
concludes: “Man’s hand then will be a thing apart not as separable organ but
because it is different, dissimilar from all prehensile organs (paws, claws, tal-
ons); man’s hand is far from these in an infinite way through the abyss of being”
(1987, 174). The difference is not a mere ontic difference but rather an onto-
logical one. The very distinction between ontic and ontological, however,
which is foundational to Heidegger’s thought, is presupposed and supported by
the absolute limit drawn between man and animal, a limit that Derrida argues is based on supposition rather than evidence. Heidegger maintains that *Dasein* is distinctive in that it can grasp in a way that gives and not merely takes; but Derrida challenges the assumption that only humans give, saying “Nothing is less assured than the distinction between giving and taking” (1987, 176). Indeed, for Derrida, ethics requires that we unceasingly question that very distinction. When is a gift really a gift? In what ways do we take by giving?

As he does with Heidegger, Derrida also sees in Levinas’s writings a moment that subverts the priority of man over woman, but it too is still based on the opposition between human and animal. For example, Derrida points out that Levinas reads the Genesis myth of origin as presenting a neuter earth creature first, and sexual difference second, after a rib is taken from the first creature to create a second (see 1991, 450). Derrida concludes: “It is not feminine sexuality that would be second but only the relationship to sexual difference. At the origin, on this side of and therefore beyond any sexual mark, there was humanity in general . . . ” (1991, 450). Derrida quickly points out that even this view risks privileging the masculine as first and dominant. In L’animal, however, he engages Levinas on a different score, one that demonstrates how Levinas’s ethical relation retains a form of “humanism” that is maintained against animal difference. Levinas describes the face-to-face encounter that commands us to be ethical as uniquely human. And when asked in an interview whether or not an animal has a face, he says that he cannot respond to this question (Levinas 1986, 169). Derrida works Levinas’s non-response to the question in relation to a traditional division between humans and animals, namely that humans can respond while animals merely react (see Derrida 2006, 150–55). Earlier in L’animal, he has shown that for Descartes the distinction is even more specific: humans can respond to questions whereas animals cannot. So, in terms of man’s distinctive ability to respond to questions, what does it mean when Levinas says that he cannot answer the question? Derrida follows this track in order to challenge Levinas’s latent humanism and man’s unique possession of the face, and therefore, of ethics. Derrida suggests that both of these nondialectical, nonhumanist, nonoppositional thinkers, Heidegger and Levinas, in the very moments at which their thinking promises to take us beyond the sexual binary, fall back into a dialectical logic of opposition in terms of humans versus animals. At the moment when their philosophies offer the possibility of a nondialectical relationship of difference that is not reduced to opposition or even to a binary, they support their openness to sexual difference with close-mindedness in terms of animal difference. In other words, within these philosophies, sexual difference is avowed only if animal differences are disavowed through the general and fixed category of *the animal*. Releasing us from one binary trades on reinstating the other. So, how can we begin to think
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. 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
humanity, from clothing and culture to time itself. Thus, within the Judeo-Christian tradition, animal difference and sexual difference are intimately associated from the beginning of time.

**DERRIDA’S PUSSYCAT**

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

Derrida insists that his is a real cat and not a metaphorical or figurative cat; rather it is a being that he can encounter through shared bodily mortal existence:

If I say “it is a real cat” that sees me naked, it is in order to mark its unsubstitutable singularity. When it responds in its name [Quand il répond à son nom (2006, 26) also can mean when it responds to its name] (whatever respond means, and that will be our question), it doesn’t do so as the exemplar of a species called cat, even less so of an animal genus or realm. It is true that I identify it as a male or female cat. But even before that identification, I see it as *this* irreplaceable living being that one day
enters my space, enters this place where it can encounter me, see me, even see me naked. Nothing can ever take away from me the certainty that what we have here is an existence that refuses to be conceptualized. (2002, 378–79)

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

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

In L’animal, Derrida describes a series of metonymical associations between sexual difference and animal difference through which hierarchies are maintained that privilege human over animal and man over woman. These metonymies revolve around the notion that humans are distinct from animals in terms of their upright posture or erect stance, which recalls man’s erection as what distinguishes him from woman. The metonymy between erect posture and erect phallus leads Derrida to conclude that the modesty or shame that separates humans from animals is concentrated on man’s genitals as the distinctive trait that supposedly gives him the right to dominate animals and women. His physical up-rightness both in terms of his stance and his sex give him the moral right to dominate. Derrida argues that this distinctive trait is inseparable from man’s sovereignty as giving himself the right to lord over animals. He suggests that the metonymy breaks down, however, when we consider that man’s erection (like the so-called instinctive reactions of animals) cannot be feinted or dissimulated:

My hypothesis is that the criterion itself, the distinctive trait, is inseparable from the experience of giving itself the right, of the
right as erection in general in the process of humanization. To the interior of a general phenomenon of erection as a passage to the verticality right [right verticality] of the upright station which distinguishes man from other mammals, it is necessary still to distinguish sexual erection from standing erect, and overall in that, of an alternating rhythm of erection and of detumesence which the male cannot dissimulate in the face-to-face of copulation (another trait massively distinctive of the human accomplishment). That where this difference of desire cannot be spontaneously feinted or naturally dissimulated, the modesty (la pudeur) carries itself properly, this is to say in stopping or concentrating its metonymy on the phallic zone. (2006, 89–90)

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

Since Freud, the essential distinction between humans and animals turns on another twist of the phallic zone, namely castration. Within orthodox psychoanalytic theory, man’s psyche is formed through the circuit of desire that revolves around the Oedipal Complex, where it is the fear of castration that carries the weight of the law that separates humans from animals; out of fear of punishment, humans give up their incestuous impulses while animals do not. Put another way, man is cut off from the source of satisfaction, which must be continually displaced and deferred. The unfulfillable nature of desire constitutes 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 bêtuse 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
female. However, it is not just that philosophers haven’t been concerned whether an animal is a cat or dog or a male or female. Moreover, they haven’t thought about the different sexualities of animals that might take us beyond the male–female sexual binary itself. Considering various sexualities, sexes, and modes of sex among different animal species, not to mention different individuals within species, might teach us to appreciate the multitude of sexualities and sexual differences beyond two (which so easily degenerates into war and domination). Insects and other animals, whose sex is not easily determined, categorized, or marked, especially fascinate Derrida.

First there is the sexy little silkworm, whose “milk become thread” is “the extruded saliva of a very fine sperm, lustrous, shiny, the miracle of a female ejaculation ... the secret of a marvel ... at the infinite distance of the animal, this little innocent member, so foreign yet so close in its incalculable estrangement” (Derrida 2002, 404). Quoting his own earlier text “A Silkworm of One’s Own,” Derrida describes the worm as beyond the sexual binary male–female, an image that becomes the basis of a fantasy of a multiple sex of “one’s own”: “the spinning of its threads [or 'sons'] or daughters—beyond any sexual difference or rather any duality of the sexes, and even beyond any coupling. In the beginning, there was a worm which was and was not a sex” (2002, 404).

*L’animal* discusses several monotreme animals. One is associated with the Chimera, a mythical, flame-spitting monster with the head of a lion, the body of a goat, and the tail of a dragon. This animal conglomerate becomes an icon for the monstrosity of the word *animal* itself, a word that mixes so many varieties into one. Just as a chimera is an illusion, so too is the general category “animal.” With the monotrem, however, the condensation of various bodily functions into one hole becomes fascinating to Derrida, who points out that Chimera is the offspring of Echidne, the name of both a serpent and a monotremic mammal: “This mammal lays eggs, something quite rare. Here we have an oviparous mammal that is also an insectivore and a monotrem. It only has one hole (mono-trema) for all the necessary purposes, urinary tract, rectum, and genitals” (2002, 409).

As Derrida reminds us in *L’animal*, his writings are full of various animals with whom he identifies and in whose names he sometimes signs. There are worms, monkeys, horses, hedgehogs, squirrels, sheep, ass, wolves, birds, snakes, fish, ants, sponges, and even viruses. His writings are a regular zoo. Moreover, his interest in animals often activates his interest in sex. In “Fourmis,” for example, he is once again fascinated by the sex of insects when he muses on how the sex of little black ants defies identification; there, ants embody the thousands of possibilities of reading, of interpreting, and of sexes (1994, 72). It is not just that animals make him wonder about sex but also sexual difference apparently incites his bestiary. For, as he also reminds his reader in *L’animal*: 
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)

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

NOTES

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

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

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

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


6. I discuss the ways that Derrida's insistence that concepts of woman, the feminine, and femininity are undecidable and should not become objects of knowledge possibly undermine the project of feminism. See Oliver (1995).

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

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


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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Whitty, Julia. 2007. In 93 years, half of all life on earth will be extinct. So what? *Mother Jones* 36–45, 88.
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