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LEVINAS AND THE ACTUAL DIMENSIONS OF HUMANISM

'WITHOUT GENUS': LEVINAS'S HUMANISM RECONSIDERED

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Abstract

Emmanuel Levinas proposed a 'humanism of the other man,' emphasizing human beings' uniquely prominent place in the universe without endorsing traditional metaphysical humanism. He rejected the idea of humanity consisting of similar individuals sharing a common, unchanging essence that would serve as the basis for a supreme value, instead focusing on individuals bound by mutual responsibility and addressability within a community. This perspective seems to distinguish Levinas's from traditional humanism, yet it poses a challenge: if the ethical relation is confined to human-to-human interactions, this implies a common human nature, potentially undermining the Other's absolute alterity. This paper argues that insisting that the I and the Other are essentially human risks negating Levinas's core idea of the Other's irreducible singularity. Consequently, it would appear that we cannot a priori *exclude the possibility of an encounter with the Other that is an encounter with a being that* is other than 'man.'

Keywords: Levinas; humanism; essentialism; alterity; animals.

> *It is not because the neighbor would be recognized as belonging to the same genus as me that he concerns me. He is precisely* other. Emmanuel Levinas (1981, 87)

Introduction

That Levinas had a humanistic view of the world cannot be seriously doubted. However, in no way did Levinas embrace what might be called traditional ('metaphysical') humanism. While he acknowledged that human beings occupy a uniquely prominent place in the universe, he rejected the notion that humanity consists of similar individuals sharing a common, unchanging essence that would serve as the basis for a supreme value or dignity. What he embraced was a 'humanism of the *other man*,' of man not as a member

of a genus, not man in general, but man as a member of a community of individuals bound together by their capacity to be addressed by each other and to be responsible for one another. At first glance, this appears sufficient to distinguish Levinas from traditional humanism and figures such as Pico della Mirandola, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, and Sartre. The question, however, is whether it is necessarily the case that the I and the Other are human. If the ethical relation is restricted to "the relationship of man to man" (Levinas 1969, 79), then it would seem that members of the moral community share a common nature after all, one that ontologically demarcates them as members of their species and serves as an explanation of their exclusive membership in the moral community. The more one thinks about it, the more one realizes that *being human* for Levinas is a concept that risks subverting what he wants to say about the Other's uniqueness or "singularity" (Levinas 1981, 18, 83, 86, 100, 106, 108, 129, 153, 176, 190, & 194), his or her irreducibility to any concept that I, qua the 'Same,' am able to think and account for. In this paper, I argue that we cannot settle the question of whether members of the moral community are species-specific short of undermining the absolute otherness of the Other. Consequently, it would appear that we cannot *a priori* exclude the possibility of an encounter with the Other that is an encounter with a being *other than* '*man*.'

1. 'Humanism of the Other *Man*'

Humanisme de l'autre homme is the original French title of one of Emmanuel Levinas's books, first published in 1972. The volume collects three journal articles originally published separately during the previous decade, to which a six-page preface was added for their republication. It was translated into English as *Humanism of the Other* and published in 2003.The translator Nidra Poller does not explain in her short "Translator's Note" (Levinas 2003, xlv-xlvi) why the noun phrase *l'autre homme* was replaced by the singular term 'the Other,' thereby dropping the term 'man,' though I can only assume it was motivated by a concern to avoid sexist language. Not only is this translation inconsistent, since in the two instances in the preface where Levinas uses the noun phrase *l'autre homme*, it is rendered literally as 'the other man' (Levinas 2003, 6)—but it also obscures a crucial aspect of Levinas's philosophy. If Levinas had intended to say *humanisme de l'Autre* or *humanisme d'Autrui*, he could easily have done so. But he did not. He deliberately used the generic term *l'homme*, not, I believe, due to sexism (though I won't debate that here), but because he held that ethics pertains to relationships unique to human beings. This is implied by the phrase *l'autre homme*, which denotes a human person who

is distinct from the speaker. The English title *Humanism of the Other* misses something essential. It conceals the fact that Levinas's thinking had no interest in that which is *other than man*. It downplays Levinas's throughgoing anthropocentrism.[1]

Levinas's book raises legitimate questions distinct from concerns about gendered language. His depiction of ethics as a *'humanisme de l'autre homme*' presents two issues: a minor problem and a major problem. The minor problem is this: after *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas aligns his thinking with the contemporary critique of humanism—'contemporary' in the context of late 1960s and early 1970s France, marked by a spate of anti-humanist writings (e.g., Derrida 1982). From this, it would seem to follow that Levinas's thinking is also opposed to humanism. But this could hardly have been Levinas's view, for why would he then have branded his own thinking 'humanism' if he were opposed to it?

I view this as a minor problem because it has an easy answer. Levinas was not fundamentally opposed to humanism per se, but rather opposed to the way the philosophical tradition had sought to define the human. Reduced to its essentials, 'humanism,' coined from *humanus*, meaning "whatever is characteristic of human beings, proper to man" (Giustiniani 1985, 168), denotes a philosophy of man based on a certain conception of what it is to be a human being as opposed to being merely an animal. In the history of philosophy, this has typically taken the form of identifying a property (*logos*, reason, 'spirit, 'soul' or 'free will,' etc.) that is meant to distinguish humans from everything else and is allegedly the source of their superior moral value. It is well known that Levinas repudiates this type of classical ('metaphysical') humanism grounded in a philosophy of substance from Aristotle to Kant. In *Otherwise Than Being*, he says: "Modern anti-humanism is undoubtedly right in not finding in man taken as the individual of a genus or an ontological region—an individual like all substances persevering in being—a privilege that would make of him the goal of reality" (Levinas 2003, 56). However, Levinas was never an uncritical partisan of modern anti-humanism. His thinking was too opposed to the ontology that underlay it—much of it stemming from Heidegger (see Heidegger 1993)—for him to accept its conclusions without reservation. In *Otherwise Than Being* he writes:

[1] Lawrence Burns mentions this in his review of the book: "The English translation drops the 'Man,' and in so doing underemphasizes the extent to which the other for Levinas is a human other" (Burns 2008, 205).

> Modern antihumanism, which denies the primacy that the human person, free and for itself, would have for the signification of being, is true over and beyond the reasons it gives itself. It clears the place for subjectivity positing itself in abnegation, in sacrifice, in a substitution which precedes the will. Its inspired intuition is to have abandoned the idea of person, goal and origin of itself, in which the ego is still a thing because it is still a being. (Levinas 1981, 127-128)

If the truth of antihumanism lies in its dismantling of the metaphysical foundations of classical humanism, creating room for ethical subjectivity ("substitution"), its weakness is its inability to secure a distinct place for humanity in the resulting void, leading to humanity's dissolution into an impersonal "totality" (Levinas 1969, 133). Thus, Levinas concludes in "Humanism and An-archy": "Modern anti-humanism is perhaps not right in not finding in man, lost in history and in order, the trace of this pre-historical and an-archical saying" (Levinas 2003, 57).

But this raises a much more serious problem, one that calls into question the humanist framework of moral considerability in Levinas's work, and which I shall argue Levinas does not resolve. The objection can be stated as a philosophical problem that emerges from a reading of *Totality and Infinity*, even though, surprisingly enough, the word "humanism" does not appear there. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas states: "The absolutely foreign [*étranger*] alone can instruct us. And it is only man who could be absolutely foreign to me—refractory to every typology, to every genus, to every characterology, to every classification" (Levinas 1969, 73). To state that only a human being can be "absolutely foreign" to me implies that the Other is always the *human* other. In other words, it connotes membership of a particular biological species and assumes that no member of another species is the Other. Yet, if the Other cannot be classified within a genus alongside others of the same kind—since that would involve comparison and thus some degree of sameness—what grounds are there for associating the Other with the term 'human' or supposing the Other to be uniquely human? In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas says: "The establishing of this primacy of the ethical, that is, of the relationship of man to man … is one of the objectives of the present work (Levinas 1969, 79). If being members of the same species is required for ethics, and being ethical implies being human, then the Other and I would be represented as being in a relationship in respect of our shared common feature or essence. But in the same work, Levinas rejects the Aristotelian hypothesis according to which there is a genus concept under which the Other and I are included: "I, who have no concept in common with the Stranger, am, like him, without genus" (Levinas 1969, 39). Why, then, does Levinas state that ethics consists of the rela-

tionship between members of the same species? How are we to make sense of the *identification* of the Other and me with the classificatory concept 'man'? As Robert Bernasconi writes, albeit in a different context, "'Being human' is an idea with a content. Is it not imposed on the Other by an 'imperialism and an egoism' that the 'humanism of the other man' is supposed to counteract? Does it not compromise alterity?" (Bernasconi 1992, 5) I argue that this identification represents a limitation in Levinas's ethics. Though not fatal to his framework, this tension prompts a reconsideration of his portrayal of ethics as a form of humanism.

2. The Notion of 'Radical Alterity'

The claim that the Other is none other than human has been given short shrift by an increasing number of Levinas's critics—certainly since John Llewellyn in the English-speaking world questioned whether Levinas was right to exclude what he paradoxically called "the humanism of the Other Animal" (Llewelyn, 1991).[2] The criticism extends beyond merely highlighting what many might see as an arbitrary—and unethical—exclusion of non-human animals in Levinas's ethics. It strikes at the core of what 'radical alterity' means in Levinas's philosophy.

The concept of radical alterity is highly elusive, and I cannot hope in this essay to give a comprehensive account of all the ways in which Levinas's ethical framework might be extended to include not only human beings but animals of other species as well. Whether members of some animal species also count as 'the Other,' however, is surely not to be settled merely by comparing or contrasting them with human beings. This, I argue, is a limitation in Derrida's approach in his 1997 Cerisy-la-Salle lecture, published posthumously in 2006 under the title *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. In that lecture, Derrida placed the question of the animal at the forefront of his interrogation of Levinas's ethics: "One might be surprised, from another point of view, by what remains, in its very originality, a profound anthropocentrism and humanism. For a thinking of the other, of the infinitely other who looks at me, should, on the contrary, privilege the question and the request of the animal" (Derrida 2008, 113). While I believe Levinas's ethics should extend greater inclusivity to animals (though the question of which animals remains

[2] For further details see Clark 1997; Guenther 2007; Calarco 2008; Plant 2011; Atterton 2011a; Perpich 2012; Bunch 2013; Crowe 2013; Efstathiou 2019; Loevy 2019; De Villiers 2020.

open), Derrida's call to "privilege" the animal when reading Levinas risks inverting the concept of radical alterity, skewing it excessively toward the non-human. As an illustration of the tendency to over-compensate for the exclusion of animals in Levinas's ethics, consider the following remark made earlier in the lecture:

> That can be a surprise, coming from a thinking that is so "obsessed" (I am purposely using Levinas's word), so preoccupied by an obsession with the other and with his infinite alterity. If I am responsible for the other … isn't the animal more other still, more radically other, if I might put it that way, than the other in whom I recognize my brother, than the other in whom I identify my fellow or my neighbor … still more other than the other human, my brother or my neighbor? (Derrida 2008, 106–107)

Hicham-Stéphane Afeissa has described the claim that "the animal is the most 'other' of all others"—a formula originating with Claude Lévi-Strauss (Lévi-Strauss 1976, 39)—as "a veritable mantra of contemporary animal philosophy." He rejects it as "utterly false," arguing: "We would need to be able to measure what has been irretrievably lost in a culture when the human-animal relation comes to be held as the paradigm of the relation to otherness, to the detriment not only of this figure of otherness that is the other human ('the absolutely first stranger is the other-I,' said Husserl), of these figures of otherness to oneself that are the dreamer, the child, and the madman (who held all of Descartes's attention), but also of this major figure of the Other [*l'Autre*]—properly transcendent—that is God himself" (Afeissa, 2021). The reason it should be rejected in discussions of Levinas in particular is that it threatens to undermine the conditions of intelligibility of Levinas's own discourse. How could there be anything "more radically other" (animal) than what is already *radically other* (human)? We should not forget that one of Levinas's basic reasons for speaking of "the radical alterity of the other" (Levinas 1969, 35-36) was precisely to get away from the idea of a *difference based on distinction*. Distinction requires me to isolate some quality or other that makes something different from something else, and as such, cannot be used in the analysis of something like Levinasian otherness, which is intrinsic to those things that have it, and which, given its radically individual character, is impossible to explain. Levinas explicitly says:

> The Other [*Autrui*] is not other [*autre*] with a relative alterity as are, in a comparison, even ultimate species [*espece*], which mutually exclude one another, but still have their place within the community of a genus. … The alterity of the Other does not depend on any quality that would distinguish him from me, for a distinction of this nature would precisely imply between us that community of genus which already nullifies alterity. (Levinas 1969, 194)

To say that the otherness is not "relative" means that the expression 'X is radically other' is not merely elliptical for 'X is other than Y,' which would make the identity of X dependent on that of Y, but that X is absolutely other, that is to say, absolved from any relation with Y. All this goes to show that it makes no sense to speak of the animal as "the animal more other still, more radically other," than the human Other. I will briefly revisit the animal question later. For now, I want to focus on whether Levinas undermines his account of alterity by referring to a humanism of "the other man."

We are questioning how it is possible to reconcile the claim that the ethical relation with the Other is a relation between two unique individuals that cannot in principle be correlated or sorted based on some common, unchanging essence or nature, with the claim that the ethical relation is a "relationship of man to man." If we accept Levinas's characterization that "I, who have no concept in common with the Stranger, am, like him, without genus," then should we not give up the assumption that being human is a *necessary* (as opposed to merely sufficient) condition for ethics? If the ethical relation is necessarily a relation between human beings, then despite appearances to the contrary, it would seem that Levinas's theory requires us to *presuppose* that members of the moral community have some underlying trait in common that serves to distinguish them as members of their species, and which serves as the foundation for an explanation of membership in the moral community. But Levinas tells us this is impossible. Again: "I, who have no concept in common with the Stranger, am, like him, without genus."

One could say of Levinas's deployment of the notions 'man' and 'human' (as a substantive) what Derrida says of the term 'Dasein' in the work of Heidegger: "though not man, [it] is nevertheless nothing other than man" (Derrida 1982, 127). What Derrida means by this can be explained in terms of the distinction between intension and extension. 'Intension' (not to be confused with the phenomenological term 'intention') is a term used in semantics and philosophy of language to refer to any property or properties connoted by a word that provides its meaning. Like the Saussurean idea of the signified, it is the meaning, concept, or idea that a sign expresses or evokes. 'Extension,' by contrast, applies to all the things, or the set of things, to which that idea applies, similar to the referent in the Saussurean system. For example, the intension (or intensions) of the word 'Dasein' includes properties such as 'being concerned for Being,' 'having a relation to Being,' 'clearing of Being,' among others. It does not simply mean the 'man' of metaphysics, 'human reality,' 'member of the species *Homo sapiens*,' etc. However, as Derrida points out, it does not refer to or denote anything other than what the metaphysical or biological predicate 'human' might name. Likewise, Levinas's use of the term 'man' does not refer to

anything other than the entities that biologists call 'human,' though it does not mean or connote anything that can be defined in terms of essential properties that are meant to be intrinsic properties of the membership of the species *Homo sapiens*. This does not necessarily put Levinas's understanding of the meaning of the notions 'man' and 'human' at odds with biology. Levinas writes: "There does indeed exist a human genus as a biological genus [*un genre humain comme genre biologique*] and the common function [*la fonction commune*] men may exercise in the world as a totality permits the applying to them of a common concept" (Levinas 1969, 213). The fact that Levinas here points to functional biology rather than evolutionary biology to delimit the range of applicability of the concept 'human' as a substantive perhaps goes to show just how resistant Levinas was to the possibility of an affinity between his own rejection of essentialism and that of modern biology—to his detriment, I would argue. But even if we leave to one side Levinas's almost complete silence on the subject of Darwinian evolution, (See Atterton, 2011b.) surely one reason that Levinas puts the matter this way ("There does indeed exist a human genus as a biological genus") is that he wishes to distinguish between, on the one hand, human beings in the sense of a population of unique individuals that are fundamentally separate from one another, and, on the other, the biological species concept. Levinas thus distinguishes between two ways of conceiving of humanity: one as a disparate, disconnected group individuals that are absolutely different from one another while being ethically bound to each other in a relationship of responsibility; the other in terms of biological relatedness of its members that make up the genus *Homo*. The difference between these two conceptions—ethical and biological—is marked by a difference in level, with the ethical, as always with Levinas, being the more fundamental (e.g., Levinas 1981, 166).

If there is something of a puzzle here, however, it is that Levinas ultimately has recourse to the biological and familial tropes to formulate what he presents as, in some sense, prior to biology:

> But the human community instituted by language, where the interlocutors remain absolutely separated, does not constitute the unity of a genus. It is stated as a kinship (*parenté*) of men. That all men are brothers is not explained by their resemblance, nor by a common cause of which they would be the effect…. Paternity is not a causality, but the establishment of a unicity with which the father does and does not coincide. […] The very status of the human implies [*implique*] fraternity and the idea of the human race [*genus*]. Fraternity is radically opposed to the conception of a humanity united by resemblance. (Levinas 1969, 213-214)

That the term 'fraternity' is here used as a metaphor by Levinas is evident. Derived from Latin *frater*, it literally means a form of kinship between male individuals having at least one parent in common, but Levinas plainly does not intend the word in this biological sense. In the same passage, he also claims that (human) fraternity "implies [*implique*] the commonness of a father, as though the commonness of race [*genus*] would not bring together enough. … Monotheism signifies this human kinship, this idea of a human race [*race humaine*] that refers back to the approach of the Other in the face" (Levinas 1969, 213-214).

The difficulty, however, is that Levinas appears to presuppose the Judaic figure of God the Father (cf. Isaiah 64:8, "You are our Father") rather than derive the meaning of religious terms from the face-to-face encounter itself. To say that the ethical bond which unites the human race *implies* God yields, by Contraposition: if God does not exist, then ethics does not exist either. Levinas could scarcely defend this conditional without abandoning the transcendental-phenomenological method he claims to follow.

It is the first claim that I wish us to focus on: the assertion that the ethical community—that is to say, the population of beings who are bound to one another responsibly in "fraternity"—involves particulars whose logical status is not reducible to the status of ultimate differences in a genus. Now, if the relation between individuals were based solely on consanguinity, it would constitute a purely biological tie—the kind that exists between similar organisms—which Levinas strenuously denies: "Here there is a relation of kinship [*parenté*] outside of all biology" (Levinas 1981, 87). Yet if the ethical relation truly lies "outside of all biology"—which, in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas says merely "furnishes us the prototypes" of the types of relationships that we find within ethics, relationships he is quick to add that "free themselves from their biological limitation" (Levinas 1969, 279)—then it becomes difficult to see why the ethical relation is invariably, without exception, a "relationship of man to man."

3. Levinas's Anti-Essentialism

A natural way to defend this claim would be to show that the members of the moral community belong, *by their very essence*, to the human species. But this, Levinas says, is impossible. For if the self and the Other essentially belong to the biological genus *Homo*, meaning that members of the moral community could not have been non-humans, then it would have to be true that the self and the Other share a common essence, and this

is something Levinas rejects. Let me add quickly—for the sake of clarity—that the doctrine that biological organisms are essentially members of the species to which they belong, sometimes called 'individual essentialism,' is not to be confused with the position that each species has a particular essence (Aristotelean or biological) that separates it from other species, or 'species essentialism.' If it is true that each species has a set of biological traits that define its species, a claim that appears refutable, (See Okasha, 2002) then it would be true that the species *Homo sapiens* has an essence. But it would not follow from this necessarily that every individual member of the human species belonged to its kind essentially and could not have belonged to a different species. (The question to ask yourself is whether Socrates is essentially or even necessarily a man.) So, even if it could be shown that species have essences, it would not automatically follow that the self and the Other essentially belong to that species. The 'I' and the 'Other' are not, in any case, observable. They are never perceived by the senses in the manner of things, and never could be, no matter how refined or rigorous our phenomenology. Says Levinas: "You turn yourself toward the Other as toward an object when you see a nose, eyes, a forehead, a chin, and you can describe them" (Levinas 1985, 85). One wonders whether this entitles one to overlook all common morphological, physiological, or genetic traits that set the human Other off from members of other species. Just as we shouldn't notice the color of the Other's eyes (Levinas 1985, 85), perhaps we shouldn't notice whether they have opposing thumbs or have 23 pairs of chromosomes or walk upright or write poetry (and, of course, not all humans do). The easiest and most natural thing to do is to *deny* that the members of the ethical community are individuals who share a common biology that distinguishes them from members of other species or genera. Indeed, what else can Levinas mean when he says that "I, who have no concept in common with the Stranger, am, like him, without genus"? If we take seriously the claim that the self and the Other in a relationship of "fraternity"—understood metaphorically, that is, as fictive kinship—have no properties in common that could serve to distinguish them from other species, *because if they did then they would be defined in terms of certain essential characteristics*, then we are required to suppose that what Levinas calls 'I' and 'the Other' function like proper names that refer independently of identifying descriptions, and that it is not the possession of an *underlying trait* that all human beings share (including speech and reason) that makes them members of the moral community, but simply the ethical capacity to call upon and/or be called upon by each other.

The point, however, is not to deny what you are—a member of the genus *Homo*—but to imagine a scenario in which there exists what we call a self (I or the Other)

that possesses what Levinas calls an "inner life" or "psychism" (Levinas 1969, 54), and all that this implies for ethics, without sharing the traits typically associated with the traditional humanist subject. I am not making a metaphysical claim here. I am simply leaving open the possibility, as I think Levinas should have done, that the I and the Other are not essentially or necessarily human—and that to insist that they are is to risk compromising or undermining the otherness of the Other by delimiting it to human beings, which of course is something we all are.

There is little doubt that Levinas was aware of the difficulty I am outlining here and that he attempted to meet it. In a discussion that took place immediately after a talk given to the *Société Française de Philosophie* in 1962 titled "Transcendence and Height," Levinas said the following:

> In my opinion, transcendence is only possible when the Other [*Autrui*] is not initially the fellow human being [*semblable*] or the neighbor [*prochain*]; but when it is the very distant, when it is Other [*l'Autre*], when it is the one with whom, initially, I have nothing in common, when it is an abstraction. … Consequently, it is necessary to discard the word *neighbor* [*prochain*] and the word *fellow human being*, which establish so many things in common with my neighbor [*Voisin*] and so many similarities with my fellow human being; we belong to the same essence. (Levinas 1996, 27)

If this was Levinas's intent after writing *Totality and Infinity* to "discard" the word *prochain*, he was not consistent in pursuing it. The word is used over 120 times in *Otherwise Than Being* alone! But what does it mean to say that ethical transcendence is only possible when the Other is not "initially" (*initialement*) a fellow human being *like me*? Once we eliminate sameness, i.e., the identification of the Other and me as members of the same genus, we are left without identity. Levinas says in *Humanism of the Other Man*, "Man is without identity. … [M]an must be thought from the responsibility more ancient than the *conatus* of a substance or interior identification" (Levinas 2003, 68). But what of the concept 'man' itself? Is it not "an idea with a content"? Levinas's answer here might surprise us; he says, in short, *the idea has no meaning*:

> Men are absolutely different from one another: *the concept of man is the only one that cannot be comprehended*, since each man is absolutely different from the other. The concept of man has a single extension, and that is human fraternity. (Levinas 1996, 27).

In other words, one cannot say what the term 'man' means but only point to what it refers to. It has only "a single extension," that is to say, reference or denotation: "human fraternity." This is why, according to Levinas, "human solidarity is a very strange thing" (Levinas 1996, 27). It is "strange" because we cannot literally make sense of the idea that

two beings who ostensibly have nothing in common with each other should be concerned for one another in a relationship of responsibility. But strangest of all, says Levinas, would be the case where members of a genus were to care for one another: "it would be very strange after all if the term *man* designated a genus: have we ever seen individuals from a genus who enter into fraternity?" (Levinas 1996, 27).

It is not as members of the genus *Homo* that human individuals are united ("I, who have no concept in common with the Stranger, am, like him, without genus"), but as different individuals joined together in a relationship of empathy and sometimes mutual responsibility. It is this that constitutes what Levinas means by 'fraternity,' which, as we have seen, is considered to be a metaphorical or fictive kinship rather than a biological or species concept, and so can, in principle, be extended beyond what biologists dub *Homo sapiens* to include what is *other than man.*

The paradox here, of course, is that if conceivably there were a being that was not a member of the biological species man and which was nevertheless to exhibit the type of ethical behavior Levinas associates with the referent 'man,' then it would be closer to the 'humanism of the other man' than any being that was clearly human in a biological sense but showed itself incapable of ethics. It is possible that Levinas's discussion in *Difficult Freedom* of Bobby, the stray dog that befriended Levinas and the other prisoners during their captivity in WWII, fits this description:

> And then, about halfway through our long captivity, for a few short weeks, before the sentinels chased him away, a wandering dog entered our lives. One day he came to meet this rabble as we returned under guard from work. He survived in some wild patch in the region of the camp. But we called him Bobby, an exotic name, as one does with a cherished dog. He would appear at morning assembly and was waiting for us as we returned, jumping up and down and barking in delight. For him, there was no doubt that we were men. (Levinas 1990, 153)

Though a member of the species *Canis familiaris*, Bobby is likened by Levinas to a Kantian ethicist ("This dog was the last Kantian in Nazi Germany" [Levinas 1990, 153]), not because he possesses *logos* (he does not), but because, unlike "the other men [*les autres hommes*] called free, who encountered us or gave us work or commands or even a smile … [and who] stripped us of our human skin," Bobby alone recognized Levinas and his fellow Jewish prisoners as "men," attesting thereby to their dignity as the Other. Hence Levinas's earlier exclamation: "That is what the friend of man means. A transcendence in the animal!" (Levinas 1990, 152).

I have argued elsewhere that whatever concepts Bobby may entertain, they probably do not include the canonical concept of *man* (person, member of the species *Homo*

sapiens, etc.). (Atterton 2019, 73) This, however, is simply irrelevant to Levinas's ethical point. It is precisely Bobby's incapacity for (human) conceptualization that allows for the specifically ethical dimension of the welcome to come through: the welcome as the ability to respond to Levinas and the other (human) prisoners as *the Other*. This does not imply that only human beings can be absolutely foreign; it does, however, suggest the converse—that all human beings are capable of being absolutely foreign—while not *a priori* excluding the possibility of an encounter with the Other that is an encounter with a being *other than* '*man*.'

Conclusion

Levinas's ethical philosophy, with its emphasis on the irreducible singularity of the Other who is "without genus," represents a challenge to traditional humanism and its reliance on a shared human nature. By arguing that the ethical relation must remain open to the possibility of encountering a being beyond the category 'man,' this paper has sought to highlight the radical implications of Levinas's thought. I have argued that insisting on the essential *humanness* of the I and the Other risks not only undermining the very alterity that defines Levinas's ethics, but also risks excluding what is other than man for no other reason than that it is not man. Thus, to preserve the Other's absolute singularity, and on pain of philosophical consistency, we should embrace an ethical openness that transcends anthropocentric boundaries, allowing for the possibility of an encounter with a fundamentally unknowable Other that may not be human. This perspective not only satisfies the conditions for consistency in Levinas's philosophy, but also invites us to rethink the scope of ethical responsibility in a world where the boundaries of 'human' are increasingly contested. Restricting ethics to humans would contradict this by subsuming the Other under totalizing concepts and imposing a categorical limit, negating the Other's absolute or radical alterity.

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