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Animals and Us, Us as Animals**

SUMMARY

The field of animal ethics in philosophy has seen a variety of approaches since its recent resurgence. In this discussion, J. M. Coetzee's book *The Lives of Animals* serves as a focal point. Two contrasting responses to Coetzee's work are presented. The first response takes a traditional approach to the animal question, which aims to prevent suffering, improve animal welfare, and reject speciesism. The second response is more radical and emphasizes that the animal question is not just about animals, but also about us, human animals. This approach helpfully highlights the limitations of rational, philosophical thought when it comes to understanding the complexity of the animal question and ascribes the limitation to the phenomenon of the difficulty of reality.

Keywords: animal ethics, nonhuman animals, wellbeing, suffering, animal companions, philosophical thought.

INTRODUCTION

In J. M. Coetzee's novel (1999, p. 43), *The Lives of Animals* the President of the Appleton College Garrard asks the main protagonist of the novel, a guest of the college Elizabeth Costello "But your own vegetarianism, Mrs. Costello, ... it comes out of moral conviction, does it not?" "No, I don't think so," replies Elizabeth "It comes out of a desire to save my soul". The mentioned novel offers a very complex and subtle insight into the animal question. The book represents the *Tanner Lectures* (1997–98) that Coetzee has delivered and decided to frame as a story itself encompassing a set

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of academic talks and a seminar by the main character, an author Elizabeth Costello, as a part of visiting her former college.

In the book, Coetzee tells the tale of established author Elizabeth Costello, who is honoured by her former university by being asked to give a lecture and a seminar. Elizabeth instead chooses to talk about our relationship with and treatment of nonhuman animals rather than her works. Elizabeth opts for a notably personal way of addressing the issues. The plot of the narrative raises a number of issues and levels of discussion regarding our interactions with nonhuman animals as well as our own nature, particularly in regard to features of livingness, vulnerability, death, and relationality. In order for us to feel closer to nonhumans and understand the instilled divide between them and us, the major theme of the story seeks to evoke our most human qualities.

Focusing on this work is also important since it has inspired two very different and incongruent philosophical replies or echoes (cf. Strahovnik 2013a; 2013b). The first reaction is the more conventional approach to animal concerns, which rejects speciesism and frames important issues in terms of the interests or rights of animals in an effort to change how we currently treat them in many of our practices (e.g., Singer, 1999).

The second, contrasting, or even opposing response is more radical in its interpretation of Coetzee's novel (Cavell, 2008; McDowell, 2008; Diamond, 2008). It differs from the first response primarily in two ways. Firstly, the first response sees *The Lives of Animals* as being primarily about nonhuman animals and how we treat them, the second sees it as primarily about us, human animals, and our understanding of ourselves and our condition. Secondly, while the first interpretation sees Coetzee's work as providing us with philosophical arguments and reflections in the form of a fictional story (and thus perhaps as not fully committed or elaborated; Singer 1999, p. 91), the second interpretation sees it as more of a demonstration of the difficulty or powerlessness of arguments or philosophy itself in relation to the animal question. Here is a quote from Cora Diamond's reflection (2008, p. 53) about the story of Elizabeth that serves as an excellent illustration of the second response: "In the life of the animal she is, the argument does not have the weight we may take it to have in the life of the kind of animal we think of ourselves as being. She sees our reliance on argumentation as a way we may make unavailable to ourselves our own sense of what is to be a living animal".

LEVELS IN THE STORY

The story in *The Lives of Animals* unfolds in a multifaceted manner that can be followed and interpreted on multiple levels. The first, basic level is descriptive or factual. It involves recognizing and raising awareness of facts and providing a somewhat detailed description of how we treat non-human animals, their suffering, and our need and potential to effect change in the current situation.

The second level is philosophical and deals with assessing and assigning moral standing. Elizabeth's story includes a number of well-known philosophical debates, counterarguments, and traditional strategies for dealing with animal issues that are interconnected and intersect in various ways. However, as we shall see later, if one were to simply reduce the story or the animal question to the status of an argumentative or philosophical debate, one would miss a very important aspect of this question.

The third level is emotive or, better yet, poetic. It is here that Elizabeth reveals her vulnerability, her wound that is hidden and revealed at the same time. In her address to the audience, she says: "I am not a philosopher of mind but an animal exhibiting, yet not exhibiting, to a gathering of scholars, a wound, which I cover up under my clothes but touch on in every word I speak" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 23). Her relationships with her son and his family, as well as with society at large, reveal her vulnerability, fear, and detachment. She feels isolated from these relationships and struggles with showing contempt, which contributes to her exhaustion and inability to come to terms with life. At this point, both full humanity and full animality have been established. Here, our doubts about such a status itself are entwined with questions about our status and moral standing (The second and third levels are explicitly present even in the titles of Coetzee's lectures since the first is titled "The Philosophers and the Animals" and the second "The Poets and the Animals").

The animal question can finally be properly posed at the fourth level, which can be labelled as the meta-level or level of (meta)narrativity, where all previous levels are interpolated and reflect one another.

THE FIRST RESPONSE

The most straightforward way to address the animal question is to acknowledge the needless suffering that animals endure as a result of many of our customs. The fundamental line of reasoning in this regard was articulated by Jeremy Bentham (1998, p. 26), who stated that the [relevant] question regarding nonhuman animals is not, "Can they *reason?*, nor Can they *Talk?*, but, Can they *suffer?*". Henry Salt (1892, p. 24) similarly claimed that "[p]ain is pain ... whether be inflicted on man or

on beast; and the creature that suffers it, whether man or beast, being sensible of the misery of it while it lasts, suffers *evil*".

Similar ethical considerations can be traced back in philosophy to Pythagoras, Plutarch, and Porphyry, who emphasized characteristics that nonhuman animals share with humans, particularly sentience, followed by the fact that humans can abstain from eating meat and that it is a matter of justice that we also refrain from causing unnecessary suffering to nonhuman animals (Engel & Jenni, 2010, pp. 9-12). This part of stopping the needless suffering of nonhuman animals fits best with broadly consequentialist or utilitarian considerations since the very base of them gives us little room to exclude the pain and suffering of animals from our understanding of utility or welfare and its connection to the ethical status of our practices. The only way to avoid such a conclusion is to explicitly exclude nonhuman animals from the moral domain of creatures who ought to be morally considered at least minimally.

In *The Lives of Animals*, Elizabeth's talks avoid direct reference to all the suffering in the slaughterhouses, during breeding, and other horrifying experiences that non-human animals endure and that humans constantly inflict on them. She more or less takes it for granted that we know the facts and all the horrors non-human animals have to go through as part of our food production and other practices. She thus spares her audience from having to recollect these facts. On this, factual or descriptive level it only amazes her, how we are able to sustain the illusion of innocence and remain morally immaculate at the same time, that is "that we can do anything and get away with it; that there is no punishment" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 35). Elizabeth sees it as a result of closing our hearts as seats of compassion in the face of these heinous "places of death." Cavell (2008, p. 93) suggests viewing this as a type of "soul-blindness" connected to the concept of "seeing something as something" in the sense that this diversity in responses is surprising "not a function of any difference in our access to information; no one knows, or can literally see, essentially anything here that the other fail to know or can see".

Similar reflections are in place if one focuses instead on an approach to defending non-human animals in terms of animal rights (Regan, 2004). When we mention rights, we must first and foremost highlight that the rights in question are predominantly moral rights and not (necessarily or generally) legal rights. Legal rights are inextricably linked with legal orders and systems, whereas moral rights belong to their bearers independently of those systems, based on the premise that bearers of such rights are beings or other entities who possess the necessary morally relevant characteristics, on which those rights are based. Regan contends that (at least some) nonhuman animals have negative non-interference rights, such as the right not to be killed, damaged, or tormented. Most of our existing practices regarding

non-human animals involve serious violations of at least some of these rights and are considered wrong and unacceptable in this respect. Because such a view only accepts the principle of equality of interests and rejects the view that reduces moral rightness or goodness to a dimension of pleasure, pain, or interest satisfaction it is not inherently utilitarian (Engel and Jenni, 2010, pp. 24-26). Regan's approach is based on the ascription of intrinsic or inherent value to all sentient beings, that is living beings that can be regarded as experiencing subjects of a life (e.g., with perceptions, beliefs, wishes, motives, memories, etc.) and whose lives can fare well or bad over time. As such they have "an individual experiential welfare, logically independent of their utility relative to the interests or welfare of others" (Regan 1989, p. 38; cf. Regan, 2004). This then serves as the basis for their rights and ethically obligates us to refrain from actions that would significantly impair the lives of such beings. Despite significant differences between the described interests- and rights-based approaches, the practical effects of both are or should be relatively similar. Both Singer and Regan use the same (or very similar) criterion for inclusion into the moral community in its broadest sense, and both approaches see the majority of existing practices involving nonhuman animals as unacceptable and unjustifiable because we mostly appeal to arbitrary and ungrounded differences about the status of sentient beings to justify unequal treatment (Engel and Jenni, 2010, p. 27). Thus, even rights-based approaches can be understood to fall broadly into the first type of response to animal problems. Protecting their rights is the best way to achieve this general goal. In the framework of *The Lives of Animals* these two approaches are considered as equally (un)satisfactory.

THE SECOND RESPONSE

Let us revert to the original framing of the inquiry about animals as depicted in *The Lives of Animals*. This framing encompasses multiple approaches simultaneously, highlighting their discrepancies and limitations. These gaps are noteworthy because they underscore the disparity between moral theories and our real-life conduct.

The story of Elizabeth Costello in *The Lives of Animals* delves into various perspectives and ideas related to the animal question. However, it goes beyond these concepts to explore philosophical questions about whether animals have rights and what responsibilities humans have towards them. The story presents a dual perspective on this matter. On one hand, it emphasizes the powerlessness of philosophy in most situations, making it challenging to find rational arguments or justified proposals that would elicit a sort of general assent with a grip on the practices of people. On the other hand, Elizabeth continues to revisit the issue and does not abandon philosophical thought entirely. This raises the question of whether a new philosophy

is necessary to promote moral sensitivity towards animals, moving beyond traditional arguments and focusing on emotions and personal connections. However, even this emotional level seems inadequate, as Elizabeth feels uneasy and excluded from those around her, including her family. The conclusion will revisit these questions after examining specific moments in *The Lives of Animals* that reveal insights into these issues.

Elizabeth's first talk begins with a reference to Franz Kafka's story "A Report to an Academy," (1917), which tells the story of Peter Red, an ape who learned human language and behaviour. Dressed up and speaking eloquently, Peter addresses the academic audience about his previous life as an ape and his transition to the world of human animals. Elizabeth seems to be trying to bridge a similar gap between her world and that of her audience, but she finds it much more difficult to establish common ground than Peter Red does. This highlights the inherent difficulty of the animal question. Elizabeth chooses not to describe in detail or at length the gruesome practices involving animals, but instead encourages the audience to bring these images to mind themselves.

Similar to Peter Red, who reports on his experience in a purely scientific manner without passing judgment despite the horrors that he suffered as part of his transformation. There is a moment in Elizabeth's talk where she draws an analogy between the treatment of animals and the Holocaust, using the image of the death camp Treblinka as a central focus. "We have only one death of our own, we can comprehend the deaths of others only one at the time. In the abstract we may be able to count to a million, but we cannot count to a million deaths" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 19). We struggle to comprehend the billions of deaths of nonhuman animals each year due to meat production and experimentation. Elizabeth questions why there isn't a similar feeling of shame, pollution, and remorse in us as there was in the German people after WWII, who felt a loss of full humanity. She wonders if it's a result of reason, which emphasizes our special place in nature and likeness to God, triumphing over nonhuman animals. "Each day a fresh holocaust, yet, as far as I can see, our moral being is untouched. We do not feel tainted. We can do anything, it seems, and come away clean" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 35).

Elizabeth emphasises that nonhuman animals have been stripped of their power, and they can now only communicate with us through their silence. The exception to this is Peter Red, who has become a human animal and can communicate with us through his appearance. Elizabeth believes that our experiments with primates, designed to showcase their intelligence, actually insult their intelligence. Rather than focusing on their reasoning abilities or consciousness, Elizabeth emphasizes the importance of acknowledging their vulnerability and the fact that they are living beings. Elizabeth

disagrees with Nagel's conclusion in his famous paper "What Is it Like to Be a Bat?" (1974) that we are limited in our ability to imagine the subjective experiences of nonhuman animals. She argues that we should focus on the embodied life and vitality of animals. In the first part of Coetzee's story, there is a common theme of philosophy and reason struggling to penetrate and connect with others. Following Elizabeth's lecture, the evening culminates with a dinner where the atmosphere is fraught with negative emotions like embarrassment, discomfort, guilt, and shame. During the dinner conversation, being a vegetarian and abstaining from eating animals is even portrayed by many as a way of displaying superiority and strength over others.

Coetzee continues the story with the second part titled "The Poets and the Animals", which promises to surmount the difficulties of philosophy and philosophical language framed in terms of pain, interests, consciousness, rights, soul, and differences, and provide a resolution. This part of the story opens with a letter that Elizabeth receives from a poet, Abraham Stern, explaining his absence at the dinner after the first lecture. In the letter, he strongly objects to the analogy Elizabeth has made between the Holocaust and animal farms and slaughterhouses. He sees it as a "trick of words". He writes to Elizabeth, "You misunderstand the nature of likenesses; I would even say you misunderstand wilfully, to the point of blasphemy. Man is made in the likeness of God but God does not have the likeness of man. If Jews were treated as cattle, it does not follow that cattle are treated like Jews. The inversion insults the memory of the dead. It also trades on the horrors of the camps in a cheap way" (Coetzee, 1999, pp. 49-50). In the story, Elizabeth delves into issues from the lecture in her seminar and addresses the notion of animality as an embodied existence that is full of life (using the differences between Rilke's poem about the panther and Hughes' poem about the jaguar). The key dimension seems to be what it is like to inhabit a body, and not merely what it is like to have a particular aspect of the mind. Elizabeth exposes a confusion embedded in the kind of ecological philosophy that preserves some kind of idea of natural order, as a dance of life, in which every being, every species has its place, function, and role, and that is placed above the beings themselves. Since such an ordered character of nature is accessible to humans only, we stop understanding ourselves as a proper part of it. Elizabeth stresses that nonhuman animals are not treated as mere objects, but rather as prisoners of war (1999, p. 58). The limitations of reason and philosophy to provide satisfactory answers to the animal question are once again highlighted in her seminar. The story ultimately concludes with a sense of helplessness, fatigue, and Elizabeth's detachment from others. As her son accompanies her to the airport, he tries to comfort her by saying that it will all be over soon. However, it remains unclear what exactly will be over and how it will end.

Posed at this kind of intricate interlacement of different aspects and levels Coetzee's story highlights the inadequacy of philosophy and reason, which is further emphasized

when we consider the persuasive philosophical arguments for radical change in our treatment of nonhuman animals. Even the second wave “Singer 2006” of the animal liberation movement, with its achievements in reducing animal suffering and experimentation, is tainted with a sense of powerlessness, as the vastness of animal suffering and lack of moral consideration remains. The question is whether this sense of powerlessness is rooted in the limitations of philosophy, and if a more radical approach is needed to address the animal question.

THE DIFFICULTY OF REALITY

In this final section, we will explore the ideas of Cora Diamond and Stanley Cavell regarding the animal question. They both responded to and reflected on Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals*, so we can draw some conclusions regarding the questions raised earlier. The animal question appears to be too complex to be fully articulated and posed. Diamond, therefore, links this to the notion of “the difficulty of reality,” which she understands as “experiences in which we take something, in reality, to be resistant to our thinking it, or possibly to be painful in its inexplicability, difficult in that way, or perhaps awesome and astonishing in its inexplicability. *We take things so*. And the things we take so may simply not, to others, present the kind of difficulty, of being hard or impossible or agonizing to get one’s mind round” (Diamond 2008, pp. 45-6). We perceive things in this way, but to others, they may not present the same difficulty or be as hard or impossible to understand. This is evident in Coetzee’s story, where Elizabeth is tormented by the way she perceives the suffering of animals and the responses of those around her to it. It also highlights the limitations of reasoning and argumentation in bringing about a relevant shift in perception. Diamond’s approach (2008, p. 57) suggests that the difficulty of the animal question “itself expresses a mode of understanding of the kind of animal we are, and indeed of the moral life of this kind of animal”.

Diamond (1991a) aims to discover grounds for a unique solution to the animal conundrum in her earlier paper “Eating Meat and Eating People”. A traditional approach, framed in the language of interests, rights, and specialism, throws ambiguity into the interaction between humans and nonhuman creatures on the one hand, and people themselves on the other. Diamond contends that the fact that we refuse to consume human meat (or, at the very least, find the thought disgusting) is not simply a result of our unwillingness to kill or torture people, or to be persuaded by their rights and interests. The injustice that we sense in such an activity is more than just a breach of rights or a disregard for interests. For Diamond, the fact that we believe it is unethical to kill a human in order to eat it is inextricably linked to our opinion that a person is not anything to eat. A classical approach can only make sense

of the parallel that just as killing a person for meat is immoral, so is raising and killing an animal for the same purpose, but it sees nothing intrinsically wrong with eating animal meat (e.g., in the instance of a painless death of a wild animal or similar). The parallel should be the same in the case of nonhuman animals, according to Diamond, in order to grasp how the fact that we refuse to kill and consume nonhuman creatures is related to the idea that a nonhuman animal is not anything to eat.

When addressing the animal question, we should not simplify our responses to just one morally significant or decisive relationship. There are various morally relevant relationships, each with its own significance within a particular way of life (Diamond, 1991a, p. 325; cf. 1991b). Diamond (1991a, pp. 328-9) suggests that our relationship with non-human animals can be viewed as one of our fellow creatures or companions, which we may seek out for companionship. This idea of a creature is not based on biology, but on morality, and it is crucially linked to our understanding of ourselves. “The response to animals as our fellows in mortality, in life on this earth [...], depends on a conception of *human* life. It is an extension of the non-biological notion of what human life is” (Diamond, 1991a, p. 329). Therefore, this takes us beyond moral concepts of rights, justice, or self-interest and towards respect, dignity, compassion, companionship, and mutual dependence.

What creates the relationship between humans and non-human animals is a shared sense of vulnerability and mortality linked to us as creatures with a living body (Diamond, 2008, p. 74). When we view and treat non-human animals as objects, we fail to recognize injustice as injustice within our relationship with them, and we limit ourselves to focusing on interests and rights. To shift this perspective, we must acknowledge our shared vulnerability, which is raw and direct. In Elizabeth Costello’s case, this rawness leads to a point “that pushes her moral response to our treatment of animals beyond propositional argument – and sometimes beyond the decorum of polite society” (Wolfe, 2008, p. 8).

Furthermore, the “awareness we each have of being a living body, being ‘alive to the world’, carries with it the exposure to the bodily sense of vulnerability to death, sheer animal vulnerability, and the vulnerability we share with them. This can make us panic and to acknowledge it at all, let alone as something we share with other animals, in the presence of what we do to them, can also make us feel isolated, as Elizabeth Costello is isolated. Is there any difficulty in seeing why we should not prefer to return to the moral debate, in which the livingness and death of animals enter as facts that we treat as relevant in some way, not as presences that may unseat our reason?” (Diamond, 2008, p. 74). Diamond goes on to claim that the animal question is thus genuinely marked with the difficulty of reality that “lies in the apparent resistance by reality to one’s ordinary mode of life, including one’s ordinary

modes of thinking: to appreciate the difficulty is to feel oneself being shouldered out of how one thinks, how one is apparently supposed to think or to have a sense of the inability of thought to encompass what it is attempting to reach” (Diamond, 2008, p. 58). The dominant approaches in moral philosophy create an excessively broad distance between rights and related justice on the one hand and compassion, love, sympathy, and sensitivity on the other. The basic concept of (in)justice necessitates a level of established compassion and a loving relationship with a being capable of suffering injustices. When we fail to establish that, we should talk about what is right.

Along a similar line, Cavell addresses the same aspect of the difficulty of reality, and in the instance of Elizabeth, we can see how this is tied to the difficulty of experiencing reality around her (Hacking, 2008). Commenting Diamond Cavell says that he sees her, “as raising a question of [...] inordinate knowledge, knowledge whose importunateness can seem excessive in its expression, in contrast to mere or unobtrusive knowledge, as though for some the concept of eating animals has no particular interest (arguably another direction of questionable – here defective – expression)” (Cavell, 2008, p. 95; cf. McDowell 2008).

Cavell (1979) acknowledges the confusion and unease that may arise from the disparity between philosophy and real-life practices. His scepticism about the existence of other minds is a crucial element of his philosophy, and this aspect can be related to the animal question. If scepticism regarding the existence of other minds stems from our own difficulties and shortcomings in recognizing their existence (Goodman, 2012, p. 61), then the connection to morality remains significant. This is because there is still an important link between responsibility and the delusion or self-deception that arises from scepticism. If we persist in our self-deception, we may feel relieved of responsibility, but this is a false sense of relief because we are actually to blame for it. This is not simply a mistake about the nature of reality. By directly addressing the animal question, as Elizabeth does, we can work towards eliminating this self-deception. It is unclear whether John, Elizabeth’s son, means that her feelings of estrangement will end with her death or whether the way we perceive nonhuman animals will persist. Given the persistent failure to recognize the moral significance of nonhuman animals, there is a risk that death will overcome our attempts to change and the limitations of philosophy.

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Životinje i mi, mi kao životinje

SAŽETAK

U polju životinjske etike u filozofiji niknuli su mnogi pristupi otkako je ono ponovno zaživjelo. Knjiga *Životi životinja* J. M. Coetzeeja služi kao središte ove rasprave. Iznesena su dva oprečna odgovora Coetzeejevu radu. Prvi odgovor koristi tradicionalan pristup problematici životinja, onaj koji želi zaustaviti patnju, popraviti dobrobit životinja i odbaciti specizam. Drugi je odgovor radikalniji i naglašava kako se pitanje životinja ne bavi samo životinjama, već i nama, ljudskim životinjama. Ovaj pristup pomaže naglasiti složenost pitanja životinja i pripisuje ograničenje fenomenu težine stvarnosti.

Ključne riječi: životinjska etika, neljudske životinje, dobrobit, patnja, životinjski drugovi, filozofske misli.