

Le plaisir de la lecture
Reading the Other Animal

Simon Glendinning

Reading is that fertile miracle of a communication effected in solitude.
Marcel Proust

A Distinction Within the Realm of the Senses

Traditional empiricism, the stout defender of the senses, is by all accounts sick.¹ But perhaps a certain empiricist legacy is still fighting for life. Without seeking a resurrection of empiricism, the aim of this paper is to engage in what Levinas calls a ‘rehabilitation of sensation’.² I want to resist theorizations of our life that would seek to exclude our sensible relations with things and with others from any intrinsic involvement with our understanding of them; to resist conceptions that regard sensibility as something in itself dumb and brute, something (as tradition would have us have it) ‘merely animal’. However, the trajectory of this discussion will not remain in every part faithful to its Levinasian inspiration. And it will not leave the traditional conception of animality intact either. In what follows, what my five-year-old daughter calls our ‘humanity’³ will not be elaborated in terms of (trans)formations of life that Levinas, with the tradition, calls a ‘break’ from ‘animality’ or from ‘the animal condition’.⁴ Every other, I want to affirm, is every bit an animal.

However, before getting to these issues I want first to draw attention to what may appear to be a more immediate departure from Levinas, an infelicity already in the French part of my title. In English we have been invited to read Levinas’s discussion of ‘the plane on which [our] sensible life is lived’ as a discourse on ‘enjoyment’.⁵ And my title wants to retain a Levinas-inspired affirmation of an interiority indissociable from the iteration of writing that we call *reading*.⁶ However, by leaving my title in French, far from recalling Levinas I may be taken to be removing myself from him altogether. For the word that (‘for want of a better word’⁷) ‘enjoyment’ translates is not, as one might perhaps have imagined, the more or less general term ‘*plaisir*’ but the typically more specific or specialized one ‘*jouissance*’. That is, for Levinas *jouissance* is not one (rather distinctive) affective state among others but that ubiquitous sensory mode in which every ‘I’ undergoes its worldly sojourn.

So on behalf of Levinas we might suggest a change in my title to ‘*La jouissance de la lecture*’, and following him would, no doubt, be simplified by that alteration. However,

my title is also a response to a striking supplement to his identification of *jouissance* as the general field of (human) sensibility. For in the course of an analysis of the solitude of interiority where talk of such heightened delight might seem most appropriate, in a phenomenology of the sensual marvel of touching another person, he identifies an internally differentiated domain of pleasure that complicates his conception of that general field. Or rather that general field is, in a certain way, re-situated within a wider and internally differentiated domain of pleasure: '*voluptuousness*' Levinas insists, '*is not a pleasure [plaisir] like others because it is not solitary like eating or drinking*'.⁸ The reason why we might regard this formulation as a distinctive complication of Levinas's analysis is that the case of *plaisir* with which the voluptuous is contrasted is that of alimentation: 'eating and drinking'. And that case too is not just one among others for Levinas. On the contrary, it covers, quite precisely, the totality of the sensuous life of enjoyment itself. 'Eating', Levinas suggests, has the sense of 'the transmutation of the other into the same', and this transmutation is 'the essence of enjoyment', so 'all enjoyment is in this sense alimentation'.⁹ We 'eat' the other (object) and in that respect it is the other relative to me. The Other (person), by contrast, is presented by Levinas precisely as *not* falling under my power: 'he is not wholly in my site' and 'escapes my grasp by an essential dimension even if I have him at my disposal'.¹⁰ In short, the alterity of the Other cannot be appropriated, one cannot enjoy the Other. On the contrary, the Other is given to me in a presentation 'totally different from experience in the sensible sense of the term, relative and egoist'.¹¹ Thus although the distinction between solitary and non-solitary pleasure emerges within an analysis of the solitude of our sensible life, it seems to reproduce – *en abyme* – the oppositional structure that controls *everything* in Levinas's thought: namely, the distinction between the 'relative and egoist' objectivity of enjoyed objects and the absolute transcendence of the Other.¹²

But now, at this point, one cannot avoid asking: if what Levinas calls the 'bond' with the Other is not in this way a relation experienced within the realm of the senses what possible sense can there be to the idea of an experienced *pleasure* that is somehow irreducibly 'not solitary'?

We should note that while this question raises a serious problem for Levinas's attempt to mark the domain of pleasure with an internal division, it raises an equally serious problem for any philosophy that does not find satisfaction with empiricism. The fundamental mark of empiricism is not that it does away with every mode of receptivity apart from sensibility, but that it attempts to conceive every such mode *in terms of sensibility alone*. If this doctrine is construed as implying that we can speak of 'seeing the Other' or 'feeling the Other' in the same sense in which we might speak of 'seeing the colour of someone's eyes' or 'feeling the warmth of their breath' then I think Levinas is absolutely right to reject it. On the other hand, however, I am not satisfied with Levinas's attempt to remove the 'bond' with the Other from the realm of the senses altogether. In my view, our aliveness to others as such – and I drop the capitalization here in order more comfortably to include our aliveness to the lives of animals, our most other others – is not something that has to be understood utterly apart from the sensible life of a 'merely' animal condition. Indeed, I will argue that it is inseparable from the perception of marks and traces of a kind that is not exclusively human.

An empiricist might try to steer clear of Levinas's insistence on the non-sensible presentation of the other by recalling his division within the domain of sensory pleasure: by reverting to the difference between undergoings that are impressions of objects like food and drink and undergoings that are impressions of others like myself, other sensitive beings, beings whose own existence is also steeped in affective sensibility. The trouble is, however, that for the empiricist, no sensible impression I am in a position to get is up to the job of giving rise to an idea of an other. The voluptuous pleasure of a caress, that mode of sensibility in which I am supposed to undergo a pleasure that is not solitary, is, for the empiricist, just a series of impressions of another body. I want an impression of a pleasure that is not *my* pleasure. But for the empiricist success in this would be total failure.¹³

So the empiricist cannot sustain the distinction Levinas wants to identify within the domain of sensory pleasure, between solitary pleasures like eating and drinking and manifestly non-solitary pleasures like the voluptuous. The empiricist is not only left uncertain whether the other enjoys his touch or not, but simply cannot *make sense* of the idea of the other's enjoyment: the very idea of 'the enjoyment of the other' has, for him, no possible sensory content, and so, for him, no content period.

Since Levinas positively affirms a mode of presentation of the other irreducible to anything merely sensible he does not regard the empiricist's predicament as a problem he is confronted with at all. And, as I have indicated, I think Levinas is right to resist the idea that the presentation of the other should be understood in terms of some kind of perception or experience of the other 'in the sensible sense of the term', in the sense, that is, in which one perceives the colour, texture, temperature or shape of a body. In my view, what we need to focus on in order to avoid the empiricist's shipwreck on the reef of solipsism, is not an impression of a body that could found an idea of an other but a lived orientation towards the other as such. Levinas's wonderfully understated example is of my caressing a hand that has been given. And he notes, surely correctly, that if I caress a hand it is not the 'softness or warmth of the hand' that I am aiming to feel or touch, but the other as such: the pleasure lies in touching *her* or *him*.¹⁴ And while it is true that the other's pleasure – the feeling of me feeling them – is something I experience 'as pure future' as Levinas nicely puts it, rather than as a presently enjoyed content, that does not mean the other's feeling is without interest to me. On the contrary, in this moment nothing is more interesting to me than this future! Or again, as Wittgenstein might put it the 'image' of the other's feeling is irrevocably part of the scene here, only not as a 'picture' or representation, not as a given sensory content.¹⁵ The situation is therefore one where, thankfully, in close contact we remain totally distinct, absolutely separate.

Bread and Books

I have been exploring the paradoxical idea of a mode of interiority or solitariness that could be in some way manifestly non-solitary. The empiricist got nowhere with this. One might think, however, that empiricism could fair better in the context of relations that are in Levinas's view 'relative and egoist'; in the context of solitary pleasures. Perhaps empiricism is on safer ground with 'bread and books', to use a striking phrase

of Diane Perpich's.¹⁶ Since both are, in one way or another, closely connected to eating they lend themselves well to Levinas's analysis of 'living from...' as alimentation. On the other hand, however, even bread and books are caught up in profoundly ethical – and thus other-related – connections. Bread, of course, is itself food. But it is not just one food among others. It is, for example, something we might dip or dunk in Levinas's 'good soup'.¹⁷ More significantly still, bread is also an emblem of what, for want of anything better, I might give to the other by, as Simon Critchley puts it, 'tearing [it] from my own mouth'.¹⁸ That is, as an object of enjoyment, bread is also caught up in the most primordial of images of what Critchley calls 'the generous movement of the ethical work'.¹⁹

And books too are not just one kind of sensible object among others. Books may *be* ethical works, good books, even 'the good book' itself. Even books that are not in themselves ethical works can be caught up in ethical work – whether one is writing a book for another or others, or even, as Wittgenstein considered, writing to the glory of the supreme Other, 'to the glory of God'.²⁰ Whether one is reading a book out loud to another or others, whether one is giving one as a gift or perhaps preventing them from being burnt, books belong with bread as among the most precious objects in our ethical imagination.

Nevertheless, books, like bread, are quintessential objects of nourishment. Wittgenstein would talk of his favourite American 'detective mags' as being 'rich in mental vitamins & calories'.²¹ We find it utterly unproblematic to speak of someone as 'a voracious reader', and there is nothing surprising in the partly borrowed subtitle of Francis Spufford's memoir: *Confessions of an English Fiction Eater*.²² Some people devour books as the starving devour bread. So, for the moment, and despite the profoundly ethical involvements of both bread and books, I will continue to try to respect Levinas's distinction within the domain of pleasure and regard our (let's say) primary relation to such objects as a mode of solitariness that is solitary. I will come fundamentally to question it at the end, but the idea that our gobbling-up of books is a paradigmatically solitary pleasure, a perfect image of solitariness and interiority, seems genuinely compelling.²³ When it comes to it, it can seem that there is no scene in which we are so alone, so solitary, as the private scene of the enjoyment of reading. I will now turn to this reading matter directly.

The Enjoyment of Reading

I mentioned Francis Spufford's little childhood memoir. Its main title is *The Child that Books Built*. The text itself is built on the alimentary metaphor of the subtitle, and he clearly delights in thinking of books as 'objects you consume'²⁴ and, in a somewhat more ambiguous metaphor (Levinas might think a tragic one), of 'sucking the words off the page'.²⁵ The title *Confessions* too betrays that the solitariness of Francis's reading, the isolation of what his mother called his 'reading silence', might also involve him in a transgression of the proper forms of childhood play, in ordinary intercourse with others.

Of course, confessions are also events of outward avowal of something inner, events which others may or may not find convincing. They belong therefore with any other

testimony where perjury is possible; wherever one might take the opportunity of putting a sincere expression out of play and putting something else, a dissimulated expression or perhaps no expression at all, in its place. *Confessions of an English Fiction Eater* thus attests not only to the transgression of properly childlike behaviour but, at the same time, to the interiority or privacy of the pleasure of reading. In the most powerful (if problematic) motifs of the book Spufford refers to 'the degree of inwardness' without 'outward trace' that belongs to his reading pleasure – an inwardness which he links closely (and equally problematically) to the 'transformation' of children into independent 'autonomous' adults who will, he says, 'think for themselves'.²⁶

I must confess that I found Spufford's own thought here more or less completely overwhelmed by two prejudices concerning this idea of adult inwardness, prejudices of a rather traditional sort – no doubt ones he got caught up in reading all that fiction. The first he shares not only with Levinas but with a classical tradition that goes back to Greek and Roman sources, in the idea that it is through some more or less violent passage of initiation, through a radical transformation of our animal being, that we become properly 'minded' human beings, autonomous subjects with private, inner lives. The second is something more symptomatic of our present age, and concerns a certain confusion about the nature of mindedness and inwardness itself. Specifically, with regard to the experienced pleasure of reading, Spufford's own mind is hopelessly divided between two equally hopeless alternatives. On the one hand, he happily endorses the attempt to grasp the enjoyment of reading scientifically: 'between the black lines of print and the eye' he states 'a channel is opening up on which information is pouring'. In this way what he calls 'the receiving mind' is 'filling' with information. On the other hand, however, and somewhere unsatisfied with the scientific image, Spufford also wants to invoke a more traditional idea of an 'inwardness' which is *not* replaceable by any infomatic or technical process description, an inwardness which, he states 'leaves no outward trace' and which cannot be detected by 'the subtlest microphone'; an inwardness which remains essentially out of reach of science.²⁷

There is a seemingly unstoppable oscillation between two radically different conceptions of the enjoyment of reading on display here. Between reading grasped 'objectively' as neurological information processing and reading construed 'subjectively' on the model of what Derrida calls 'the system of hearing/understanding-oneself-speak', the system in which a phonic image (a sound-for-consciousness in contrast to the gross and material 'black lines of print' or 'the openly spoken voice') 'presents itself as the non-exterior, nonmundane...signifier', an inwardness that can remain, in principle, without outward trace and involving a phonic signifier undetectable by the subtlest microphone.²⁸

In my view, what we shuttle hopelessly between here are not sound scientific claims and equally sound phenomenological ones but between confused science and misleading phenomenology. To get off this see-saw we need to attend neither to supposed scientific wisdom nor to supposed first-person testimony, but to the fact that there really are various and familiar (outward) criteria for 'reading', and indeed, (outward) criteria for someone 'reading silently' to themselves. I am not going to go

over these well-rehearsed points on this occasion. However, the basic thought is that supposing there is no ‘outward trace’ of silent reading is a profoundly conceptual and not merely empirical error.²⁹

Spufford’s text, however, only barely worries about any tensions between or incoherences within the ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ conceptions of the interiority of reading, and in the memoir mode gets on well enough without needing to. By contrast, in a recent paper by Peggy Kamuf, the distinguished American literary theorist and translator of many writings of Derrida, the different ways in which we try to get at what is going on in reading (specifically as she puts it ‘from within’ and ‘from without’) are the focus of explicit thematic investigation. Kamuf’s paper, entitled ‘The End of Reading’, is not currently in print but is of considerable interest – and not only because it got her into terrible trouble and lead, utterly ludicrously, to her being named as runner-up for the ‘Bonehead of the Year’ prize in a US based e-magazine. But before we get to that awful business, business connected by the way to Spufford’s first implanted prejudice – the classical account of what John McDowell has called the ‘ordinary upbringing’³⁰ that characterises ‘the normal coming to maturity of the kind of animal we are’³¹ – I want to trace Kamuf’s involvement in the see-saw of the second prejudice, an involvement that will raise sharply the question of the other as an animal.

The Other (Animal) Reading

Following a review of some of the scientific literature, and what she surely rightly perceives as the more or less dreamlike attempt of contemporary neurological sciences to get to grips with the reading experience ‘from within’, Kamuf turns to a non-scientific account: that of Augustine watching St Ambrose silently reading to himself. Quoting the text, Kamuf declares that she will ‘read aloud from Book 6’ of the *Confessions*. Here it is, you can read it to yourself:

When [Ambrose] read, his eyes moved down the pages and his heart sought out their meaning while his voice and tongue remained silent. Often when we were present—for no one was forbidden to enter, and it was not his custom to have whoever came announced to him—we saw him reading to himself, and never otherwise. After sitting for a long time in silence—who would dare to annoy a man so occupied? – we would go away.

Just as Spufford’s ‘confessions’ point towards a private indiscretion or suspicion of secret transgression, Kamuf notes that ‘Augustine writes that he and his companions hesitated as to how to explain Ambrose’s behavior’ and felt the need ‘to dispel a...thought’ that he was keeping to himself ‘some secret guilt, an evil and not a good purpose’, something that should have been ‘proffered openly’. Again, however, what fascinates Kamuf most is that our experience of the other’s reading seems not to be an experience of reading at all. Augustine, attending this scene of the other’s reading finds that *there is nothing to attend to*, nothing to understand: in short the *impression* of the other’s reading is, it seems, lacking:

So, he neither sees nor hears the other's reading taking place; he can only believe that it takes place nowhere that he can hear or see, cut off, therefore from his own understanding. So long as reading manifests itself in the openly spoken voice, then its conditioning ground of alterity can appear to disappear into that powerful figure of sameness Jacques Derrida has called 's'entendre-parler', hearing/understanding-oneself-speak.

As long as there was the apparently phenomenal presence of the other's voice it could seem to Augustine that the other's reading was something he could have an experience of, an impression of. And Kamuf deploys the Derridean figure of the sameness of speech and understanding as something that might have given intellectual comfort to that impression.

But wait! This turn to Derrida seems exactly to miss the point of that 'powerful figure'. For Derrida invokes it as a deeply tempting conception not of public exteriority (the 'openly spoken voice') but, as we have indicated already, of an interiority that presents itself as, in principle, *without* exterior: the figure of an inwardness *without* outward trace. In other words, what Derrida is calling into question is precisely the picture that Kamuf presents in this passage as the hidden truth of the other's reading ('nowhere that he can see or hear'). As she notes elsewhere, she takes it as simply 'obvious' that the other's reading is 'essentially and irreducibly unobservable from within'.

A certain conception of interiority has, Derrida suggests, 'dominated the history of the world during an entire epoch',³² a conception of consciousness as immediate self-presence inaccessible to every other. And despite her considerable debts to Derrida, this conception dominates Kamuf's text at this point too. Kamuf cannot get off the seesaw between bad science and poor phenomenology because she is sitting squarely on one end of it.

In Spufford's interpretation of the inwardness of reading we saw him connect the interiority of his 'reading silence' to a *Bildung* through which an infant human animal is transformed into a subject proper who can think for himself. We have just seen how Kamuf endorses the invisible and inaudible side of the debate over the nature of interiority. I want now to turn to her endorsement of the developmental prejudice. For it was here that Kamuf got into real trouble. I don't mean more conceptual trouble, although there is something of that too, but (especially for her) terrible, horrible trouble – trouble you would not wish on anyone; trouble that lead her to say 'I feel as if I have just been mugged'. And it was all due to her description of 'what is involved in learning to read':

The practice [of reading] gets passed down, most typically, in the voice of mothers, usually mothers, reading aloud to their children. [...] [T]he scene is certainly not a natural one. It has also to be produced, reproduced, instituted. With the scene we are evoking [...] *it is the institution of written signs themselves*, and thus of all possible institutions that is being passed down. The institution of the family of man takes place in

a scene of learning to read. But what we forget, what we have to forget or repress is that this is always also a violent scene inasmuch as it has to repeat, reinflct the violence that wrenches the human animal out of the state of sheer animality, where, as we are taught to believe once we can read, there is no such thing as reading in this common sense, the sense we all supposedly share, sharing thus the belief that only humans read or do what we call reading.

As I say, Kamuf got into terrible trouble with this invocation of a certain violence connected to reading to children. Well there is no doubt: real life with kids just ain't like the simulated expressions of it in *Barney*. However, since her suggestion about violence was expressly intended to challenge what she calls 'our dearest common notions', notions about parents reading bed-time stories and the like, perhaps she should not have been quite so surprised when some of those who really do hold those common notions dear retaliated from the assault they felt, the mugging they felt, at the hands of this academic theorist.

It got started when a journalist called Amy Halloran, who was in the audience for Kamuf's presentation of her paper, wrote an article about this supposed reading-violence, an article that was published in *Salon.com*.³³ Halloran didn't like what she thought was being said by Kamuf, and against it wanted to affirm that her young son's life was, as she put it, 'served' and not 'hurt' by his parents reading to him. She wanted positively to affirm a parental role (male or female) that would 'push that little creature further from the wild'.

Again, however, wait! Is this 'push' to that 'little creature' really so very different from what Kamuf called 'a certain violence' involved with 'the initiation of children into language'. And then suddenly the players in this piece change places. For while Halloran vigorously denied the idea of violence while also, in a way, affirming it, so, bizarrely, Kamuf continued to affirm the idea of violence while also, in another and more fundamental way, denying it.³⁴ Kamuf's major argument was in fact subtly different to the one that would see a certain violence in pushing a child out of its merely animal condition. It can look otherwise because Kamuf is herself of half a mind to accept that idea. But really it is not quite what she says. It is true that she says that the scene is violent 'inasmuch as it has to reinflct the violence that wrenches the human animal out of the state of sheer animality'. But the 'inasmuch' here is capable of weakening the level of violence to nothing, to less even than a push. And, as far as I can see, that is precisely what takes place when Kamuf goes on to affirm that 'sheer animality' is a state in which the capacity to read is, in fact, *already not lacking*, that as she puts it '*animals are also others reading*'. And if that is right, as I think it is, then the process of what both Halloran and Kamuf are content to regard as 'the civilizing of the human animal' is not the wrenching violence, the push out of animality, that at moments both are inclined to think we actually endure. Rather that civilizing is a process through which we are taught to regard humanity as uniquely distinctive by, as Kamuf puts it, '*feigning to believe that other animals are not also others reading*'.

If a child's upbringing really did involve something like a push or wrench to its animal being, a wrench which would reset it on a royal road to autonomy; if that upbringing

then really required moving from a life utterly without reading to a life profoundly shaped by it, then, yes, perhaps we could talk of this ordinary upbringing as inflicting a certain kind of violence on this young animal. But Kamuf's major argument is that, in fact, for human readers it is always only *as if* such a wrenching is going on. It is in the development in (and *as*) human history of the idea of a radical break, of a fundamental gulf between 'civilized humanity' and 'sheer animality', that the violence really lies. (The violence here is not, I should add, everywhere in a form one can or should utterly deplore, and there are less vicious, more refined ways of living it out.)

Halloran's classical conception of the human distinction would suppose that there really is no reading and *a fortiori* no writing in the life of a 'sheer animal', a situation that requires therefore that the child be given a push from outside. But that whole conception, according to Kamuf's major argument, is fundamentally a myth, indeed *the* myth of what she calls 'the institution of the family of man' – and it is the endless replaying of this myth which has constructed and reproduced the idea of the difference between 'the family of man' and what that family calls 'the animal', a difference which, in fact, the human never did find or discover. What the myth has constantly to make us forget and repress then, is not a violence involved in reading to children but, as Kamuf puts it, that in the response to iterable marks that can do without the presence of their animal producer, 'animals other than human animals read each other and read us, us other animals.' Something we are perhaps inclined to forget all the more easily when the endless array of animals in children's stories are not really animals either.

In the end then Kamuf's recourse to a misleading conception of the irreducibility of the other to sensible experience (a misleading conception based on the traditional restriction of the scope of experience to qualities and properties that are fully present in the present) serves only to occlude what her response to the reading of the other animal should have enabled her to hold more securely in view: namely, that reading is not best understood *either* as neurological 'information-extraction' *or* as an inwardness 'without outward trace'. Rather, reading is the primary means through which the other is presented to me *as such*, presented that is in the dimension of what both Levinas and Wittgenstein call '*expression*'; presented then, as Levinas says, in the face of the other. Such a face is, *pace* the empiricist, irreducible to the presentation of a complex of visual qualities or phenomenal properties. However, and now, *pace* Levinas, the 'ultimate situation' of the face to face,³⁵ is not radically beyond the senses either, not something beyond *knowledge* altogether. On the contrary, as the situation where I respond to the traces and behaviour of a living thing as to an expression of an other, it is something I *acknowledge* – and, in that way, while *not* something sensibly available to just anyone you please (as colour and shape are to an animal being with a suitably structured visual system) it is precisely *not* something radically hidden, precisely *not* something about which I can have no idea. We are separate but not separated.³⁶

Seeing the Face of the Other (Animal)

It is with this thought that, without going beyond the senses, we can get beyond the impoverished resources of traditional empiricism: the alterity one is presented with in

expression is not given to experience in the same sense as features of reality that are fully present in the present, but this does not exclude the very idea of having sensory experiences or impressions which are in themselves non-solitary. On the contrary, with the response in which the expression of an other is manifest, with the advent of the face, non-solitariness becomes part of the very fabric of our life as lived: our attitude to or acknowledgement of the other *as* other enters right into our perceptions and feelings, for example, right to the heart of our voluptuous pleasures. This makes available a conception of what can be given in sensibility that is utterly foreign to empiricism. It is, however, also utterly foreign to Levinas.

Levinas affirms that enjoyed contents in general are what occupy one's life and as such are potential objects of knowledge. This is completely different from the empiricist 'veil of perception' because it does not reify the enjoyment of sensible contents: enjoyment is not itself a new object of knowledge. For example, there is, as Levinas stresses, no internal 'vision of vision'.³⁷ On the other hand, Levinas rightly insists that rejecting the conception of experience as an inner interface should not lead us to downplay or overlook the going on of one's undergoing of a vision of things. It should not lead us to forget interiority: 'it is not knowing but enjoyment, and, as we shall say, the very egoism of life'.³⁸ Or again (in what is in fact a very Wittgensteinian formulation) 'one does not know, one lives sensible qualities: the green of these leaves, the red of this sunset'.³⁹ So in relation to contents which we 'live from' there is always also a lived enjoyment of it: 'life is *love of life*', or somewhat more prosaically, 'the bare fact of life is never bare'.⁴⁰ And this living 'happiness' is not just a 'colouring' or 'affective tonality' that we get here and there as an extra, it is the very 'pulsation' of the "I".⁴¹ The problem is, however, that Levinas's analysis of this happy pulsation leaves no room for a genuinely *sensory* encounter with the other. On the contrary, he regards the 'epiphany' that is the 'revelation' of the other as an absolutely non-sensory *imposition* into the sensory realm, 'a mode irreducible to manifestation' and 'incommensurate with [...] enjoyment or knowledge'.⁴²

To clarify – but also to problematize – this account of the irreducibility of the other to 'experience in the sensible sense of the term' I want briefly to highlight how Levinas gives conceptual shape to it by embedding it within a distinction between the condition of human sensibility and what he calls a merely (purely) animal condition. For in Levinas's thought, as in Spufford's and Halloran's (and some part of Kamuf's), the non-human animal condition is always conceived as something from which human life has been distinctively and radically 'liberated'.⁴³ The idea here is not that the lived sensuousness of a human life is, as one might say, of a superior quality to that attained by any non-human animal. Rather, Levinas's far more radical claim is that the non-human animal is 'outside of happiness and unhappiness' altogether:⁴⁴ its condition is wholly and through and through one of natural dependence, and does not achieve the solitariness that figures our independence from what we are dependent on. Heidegger famously described the animal as 'lodged' in an environment in contrast to human existence which 'inhabits' a world.⁴⁵ Levinas shares this fundamental (and not at all new) humanism even as he attempts to re-emphasise against Heidegger the importance and philosophical significance of our sensible condition. For Levinas it is even questionable whether non-human animals are, strictly speaking, born. They are not 'veritably born', he suggests, since there is no essential break for the animal from its

‘uterine existence’ to its worldly one.⁴⁶ The animal remains always in a condition of ‘enrooted’ attachment to ‘pure nature’.⁴⁷

Because of the evident similarities between human beings and non-human animals, Levinas knows that a radically non-natural explanation of human life will be resisted.⁴⁸ And he does have an impressive and compellingly nuanced account of what he (feigns to) find that would justify our concept of ‘the difference between humans and animals’. In particular, there is an intuitive plausibility to his idea that non-human animals lack the *time* made possible by a ‘postponement of dependence’:⁴⁹ the human, he suggests, is not simply ‘enslaved’ by ‘immediate and incessant contacts’ with the world,⁵⁰ but can be said ‘to have time in the midst of facts’.⁵¹ And this thought is profoundly bound up with his critique of empiricism. For according to Levinas ‘the liberation of man breaking with the animal condition’ by way of ‘having time’ can take place only because the human holds itself open to something which is essentially *not* sensibly given: namely, an openness to an ‘uncharted future’.⁵² That is, the human exists as human only in virtue of its anticipation of what it cannot fully anticipate, its striving towards what it cannot satisfy, through a relation, in short, to what is ‘absolutely other’. Thus, the distinctively human mode of dependency and neediness, the independence of solitariness which constitutes every human as ‘a veritable *subject*’,⁵³ is, according to Levinas, *already* marked and run through by a distinctively *non-natural*, or, as he puts it, ‘metaphysical Desire’: for Man ‘the physiological plane is transcended’⁵⁴ because ‘the time presupposed by need is provided me by Desire; human need already rests on Desire’.⁵⁵

For Levinas, then, ‘to be’ for the human means to live a life run though by metaphysical Desire, and that means to live a life that is inseparable from its non-sensory openness to the absolute other, inseparable (concretely) from its welcoming of the Other.⁵⁶ A fully *natural* life, by contrast, is for Levinas one which is constantly engaged in a struggle to survive, a struggle, that is, for its *own* life above all.

While it is impossible not to be impressed by Levinas’s profoundly rich challenge to empiricism I think his account betrays a profound confusion concerning the kind of difference that is in question when we talk about ‘the difference between humans and animals’, a confusion that is sustained and fed by a fundamentally distorted conception of nature and of natural, animal life.⁵⁷ I will close by suggesting how we might retrieve a conception of our openness to others which, while equally hostile to empiricism, resists recoiling from the whole idea that it is an apprehension within the realm of the senses.

Up to this point I have retained the hypothesis that the pleasure of reading is a solitary pleasure. However, what we have moved towards in the reading of Kamuf is a conception of scenes of reading as ones in which, quite precisely, another is presented to me in *expression*, and thus presented as such, in their alterity, as other. This emphasis on expression is, of course, Levinasian in inspiration as well. However, as Derrida recognized some thirty years ago,⁵⁸ any attempt to treat the face as something we must *read*, and hence as a kind of writing, would require a total inversion of what Levinas says, an inversion that is massively resisted by his text. What, according to Levinas’s phenomenology of separateness, is *experientially* given of the other? For Levinas the only

experiential answer relates to what the other *does*: his observable ‘works’, his ‘acts’, ‘gestures’ and (akin to the ‘hatchets and drawings’ of primitive humans)⁵⁹ his ‘writing’.⁶⁰ But all of these are phenomenal realities which, with respect to the reality of the other as Levinas conceives it, ultimately ‘lack reality’ and give us only traces of the living man.⁶¹ The Levinas of *Totality and Infinity* simply refuses to accept that there could be a genuine case of expression which does not pass by way of the humanly spoken word. In fact, speech too, which is profoundly privileged by Levinas as the basic mode in which the reality of the other shows itself can itself be regarded as ‘merely phenomenal’ – as ‘speech activity’ – and hence also, to some degree, as dead or lacking reality. Nevertheless, ‘Man’, ‘living man’, is always determined by Levinas as ‘subjectivity that speaks’.⁶²

But I think Derrida was right to say that a ‘rehabilitation of writing’ in the form of a renewed attention to what Levinas regarded as lifeless ‘speech activity’, and *the structure of writing that it too exhibits*, would have enormously helped the analysis of the other in terms of expression.⁶³ For here we have a phenomenon of life that in its essential iterability is *neither* a purely sensory presence in the present *nor* only the phenomenal form of a reality that is, for me, absolutely out of my sensible world. Moreover, the connections between *writing* and *self-expression* are also very strong. Don’t we know, for example, that when it comes to getting oneself across, when it comes to giving one’s thoughts the best chance of ‘bearing a stamp that marks them as mine’,⁶⁴ that ‘the writer absents himself better, that is expresses himself better as other, addresses himself to the other more effectively than the man of speech’?⁶⁵

In its unwavering emphasis on speech as the principle mode in which the reality of the other shows itself, it is one of the most striking features of Levinas’s thought that it totally refuses to accept that the face of the other might be something one could be said to *see*. And it is just as striking that Wittgenstein’s thought does *not*. Making the essential point against empiricism, Wittgenstein puts it like this:

“If you only shake free from your physiological prejudices, you will find nothing queer about the fact that the glance of the eye can be seen too.”
For I also say that I see the look that you cast at someone else. And if someone wanted to correct me and say that I don’t really see it, I should take that for pure stupidity.

On the other hand I have not *made any admissions* by using that manner of speaking, and I should contradict anyone who told me I saw the glance ‘just the way’ I see the shape and colour of the eye.

For ‘naïve language’, that is to say our naïve, normal way of expressing ourselves, does not contain any theory of seeing – does not show you a *theory* but only a *concept* of seeing.⁶⁶

There is no doubt that Levinas’s ‘rehabilitation of sensation’ involves a compelling repudiation of the traditional empiricist distortion which supposes that what is ‘given’ in general should be grasped on the basis of the ‘physiological definition of sensation’ as ‘simple quality’.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, I wonder if his refusal to countenance all talk of ‘seeing

the face of the other' is not symptomatic of the fact that he rehabilitates sensation without radically repudiating the 'physiological prejudice' that theorizes 'seeing' as a matter of the visual enjoyment of present sensory contents, a residual empiricist prejudice that leaves Levinas with an account of expression which is fundamentally out of this world. On the other hand, if we can recall ourselves to our normal ways of expressing ourselves then not only can we affirm that, in the acknowledgement of expression, we can see the face of the other but we can also come to acknowledge something else: namely, that we can see the face of the other animal too.

Notes

¹ See Richard Rorty, 'Introduction' to Wilfred Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1997). One might also recall here Donald Davidson's remarking that following the critique of the third dogma of empiricism 'it is not clear that there is anything left to call empiricism' (Donald Davidson, 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme' in *Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p.189).

² Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), pp.187-88.

³ In a private communication Martha Glendinning invented what Derrida might call the *animot* 'humanity' in a deliberate effort to mix up my thinking about the difference between humanity and animality. I am grateful to her for doing so.

⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.116.

⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.187.

⁶ The concept 'iteration' belongs to Derrida's analysis of the 'eventhood of an event' that is and can only be 'repetitive or citational in its structure' (Jacques Derrida, 'Signature Event Context' in Limited Inc (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p.17). I will revert to this concept on occasion in this paper without spelling out the details of Derrida's analysis. A summary presentation is given in Chapter Six of my *On Being with Others: Heidegger-Wittgenstein-Derrida* (London: Routledge, 1998).

⁷ Stella Sandford, 'Levinas in the Realm of the Senses: Transcendence and Intelligibility', *Angelaki*, 4:3 (2000), p.63.

⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1987), p.89. Italics added. (The French text reads: "la volupté n'est pas un plaisir comme un autre, parce qu'elle n'est pas un plaisir solitaire comme le manger ou le boire.")

⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.111.

¹⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.39. The English language translators of Levinas typically differentiate the French words *autrui* (the other

person) and *autre* (otherness in general) by capitalising the former, giving us rather impressive looking English expressions like 'the face of the Other' for the somewhat less remarkable French expression '*le visage d'autrui*'. Levinas himself capitalises both on occasion to get the impressive effect in French, but that cannot survive the translation convention.

¹¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.193.

¹² Citing both Plato and Aristotle as forerunners to this distinction, Levinas stresses the central importance that it has for his thinking, affirming (in italics) that '*the difference between objectivity and transcendence will serve as a general guideline for all the analyses of this work*' (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.49, emphasis in original.)

¹³ Levinas puts it as follows: if we 'could possess, grasp and know the Other, it would not be Other' (Levinas, *Time and the Other*, p.90). The traditional empiricist would concur. Indeed, I think Levinas's inference from the logical impossibility of undergoing ('possessing', 'grasping') the other's experience to the impossibility of *knowing* what the other undergoes is a very traditional idea – and an error. I will return to this in the final section.

¹⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, p.89. Compare Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), §286: 'If someone has a pain in his hand...one does not comfort the hand, but the sufferer: one looks into his face'.

¹⁵ Compare Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §300: 'The image of pain certainly enters into the language-game [with the words "he is in pain"] in a sense; only not as a picture'.

¹⁶ Diane Perpich, 'The Demands of Ethical Life', *Research in Phenomenology*, 30:1 (2000), p.266.

¹⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.110.

¹⁸ Simon Critchley, 'Bois' in *Re-Reading Levinas*, eds. R. Bernasconi and S. Critchley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p.163.

¹⁹ Simon Critchley, 'Bois', p.163.

²⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Remarks* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975), 'Foreword': 'I would like

to say “This book is written to the glory of God”, but nowadays that would be chicanery, that is, it would not be rightly understood’.

²¹ Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p.32.

²² Francis Spufford, *The Child that Books Built* (London: Faber, 2002). The title is borrowed from the rather more adventurous *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*.

²³ It should be noted that a result of denying that bread and books (etc.) mark instances of a solitariness that is solitary opens the way to affirming a reversal of Levinas: the realm of the senses is marked by its *non-solitariness*, and is a realm within which we may identify modes of non-solitariness that are solitary. This result falls nicely in line with Heidegger’s analysis of Dasein as Being-with, Wittgenstein’s remarks on privacy and Derrida’s critique of the idea of a structurally secret code. See also the epigraph to this paper.

²⁴ Francis Spufford, *The Child that Books Built*, p.7.

²⁵ Francis Spufford, *The Child that Books Built*, p.10.

²⁶ Francis Spufford, *The Child that Books Built*, p.9.

²⁷ Francis Spufford, *The Child that Books Built*, p.22.

²⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp.7-8.

²⁹ See the final chapter of my *On Being with Others* for the outlines of an argument in this case.

³⁰ John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p.83.

³¹ John McDowell, *Mind and World*, p.88. See also p.91 and p.123.

³² Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p.8.

³³ Peggy Kamuf delivered her paper ‘The End of Reading’ as a plenary lecture to a conference entitled ‘Book/Ends’ at the University of Albany, 2000.

³⁴ While there is a formal change of places here there is no changeover in mode of discussion, and the massive superiority of Kamuf’s argumentation should not be forgotten.

³⁵ Emmanuel Levinas *Totality and Infinity*, p.81.

³⁶ See Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p.369. The point here is not that we always know what someone else is thinking, but that my grasp of the other’s reading – and indeed the other reading (a more ‘psycho-analytic’ alterity at stake here) – is a mode of my acknowledgement of them. The treatment of the relation to others in terms of acknowledgement is elaborated by Cavell throughout Part Four of *The Claim of Reason*.

³⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.112.

³⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.112.

³⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.135.

⁴⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.112.

⁴¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.113.

⁴² Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, pp.197-200.

⁴³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.116.

⁴⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.146.

⁴⁵ Martin Heidegger, ‘Letter on Humanism’, in *Basic Writings* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.230.

⁴⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.134.

⁴⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, pp.116-17.

⁴⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.149.

⁴⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.116.

⁵⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.116.

⁵¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.117.

⁵² Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.117.

⁵³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.116.

⁵⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.115.

⁵⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.117.

⁵⁶ Recall here, Levinas describing the Other’s pleasure for me ‘as pure future’.

⁵⁷ I follow Derrida in thinking that Levinas’s work depends on a completely unexamined ‘concept of nature’ (Jacques Derrida, ‘A Word of Welcome’, in *Adieu: To Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p.90). And I follow Cora Diamond in wanting to see a fundamental difference between the concept of ‘the *difference* between human beings and animals’ and the concept of ‘the *differences* between human being and animals’. The latter concept concerns what might be disclosed by an empirical inquiry into nature (inquiries which typically show that the differences are not so sharp as is often supposed) while the former concept is not just one among such differences and is not something we find or discover at all. As Diamond puts it, it is ‘a central concept for human life and is more an object of contemplation than observation’. (Cora Diamond, ‘Eating Meat and Eating People’, in *The Realistic Spirit* (Massachusetts: MIT University Press, 1996), p.324). It is, I am suggesting, a construction or imaginative (self-)elaboration worked at and worked over in (and as) human history.

⁵⁸ Jacques Derrida, ‘Violence and Metaphysics’ in *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1978), p.126.

⁵⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.181.

⁶⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.182.

⁶¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.181.

⁶² Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.182.

⁶³ Jacques Derrida, ‘Violence and Metaphysics’, p.127.

⁶⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Preface.

⁶⁵ Jacques Derrida, ‘Violence and Metaphysics’, p.127.

⁶⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel* Second Edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), §223.

⁶⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, pp.187-88.

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