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# Play, Laugh, Love

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## Cynthia Willett's Challenge to Philosophy

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IT IS AN HONOR TO respond to Cynthia Willett's work, which has been an inspiration for me personally as well as a crucial corrective to the biases and blind spots of Western philosophy. Reading her entails reviewing some of the most basic features of one's life: the place you call home, the people you live with, your mother or primary caregiver, the words you utter, the other animals you love or ignore, and local conditions for justice, for play, for laughter, and for art. Her four major texts, all of them ethical, confront irony, motherhood, social justice, and animals. Because it would be impossible to deal comprehensively with the ways in which Willett has challenged and strategically sabotaged philosophy, my remarks here will focus on her most recent book, *Interspecies Ethics*, which expands several aspects of her early work on irony and laughter and her groundbreaking research on affect in *Maternal Ethics and Other Slave Moralities*.

*Interspecies Ethics* is a brave and joyful investigation into the possibilities for camaraderie and justice among and between animal species. The book is moving in its descriptions of animal behaviors and sharp in its critique of philosophy's implication in the chasm between human beings and other animals. Willett's text is also ingenious in its performative aspects. She devotes much of her attention to the comic and to laughter, in spite of the grave subject matter she tackles and a final chapter devoted to J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. She not only enjoins us to consider other animals' capacities for laughter and humor, she tells jokes. Her first chapter, "Can the Animal Subaltern Laugh?"

(co-written with her sister) revolves around a *Colbert Report* episode relating to monkeys and ends with the phrase “jello and porn” (probably the first-ever invocation of these terms, together, in a philosophical text). Willett’s humor recalibrates the expectations we have for philosophical prose and expands the resources we might use when philosophizing. Additionally, in laughing along with Willett, we are already exhibiting our animal natures. As she writes, “Waves of laughter lower defenses and mock the borders of subjects and groups, exposing these borders as more porous than they might have been thought” (Willett 2014, 79). In the spirit of forging a community of the laughing, Willett begins her thinking about animals not from the perspective of pity, shame, or horror at what we do to them, but from a celebratory glee in animal life.

In this essay, I will stress a few of the themes running through Willett’s work and pose three questions for further discussion. These relate, in order, to interspecies contact, playgrounds, and to her reading of *Disgrace*.

## CONTACT ETHICS

Willett is concerned with the world we share with other animals, with our common lots and the blurred edges of our differing bodies and habitats. Her book invites an awareness of the tragic fates of so many animals, but also the ridiculous, comical, and joyous aspects of our overlapping animal natures. Her emphases fall on playfulness, laughter, and musicality—traits she observes across animal species and that challenge human exceptionalism. *Interspecies Ethics* continues Willett’s ongoing project of reimagining the conditions for ethical life. Rather than an ethics based in infinite responsibility, one premised on sympathy and the recognition of mutual suffering, or an ethics rooted in the internalization of a universal law, Willett envisions an ethics grounded in “call and response,” which she describes as “discourse ethics across species” (Willett 2014, 27). For her, “discourse” means an initial, preverbal, rhythmic participation in the life of another creature. This is a far cry from the rational discourse ethics associated with Habermas. Instead, she sees call and response ethics as a tentative, playful exchange that challenges accounts of language, reason, and rationality. It also corrects Levinasian response or alterity ethics by reminding us that “responding to alterity is not [equivalent to] living with those other creatures” (Willett 2014, 9). In a way, Willett’s vision of ethics entails normalizing and extending the Levinasian face to face encounter to see what happens when we face each other (and other animals) daily, at home and in scenes of common life.

Call and response ethics is meant to capture something ordinary and pervasive about the ways in which creatures naively interact, modeled for Willett on the “infant and adult engaged in a song and dance of playful

exchange or irritated struggle” (Willett 2014, 15). As in *Maternal Ethics and Other Slave Moralities*, Willett describes the infant/caregiver relationship operating at a level “that may be preverbal, nonrational, and mysterious and yet vital for the ethicality of biosocial bonds” (Willett 2014, 91).<sup>1</sup> In chapter 3, she explores this dynamic exchange through affect attunement, asking us to consider whether “communicative lines through visual, aural, gestural, olfactory, pheromonal, and neurochemical transfers of social signals and crisscrossed modes of social contest [might] open networks of discourse in mix-species public spaces” (Willett 2014, 80). This chapter challenges the ethical significance of spoken language in order to examine the rhythmic *musical* ways in which animals attune themselves to one another and to the places they cohabit.

Affect attunement takes place below the threshold of full-blown speech and highlights the intricacy of pre- or nonverbal interaction. Willett emphasizes the creative dimensions of affect attunement and play, describing infants and parents as “veritable artists” (Willett 2014, 91) in their mutual tuning of and to one another. Her emphasis on creativity has the double effect of dignifying the infant (who is not merely mirroring or “aping” an adult) and dignifying the labors of caregivers.<sup>2</sup> It does this without demanding any specific behavior or skill set from either of them beyond being together, skin to skin. Both infant and caregiver (disproportionately mothers) become artistic co-collaborators in the ongoing process of making sense of each other and their world. In the process, as in any genuine collaboration, they not only create something new, they co-create one another in ways that are entirely unpredictable.

Across Willett’s work, affect attunement serves as the baseline activity of interaction and engagement that primes a creature for caring relationship with the wider world. Characterized by give and take, perpetual adjustment, and sensitivity to the fine-grained singularity of another, affect attunement sets the stage for self-conscious moral and political comportment in a more extensive, more anonymous society.<sup>3</sup> Crucially, though, moral/political comportment is always at risk of forgetting the fundamental role of affect attunement in shaping and reshaping social animals. Although we may think we have mastered or graduated from affect attunement (perhaps in acquiring full-blown speech), Willett reminds us of our routine blindness to other creatures and the necessity of perpetual adjustment. Just as a guitar falls out of tune when left unplayed, a person loses touch with affect when left unchallenged. Language acquisition may mitigate the role of affect attunement as we grow up, but it cannot replace it.<sup>4</sup> Concretely, safeguarding an infant or animal capacity for affect attunement entails putting ourselves in the midst of others whose primary means of communication are not linguistic and who require something more and different from us than ready-made forms of compassion

or understanding. These might be other animals, infants, or *other* others. Though Willett does not discuss autism, her account of affect attunement has striking implications for how we might practice communication with nonverbal autistic individuals.

One of Willett's urgent claims is that we have to *live* with other animals in order to develop sensitivity to their ways of being. Her focus on needing to *live* the experiences we theorize about is one of her enduring gifts to philosophy. In concert with Donna Haraway, she calls for us to "engage more fully with the animals [we] speculate about so that [we] might begin [our] reflections from the experience of companionship" (Willett 2014, 71). The appeal to real life encounters echoes a Levinasian stress on the face to face (although Willett prefers the imagery of nose to crotch). Philosophy seems allergic to engagement, ill-equipped to muddy itself in the rough terrain of communal life. This is one reason that Barbara Smuts, an anthropologist and psychologist, emerges as a quasi-heroic exemplar in *Interspecies Ethics*. Smuts's intense fieldwork living with baboons in Tanzania and Kenya starting in 1976 serves as a reminder that it is easy to fantasize about the otherness of others but it is very different to expose oneself as an other among them. Such exposure entails becoming vulnerable and being physically close enough to smell and touch them, but also to be smelled and touched in return.

Smuts, like Willett and Haraway, stresses the standpoint of companionship. In her response to Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals*, she laments the lack of references to "real life relations with animals" in his text. Describing her own first attempts to observe baboons in the wild, she writes:

The baboons stubbornly resisted my feeble but sincere attempts to convince them that I was nothing more than a detached observer, a neutral object they could ignore. Right from the start, they knew better, insisting that I was, like them, a social subject vulnerable to the demands and rewards of relationship . . . . I was thus compelled to explore the unknown terrain of human-baboon intersubjectivity. (Coetzee 2001, 109–10)

Her point is that detached observation of animal behavior brings us no closer to any animal and even has the negative effect of insulating us from the very lives we claim to examine.

Smuts coins the phrase "nonhuman persons" to describe any animal with whom one might develop a personal relationship.<sup>5</sup> If we are concerned with nonhuman persons, as well as with infants, the autistic, and a range of others who communicate in ways we have yet to learn, then we must find ways of being with them not so that we can scrutinize their behaviors in the service of another theory, but so that they can touch us and teach us. This leads me to my first question. Although Willett describes her approach as "call and response

ethics,” I’m wondering whether its more fundamental feature is *contact*, touch, or immersion. Willett uses the word *contact* when she writes, “[A]ny purported animal-human gap has less to do with unique human capacities than with the rise of urban centers and the loss of *contact* with other species” (Willett 2014, 124; my emphasis).<sup>6</sup> In her work, ethics begins quite literally in the skin-to-skin contact of mother and infant (or even earlier in the undistinguishable mesh of fetus and pregnant body). Does “call and response” adequately capture the intimacy and intensity of these entanglements?

## PLAYGROUNDS AND OTHER SITES OF ENCOUNTER

Affect attunement is, for Willett, the earliest form of art and the first form of play. About play, she explains, “In contrast with the abstract equality of atomized individuals before modern laws, friendly play provides a training ground for a concretely situated reciprocity that binds selves-in-communities” (Willett 2014, 75). The back-and-forth negotiations of caregiver and infant exemplify what Gadamer calls *play* in the first half of *Truth and Method*. I mention this because for Gadamer, as for Willett, play opens onto art (in a moment Gadamer describes as “transformation into structure”—the moment when play become *a play* directed toward an audience) and both are integral to ethics. Willett’s attention to play also links with Dewey’s observations about the aesthetic relevance of animal play in *Art as Experience*. Willett makes explicit the connections between play, art, and ethics in chapter 3, when she asserts: “Postmoral ethics is aesthetics” (Willett 2014, 98). Later, in chapter 5 she writes, “The artistry of ethics is in the last analysis unanalyzable—it is a gift” (Willett 2014, 143).

Play for Willett is the testing and training ground for sociality. Though she doesn’t say this explicitly, it seems that creatures who can play can also love. Somehow, our abilities to play together prime us for the different labors of living together in caring appreciation for another’s unique needs and desires. Playing makes space for the asexual eros that Willett insists can spread among and between species—an eros predicated on shared touch, smells, and sounds.

But playing also requires time and space: playgrounds and the leisure to use them. As Willett notes, the opportunities for playing alongside/with other animals are radically diminished in the modern world, where few of us live on farms or in the midst of nature in any meaningful sense. Fewer still live for months at a time in the remaining wild places of the earth. As Hanna Rosin has shown in her recent article “The Overprotected Kid,” even playgrounds in America have become radically homogenized and oriented toward safety and risk-aversion.<sup>7</sup> They invite repetition rather than creative exertion or collaboration. I agree entirely with Willett about the continuum

between play, art, and ethics, and the ways in which thinking ethics from the vantage point of contact and play productively changes the whole picture of ethical life. But here is my second question: Where are our playgrounds? Mustn't playgrounds include not only sites for socializing and creatively being together but also opportunities for danger and risk?

I love Willett's exploration of affect attunement precisely because it points us back to complicated scenes of engagement and the *risks* involved in being with others (*actually* rather than *virtually*). This is something Coetzee's literature does as well, as he invites us to cohabit a landscape of humans and animals devoid of familiar demarcations of good and evil and bereft of consolations. Coetzee provides an occasion for immersion in the lives of others, but Willett seems ultimately interested in *nonfictional* contact; the kind of real life contact Smuts made with the baboons. In a world where half of the wild species of the earth have disappeared in the last forty years and the habitats of the remaining species are in peril, *where* will we have the encounters with nonhuman persons that might alter our sense of self and others? Are novels (paintings, poems, films, etc.) our last wild frontiers? And can they provide a stage for affect attunement?

Throughout her text, Willett highlights stories of solidarity between animals and humans, noting for instance the relationships that developed between Colorado miners and the mice they befriended and whom they relied upon to signal minute, life-threatening tremors and changes in atmosphere below ground (IE 57–58).<sup>8</sup> Individuals can forge intense relationships across species, though often (and in cases of nondomesticated animals in particular) these develop under conditions of extreme pressure, captivity, or oppression.<sup>9</sup> Are there more spontaneous or normalized opportunities for intense interspecies engagement?<sup>10</sup> Perhaps Willett's discussion of the "gut brain" and the degree to which we are always cohabiting and inhabited by microorganisms provides one possible answer by moving us from a view of open wild places large enough for elephants to roam (Willett's opening image), to the inner wild landscapes of our own bodies and their strikingly indefinite borders. Yet what kind of place is a body? Can we meet there?

Even if most of us cannot or will not live with other animals, it would seem most of us have some opportunity of being with infants, preverbal children, and those with variable relations to language who might teach us about contact, affect attunement, and synesthesia. But even in the domain of the human, the time and space required for the interaction with and care of these creatures is frustrated by failures to prioritize early childhood education, to legislate maternity and parental leave, or to value differing cognitive and physical abilities. Few of us are able to be with others in the intense and focused way Barbara Smuts was with the baboons—even when the other in question is one's own infant. The lack of contact endemic in modern society is exacerbated by a

digital culture in which everyone can be connected all the time without having to touch or smell or feel another body, a culture in which surveillance replaces sensitized response. Therefore, in addition to the geographical challenges to finding a place to be with nonhuman persons, we are faced with the digital challenges of losing touch with one another, as expanding networks of “friends” reflect increasingly self-replicating and insulated lives.<sup>11</sup>

## DISGRACE

Willett leaves us with the image of a lame dog, on the cusp of being euthanized, howling along to an old man clumsily strumming a toy banjo behind an animal shelter in South Africa.<sup>12</sup> It is a scene from Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, and it becomes emblematic of several strands of her thinking: Man and dog, brought together under tragic circumstances, trying to sing together, to make music from the hearts of their own darkneses.

I was deeply moved by Willett’s concluding chapter, which is devoted to a reading of *Disgrace* in concert with Kristeva, and foregrounds a musical subplot pervading the novel. I had not heard the song inherent in the narrative prior to Willett’s illuminating reading of it. She suggests that the real story of *Disgrace* is about the protagonist, David Lurie’s, evolving relationship with animals—the sheep on his daughter’s farm, and later the dogs and cats he helps to euthanize and incinerate at a local animal clinic. As she points out, Lurie learns to say the word *love* as he learns to hold the animals gently but firmly on the operating table and to be with them as they take their last breaths. But the image of Lurie singing alongside the dog is not the last image of the novel, and in a way, Willett’s efforts to show us the comic aspects of the tragic are difficult to reconcile with where Coetzee leaves us. In the final page of the novel, Lurie is assisting Bev Shaw (the Temple Grandin-like character who runs the animal shelter) with executing twenty-three cats and dogs. After they finish the last one, Bev asks him if they are done for the day. The remaining dog is the one who had befriended Lurie, the one who sang along with him earlier in the story, the “one who likes music” (Coetzee 1999, 219). Lurie replies to Bev Shaw that there is one more. Here are the last lines of the novel:

He opens the cage door. “Come,” he says, bends, and opens his arms. The dog wags its crippled rear, sniffs his face, licks his cheeks, his lips, his ears. He does nothing to stop it. “Come!”

Bearing him in his arms like a lamb, he re-enters the surgery. “I thought you would save him for another week,” says Bev Shaw. “Are you giving him up?”

“Yes, I am giving him up.” (Coetzee 1999, 220)



Lurie does nothing to stop the licking, but it fails to move him. Perhaps this is a reminder (contra Merleau-Ponty) that it is possible to touch without being touched—that contact is ultimately insufficient.

Willett reads *Disgrace* as oriented toward “a primordial eros, in this case . . . a calm passion, for a meaningful life shared with others” (Willett 2014, 155). For her, Lurie’s commitment to the corpses of the animals, to their deaths and their proper disposal, signals a “ground zero for postmoral ethics” (Willett 2014, 170), found in the animal cry not to be abandoned in dying and in Lurie’s response in the form of his holding them and witnessing their deaths. Here is Willett’s last paragraph:

[T]he abandoned dog guides the ethical response. This animal does not speak, and the novel does not give us in words what the dog’s love might mean. Instead the dog leaves us with a bare assertion of faith; that in this world there is meaning and that this holds for even those creatures that are abject or strange or otherwise beyond any ordinary moral concern. And that these deaths tear holes in this world of ours, holes that are also wounds, and that these deaths, this suffering, should not be left unobserved or unattended. Ethics forbids allowing the other, this time an animal other, to die alone and unmourned. (Willett 2014, 174)

In spite of her resistance to any prescriptive ethics, Willett arrives at a single ethical maxim: “Thou shalt not let the other die alone and unmourned.” Strikingly, Levinas, who also avoided prescriptions, invokes the single maxim “Thou shalt not kill.” Coetzee’s novel challenges them both. Particularly, it seems to challenge the conception of companionship (human or interspecies) so central to Willett’s research. In the end, Lurie discards the dog, however gently. Willett tells us that postmoral ethics *is* aesthetics and that it has no determinate boundary or end. Coetzee, on the other hand, seems to show us that postmoral ethics has no happy end. As a result, I have a hard time seeing the comic in the tragedy of *Disgrace*, as heroic as Willett is in turning our attention to the poignant/ridiculous image of man and dog howling together—an image that relates to the woodblock print of a wary donkey and an eager dog sitting nose to nose and trying to engage in song on the cover of her book. Does *Disgrace* give us any occasion to laugh? Does Lurie inspire faith in our ability to be with and to be moved by animal lives?<sup>23</sup> I do not think so. *Interspecies Ethics*, however, (and to Willett’s credit) does both.

*Disgrace* is too dark a place to stop, especially since Willett, across her four major books, invites us to laugh. I want to close then by thanking her for these invitations, which go beyond philosophical interventions, reworkings,

transmutations, and voicings of the unvoiced to give her readers concrete hope, occasions to laugh out loud, and incentive to love beyond our means.

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## NOTES

1. See chapter 4 of *Maternal Ethics and Other Slave Moralities*, in which Willett explores Daniel Stern's work on affect attunement (Willett 1998, 75–94).
2. This aspect of Willett's work relates to Eva Kittay's analysis of dependency and care in *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency*.
3. Willett writes, "Affects constitute an elementary ground for communicative ethics from infancy through adulthood" (Willett 2014, 90).
4. See Henri Bergson on immersive sympathy and the differentiation between intellect and instinct in *Creative Evolution* (Bergson 2007, 137 ff.).
5. See Smuts in *The Lives of Animals* 108. She returns to the idea late in her essay to explain: "[W]hen a human being relates to an individual nonhuman being as an anonymous object, rather than as a being with its own subjectivity, it is the human, and not the other animal, who relinquishes personhood" (Coetzee 2001, 118).
6. I am interested in contact and the embodied dimension of ethics as it pertains to Levinas, for whom the face to face is not a frontal, visual encounter between human beings, but the embodied sensibility of another living body in the dark. Such encounters hinge on being in close proximity with another person, close enough to hear or feel their breath, to sense the heat of their body, or to smell their skin. Willett would like an even more intense proximity as the ground for ethical sociality, perhaps one founded on a Merleau-Pontian sense of flesh.
7. See Hanna Rosin, "The Overprotected Kid," *The Atlantic*, March 19, 2014.
8. Reading Willett, I was reminded of the story about "Bobby," the dog in the labor camp where Levinas was held captive in World War II who greeted the prisoners upon their return each day and who Levinas described as "the last Kantian in Nazi Germany, without the brain needed to universalize maxims and drives" (Levinas, 1990, 153).
9. As I was reading Willett's text I was thinking about my own fear of certain animals that goes back to early childhood—horses that routinely threw me on the farm when I tried to ride them (despite all my efforts to commune with them), dogs that bit me, the coyote that slaughtered all the chickens. I also recall refusing to mow the fields on the tractor because of the experience of rabbits and all kinds of small animals fleeing in front of me as I drove—like a massacre, I thought. I was also reminded of particularly intense interactions with animals in my life: the relationship I developed with mice while living in a dune shack on the National Sea Shore in Provincetown for a painting residency in the spring of 2001 for instance.

They literally crawled all over me the first night I was there (entirely alone in the middle of nowhere), and out of sheer necessity, I befriended them since the only other option was to lose my mind in sheer panic. It seems like many intense relationships with animals develop along similar lines—out of necessity or even in flight from the human world. I also recall holding a whale afloat in the harbor of Cape Cod with my dad as a team from Woods Hole arrived to tranquilize it—it had been tagged and had beached itself repeatedly. We held it along with eight or nine others as they gave it the shot and watched as it thrashed wildly in the water before going still and being hauled up out of the water onto a boat trailer. Finally, Willett's work has me thinking so much about my daughter, Violet (who is now one). From birth she has loved animals in a way that is completely alien to me. She prefers them to people; she literally lays her head on the ground at the feet of large dogs as if bowing in adoration to them. In turn, I've noticed she has a unique power to calm and quiet animals. I've had to resist the impulse to keep her at a distance from dogs, horses, cows, goats, and any other creature she encounters. I let her approach them, since she seems to know exactly how to do it. She is teaching me so much about affect attunement across species.

10. Owning pets might be one starting point, but Willett's work begins with an account of the plight of elephants, their displacement, and their collective, multi-generational trauma. She invites us to think about more global, undomesticated sites for interspecies ethics than those relationships that develop in living rooms and backyards across the United States.
11. See Claire Cain Miller, "How Social Media Silences Debate," *The New York Times*, August 26, 2014.
12. Willett provides a history of the banjo as an African instrument, but it seems crucial in this instance that the banjo is a toy David Lurie bought for his daughter, Lucy, when she was a child. As he first composes, "there is something about the sound of the piano that hinders him: too rounded, too physical, too rich" (Coetzee 1999, 184). He comes to prefer the "silly plink-plonk of the toy banjo" (Coetzee 1999, 184). Later, as he develops his opera, it is the five-year-old Allegra, Byron's daughter, who calls out to her father as she lies dying: "*Why have you left me? Come and fetch me! So hot, so hot, so hot!*" (Coetzee 1999, 186).
13. For my own reading of *Disgrace* see "James and the Ethical Importance of Grace," in *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, forthcoming.

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