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# Loving More, Being Less

## Reflections on Vladimir Jankélévitch's *Le paradoxe de la morale*<sup>1</sup>

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"[T]he word 'excess' has no meaning when it's a question of love," writes Vladimir Jankélévitch in *Le paradoxe de la morale*, and "like love, the moral imperative endlessly overflows its present literal interpretation."<sup>2</sup> Thus Jankélévitch announces a concept of pure and deliriously unwise love that he attributes to Plato, St. Paul and St. Augustine, and which will undoubtedly catch the attention of readers who are already familiar with accounts of infinite moral responsibility and hyperbolic ethics that can be found in the work of other French philosophers. However, rather than focusing on the way in which moral responsibility presents itself to us, Jankélévitch describes the way that love's commands are actually lived in a moral life. Are human persons actually able to fulfill those commands? To what extent is the human condition a help or a hindrance—or perhaps both—in realizing the apparently endless moral imperative? These are the questions that motivate *Le paradoxe de la morale* and the reading of it that I offer in this paper.

Here, I will argue that Jankélévitch actually suggests two different visions of the moral life in the text and that these visions are in tension with one another. On the first vision, the moral life is an acrobatic<sup>3</sup> act in which we must perform the extraordinary feat of balancing the demands of love against our natural, egoistical attachment to self. On the second vision, however, the excessive demands of pure love really can be fulfilled through a supernatural conversion away from egoism that overflows one's own natural resources. In conclusion, the tension between the two visions might be resolved if we imagine the dynamics of conversion—the movement from natural to supernatural—to be themselves part of the larger acrobatics of morality that Jankélévitch aims to describe. When we do manage instants of pure love, we cannot imagine that these moments are the result of our own good intentions; rather, such instants are beyond reason and remain without cause.

In order to defend this thesis, I will not systematically compare or contrast Jankélévitch to other figures, but I do assume that the arguably hyperbolic concept of pure love that inspires *Le paradoxe de la morale* will be of interest to readers of both Levinas's and Derrida's ethics. I also assume that many readers may be relatively unfamiliar with Jankélévitch's work, and for them I hope this essay can serve as a limited but helpful introduction to Jankélévitch's thought. Indeed, I hope that this goal might be particularly served by focusing on *Le paradoxe de la morale*, since in this work both Jankélévitch's predilection for paradox as a philosophical method and his characteristic position that the moral life involves endless oscillation between various pairs of contraries are on full display.<sup>4</sup> As I read it, *Le paradoxe de la morale* represents a mature and basically harmonious development of a philosophical method and key concepts that are already introduced in earlier works, including *Les vertus et l'amour* and *Philosophie première*.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless my primary goal in this paper is not to situate *Le paradoxe de la morale* vis-à-vis Jankélévitch's other works but rather to contrast and consider the two accounts of moral life that can be found there. Thus his reflections on the human condition and the possibility of responding to the demands of love are ultimately my main interest, and it is to these I now turn.

## Two Visions of the Moral Life: An Overview

In what is perhaps the best-known passage of *Le paradoxe de la morale*, Jankélévitch proposes that the difficulty of moral life just is the task of realizing the "maximum of love (*amour*) in the minimum of being (*être*)," or, alternately, "administering the minimum of being or necessary evil compatible with the maximum of love."<sup>6</sup> Without supposing we've exhausted the meanings Jankélévitch evokes with the word, "being" at first blush can be read as pointing to the human condition, particularly insofar as humans are material, finite, and instinctively concerned with their own well-being. "Love" meanwhile is a pure and disinterested orientation towards the other: a charity without measure that knows only my duty towards the other and thinks nothing of my own rights. Love that sets a limit on its commitment is tepid and lacking in faith, writes Jankélévitch, and such impure love fails to meet the moral obligation of loving uneconomically, with the entirety of one's physical and personal resources.<sup>7</sup> It is because he thinks of being as inevitably bound up with egoistic attachment to oneself that Jankélévitch insists on the inverse relationship between being and love: "The more being there is, the less love there is. The less being there is, the more love there is."<sup>8</sup> Thus Jankélévitch proposes that the moral life comprises an acrobatic act in which we balance the demands of love against our natural, egoistical attachment to the self.

Yet, if being appears as an obstacle to be overcome as we aim to love, it also appears as a necessary aide to the good life. This is the case, first,

because our material existence seems to be a prerequisite to performing any loving action, such that the moral life is not only threatened by an excess of being but also by its deficit. As Jankélévitch proposes, because man's being is finite but love's demands are infinite, there is a "superabundance of normativity" caused by the overflowing of duty beyond man's material capacity to do good.<sup>9</sup> A second reason why being is an aid to love is that, according to Jankélévitch, being's calculative concern for the self and the self-satisfied pleasure of having fulfilled the demands of one's conscience are inevitable and appropriate components of moral acts. Acts that would be utterly free from any concern for the self are, he asserts, a "chimerical limit" for finite, impure man.<sup>10</sup> Hence, although the demands of pure love compel us to constrain the egoism of being, the moral life on this account does not turn out to be a life of pure love, but rather a life lived in the tension between love and being.<sup>11</sup> Morality is a paradox because love commands us to decrease being—love is sacrifice, a gift of myself—and yet love also needs being. Moral life, Jankélévitch concludes, consists in a difficult acrobatics of being and love, and amounts to minimizing the necessary evils associated with the egoistical human condition and aiming to maximize concern for others.<sup>12</sup>

The vision of moral life as acrobatics is the central paradox of morality that Jankélévitch discusses in his eponymous text. This vision, however, stands in apparent tension with another account of the moral life also offered there. On this alternate account, which Jankélévitch seems to suggest in the text's last few sections, the moral life is marked by the surpassing and transformation of human nature. Inspired by the relationship with another, I undergo a sudden conversion that displaces the natural egoism associated with the human condition.<sup>13</sup> This displacement, it might seem, constitutes a real change in the "being" that supports the central paradox of morality. Indeed, as Jankélévitch describes it, the "supernatural" transformation of human nature opened by the relationship with "the you" [*le toi*] makes possible exactly those sorts of loving acts that Jankélévitch earlier presented as a chimera. Now, pure, disinterested love is possible because, faced with the pure alterity of another, I can love him simply as other and for no reason at all.<sup>14</sup> In contrast to the *perpetual acrobatics* of being and love, moral life here presents itself as a *miraculous transformation* of being in favor of an experience of love that overflows my own resources.

Thus, without announcing the fact, *Le paradoxe de la morale* implicitly ends up presenting us with two apparently very different visions of the moral life. On the one hand, there is the paradoxical co-dependence of love and being that occupies Jankélévitch's attention throughout the greater part of the text. On the other hand, there is the supernatural possibility that the morally vicious, self-centered aspects of being truly can be overcome, and love can win out fully and purely. In the following, I aim to develop and resolve the tension between these two visions of the moral life. In the next

section, I will consider the account of moral life as a paradox or acrobatics of being and love. Here, I will discuss Jankélévitch's claim that being is an "organ-obstacle" of love, by which he aims to show that the moral life is an endless but fruitful struggle between being and love. In the final section of this paper, I will go on to consider those passages where Jankélévitch presents moral life as a supernatural surpassing of the human condition. As I see it, these are best interpreted as indicating that in the moral life we do not fully overcome the egoism of being but that we do go beyond conscious, rational deliberations and find ourselves moved, as though without reason, by a commitment to the other.

### Being as the "Organ-Obstacle" of Love

I have already noted that Jankélévitch uses the term being [*être*] throughout *Le paradoxe de la morale* to indicate the human condition, particularly insofar as humans are material, finite, and egoistic, in the sense of being concerned with their own well-being. It is this condition that makes possible moral activity, and yet by its various limitations also tends to lead us away from loving acts. Hence, using one of his signature terms, Jankélévitch describes being as the "organ-obstacle" [*organe-obstacle*] of love and the moral life.<sup>15</sup> In order to understand Jankélévitch's account of the moral life, and the human condition in general, we will need to appreciate why being is both "organ" and "obstacle".

The claim that being is the "organ" of love is, first of all, a way of emphasizing the material reality of moral choices, in repudiation of any dualism that would relegate morals to a spiritual, metaphysical realm. Thus ethics is not, Jankélévitch writes, an other-worldly ascension to a sublime region where the sun of the Good shines.<sup>16</sup> The polemic against Plato is important for Jankélévitch because he wants to prevent the reader from interpreting the tendentious relationship between being and love simply as a rift between evil matter and good spirit. Love, to be sure, makes infinite demands that go beyond the finite possibilities of our material condition.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, love remains on "this side" of Plato's heaven, since love "strictly said" has its place in the precise relationship of the one to the other.<sup>18</sup> Thus Jankélévitch insists that love *needs* being and spirit *needs* the weight of matter. This, however, does not mean that love is an expression of being's natural egoism. Rather, as Jankélévitch has it, love manifests itself by leaping upwards from egoism, and he appropriates the term *élan* to describe this movement.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, he suggests that in loving, we "rebound" [*rebondir*] upward from being as one bounces from a springboard; the image is meant to convey the continual dependence of the moral life on being, as well as its departure from it.<sup>20</sup>

This passage in which Jankélévitch describes the relationship between being and love as a rebound [*rebondissement*] also offers further insight into what he means by "being", since here being is the condition that constitutes

the springboard from which we jump. Being as the condition of love's bounce is here associated with immanence [*immanence*], the body [*corps*], and matter [*matière*].<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, Jankélévitch suggests that our "naturalness" [*naturalité*] can be thought of as just these conditions, which support the *élan* of love even as they are transcended in the bounce:

Une chose est certaine: [l'*élan*] ne tient plus au corps que par un fil, mais, malgré ce fil délicat, il est solidement amarré dans l'immanence; il plonge ses racines au plus profond de notre naturalité, il se cache, invisible, au centre de cette matière qui le porte et le propulse. L'*élan* est indissociable de la matière où il prend naissance: la matière le retient, l'alourdit et l'entrave, mais en même temps et *par là même* lui sert de point d'appui ou de repoussoir. Le corps est donc à la fois le souci de l'*élan* et le fondement de sa confiance.<sup>22</sup>

Love, then, is an upward movement "towards the height" [*vers la hauteur*], a spiritual reality that is realized in and through our natural, material condition. The relationship within love between spirit and matter is at the heart of the paradox of love and being. This sort of relationship is possible, Jankélévitch proposes, only because the human person is himself "undividedly soul and body" [*indivisément âme et corps*].<sup>23</sup> He also coins the term *être-aimant* to describe the individual who loves, insisting in parallel fashion that this individual is "indivisibly being and love" [*indivisiblement être et amour*].<sup>24</sup> Jankélévitch's point in this passage, however, is not to defend some particular metaphysical anthropology. Rather, these appeals to the human's dual nature are meant to underscore a key reality of moral life: namely, that duty cannot be fulfilled through some merely spiritual gesture, some feeling of compassion or good will. Rather, the moral *élan* of love brings us to be point where we give our whole self, to the point of suffering in our flesh and sacrificing our very being.<sup>25</sup> Love, Jankélévitch insists, is distinctly material, even while it is also a movement towards heights far above our natural condition.

Thus it is the materiality of love that Jankélévitch aims to highlight when he claims that being is the "organ" of love. But in what sense, then, is being also love's "obstacle"? In what way is the natural, material human condition a challenge to love? Here Jankélévitch draws our attention not merely to the materiality of the human condition, but more particularly to all those limitations and imperfections traditionally associated with it, most importantly mortality and egoistic self-love. Thus, he tells us, simply baptizing being as an "organ-obstacle" of love will not be enough to support the paradox of being and love, unless we understand that being signifies also "the fact of death, the necessity of dying in general" [*le fait de la mort, la nécessité de mourir en général*], as well as natural self-interest [*intérêt-propre*] or "elementary egoism" [*égoïsme élémentaire*].<sup>26</sup>

That death and self-interest are necessarily tied to human existence as we know it is, perhaps, incontrovertible.<sup>27</sup> What is distinctive about Jankélévitch's account is, first, his insistence that death, like any suffering we undergo when we truly sacrifice for another, puts a limit on our love, and is therefore an obstacle that "weighs down" [*alourdit*] love's *élan*.<sup>28</sup> As we love more, we give more, and we suffer. Indeed, a willingness to suffer, Jankélévitch argues, is constitutive of moral action, precisely because we *cannot* meet love's infinite demand by giving infinitely, and thus begin to meet it only by depleting our own precious resources.<sup>29</sup> Unlike God, who mysteriously still has whatever He gives, that which we give of ourselves is truly *given*, truly sacrificed—and yet still we are called to infinite duty [*devoir infini*] and to give without counting the cost. Thus death as the limit of suffering is truly both obstacle and organ: our finite condition limits our love but also makes possible our meager participation in an infinite gift of self, by making self-gift possible.<sup>30</sup>

Also distinctive is Jankélévitch's claim that natural self-interest is a precondition of moral "disinterest" [*désintéressement*]. Here perhaps it is helpful to recall the image of love as a "bounce" from the springboard of being. In moral action, we 'bounce off' our natural tendency to self-love, which conditions self-gift by making sacrifice meaningful. Thus the egoism that Jankélévitch sees as natural to the human condition is a precondition for the act of love:

Ici encore nous achoppons à l'inéluctable contradiction interne qui est toute la paradoxe de la morale: un égoïsme élémentaire, inhérent à l'être-propre, est la condition minimale et en quelque sorte vitale de l'altruisme!<sup>31</sup>

If we love our own self too much, of course, we may simply fail to love others. But the idea here is that if we love ourselves too little, then self-sacrifice and the demand to love even unto death are insignificant. At this point, Jankélévitch's account brings to mind Kant's discussion of the warm-hearted altruist, whose actions have no moral value precisely because he is, by nature and inclination, so self-giving that he does not suffer in doing good.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, Jankélévitch does hold that good or loving intentions are, necessarily, self-sacrificing intentions, gifts of our finite resources: hence the ineluctable paradox of the moral life, which reveals itself as an inevitable tension between altruistic love and egoistic being.

Yet Jankélévitch's position is more complex than this allusion to Kant may suggest, since for him it is not my suffering that constitutes the moral value of my good actions; rather, it is my turn towards the other and away from my own concerns. Self-sacrifice, in this sense, may tend to overlap with emotional or physical suffering, but it needn't always. This is clear from Jankélévitch's discussion of the "irreplacable surgeon" [*irremplaçable chirurgien*], an individual whose moral duty includes self-preservation

precisely because he is the only individual whose skills are able to bring about the good of others.<sup>33</sup> The coincidence of his own good with his moral duty does not exclude the surgeon from the moral life, and this is true even if this coincidence conceals an egoistical subintention. To be sure, when the surgeon acts so as to preserve his own self he may not be realizing the loving *élan* that would exemplify the highest sort of human virtue, but neither is he a condemnable figure. Rather, he is "happy a thousand times over" [*mille fois heureux*].<sup>34</sup> A similar situation obtains with regards to any man, Jankélévitch notes, when we consider our duties towards our "dear ones" [*êtres chers*]; since it is we alone who bring about certain goods for them, our duty to them particularly excludes certain types of self-sacrifice. In such cases, Jankélévitch notes, we receive our own life as "a grace" or a "present", since we have not been called to suffer in our sacrifice:

[I]l suffit que nous n'ayons pas expressément demandé toutes ces bénédictions: continuer de vivre est alors une grâce qui nous est faite, un cadeau qui nous est donné par surcroît--et c'est le plus beau de tous les cadeaux.<sup>35</sup>

To be sure, this gift of a happy coincidence between self-love and love of others is not prevalent in Jankélévitch's moral universe. We cannot and should not expect the grace of our own happiness; more commonly, moral life is a "coming and going" [*va-et-vient*] between love and being.<sup>36</sup> The *élan* of love pulls us away from our attention to self towards others, yet the commitment to our own being must be maintained, since it enables us to continue giving. It is this coming and going that comprises the acrobatic achievement of moral life, the difficult task of realizing the "maximum of love in the minimum of being."<sup>37</sup>

Thus to see that being is both an obstacle and an organ of love is, for Jankélévitch, to commit to the thesis that morality is a paradox. Being--the materiality, finitude, and egoism of the human condition--make self-sacrificing love possible precisely because being is overcome in love, yet the overcoming of being is essentially and necessarily endless. This endless movement between being and love is captured well by Jankélévitch's privileged metaphor of being as the springboard from which love jumps; in the leap of love, we jump and we always fall back to jump again. The fact that this movement is experienced as an acrobatic balancing act, meanwhile, is captured well by description of moral life as the problem of maximizing love in a minimum of being. What these images ignore or deny, however, is the possibility that the demands of pure, disinterested love--and our desire for such love--might ever be truly met.

## Nature, Conscience, and the Supernaturality of Love

The vision of the moral life that I have discussed thus far--of the moral life as an acrobatics of love and being--is surely the dominant picture

offered by Jankélévitch in *Le paradoxe de la morale*. Yet throughout the text, and especially in sections 4-8 of Chapter IV, there is also a competing picture, according to which the self-love or egoism that characterize the human condition are not merely balanced or repeatedly overcome, but rather are actually transformed in the moral life. In this vision, moral life marks the advent of a "supernature" [*supernature*] that supplants ordinary human nature and overcomes the oscillation of being and love.<sup>38</sup> To be sure, Jankélévitch himself does not systematically distinguish this vision of moral life as a transformation of human nature from the vision of moral life as a paradox between love and being. Nevertheless by suggesting that moral life is in some way supernatural—even "beyond being" [*au-delà de l'être*—Jankélévitch presses upon us an alternate vision in which the human condition does not merely persist as organ-obstacle but is in some way transformed for the better.<sup>39</sup> In the remainder of the paper, I will discuss this alternate vision of the moral life and, in closing, I will offer some remarks as to how the two visions of moral life as paradox and as transformation can be read as complementary rather than contradictory. As we will see, Jankélévitch does hold that truly loving actions are possible through a transformation of the human condition, even if moral life as a whole does not succeed in avoiding the paradox of love and being.

In order to explicate Jankélévitch's account of the way in which love transforms human nature, I would like to begin by explaining what he means when he says that something or some aspect of the human condition is "natural". Although Jankélévitch himself does not explicitly distinguish between different senses of the term in *Le paradoxe de la morale*, I would suggest that there are at least two distinct ways in which he thinks of nature and, in particular, what is natural to the human condition. First, "nature" is identified with the "elementary egoism" inherent to our being as such, which I have already discussed in the preceding section. In this sense, what is natural to humans is our bodily, material condition, our being.<sup>40</sup> As we have seen, man's being includes a natural self-love [*philautie*] that is tantamount to an instinct or biological condition.<sup>41</sup>

Yet human nature is not only, for Jankélévitch, characterized by materiality and self-love. It is also characterized by conscious life, and in particular the capacity for moral reflection. In this sense, nature indicates man's distinctive self-consciousness, and in particular his moral self-consciousness. Nature in this sense need not always be in perfect harmony with nature qua being: as Jankélévitch observes, through self-conscious reflection I can actually try to reject my own natural instinct. That is, I can through moral reflection distance myself from my own "shameful egotistic preference" [*l'inavouable préférence égoïste*].<sup>42</sup> Thus the human condition actually includes the possibility of a reflective fission in the self, or rather, in human nature; as consciousness rejects instinct, "me and myself" [*moi et moi-même*] are no longer fully one.<sup>43</sup>

While self-consciousness opens the possibility of rejecting egoistic preferences, it is not always put to such good ends. Like freedom, Jankélévitch proposes, self-consciousness can also be used to turn us away from our moral vocation:

À l'intérieur du minimum éthique, la conscience-de-soi peut apparaître, dans certains cas, comme l'élément le plus pesant de notre bagage, lorsque s'accumule en elle le stock de nos souvenirs, de nos traditions et de nos préjugés. Car la conscience de soi est, comme la liberté elle-même, une arme à double tranchant: elle est la libération réflexive qui met fin à l'indivision végétative; mais, dans la mesure où elle est parfois introversion et rétroversion, elle est aussi perversion et nous détourne de notre vocation qui est d'agir et d'aimer...<sup>44</sup>

Self-consciousness, then, is a sword that can cut both ways: towards love or towards the self. Because we are able to reflect on ourselves and our identities, we run the risk of becoming overly attached to ourselves and less willing to respond to others in love. A new, reflective and conscious variety of egoism may grow to complement our already self-centered instincts.

It must be noted that in the passage just quoted, Jankélévitch takes advantage of the flexible French *conscience*, which can suggest both consciousness and conscience. While at a first reading it seems clear that he wants us to read the term as 'consciousness' or 'self-awareness'— hence "*conscience de soi*"—, the discussion of Genesis that follows this passage indicates that Jankélévitch also wants us to interpret *conscience* as the knowledge of good and evil—i.e., conscience, with all of its moral resonances. In that discussion, Jankélévitch uses the account of Adam and Eve in order to illustrate the moral complexity of human life that derives from the ambiguities of conscience. Re-employing the concept of "obstacle-organ" that he used to explain the double role of being in the moral life, Jankélévitch here defends the claim that conscience, too, is a means that becomes an obstacle to love [*un moyen qui fait obstacle*].<sup>45</sup> The clear-sightedness that comes with conscience, Jankélévitch proposes by way of exegesis, is the discernment of good and evil, but this knowledge is "not compatible with a blissful eternity" [*n'est donc pas compatible avec une éternité bienheureuse*].<sup>46</sup> Fragile, pure innocence is lost, he explains, and so is the possibility of love without hidden motives and selfish afterthoughts: this is true, we are to presume, not only of Adam and Eve but also of ourselves. Nevertheless, if the origin of conscience marks the loss of the possibility of loving purely, it is also clear that self-awareness and the knowledge of good and evil are, for humans in their post-lapsarian condition, the means by which they can do good. Thus though human beings are fallen, the condition of their fallenness— which includes *conscience* in its double sense—becomes their greatness. Borrowing from Pascal, Jankélévitch

describes this condition of fallen conscience as "my irreplaceable superiority as a thinking reed!" [*mon irremplaçable supériorité de roseau pensant!*]<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, it would be equally impossible for me not to take up this problematic, double-edged conscience as it would be to stop thinking in general. The best we can do is chase after innocence by reflecting and questioning our choices, motivations, and intentions. Jankélévitch, in passing, suggests the term "higher conscience" [*surconscience*] to indicate this reflective activity, which leads us to an appreciation of others' rights and to contemplate the relationship between those rights and our own.<sup>48</sup>

All of this makes the question of what exactly is 'natural' to the human condition a complex issue—yet it is this question that we must pursue before we can appreciate those passages in which Jankélévitch suggests that the moral life involves a supernatural element. To be sure, materiality and finitude as well as egoistical instinct and self-awareness are all, for Jankélévitch, natural. But what about a distinctively moral self-awareness—a conscience? Is the discussion of Genesis meant to suggest an Edenic portrait of nature, a time prior to time when pure innocence was in harmony with our rational nature, and consciousness did not include conscience? Or does the discussion suggest, rather, that human nature is as it manifests itself now: a condition wherein our awareness of self includes moral reflection and the possibility of moral self-correction, but which also opens the possibility that selfish pride and narcissistic deliberations simply reinforce egoistic instinct at a more sophisticated level?

The better option here is the latter: human nature in this context is not Edenic innocence but rather the postlapsarian reflective conscience that opens the possibility of moral life as we know it. This is the case, first, because Jankélévitch in *Le paradoxe de la morale* is not aiming to engage in theological or metaphysical speculation about humans before the fall, but rather to describe the lived experience of morality. Second, and more importantly, we have already seen that Jankélévitch is determined throughout the text to present moral life as a never-ending cycle, a delicate acrobatics, a ceaseless return from egoism to love and back. In claiming that conscience is both a means and an obstacle of love, Jankélévitch wants to tie his account of moral self-awareness back to this vision. The double-edged sword of conscience is just as natural as the acrobatics of the moral life. What is natural to man on this account, what most clearly marks his existence, is the experience of moral life as complex and compromised. It is, if you will, part of the human condition that our moral life has the "dynamics of a springboard" [*dynamique du tremplin*], where love rebounds upward from that all-too mixed nature of the loving-being [*être-aimant*].<sup>49</sup>

With this rough account of human nature as presented in *Le paradoxe de la morale*, we are now in a position to examine and explain those passages where Jankélévitch describes the movement of love that is realized in the moral life as the realization of a higher "supernature" [*supernature*]. In these

passages, he proposes that this supernatural transcends nature and that this transcending is not a simple rejection of nature since it also transcends what would be counter to nature:

La surnature transcende à la fois la nature et la nature contre nature . . . laquelle n'est jamais qu'une nature à l'envers! Ou plutôt, la surnaturalité ne sera jamais, en acte, contre-naturelle, ne s'habitue jamais à marcher la tête en bas: du moins une lutte sans répit devient-elle possible entre l'amour désintéressé et les réflexes harcelés par les scruples.<sup>50</sup>

According to Jankélévitch, this supernatural state marks "the advent of a moral life" [*l'avènement d'une vie morale*] and is constituted by a reversal wherein I replace my own self-obsession with a passionate interest in another, who is my "partner (the you)" [*partenaire (le toi)*].<sup>51</sup> This "revolutionary inversion" [*interversion révolutionnaire*] where I put you first is "literally super-natural" [*littéralement surnaturel*] because it dislodges the ego from first place, reversing the instinctive self-orientation and signaling a new "naturalness against nature" [*naturalité contre nature*].<sup>52</sup> This movement is supernatural, first, in its surpassing of our elementary egoism; pulling me away from the material desires of being, "the you" redirects my desires towards his needs.

Yet this movement is not only supernatural in the sense of transforming the self-orientation that Jankélévitch designates as being. It is also supernatural insofar as it is impossible that this transformation could be a result of my own self-reflection. Instead, Jankélévitch proposes, the transformation is brought about through a reflection that takes place from the perspective of another. Conscience, that shabby tool that distinguishes between right and wrong but so often fails to lead us to right willing, finally manages to reflect on things rightly only by considering them through a passionate obsession with the other. Indeed, as Jankélévitch puts it, it is almost as though my *conscience-de-soi* is replaced by a *conscience-de-toi*. How is it that the other becomes "my new first person" [*ma nouvelle première personne*] while "remaining numerically an other person" [*en restant numériquement une autre personne*]?<sup>53</sup> Only, says Jankélévitch, through a conversion that is "sudden and often without tomorrow" [*une conversion subite et souvent sans lendemain*].<sup>54</sup> Thus, although our own conscious life is generally insufficient to sustain pure, radically disinterested love, Jankélévitch proposes that when we are graced by the appearance of another in the instant of conversion it becomes possible to turn outwards with an act of love that is truly above our nature. It is important to stress that although this event is supernatural, this re-orientation does not establish a new nature; it is not a conversion wherein some second nature is substituted for the first [*ne peut-on parler d'une seconde nature qui se substituerait à la première*]. Although Jankélévitch does not make it explicit, this claim that no second

nature is substituted for human nature suggests that this sudden, supernatural realization of love is in some way a fulfillment of our natural capacities.

If moral life is in any moments or to any extent supernatural, it is only because love itself, on Jankélévitch's account, is a supernatural reality. Throughout *Le paradoxe de la morale*, Jankélévitch aims to show that the apparently straightforward moral vocation of man—i.e., the call or duty "to love, and to live for others" [*d'aimer, et de vivre pour les autres*]<sup>55</sup>—is fraught with difficulties so complex they constitute lived paradoxes. In this paper, I have touched on just two of the ways he develops the portrait of moral life as paradox: namely, the tension of being and love, and the double-edged sword of conscience. What these paradoxes reveal is that there is no way for man, given his natural condition, to love with the sort of pure love that is truly called for, since our moral intention is always invaded by our egoism:

[L]e contradictoire égoïste pénètre profondément dans la texture intime de l'intention morale, non seulement parce qu'il la conditionne, mais parce qu'il lui emprunte son visage, parce qu'il la mime, à s'y méprendre; la charité hypocrite emprunte le masque de la vraie charité et, à la limite, elle en devient indiscernable. Nous parlions d'un hybride appelé organe-obstacle.<sup>56</sup>

The upshot of this, however, is not that love or the moral life is impossible for man, but rather that if it is possible, it will not be through the natural possibilities of conscience, which are at least as much obstacle as organ. What follows, according to Jankélévitch, is that love, to the extent that it is true, pure love, does not stem from the merely human condition, whether we describe it as being or as *conscience*. Rather, pure love must be completely without reason; we ought to love for "no other reason . . . than the fact of pure alterity, which is evidently not a reason" [*il n'y a pas d'autre raison d'aimer que le fait de la pure altérité... Ce qui n'est évidemment pas une raison*].<sup>57</sup> The idea here is that if we love *for a reason*, then we are necessarily 'interested' in some morally questionable way, which contaminates love; all intentions are infected with egoism, so any action that springs from our ostensibly good intentions is less than pure.<sup>58</sup> Hence truly selfless, disinterested [*désintéressé*] love is unmotivated [*immotivé*] love.<sup>59</sup>

If love is ultimately, for Jankélévitch, without reason, it is nevertheless not a descent into madness. Glossing love without reason as love *causa sui*, Jankélévitch suggests such love is nothing other than the central mystery of divine creation [*le mystère central de la création divine*].<sup>60</sup> If love *causa sui* is indeed the paradigm of pure love, it should perhaps be no surprise that the purest human love manifests itself in the moral life as love without reason, an image of its divine and supernatural source. It comes to us, overflowing our nature, in the fraternity of two faces [*la fraternité de deux*

*visages et célébrera la rencontre de deux regards*]. It is in this proposal, perhaps, that Jankélévitch presents the most compelling paradox of his text: namely, that such overflowing of nature would be not only possible, but also represent nature's fulfillment.<sup>61</sup>

### Love as the Dynamic Transcending of Being

In closing, I would like to offer a few comments on the way in which this vision of moral life as the opening to supernatural love can be read alongside Jankélévitch's vision of moral life as a paradox of love and being, which I discussed earlier. There, I described his proposal that moral life has the "dynamics of a springboard" [*dynamique du tremplin*], where love bounces upward from that all-too mixed nature of the loving-being [*être-aimant*].<sup>62</sup> Yet this account of love as deeply and paradoxically dependent on the human condition seemed initially at odds with Jankélévitch's contention that moral life represents also a true overcoming of nature, a radical reversal of self-obsession in favor of a supernatural commitment to the other. If moral action reveals itself in the acrobatic balancing of love and being, how can Jankélévitch also propose that moral life realizes the transformation of being?

The tension is resolved, I would propose, if we are willing to interpret the transcending of the human condition that occurs in the moral life as, in fact, a new iteration of Jankélévitch's main theme. Here, the dynamics of love and being are replaced by the dynamics of natural and supernatural: the natural is a springboard for supernatural love, just as being is a condition of love. This does not mean that nature just is being for Jankélévitch; to the contrary, as we have seen, being points towards the materiality and finitude of the human condition, but *conscience* in its double sense is also and importantly natural to that condition. Now if we ask whether love is or is not beyond being for Jankélévitch, we will be able to propose a more nuanced response. First we can say that that devotion to the other never fully overcomes the natural egoism of the human condition—love's *élan* can leap only so far beyond being. Yet it is also true that that this devotion does in its most pure moments go beyond reason and moral reflection, beyond *conscience*, and presents itself as an immediate loving response, a conversion that overflows our own resources. Thus in the end it is not being but rather *conscience* that is the most important "organ-obstacle" of Jankélévitch's text, for if the knowledge of good and evil and the capacity for moral reflection seem to be the conditions of a moral life, they also turn out to be the obstacles that prevent our responding to the other directly, suddenly, and as though without reason. This recourse to the paradox of a love that aims to fulfill the needs of the other while purging itself of rational calculation is ultimately the most memorable—and most Lévinasian—of Jankélévitch's paradoxes; it is also, one suspects, the outcome of historical

atrocities so hideously calculative that they would make anyone doubt the worth of reason in cultivating love.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank my colleagues in the philosophy department at Mount Saint Mary's University, who commented on a draft of this essay. I would also like to thank Kevin Hart and Andrew Kelley, who have been very helpful in directing me to resources on Jankélévitch.

<sup>2</sup> “[L]e mot ‘excès n’a pas de sens quand il s’agit d’aimer: comme l’amour, l’impératif moral déborde indéfiniment de sa littéralité actuelle.” Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Le paradoxe de la morale* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1981), 63. Hereafter “PM”.

<sup>3</sup> I thank the peer reviewer who suggested using the term ‘acrobatics’ to describe this aspect of the human condition.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Joëlle Hansel, *Vladimir Jankélévitch: Une Philosophie du Charme* (Paris: Éditions Manucius, 2012), 40-42 for a helpful discussion of Jankélévitch’s characteristic method of philosophizing by paradox.

<sup>5</sup> See *Philosophie première: Introduction à une philosophie du “presque”* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1986), originally published in 1953; *Traité des vertus II: Les vertus et l’amour*, 2 vols. (Paris: Flammarion, 1986), originally published in 1949.

<sup>6</sup> “Le problème scabreux de la vie morale ressemble à un tour de force, mais on réussit ce tour de force presque sans y penser quand on aime: c’est, répétons-le, *de faire tenir le maximum d’amour dans le minimum d’être et de volume, ou à l’inverse de doser le minimum d’être ou de mal nécessaire compatible avec le maximum d’amour*” (PM, 150).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. PM 57-65, 166-173. As I mention in the introduction, Jankélévitch attributes this concept of love to Plato, St. Paul, and St. Augustine. François Fénelon, who is frequently mentioned by Jankélévitch, is also an important source of his notion of pure love (Cf. Isabelle de Montmollin, *La philosophie de Vladimir Jankélévitch: Sources, sens, enjeux* [Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2000], 349).

<sup>8</sup> “Plus il y a d’être, moins il y a d’amour. Moins il y a d’être, plus il y a d’amour” (PM 150).

<sup>9</sup> “surabondance de normativité,” (PM 151).

<sup>10</sup> Jankélévitch, *Le paradoxe de la morale*, 143.

<sup>11</sup> In this paper, I follow Jankélévitch in using “morals” or the “moral life” [*morale, vie morale*] to describe the good human life. The major tension that I will consider

is whether the moral life turns out to be the acrobatics of love and being that Jankélévitch describes at length or, rather, whether it might consist in a more radical turn to pure love. I will avoid the terms “ethics” and “ethical” [*éthique*], since Jankélévitch himself uses the word less to describe either account of the good life. In general, Jankélévitch does not develop a consistent conceptual distinction between “morals” and “ethics” in the *Le paradoxe de la morale*, though he does use the latter term to refer to the moral theory of other philosophers (e.g., “*l'éthique de Platon*”, p. 36) and he does briefly associate “ethics” with a juridical normativity in which I insist on claiming my rights along with yours, which therefore runs contrary to the radical demands of pure love (PM 172-3).

<sup>12</sup> It should be noted, however, that the balance achieved is perpetually unstable; hence Jankelevitch describes it at an “oscillatory fluttering” [*battement oscillatoire*] (PM 82).

<sup>13</sup> Jankélévitch, *Le paradoxe de la morale*, 167.

<sup>14</sup> Jankélévitch, *Le paradoxe de la morale*, 167, 170-171.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. especially Jankélévitch, *Le paradoxe de la morale*, 109-113.

<sup>16</sup> “L’*éthique* de Platon, tout comme la dialectique de Platon, obéit à l’élan ascensionnel qui l’emporte dans la région sublime où rayonne le soleil du Bien. Pourtant, si le dessein de l’homme moral n’est pas de s’établir au centre de la zone tempérée qu’Aristote appelle le just milieu, ce dessein n’est pas davantage de s’élever jusqu’à la cime de la perfection ni d’atteindre le sommet de la valeur” (PM 36).

<sup>17</sup> See Chapter II of *Le paradoxe de la morale* for Jankélévitch’s defense of love’s infinite demands. Love, he argues, is infinite in the sense that there can never be an excess of it; love’s work is without measure since it is never satisfied, never done (PM 62-63).

<sup>18</sup> “Au-delà de l’être et de l’épaisseur physique, mais en deçà de l’amour platonique et de la diffluence mystique, il y a place pour l’amour proprement dit qui est rapport aigu et précis de l’un à l’autre,” (PM 131). In the next section, I will aim to show in what way love is, for Jankélévitch, “beyond being.”

<sup>19</sup> Jankélévitch, *Le paradoxe de la morale*, 92-97.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Jankélévitch, *Le paradoxe de la morale*, 92-95.

<sup>22</sup> “One thing is certain: [*l’élan*] holds onto the body by nothing more than a thread, but, despite this delicate thread, it is tied down firmly in immanence; it buries its roots in the depths of our naturalness, it hides itself, invisible, in the center of this

matter that supports and propels it. *L'élan* is inseparable from the matter where it is born: the matter holds it, weighs it down, and hinders it, but at the same time and thereby serves as a point of reference or of framing. The body is thus at the same time the worry of *l'élan* and the foundation of its confidence" (PM 93-94).

<sup>23</sup> Jankélévitch, *Le paradoxe de la morale*, 97.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Jankélévitch, *Le paradoxe de la morale*, 125-127.

<sup>27</sup> Jankélévitch's decision to highlight self-interest and death as salient features of the human condition may inspire comparison to Freud's account of the ego-instincts or, perhaps more remotely, Freud's later focus on the death drive. Indeed, Jankélévitch's father, Samuel, was the first translator of Freud into French—a fact which naturally invites speculation about the influence of psychoanalytic theory on Vladimir's work. Such speculation remains largely conjecture, however, and it is difficult to detect a significant influence on the basis of the texts themselves. Jankélévitch the son does not discuss psychoanalytic theory and he does not rely on key Freudian concepts such as the unconscious in order to develop his account of the human person (Cf. Montmollin, 175, footnote 2). A more likely influence on the account of being, with its focus on our finite, material condition and our propensity to self-love, is Jankélévitch's reading of the Church fathers, who develop similar themes quite apart from a psychoanalytic framework, and who are directly cited by Jankélévitch (Cf. Ibid., 30-32). For an example, see PM 134-5, where Clement of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa are referenced as predecessors who have described the struggle between self-interest and pure love.

<sup>28</sup> Jankélévitch, *Le paradoxe de la morale*, 127, cf. 61.

<sup>29</sup> Jankélévitch, *Le paradoxe de la morale*, 51.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> "Here again we come up against the unavoidable internal contradiction that is the entire paradox of morality: an elementary egoism, inherent to being itself, is the minimal and in some way vital condition of altruism" (PM, 127).

<sup>32</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), Ak. 398.

<sup>33</sup> Jankélévitch, *Le paradoxe de la morale*, 67-69.

<sup>34</sup> Jankélévitch, *Le paradoxe de la morale*, 68.

<sup>35</sup> "It suffices that we have not expressly asked for all these blessings: to continue to live is then a grace that is done to us, an extra gift that is given to us—and it is

the most beautiful of all gifts” (PM 70). Cf. 177, where Jankélévitch describes the appearance of *my* right, corresponding to *your* duty, as something that I cannot expect but which I receive as a happy and “blessed” [*béni*] surprise and a grace [*grâce*].

<sup>36</sup> Jankélévitch, *Le paradoxe de la morale*, 129. Jankélévitch clearly presumes that this coming-and-going presupposes certain anthropological realities. First, the rebound off of the ego to love would not develop if not for a chronic bad conscience that already lies dormant in the ego (PM 129). Further, it is only through the ego’s willingness to enter into impure love such as it is that it receives interiority, subjectivity, and personhood (PM 130-1). Readers familiar with Emmanuel Lévinas’ *Otherwise than Being* will no doubt recognize these themes, and the association is strengthened when Jankélévitch employs the phrase “au-delà de l’être”. (Cf. also Jankélévitch’s *Philosophie première*, 3rd edition [Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2011], originally published in 1953, in which Jankélévitch discusses both the other and the otherwise than being; my thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.) Nevertheless it is the distinction between Jankélévitch and Lévinas that comes across more forcefully, for what Lévinasian hostage would ever accept that the moral life is necessarily impure, and that in it love does not successfully annul being (PM 130-1)?

<sup>37</sup> Jankélévitch, *Le paradoxe de la morale*, 150; Cf. note 6.

<sup>38</sup> Jankélévitch, *Le paradoxe de la morale*, 167.

<sup>39</sup> Jankélévitch, *Le paradoxe de la morale*, 131.

<sup>40</sup> Jankélévitch, *Le paradoxe de la morale*, 93-94.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Joëlle Hansel, *Vladimir Jankélévitch: Une Philosophie du Charme* (Paris: Éditions Manucius, 2012), 85. Here Hansel nicely sums up this sense of ‘naturalness’ as “the strictly biological and instinctive plan where the ‘priority of the self’ anxious about its own preservation manifests itself” [*le plan strictement biologique et instinctif où se manifeste la ‘priorité du moi’ soucieux de sa propre conservation*].

<sup>42</sup> Jankélévitch, *Le paradoxe de la morale*, 166.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> “At the interior of the ethical minimum, self-consciousness can appear, in certain cases, as the heaviest piece of our luggage, since in it accumulates the stock of our memories, our traditions, and our prejudices. Because self-consciousness is, like freedom itself, a double-edged sword: it is the reflexive release that puts an end to vegetative undividedness; but, to the extent that it is sometimes a turning inwards and backwards, it is also a perversion and diverts us from our vocation, which is to

act and to love...” (PM 174). Note that in this passage Jankélévitch uses the metaphor of baggage to describe the weight of conscience as it pulls us away from our loving vocation. Robert Bernasconi comments on Lévinas’s and Jankélévitch’s uses of this metaphor: Robert Bernasconi, “Travelling Light: The Conditions of Unconditional Forgiveness in Lévinas and Jankélévitch”, in *Vladimir Jankélévitch and the Question of Forgiveness*, ed. Alan Udoff (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013), 91.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Jankélévitch, *Le paradoxe de la morale*, 175.

<sup>46</sup> Jankélévitch, *Le paradoxe de la morale*, 174.

<sup>47</sup> Jankélévitch, *Le paradoxe de la morale*, 175.

<sup>48</sup> Jankélévitch, *Le paradoxe de la morale*, 175-176.

<sup>49</sup> Jankélévitch, *Le paradoxe de la morale*, 129.

<sup>50</sup> “The supernature transcends both nature and nature against nature . . . which is never only a nature in reverse! Or rather, supernaturalness will never be, in act, counter-natural, nor will it ever grow accustomed to walking with its head down: at least an endless struggle becomes possible between disinterested love and reflexes pestered by scruples” (PM 167).

<sup>51</sup> Jankélévitch, *Le paradoxe de la morale*, 166.

<sup>52</sup> “Par une conversion subite et souvent sans lendemain, mon devoir envers autrui déloge ainsi l'égoïsme qui occupait la première place—toute la place” (PM 166-7).

<sup>53</sup> Jankélévitch, *Le paradoxe de la morale*, 166.

<sup>54</sup> Jankélévitch, *Le paradoxe de la morale*, 167. In claiming that the conversion to pure love is ‘without tomorrow’, Jankélévitch seems to suggest the distinction between the ‘instant’ [*l'instant*] and the ‘interval’ [*l'intervalle*] that he develops in both his metaphysical and his ethical works. Though the instant is an “almost nothing” [*le presque-rien*], it is in an instant, he proposes, that direct insight into being and pure love become possible. Whether and how it is possible to extend the pure love of an instant into the habitual virtue that must mark the intervals of a moral life is treated, e.g., in *Les vertus et l'amour*, vol. 1, 12-31. Indeed, although Jankélévitch does not describe it this way, it would be possible to re-state the acrobatics of the moral paradox articulated in *Le paradoxe de la morale* as a variation on the theme of instant and interval: pure love, we might say, occurs in an instant and thereby both comes from and breaks with the interval of being. The description of supernatural conversion might, meanwhile, describe the transformation that is effected in an instant. Such a reading has the important

implications that (1) pure love really is possible, but (2) that it is impossible to lead a whole life of love since the instant by definition does not endure (Cf. Montmollin, 350-351). Although Jankélévitch does at times seem to defend both of these positions, he also seems to suggest—as, e.g., in the discussion of conscience and conversion presently under consideration—that the transformative effects of pure love extend beyond a mere instant, since they mark a change in the way I conceive of self and other as well as rights and duties.

<sup>55</sup> Jankélévitch, *Le paradoxe de la morale*, 184.

<sup>56</sup> “[t]he contradictory egoist deeply penetrates within the private structure of the moral intention, not only because it conditions it, but because it borrows its face, because it imitates it, so it’s hard to tell them apart; hypocritical charity borrows the mask of true charity and, at the limit, becomes indistinguishable from it. We spoke of a hybrid called organ-obstacle” (PM 184).

<sup>57</sup> Jankélévitch, *Le paradoxe de la morale*, 170.

<sup>58</sup> It is worth noting that when Jankelevitch proposes that acts of true love are without intention, he does not seem to be challenging the assumption that at least part of what distinguishes human action from instinctual or physiological acts of a man is precisely their intentional character. Rather, he seems to be using “intention” to describe a reason for acting that is recognized and accepted as such; hence he states, “le précieux, l’inestimable mouvement de l’intention, aussitôt qu’il prend conscience de soi, devient schéma inerte et fausse monnaie” (PM 170-1, italics added). The highest sort of moral acts, acts of pure love, are human actions, yet in them the person who acts gives himself over to the beloved with complete self-forgetfulness [*oubli de soi*]. Directed at the very essence of the beloved being [*l’essence même de l’être aimé*], the love seems to give itself in an “ecstasy” [*l’extase*] that abandons the structures of rationality and consciousness (Ibid.).

<sup>59</sup> Jankélévitch, *Le paradoxe de la morale*, 170.

<sup>60</sup> Jankélévitch, *Le paradoxe de la morale*, 48.

<sup>61</sup> Jankélévitch’s discussion of love as without reason and *causa sui* in *Le paradoxe de la morale* rightly bring to mind as well Chapter 3, “Mad Forgiveness: ‘Acumen Veniae’” of his text *Forgiveness*, trans. Andrew Kelley (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005). See also Andrew Kelley, “Jankélévitch and the Metaphysics of Forgiveness” in *Vladimir Jankélévitch and the Question of Forgiveness*, ed. Alan Udoff (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013) pp. 27-46 and, in the same collection, Robert Bernasconi, “Travelling Light: The Conditions of Unconditional Forgiveness in Lévinas and Jankélévitch,” 85-96. Well before *Le paradoxe de la morale*,

Jankélévitch had also considered treated the relationship between love and merely human excellence in *Les vertus et l'amour*.

<sup>62</sup> Jankélévitch, *Le paradoxe de la morale*, 129.

<sup>63</sup> Those interested in Lévinas's own very positive assessment of Jankélévitch might consider Emmanuel Lévinas, "Vladimir Jankélévitch" in *Outside the Subject*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 84-89.