

■ **Who Is Sylvia or Who Are We?:
Alternative Subjectivity in Albee's
*The Goat or, Who Is Sylvia?:
Notes toward a Definition of Tragedy***

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Abstract

This paper investigates the philosophical question of “who we are” evident in Edward Albee’s work *The Goat or, Who Is Sylvia?: Notes toward a Definition of Tragedy*. Dramatizing a(n) (extramarital) “love affair” between a human being (Martin) and a goat (Sylvia), Albee’s play, I argue, asks a more important question, beyond that of “who is Sylvia,” that is, “who are we.” Taking the self-other issue to the larger context of the human and the non-human, the paper examines the dialogism of Emmanuel Levinas’s ethical theory and the play, and further argues that the absolute alterity of the Other forces the Self to face itself, or its own conscience. Hence the Self’s decision regarding who the Other is simultaneously determines the limits and orientation as to who himself/herself may be. Understood in this light, Albee’s award-winning play poses in its depiction of a bestial affair fundamental questions concerning the Self and its world as we progress into the 21st century.

Keywords: Edward Albee, Levinas, ethics, ecology, epistemology

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“Did your food have a face?” a poster from the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) asks. This provocative statement invites consideration of how a bloody carcass is transformed into a *delicacy*: how cows become *beef* and pigs *pork*. The signification demonstrates an orderly epistemological structure that constrains non-human others within an anthropocentric cultural system. Within a human-centered system animals are often reduced to “uses” of human needs, interests, and tastes.

If ethics defines the relationship between Self and Other, then in the case of the human and the non-human it is an asymmetrical relationship. French philosopher Jacques Derrida marvels at the capacity of the word “animal” to accommodate the myriad interests of human beings. This word suggests a human hubris that informs a logocentric epistemology: “Animal is a word that men have given themselves the right to give . . . reserving for them, for humans, the right to the world, the name, the verb, the attribute, to a language or words, in short to the very things that the others in question would be deprived of, those that are corralled within the grand territory of the beasts: the Animals” (400). The deployment of the animal for human ends reflects an assumed superiority on the part of the human. Una Chaudhuri reminds us of a surprising fact that over ninety-eight percent of animals—including animals for food and pets alike—are bred for human use. She further points out, rather poignantly, the self-deception experienced by the human self: “not only does it tell us that we eat animals much more than we do anything else with them; it should also help us to recognize that the self-identification as animal lovers that we perform every day in our homes . . . is part of a paper-thin but rock-hard veneer on an animal culture of staggering violence and exploitation” (10). Beyond the inherent violence of our current regard for animals, our attitudes toward consumption and life-style point to broader global problems. For instance, a meat-orientated diet is contributing to eco crises, such as global crop shortages (Bradsher) and emissions of CO₂.¹

Humankind’s often callous and illogical use of the natural environment reflects a long genealogy of subordinating nature to human demands. The imbalanced relationship between humans and the environment owes much of its formation to the transformative seventeenth century, when rational knowledge in the forms of “scientific revolution, or the more restricted Newtonian revolution” (Cook) gained increased stature and importance, thanks to a social environment that developed a strict method for assembling, organizing, and interpreting natural phenomenon

¹ In *Diet for a New America*, John Robbins points out the destructive implications of meat-oriented diet practices: “By cycling our grain through livestock . . . we lose over 90 percent of the protein we invest as feed in our livestock . . .” (351).

(beyond the reach of our senses). Perhaps the most influential and emblematic figure of this milieu was Sir Francis Bacon, who ordered different forms of knowledge and advocated for a reliable scientific method. His life and work helped influence and shape this period, where a multi-dialogism of science (natural philosophy), technology (the mechanical arts), and commercial capitalism, along with religion, formed a potential new mode of knowledge in the service of humankind.²

In his much-debated work *The Goat or, Who Is Sylvia?: Notes toward a Definition of Tragedy*,³ Edward Albee nonetheless has Sylvia the goat break the traditional epistemological imposition and transcend from *chevon/cabrito* to an unacceptable social role, a much-loved mistress. Albee grants Sylvia a valid, however unacceptable, (social) face, one that is often rendered invisible within the human epistemological system. While the play is about an extramarital affair, or bestiality, Albee's treatment of the goat and the human realm invites broader questioning—how does the human exist in an order bigger than itself? In his own comments on the play, Albee points out:

You may . . . have received the misleading information that the play is about bestiality—more con than pro. Well, bestiality is discussed during the play (as is flower arranging) but it is a generative matter rather than the “subject.” The play is about love, and loss, the limits of our tolerance and who, indeed, we really are. . . . I ask of an audience . . . imagine themselves as being in the predicament the play examines and coming up with useful, if not necessarily comfortable responses. (*Stretching My Mind* 262)

The word “limit” here is crucial to understanding the construction of human Self. Human beings are limited in their ability to know; Bacon's scientific methods proved helpful in organizing and interpreting phenomena, translated data into comprehensible knowledge.⁴ Likewise, the construction of human subjectivity is delimited in tolerance; there exists a norm of behavior constituted for the consensus of humanity.

If Albee's work suggests a question regarding the way we treat the (human) Other, I argue, Levinas's ethical theory about the unconditional welcome for the Other can help fashion an answer. In this quote Albee underscores elements and concerns that very much resonate with Levinas's ethical theory; that is, who we

² See Bacon's *Valerius Terminus*.

³ Hereafter referred to as *The Goat*.

⁴ Bacon's impact and methods were highly important in articulating the relationship between human and the natural environment, one which gave great value to “use” and “control.” Carolyn Merchant notes in this line of thinking: “A narrative of progress emerges in which humanity is able to recover that which was lost in the Fall from Eden, giving hope for the betterment of humanity through the control of nature” (149).

really are depends much on “love, loss and the *limits* of our tolerance.” This idea of “limit” is what Levinas calls “interiority,” the interior territory constructed by human empirical epistemology which is often equivalent to human existence (subjectivity). Following Bacon’s proposal to transform the secrets of nature into human knowledge, we categorize what we know into the interiority, our comfort zone. What then allows humanity to comprehend, create knowledge, and thus enlarge its interior territory? The answer is exteriority, the non-human, Nature, or God, in Descartes’s terms.

The Levinasian notions of *finitude* (of interiority) and *infinity* (of exteriority) further help to gear the play toward a dialogism between Self and Other—one that is less a specific moral orientation than a necessary ethical mechanism (needed as much as air is needed for survival), implemented for the continuation of both human and non-human existence—an exploration of love and responsibility. This mechanism implemented for the ultimate elevation of the Other and subjugation of the Self is as tenacious as the scientific principle of *inertia*. That is, just as the inertia principle in physics dictates an object’s state of motion, Levinas’s ethics similarly affirms the Self as finite and the Other as infinite. In short, the finitude of the Self depends on the infinite Other. The Other is infinite because the finite Self cannot comprehend the Other’s absolute alterity. The Self is finite as opposed to the Other’s infinity. It is thus through this dialogism between the Self’s finitude and the Other’s infinity that we come to know who we are. This shift of ethics from a moral/religious discourse into a critical discourse leads to a fundamental question of the relation of responsibility between Self and Other, the question that permeates and enlivens Albee’s play *The Goat or, Who Is Sylvia?*

In the play, Sylvia’s face serves as a Levinasian Face, effecting a destabilization of the Self. Levinas proposes that it is the notion of the “Face” that illuminates the idea of “infinity”—what is outside human knowledge. Levinas writes: “The face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed. It is neither seen nor touched” (*Totality and Infinity* 194). In other words, what can be encompassed or categorized under my knowledge is “finite,” and “what I think” and therefore “who I am.” The Face not only escapes any reach of the senses, which construct an ontological comprehension of the world, but is also beyond our epistemological understanding. It is “not resplendent as a form clothing a content, as an image, but as the nudity of the principle, behind which there is nothing further” (262). Here the form can be seen as tantamount to a (human) teleology of a being. For instance, a goat is for lamb chops, as a cow is for beef, etc. However, a goat is a goat. It is itself the purpose of its own existence (instead of existing for human interest). In this way of thinking, the meeting of Self and the Other is not limited to dining tables, as

myriad human activities activate a process of subsumption, demanding that the Other yield to the Same/thematization.

This element brings us to the confluence of Albee and Levinas and the fundamental questions: how do humans see and exploit non-human Others? How are non-human objects (as opposed to subjects) de-faced, cut off, or deformed to become a “being” subsumed into a Selfness, a self that uses common sense and normalcy to justify its own existence? In what moments do the “Faces” of beings emerge and destabilize selfness? Both Albee and Levinas point out a new understanding of the Self and the Other, the limits of the rational Self per se, and the constraints of traditional epistemology (rationality). Their views are thus enlightening when addressing the impending ecological issues of today, such as that of meat-oriented diets and the shortage of crops that ensue. This visioning reveals the hero (humanity) as trapped, awaiting a new epistemological lens whereby the hero might obtain a new knowledge of love. In sum, the fundamental issue is one of relations and responsibility—where do we locate ethics in a world the human and the non-human both inhabit?

Following this introductory material, my discussion will proceed through two basic movements. The first section examines *The Goat* and highlights the range of issues it provokes. The second section employs Levinas’s theory to shed light on elements of the play and to show how Levinas and Albee are in dialogue—specifically, how both speak to today’s environmental issues. These efforts, in the end, will lead to a demonstration of Levinas’s ethical theory, how it is not morally oriented (that is, not built on codes or moral legalism) but rather constitutive, a condition or relation between Self and Other, and how such an ethical understanding might alternate the way human Self perceives itself and preserves both the human and the non-human.

Who Are We?: Limit and Tolerance

I was thinking about writing a play about intertwined matters—the limits of our tolerance of the behavior of others than ourselves, especially when such behavior ran counter to what we believed to be acceptable social and moral boundaries, and our unwillingness to imagine ourselves behaving in such an unacceptable fashion—in other words, our refusal to imagine ourselves subject to circumstances outside our own comfort zones. (Albee, *Stretching My Mind* 259)

The Goat was first produced at the Golden Theatre, New York City, in March 2002. It was also one of the most produced plays from 2003 to 2005 in America, and had been produced both inside and outside America since its premiere.

In keeping with the common attitude of Albee's oeuvre that challenges the status quo, *The Goat* looks beyond what is superficial in human relationships to investigate how humans define their codes and conditions of belonging. The dramatization of bestiality puts the spotlight on such fundamental concerns and questions—it testifies to the limits of humans' tolerance through which human Self is delimited. Richard Brad Medoff, in his review on the performance of March 6, points out how Albee questions the so-called problematic normalcy: "It is not all right for a man to betray his wife by loving a goat; however, it is normal for a man to betray his 'woman' with another woman." The intertwined matters Albee hints at involve a complicated convergence of epistemology, domestic politics, and human definition. Having Sylvia in the title and as the target of the drama's discussion, *The Goat* not only suggests reconsideration of the human/non-human relationship, but also the role theatre plays in such contemplation.

Social Role of Theatre

While reconsideration of the human/non-human relationship has been discussed widely in ecological discourse, the critical combination of environment and theatre has developed rather slowly in theatre studies, as theatre artist Theresa J. May points out (84). This may be because theatre has been defined as a representation of human actions and the space where such actions are staged, as Una Chaudhuri speculates. May argues that the basic epistemology evident in conventional theatre regards "nature other" as an object, a domain domesticated through an anthropocentric lens. May, however, correctly challenges this view, reminding us that "All constructions of 'nature' are ideological" (97). In *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama*, Chaudhuri gives one example of how theatre can act as a cultural site of resistance to traditional epistemology. As embodied on the naturalistic stage, theatre privileges vision. The fact that realism and naturalism dominate theatre, rendering visibility as the primary organizer of performer-audience experience, illuminates the fact that theatre is an extension of an anthropocentric epistemology (the human viewpoint dominates).

In her review of *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama*, Jeanne Colleran points out the spatial dimension of the Self-Other epistemology:

Social spaces are largely spaces of containment: places where strictures are set upon the body particularly by means of that which houses the body; strictures that determine what may enter, what may remain, what cohabit, what abide. The pervasive fears at the end of one millennium and the beginning of another revolve around the fragility of these social spaces: how much difference, after all, can be accommodated? (238)

This quote gives emphasis to the elements of boundaries and containment.

And the fact that Sylvia the goat is only allowed to appear on stage as a carcass responds to Colleran's question above. While Albee's play challenges conventional structures of human belonging—of what difference can be accommodated, the play does not completely abandon human social space (though the presence of the dead goat invites fear and disruption). The goat—as a kind of co-equal presence—is banned from the stage; she is banned from what theatre symbolizes. Theatre here embodies the epistemological site of human activities where she is only allowed to fulfill certain roles. Given the conventional outlook of theatre, it is almost impossible to represent non-human/nature (without ideological distortion).

It is therefore difficult to envision a kind of theatre that yokes human performance and non-human/nature together in a performing space. In effect, if conventional theatre gives a representation of reality through a human lens, how is it possible that non-human/nature might be performed for the sake of itself, instead of human interest? Or, is performance even possible when trying to recast the human/ non-human relationship? In *Performing Nature*, editors Gabriella Giannachi and Nigel Stewart suggest ecocritical study in theatre must necessarily be “hybrid and interdisciplinary,” even though it remains “fraught with epistemological uncertainty and controversy” (19).

Certainly theatre studies should explore new approaches and strategies in how the theatre form might accommodate new understandings of the human/ non-human relationship. Albee's play does not stand as a formal or stylistic experiment. His play retains a conventional theatrical approach in style and method. Nonetheless, *The Goat* highlights discourse and dramatic action that challenges conventional viewpoints; the play also promises new potentials for ethical reconsideration and a new model of epistemology. Such difficult subject matter can raise issues from a variety of angles. While not all critics have come to a common interpretation of the play, they share the view that Albee's play concerns human tolerance.⁵ The play asks a number of provocative and demanding questions, ones that bear upon the limits of human thinking and the extent of human belonging. Since bestiality is not something unheard of (Gold), what is so intolerable about it? Is it intolerable because an elite like Martin should not be taking part in it?⁶ In that case, what does Martin's social status symbolize?

⁵ Critic Michael Portillo asks why adultery is de rigueur while bestiality is taboo. Michael Billington identifies a different concern and writes “Albee implies there is a malaise affecting American society; but he never exactly defines the source of the unhappiness motivating Martin and the fellow-sufferers he meets at a therapy session.”

⁶ Mchael Kuchwara describes the character Martin as “The fair-haired Pullman [actor who plays Martin], dressed in a crisp, buttoned-down blue shirt and striped, preppy tie, is all WASP good looks.”

Is social status a parameter influencing human-animal relationships, in the construction of humanity itself?

Overall, nature/animals are never recognized as absolute Others. Una Chaudhuri observes that “[a]s pets, as performers, and as literary symbols, animals are forced to perform for us. . . . Refusing the animal its radical otherness by ceaselessly troping it and rendering it a metaphor for humanity, modernity erases the anima even as it makes it discursively ubiquitous” (105). Albee’s play invites questioning about the status of the animal as Other. The play’s action investigates how the Self-Other relationship and the treatment of the Other shape human subjectivity. The issues addressed are indeed intertwined, and the subject, as Albee indicates, is not bestiality per se, but how human epistemology decides our perception of the Self/human versus the Other/non-human.

With Albee affirming an attitude that calls for a disengaged regard for human behavior, the play’s plot highlights discussion of normalcy and its implicit hierarchies, a discussion that invites analysis *via* Levinas’s notion of the Self-Other relationship (in this case, human *vs.* non-human). That is, as Albee strives to provoke people into rethinking who and what they are, we note the play’s concern with ethics (as Levinas emphasizes an ethical relationship with the Other). Thus, Albee is dramatically exploring a territory that is consonant with Levinas, whose work and thoughts can provide an alternative vision for twenty-first century relationships.

The Goat

In the play, what is intolerable is, of course, Martin’s “affair” with Sylvia the goat. His insufficient justifications for this behavior make it even more insufferable. Paradoxically, his persuasion could never be sufficient because human language/discourse is a product of human subjectivity. It is finally incapable of describing experiences outside of that subjectivity. While this “discourse of normalcy” collapses once it is seen outside the territory (of Self’s interiority), it serves as a testament to the way the Self/interiority/finitude treats and looks at the Other/exteriority/infinity. “A roasted lamb chop served on the dinner table” and “falling in love with Sylvia the goat” register two drastically different phenomena in light of different ethical moments of Self-Other relationship. The two behaviors generate different ontological relationships with animals and present philosophical issues about what is normal.

The Goat is set in the cozy suburb home of a modern middle-class family, composed of three scenes. Martin (the father) is an outstanding architect who has just turned fifty and just won an award for urban design. He has a great family,

a successful career and a good old friend. At first, Martin and his wife Stevie show a deep trust and confidence in each other. Both accept, if not passionately embrace, the fact that their son is a homosexual. The story unfolds with the couple talking about daily chores, with Stevie delicately bantering about possibilities of Martin's affair, while awaiting Ross, Martin's best friend, to conduct an interview with Martin. Martin's first confession to Stevie about Sylvia, his goat-lover, is passed off as a joke. Later, when Stevie leaves Ross and Martin to their interview, however, Martin's unusual forgetfulness and absent-mindedness, together with a photo of Sylvia, all point to a more plausible account of an extramarital affair. Despite Martin's plea to keep the thing private, Ross writes to Stevie with dogmatic self-justification.

The second scene witnesses the face-off between husband and wife. Stevie and Ross alike represent defenders of tradition and normalcy. With mixed feelings of shock, confusion, anger, frustration and contempt, Stevie nonetheless keeps her fury and uneasy feelings in control. Even her breaking of bowls and pottery is carried out in a civilized manner. Martin's reassurance of his love for Stevie is nevertheless juxtaposed with his untarnished affection toward Sylvia, which drives Stevie to further fury.

In scene three, Stevie has removed herself from the house, leaving another family member (their son Billy) to confront and deal with the fact of Martin's bestial relationship. Although Billy reveals his frustration toward his father, he also shows his love. In one unexpected moment, they embrace, and Billy uncontrollably gives Martin a sexual kiss. This kiss is witnessed by Ross, who displays his contempt. Martin hates Ross' sanctimoniousness, as the three effectively proceed to tear each other apart. The play ends with Stevie coming back after the quarrel, displaying the carcass of Sylvia, which she has murdered; Stevie thus makes good on her threat to Martin at the end of scene two: "I'll bring you down with me!" (44).

Representing the Levinasian notion of Face, Sylvia and her look exist outside of this thematization of rationality. Throughout the play Sylvia's face never appears on stage, but her (Levinasian) Face is never absent. When Martin describes how he and Sylvia exchange the look, Sylvia's Face automatically surfaces (in the audience's mind). It lingers until the play ends because the play is about how Martin searches for possible ways to introduce Sylvia's Face in scene one, how Stevie (and possibly Martin) attempt to understand who Sylvia is in scene two, and how Sylvia is de-faced by Stevie in scene three. While Stevie is preoccupied with the mechanical problems involved in human-animal intercourse, Martin is infatuated with Sylvia's looks.

MARTIN. . . . it was then that I saw her. (Sees it) Just . . . just looking at me. . . .

ROSS. All right; let me help you. You're seeing her. . . . You're having an affair with her.

MARTIN. (Confused.) A what? Having a what!? (23)

Apparently Martin and Ross “see” differently here. Ross equates Martin’s seeing some woman with having an extramarital affair. Martin, however, whose symptoms of amnesia are constantly reiterated throughout the play, is overpowered by the sight of absolute otherness that is evoked by Sylvia’s appearance. Martin’s amnesia symbolizes his gradual withdrawal from common sense, or traditional epistemologies, and this removal somehow empowers him, allowing him access to the Other.

To Ross and Stevie, Martin’s affair with Sylvia the goat is preposterous, an affair that evokes fear, disgust and contempt. Sylvia’s appearance and her eyes demonstrate their ultimate power over Martin and the uncanny way the goat captures his attention. Her mysterious power is also manifest through the many epistemological and ontological questions Stevie raises. Stevie asks whether goats cry (30). While Martin emphasizes Sylvia’s looks, Stevie wonders how Sylvia puts down her forelegs, turning her head to greet her husband (42). Martin, on the other hand, protests that he will not reveal any details of their intercourse. All attempts to ridicule, understand, pin down, or escape Sylvia’s Face only tears the couple apart.

Chaudhuri analyzes Martin’s situation in *The Goat* and points out: “Martin’s case this pinnacle is, like so much else in the play, literal as well as figurative, with the literal being insistently associated with animality” (11). This fusion of the literal and the figurative—this animality that escapes our epistemology—may be viewed as a moment that invokes the Levinasian Face. The affair haunts the stage with a ubiquitous curiosity, generating mixed feelings over the destabilized boundary of human normalcy, making the Face omnipresent and omnipotent, and hence serving as a sign of transcendence.

The murder acts as a reinstatement of normalcy, a means of checking the sense of disorientation. For Stevie, “a goat killed” should be a drastically different matter from “an affair exposed.” Mixing the two together produces an epistemological earthquake that engulfs Stevie. It is, however, this epistemological betrayal rather than the affair itself that disorients Stevie. So a divorce, as Billy suggests, cannot be the solution. It must rather be a fierce means, like murder, to restore interior reality, or the “order of things”—wherein animals often function as symbols (an order where an animal’s carcass on a plate is a normal picture).

Thus, Sylvia is the scapegoat for normalcy, just as Martin is a scapegoat for the desire to change the status quo; these impulses characterize the essential

tragedy here. Indeed, with the deployment of the goat, the change of status quo, and the subtitle “notes toward a definition of tragedy,” *The Goat* seems to invoke the Dionysian origin of theatre. In ancient Greece, “the word ‘tragedy’ derives from ‘songs sung by goat-men,’ i.e., members of the cult of Dionysius” (“Goat song”). Rita Felski points out that Greek tragedy was “often hailed as an exemplary source of insight into ethical and philosophical questions; in its very remoteness from the present, it could throw light on the dilemmas of modernity” (v). She also refers to Dennis J. Schmidt’s *On Germans and Other Greeks: Tragedy and Ethical Life* when arguing that “the growing self-doubt of philosophy, the questioning of reason, analytical method, and conceptual knowledge as primary values, has much to do with the turn to tragedy, as the form that most eloquently dramatizes the stubborn persistence of human blindness, vulnerability, and error” (v). Because tragedy remains the site of cultural transformation, negotiation, struggle and change, the play brings out the Levinasian notion of Face to demonstrate a need for destabilization of the status quo. When the alterity of absolute otherness descends, Martin can only subjugate himself to this epiphany: “it was as if an alien came out of whatever it was, and it . . . took me with it, and it was . . . an ecstasy and a purity, and a . . . love of a . . . (Dogmatic.) un-i-mag-in-able kind, and it relates to nothing whatever, to nothing that can be related to! . . .” (39).

Western theatre captures this moment of cultural throes through the tragic epiphany when a new ethics is about to be born. In this aspect, it celebrates Dionysian spirits that release the sexual drive from social bounds. Through such change, it actually anticipates a positive future of fertility. The goat song (Greek word root for “tragedy”) celebrates a release from Rationality. Through such throes issues a positive hope for a negotiable, if not better, future. The goat/Dionysian not only suggests a destructive side, it also fosters possibilities of fertility. The subtitle “Notes Toward a Definition of Tragedy” appears to be a timely warning Albee gives to modern society, one that concerns the definition of normalcy and about how so-called “normalcy” may constitute violence towards the alterity of the Other. In a discussion session after a performance at the Baton Rouge Little Theatre (April 2008), a member of the audience mentioned how normalcy fluctuates over time. He noted that Martin’s treatment might compare to how homosexuals were treated forty years ago, and he humorously suggested that there might be an animated version of Albee’s *The Goat* in Disney production another forty years from now. This post-production discussion points to issues about how humans, emotions and affections are conditioned through mechanisms of social authority and common sense/normalcy; it also reveals how norms are codified and how they can change with time. As the play ends with Stevie having Sylvia the goat killed, we know Albee presents an ethical timing/tragedy

when the change of the status quo (ethical system) starts to take shape.

The Ethical Yes

Just as Martin's infatuation with Sylvia envisions an alternative ethics to come, his tragedy heralds the cultural throes that witness a society of change. Neither is the play literally about bestiality, nor is it solely concerned with an individual's story. The dilemma characters face in *The Goat* is a microcosm of what society is undergoing today, specifically on an epistemological and cultural level. Performance critic Michael Billington suggests that "Albee implies there is a malaise affecting American society; but he never exactly defines the source of the unhappiness motivating Martin and the fellow-sufferers he meets at a therapy session."

As much as Martin appears dumb, impenetrable, despicable and absurd, the ethical stance he demonstrates toward the Other heralds a Levinasian ethical vision. Abducted by an unimaginable kind of alien power, Martin in a sense bravely succumbs to the alterity for the sake of the established social status, which solely constructs his (former) identity.⁷ Unlike his friend Ross, who only resides in the "comfort zone," Martin succumbs to the Other and strides outside of human territory. It is implied that Ross is something of a TV program producer, with references to the interview and his TV crew, etc. He is good at capturing and representing what is "real" and "true." This designation makes Ross's outlook rely more on "vision," aligning him with traditional epistemology that represents a strict codification of mainstream thinking. For instance, he believes it is a fact (and normal) for all the men to have extramarital affairs, which makes Martin's fidelity to his wife look unusual. In contrast, Martin is a bold adventurer who is willing to explore the unknown. As the play begins, Martin is just winning the Pritzker Prize, which will commission him to design World City (13)—a city of the future, "out of nothing, in the heartland of the US" (Medoff 164). While

⁷ Martin's emotional transformation from clandestine guilt to furious self-defense witnesses the emergence of alternative subjectivity. In scene two, when Stevie confronts Martin's affair, we see Martin stressed and ranted rudely to Billy about his (homo) sexuality. This expression suggests that Martin had formerly feigned acceptance of his son's homosexuality in order to maintain the facade of a lovely family. Meanwhile, Martin's rudeness over Billy's sexuality almost makes Stevie laugh, but Martin does not seem to be aware of this. Which is more laughable—homosexuality or bestiality? Martin is never aware of this contradiction as an issue until well into scene three, where he reconciles with Billy. It was not until he was cruelly betrayed by his friend Ross that he realized how his socially intolerable behavior has afflicted him. It is until this moment that he reconciles with Billy and stands up for a new ethic. Why is bestiality worse than homosexuality? Why does Ross's constant extramarital affair appear morally sound and socially acceptable? Martin's confrontation with Ross breaks up the delimitation of the social norm and human subjectivity.

Martin is able and willing to deal with any unknown, with that which goes beyond the present (moment), Ross cannot demonstrate such flexibility and cannot embrace a (new) relationship out of nothing.

This feature of Martin's character points to Levinas's suggestion that a relationship with the Other is a relationship with the future. In this case, Martin is the one who lets his imagination fly, and is willing to face the Other/future. This future is not an anticipation of the what-will-be kind of future defined by tradition, but a Levinasian future—a future that is totally unknown, has no relevancy to the present,⁸ and is “out of nothing.” Through their conversation, Martin appears to be different from “other men,” the type represented by Ross.

Their difference also reflects on their ethical stances, their responses to the Face of the Other. While Martin subjugates himself to the Other at the expense of his reputation and his family, Ross refutes the Other at the expense of his lifelong friendship with Martin. Martin's subjugation to the Other risks his reputation, social status, career and his relationship with his family and friends. In short, his subjugation to the Other is hazardous to his identity. The fact that his encounter with Sylvia takes place after his prestigious award is ironic. Martin's imagining of the World City out of nowhere illuminates a Cartesian effort to be independent from God. That is, humanity strives to create something that has no reference to what already exists—not airplanes that imitate birds, for instance—something that bears absolutely no history, no traces of the Other/God. Therefore this prize proves Martin's (humanity's) ability to be truly “independent” from the Other/God. However, shortly after this independence, Martin loses himself.

The symptom of losing his social self is his constant forgetfulness, which signals a slippage of past memories and identity that make up who he is at the moment. That is, when Martin “reaches” the city out of nowhere and becomes “the author of himself,” he sheds his old identity. However, does this refer to an emancipated self or a disorientation? In depicting Martin's succumbing to the Other, the absolute alterity, Albee seems to hint that when the Self reaches the state where there are no Others, it can only meet with dissolution and destruction.

⁸ Traditional Western epistemology has subsumed time via a human-centered perspective and rationale. However, for Levinas, this ontological comprehension of time is problematic. It entails a forced logic indicative of a linear movement of time throughout history. The fact that “now” both passes and comes along in the same moment is itself contradictory. This paradox proves that such an understanding of time is framed within a subjective perception of reality, with time existing solely for its own end. In a linear movement of time, “the present encroaches upon the future” (Levinas, *Existence and Existents* 95). Levinas defines Now as the virile ego and denotes Future as an unknown Other. In a linear perception of time, however, as Future automatically flows into Now, it loses its alterity; an understanding exists solely for the Self's end. In that tradition, Now consumes Future, and perpetually triumphs over Future, as Self triumphs over the Other.

This explains why Martin feels “diminished” (48) when he reaches the pinnacle of his career—when he is at the point where he can swell his ego. Also, at the onset of the interview, Ross compliments him: “you’re at the pinnacle of your success.” Martin then “considers that” and responds: “You mean it’s all downhill from here?” (14). In sum, then, Albee suggests that a city out of nowhere proves not an achievement but an expression of human hubris, a pride that eliminates our dependence on the Other, thus begetting the disaster of human subjectivity.

Humanity imitates everything, it is never original.⁹ If humans ever desire to be or believe it is (original), Albee indicates, it only incurs its own destruction, because it not only allows a drastic severing from the Other (thereby disorienting itself), but sends itself into a blind arrogance (which justifies and glorifies in its violence). If violence gradually takes over, to become a new measurement of humanity, a primary principle of the order of things, then the human realm is likely to go terribly awry. In other words, if humans do not admit and respect the Other (non-human) as a core aspect of its own constitution, its “selfness” will dissolve in the subjugation of the Other into its own epistemology. If finitude wishes to claim infinity, it is only for self-deception.

Such an epistemology is also reflected in an ecological context, leading us back to the issue of ethics between humans and non-humans. The human Other is not limited to animals but the whole of the natural world; food chains serve as a constant reminder of the stratification of species and their interrelations between one another. As mentioned earlier, Robbins, in *Diet For a New America*, alerts us to the fact that the human species is now in jeopardy because of our lifestyles—a meat-oriented diet consumes a majority of the corn and oats we grow; the unethical raising and butchering of animals produces unhealthy meat; and chemical fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides not only hurt our health but also the Earth’s sustainability. Added to this is the controversy over whether the emission of carbon dioxide causes global warming and will lead to a drastic change of the global climate. All these issues suggest a profound, ethical relation between the human and non-human worlds.

Robbins describes why the Self in its current lifestyle feels threatened from the Other. Much like Stevie’s fear of abnormality, such fear invades our sense of reality and rationality. Robbins writes: “Because the raising of livestock requires a much greater use of resources, it puts us in a situation where there is not enough to go around. In this kind of dilemma there lurks a *fear* in us all that we will be the one who won’t get enough” (354; my emphasis). This *fear* leads

⁹ See Chaudhuri’s comparison in “(De)Facing the Animals: Zooësis and Performance” of Derek Walcott (“First True Creole”) and Albee’s (*The Goat*) different references of the goat in their works (17-18).

to violence among the human species, transforming the original infinite resources into something finite and making competition a must.¹⁰ This transformation is furthered through globalized capitalism, which objectifies non-human bodies by commodifying Nature. When water is bottled and priced, its infinity becomes finite, and access to it fosters competition, plunder, and the fear of not having enough. Theresa J. May points out that “*The Goat* explodes species taboos by offending our sense of absolute difference, illuminates the role of human desire in the commodification of nature. . .” (98). What May terms as “absolute difference” is what Levinas holds as the “face.” The commodification of nature itself also demonstrates the violence the Self imposes on Nature/the Other. In sum, finitude is what causes competition and fear. Making something infinite into something finite is a historical process demonstrating human arrogance and hubris.

The process of making infinite (resources) into finite (resources) corresponds to the subjugation of the infinite Other before the finite Self. When the finite Self cannot digest the vastness of the infinite Other, the Self is most likely to experience anxiety—asserting different forms of resource allocation and imposing needless panic (of not having enough). This explains why Levinas does not consider the Self’s infinite responsibility toward the Other a moral exhortation but a scientific principle parallel to that of inertia. Subjugation and infinite responsibility toward the Other/infinity constrain the finitude within infinity, through which the Self nurtures and defines itself. Thus, after enjoying and satiating myself by “feeding on” the Other (note Levinas’s notion of bodily enjoyment),¹¹ I should feel gratitude instead of greed.

We can use the concept of the Face to explain why gratitude and greed make two different self-constructions. Face is the nakedness of the Other, as depicted when Martin describes Sylvia as guileless. In a sense, the Other’s fragility stems from its nakedness and guilelessness. Why? Because the Other is totally ignorant of the principle of the Self (Rationality); it reasons in a drastically different way. In other words, the Other will never react in any way I will were I the Other: animals will not revenge humans; they will not trap humans for selling; Nature will not punish me if I kill more animals than I need, etc. Non-human beings do

¹⁰ The concept that fear (not enough) and avidity result in infinite resources becoming finite is from an African prince’s philosophy, recording from two (Taiwanese) blogs (see Works Cited section).

¹¹ Levinas claims that a subject is formed through bodily sensibility, which makes ethics not a virtue but the essence of subject-making. The experience/exploration/exploitation of the Other, Levinas points out, brings the Self nourishment and enjoyment. Enjoyment is a term Levinas gives to all bodily sensations. Need comes from dependence upon the Other. Need is the primary movement of the Same/Self (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 116), and hunger registers the material needs and capability of being satisfied (117). Levinas argues that “it is the relations with the other, inscribed in the body as its elevation, that makes possible the transformation of enjoyment into consciousness and labor” (117).

not change their nature in response to my cruel treatment of them.¹²

Because the Other is absolutely outside of my epistemology, it forces me to confront myself, my own conscience. When I face the Face of the Other, I do not talk to him (because I am unable to) but instead to myself, because the way I choose to treat him reflects how my own consciousness/subjectivity is constructed. In turn, my choice of how I treat the Other further shapes who I am. I can choose to bow to the Other, as Levinas proposes, no matter what the Other is, or I may wonder about the ways I can *know* him *in my own way*. In either case, I confront myself. In this crucial moment, I am forced to shape who I am when I decide on the nature of my relationship with the Other.

For example, I can kill a deer to fend for myself, or I can kill a thousand deer to make a fortune. I don't need to take into any consideration the consequence (of the Other) because deer will not change behaviors or try to bring revenge upon me (nor will they reprehend me). The Other's inactivity (from the Self's viewpoint) makes my killing purposeless except to fend for myself. That is, when the Other puts itself at my disposal—it does not react in any way which I need to take into consideration in order to mend my treatment to the Other. What I confront is not the Other but myself/my own conscience.

To kill a deer to eat has a clear purpose (to sustain myself physically), whereas this purpose does not apply to killing a thousand deer. Therefore, meaning must be imposed in order to carry out the mass killing—a meaning created for justification. The one we are most familiar with is that of commodification, the circle of selling them, earning more money, buying more deer and killing more to sell. This is why Levinas claims “killing one deer to eat” is enjoyable while “killing one thousand deers” (with its self-imposed purpose) only registers the Self's cruelty and arrogance. This meaning-making process constitutes a Selfness/epistemology that breeds commodification, competition and fear, rendering the infinite into finite resources.

To conclude, Albee's play raises an issue to which Levinas may provide an affirmative (ethical) answer.¹³ Without the Other, the Self will not be the Self. To ensure continuation of the human species, it is important to develop a respectful relationship toward the Other; this is also the best way for humans to access

¹² For example, hunters used to take advantage of minks which come out as a group to warm up those dying in the snow, by lying on the snowy ground and rounding up their rescuers.

¹³ While it has been debated that animals are mentioned only as a tool to explain transcendence in Levinas's ethical theories (how humans should transcend their animality to become real humans), here I second Barbara Jane Davy's argument that one should interpret Levinas's writing about the Face metaphorically. Davy proposes a “phenomenological understanding of the Other beyond categories such as human, animal, plant, rock, wind, or body of water” (41).

understanding of their essential Selves. The story of the spoons with handles so long that their handlers couldn't use them to reach their mouths illuminates something essential in the Self-Other relationship. Everyone will starve if they try to feed themselves individually with the over-long spoon; but everyone gets fed if they learn to feed one another. The former individual-bound situation creates suffering, whereas the latter brings relief and comfort. Levinas's affirmation that ethics is the first philosophy applies to today's world, as too often we see that violence breeds violence and that greed brings waste and degradation. Levinas suggests wisdom or love, which proffers an unfailingly supply, as Baucis and Philemon's love for strangers demonstrates.¹⁴

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¹⁴ The story comes from Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. When Zeus and Hermes come disguised as the old couple to their door, Baucis and Philemon welcome them with unconditional love. Baucis and Philemon are hence rewarded with an unfailing supply of food and wine.

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「席微雅」，抑或，「我們」是誰？ 艾爾比《羊，或，誰是席微雅？悲劇 定義的註腳》一劇中之另類主體性

摘要

本文探討愛德華·艾爾比《羊，或，誰是席微雅？悲劇定義的註腳》劇中「我們是誰」之明顯哲學議題。將一個人（馬丁）和一隻羊（席微雅）的「婚外情」戲劇化，我認為艾爾比的戲劇問了一個比「誰是席微雅」更要緊的問題，那就是「我們是誰」。將他我議題放在一個人類與非人類的更廣的背景下來探索，此文主要檢視列維納斯之倫理理論與此劇之間的對話。文中並更深入的主張他者的絕對他異性(alterity)迫使自我去面對自己，或是自己的良心。因此在決定他者是誰的同時，自我亦因此定調了本身的界線與基向。在我們邁向二十一世紀的同時，艾爾比透過這角度，在這個描述人獸戀的獲獎劇本中，提出自我與其所處世界的最基本的疑問。

關鍵字：愛德華·艾爾比，列維納斯，倫理，生態學，知識型

