

Rhyme, Reason, and Animal Rights:
***Elizabeth Costello's* Regressive View of Animal Consciousness**
and its Implications for Animal Liberation
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Abstract

Novelist J. M. Coetzee is widely credited with “shifting the species boundary” (Mason 129) in his fiction to acknowledge the personhood of at least some nonhuman animals, thereby advancing the cause of animal protection, which he is known to support in his personal life (Satya). In this article, I will argue that in *Elizabeth Costello* Coetzee treats animals as alien and unknowable because he believes, contrary to a rapidly growing body of evidence, that they lack language. Building on this belief, he uses animals instrumentally to argue for the superiority of imagination to reason. And finally, because of his insistence on the priority of the imagination over reason, he would place animals solely at the mercy of human good will and leave them unprotected by the kinds of laws that protect human beings.

Background

From antiquity to the present, our most acclaimed thinkers and artists have endeavored to erect and defend what John Wesley called “the barrier between men and brutes, the line which they cannot pass.” (Wesley) This “great wall of humanity”—as it might be dubbed—is designed to maintain the uniqueness of human beings and our superiority to all other species. Over the years, the wall has assumed various forms, as successive scientific discoveries made earlier versions impossible to sustain. “[F]irst, it was possession of a soul, then ‘reason,’ then tool use, then tool *making*, then altruism, then language, then the production of linguistic *novelty*, and so on . . .” (Wolfe 2, emphases in original). From the perspective of nonhuman animals, the history of philosophy, religion, and literature—especially in the West—is the story of a Herculean effort, sustained over millennia, to establish and defend the priority of humanity over all other species of sentient beings.

In recent decades, primatologists, ornithologists, ethologists, evolutionary biologists, and scientists from other disciplines have brought about a revolution in our understanding of the interior lives of nonhuman animals, and their work clearly demonstrates that each of the attributes alleged to signal human uniqueness and superiority is, in reality, possessed by other species.¹ This new empirical approach to understanding nonhuman animals (foreshadowed by Darwin in *The Descent of Man* and more extensively in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*) is challenging millennia-old prejudices and assumptions. But the practitioners of the humanities, the people who are supposed to be in the vanguard of those who tear down old prejudices and open new vistas, are resisting—or more often, ignoring—the findings of de Waal, Pepperberg, and Bekoff just

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as steadfastly as their scholastic forebears resisted the findings of Copernicus, Galileo, and Kepler (Wolf 2).

Twice winner of the Man Booker Prize and soon to win the Nobel, J. M. Coetzee was known to be a vegetarian out of concern for the suffering of animals. And so when it began to be rumored that he was writing a novel in which the protagonist was a vegetarian animal rights advocate, there was lively anticipation that we might soon be presented with the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of animal rights. What we got was something very different.

That novel, *Elizabeth Costello*, contains eight segments called “Lessons” plus a “Postscript.” The two Lessons that are most relevant to our purposes are number three: “The Lives of Animals: The Philosophers and the Animals” and number four: “The Lives of Animals: The Poets and the Animals.”² These Lessons are built around a lecture and a seminar that the book’s eponymous protagonist, an Australian novelist who is a vegetarian and putative proponent of animal rights, delivers on animal consciousness and our inability to access it. The views she expresses seem to reflect those of Coetzee himself, at least at the time the novel was written, and I think we may safely conclude that he has cast her as his spokesperson.

The Attack on Reason

Costello begins by pointing out that the twin pillars of modern Western civilization—Christianity and the Enlightenment—share a belief in the supremacy of reason. For Augustine, Aquinas and the generations of theologians who have sailed in their wake, reason is the defining characteristic of God, and being “created in the image and likeness of God” means having a “rational soul,” a term borrowed from Aristotle that refers to the ability to engage in the kind of abstract speculation to which philosophers owe their careers, and which they, therefore, regard as the *summum bonum* of the universe. To Augustine and Aquinas, as to Aristotle before them, creatures without “rational souls,” i.e. animals, are an inferior order of beings to whom we have no direct moral obligations (*Costello* 66-67. See Phelps 34-36, 53-58).

The Enlightenment may have dethroned God from lordship of the universe, but it did not dethrone reason as the sustaining principle of reality. Nor did it dethrone humanity from the privileged position we hold by virtue of being rational beings who are able to think abstractly, use language, enter into social contracts, etc. In fact, the Enlightenment gave us Descartes and Kant, both of whom enshrined reason as the touchstone of value and virtue (*Costello* 66-67. See Phelps 67-68, 79-82).

For Elizabeth Costello, this apotheosis of reason is at the heart of animal oppression (*Costello* 69-70). So long as we regard reason as the sole arbiter of truth and value, we will always debase and abuse those who do not possess it. Thus, she places the blame for our enslavement and slaughter of animals squarely at the doorstep of philosophy, even to the point of being dismissive of philosophers—she mentions Jeremy Bentham, Mary Midgley, and Tom Regan—who try to use reason to establish that we have direct moral

obligations toward animals (*Costello* 66). It happens that Costello is a feminist hero for her novel *The House on Eccles Street*, in which the protagonist is James Joyce's fictional character Marion Bloom transformed from a woman whose interior life can only find expression through her sexuality and tightly-scripted gender roles into a fully autonomous human being (*Costello* 1-2, 13). At this point, we have good reason to expect that Costello is leading us in an ecofeminist direction. And to some extent, she is; but she is also pursuing another agenda that actually works at cross purposes to the feminist ethic of caring for animals—or, for that matter, to any animal protection ethic. In this regard, it may be significant that in Josephine Donovan's sensitive and insightful essay on Coetzee and animals (easily among the best I have read on the subject) the discussion of Coetzee's earlier novels *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Disgrace* is more extensive and delves deeper into the text than the discussion of *Elizabeth Costello* (Donovan, *Miracles*).

Reason, Costello suggests, is not the ordering principle of the universe, it is simply an ordering principle of the human mind, and as such, only one of the ways in which the universe can be apprehended. But there are other ways to order and relate to the universe, and at least some of those ways are embodied in animals (*Costello* 67). And since animals embody other, nonrational, ways of experiencing the world, their consciousness is absolutely inaccessible to human reason.

At this point, it is important to note that nowhere does Costello actually consider the evidence concerning animal consciousness. She *assumes* both that it exists and that it is alien and nonrational. In fact, her only attempt to shore up that assumption is to cite Thomas Nagel (*Costello* 75-77), whose celebrated 1974 essay, "What Is It Like to be a Bat?" argues against physicalism by pointing out that, "If physicalism is to be defended, then phenomenological features must themselves be given a physical account. But when we examine their subjective character it seems that such a result is impossible. The reason is that every subjective phenomenon is essentially connected with a single point of view . . ." (Nagel).

I know what sensation I have when I look at a blue flower, and you know what sensation you have when you look at the same blue flower, but there is no way for either of us to know whether we have identical sensations. I cannot experience your sensation and you cannot experience mine. To generalize from that example, I can know what it is like to be me, and you can know what it is like to be you. But I can know what it is like to be you only to the extent that we are alike. And even worse, I can know to what extent we are alike only by inference, and inference is uncertain. But—according to Nagel—I can never know at all what it is like to be a bat because bats and humans are unlike to such an extreme degree. ". . .[A]nyone who has spent some time in an enclosed space with an excited bat knows what it is to encounter a fundamentally *alien* form of life," (Nagel, emphasis in original).

As it happens, I have spent some time in an enclosed space (a gazebo) with an excited bat, and there was nothing alien or unintelligible about his behavior. He flailed along the screen wire that formed the walls, emitting the high-pitched squeak of his sonar, and perhaps squealing a cry for help as well. He wanted to get out of there, and he was trying

desperately to find a way through the wire. In his situation, I would have been doing exactly the same thing.

Bats may be *superficially* alien, but they are *fundamentally* like us. Our behavior demonstrates that we both live in a three-dimensional world of objects and extension in which time flows only forward, events occur, and causality is consistent and predictable. Thus, we are both rational beings who inhabit the same universe, and there is no readily apparent reason why our thoughts about it should not be intelligible to one another. We also live in a world of feeling which is characterized at its most fundamental level by pleasure and pain, fear and hope, and which includes such powerful, consciousness-shaping emotions as anger, contentment, and so on. Both rationally and emotionally, the bat's consciousness is comprehensible in those qualities that are most fundamental and urgent and may be incomprehensible only in qualities that are less so.

For those of us who are primarily concerned with the ethical implications of animal consciousness rather than the nature of consciousness itself, the critical point is not, as it is for Nagel, that we are unable to inhabit the minds of other animals and experience their subjective sensations as they experience them. For that matter, I cannot inhabit the minds of other human beings, including those who are very close to me. But I can experience my own participation in human life and—using the behavior of other human beings as a reality check—I can be confident that the suffering of my fellow humans is as distasteful to them as mine is to me. And from this, I can draw the appropriate ethical conclusion: If my own suffering is evil and not to be caused or allowed to continue unrelieved except for the most desperate of reasons, so is theirs. This process is generally known as “compassion based upon empathy,” and it is easily applied to other species because our participation in the common life of the animal kingdom—again using observed behavior as a reality check—allows us to be confident that the suffering of our fellow animals is as distasteful to them as ours is to us. And that confidence imposes upon us an imperative to grant the members of other species equal standing within our moral universe. As Austrian philosopher Helmut Kaplan points out, “There is *one single* morality for humans *and* animals . . .” (Kaplan 11, emphasis in original, trans. Phelps).

Souls of Poets

Elizabeth Costello agrees with Nagel that the actual consciousness of animals is inaccessible to reason. But she believes that poets can create a kind of parallel universe in which they can imaginatively construct an alien consciousness that will seem verisimilitudinous to us even though we have no way of knowing whether it bears any relationship to the consciousness of any actual animal (*Costello* 77-80, 91). In undertaking this fictional presentation of animal consciousness, the crucial point is that the poem (or story) must imagine what it might be like to be the animal; it must not use the animal as a symbol for some abstract idea or attribute to animals human modes of consciousness. By way of illustration, she cites three poems describing caged animals. The first, Rilke's “The Panther: In the Jardin des Plantes, Paris,” she criticizes for using the panther to represent human concepts. The poem's real subject, she suggests, is an abstract idea of the poet's, and it treats the panther instrumentally, as a means for

expressing the poet's mental life, not the panther's (*Costello* 94-95). This is a strange claim because the Rilke poem is widely understood to be a masterwork of empathic intuition into the psyche of a wild animal caged in a zoo. In it, Rilke portrays the panther as suffering mentally from his imprisonment, having fallen prey to a mind-deadening, soul-numbing lassitude that results from the boredom of his confinement and the loss of everything that lent energy and joy to his life even while his body remains taut and powerful.

Costello's dislike of "The Panther" is all the more surprising because her creator, in his essay on Rilke, praises the poem as an effort "to find words that will take us back before words and allow us to glimpse the world as seen by creatures who do not have words, or if that glimpse is barred to us, then to allow us the sad experience of standing at the rim of an unknowable mode of being" (Coetzee, Rilke 71).³ This is a critical point because it is at the heart of Coetzee's—and Costello's—attitude toward nonhuman animals. Costello and her creator share the Chomskyite prejudice that human consciousness is superior to other forms of consciousness because it alone is formed by language.

Coetzee and Costello's claim raises two questions of paramount importance. The first is: Is our consciousness formed by language? Or is language merely a tool that our already formed consciousness uses for convenience? The second question is: Do animals really "not have words?" Or do they create and use language much as we do? Examining the first question would require more space than I have available, and that question will, in any event, be rendered moot if animals do, in fact, create and use language. Therefore, I shall proceed directly to the matter of nonhuman language.

What is it Like to be a Prairie Dog?

Key to understanding Costello's view of animals is her failure to acknowledge findings of scientists who have uncovered convincing evidence that nonhuman animals construct complex languages which they use to communicate effectively and reliably. Here, for reasons of space, I will limit myself to describing one particularly impressive breakthrough that has been made by Dr. Con Slobodchikoff, professor of biology at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, who has conducted extensive research on the social organization and language of Gunnison's prairie dogs in their natural setting.

Dr. Slobodchikoff is unequivocal about the fact—and the complexity—of prairie dog language. "We now know that the alarm calls of prairie dogs are part of a sophisticated animal language rather than merely an expression of fear. . . . Two major components [of a genuine language] are semantics and syntax. . . . Prairie dog vocalizations contain both of these basic design elements of a language," (Slobodchikoff 66). By careful observation, Dr. Slobodchikoff established that prairie dogs can announce the approach of a predator, indicate whether the predator is in the air or on the ground and the speed at which he is approaching; they can identify predators' species and even assign individual names to specific predators whom they encounter more than once (Slobodchikoff 71). Dr. Slobodchikoff's observation that prairie dog language contains syntax opens the door to a breakthrough in our understanding of both language and animal communication. While

animals may appear to have difficulty handling the syntax of human language in a sophisticated way, they seem able to construct their own syntax, one that is suited to their physiology and the setting in which they live. Therefore, a definition of language that does not account for nonhuman languages must be regarded as, at best, provisional and incomplete. To put it more bluntly, Dr. Slobodchikoff's findings suggest that our current conceptions of language are distorted by anthropocentric bias. Just as "the proper study of mankind is man," the proper study of animal language is animal languages, not animals' ability to learn human language. I would not like to have my linguistic capacities judged by my ability to learn the language of Gunnison's prairie dogs.

In addition to predator warnings, Dr. Slobodchikoff describes what he calls the "social chatters" of prairie dogs, conversations among two or more members of the community unrelated to any observable phenomenon like predators or foraging for food. "[T]hese chatters have a definite syntax. They are not given in random order but have a pattern just like words in a human sentence," (Slobodchikoff 72). It seems apparent that prairie dogs carry on social conversations just as we do.

Perhaps most important of all, Dr. Slobodchikoff discovered that, "[P]rairie dogs from different colonies differ in how they pronounce 'human' and 'dog.' . . . This suggested that the calls might be learned by juvenile animals from their parents, just like human dialects, rather than being determined by some genetically controlled instinct for calling in a precise way," (Slobodchikoff 69). In other words, prairie dog language was created by prairie dogs and is transmitted from one generation to the next in the same way that human language was created by human beings and is transmitted from one generation to the next. Reinforcing this point, Susan McCarthy, summarizing the work of other researchers, tells us that great apes, whales, dolphins, seals, sea lions, walruses, bats, parrots, songbirds, and hummingbirds have all been shown to learn their own languages from their parents. And she acknowledges that ". . . it may be that there are other groups of birds or animals out there who learn what to say," (McCarthy 92).

There is, in fact, no reason to believe that any animal who lives in a community and acts cooperatively with other animals lacks language. Regardless of species, language would seem to be the *sine qua non* of social organization. In this respect, language serves a vital evolutionary function, since efficient social organization involving divisions of labor is of tremendous survival and reproductive value. The kind of cooperative hunting strategies practiced by lions and wolves, for example, would appear to be dependent on the ability of the partners to communicate with one another. Crows and geese set sentries to watch for predators while they eat, and rotate the assignment so that everyone gets a chance at the food, a phenomenon my wife and I have observed any number of times. How do they assign the lookouts and schedule the shift changes unless they can discuss both the system and the assignments? The only satisfactory answer requiring us to presume the existence of no hypothetical entities—the answer demanded by Ockham's razor—is that they use the same mechanism we do: language. Crows and geese, by the way, like many other birds, are very vocal animals, chattering constantly among themselves. Unless they are talking, discussing matters of common interest, perhaps even gossiping—in the manner of Dr. Slobodchikoff's prairie dogs—it is difficult to construct a credible

explanation for this behavior. Constant vocalization to no purpose would be a waste of valuable energy, especially in cold weather or on long flights, and would alert predators to the birds' presence, both outcomes that would be counterproductive from an evolutionary standpoint. It seems likely, therefore, that this behavior has some countervailing evolutionary value, and that this value lies in communication.

The claim that animals lack language is an ancient prejudice that can no more be sustained in the light of contemporary scientific research than the ancient prejudice that the sun revolves around the earth could be sustained in the light of Renaissance science.

Imagining Molly Bloom

To return to my main thread, it might appear at first glance that Costello is claiming that poets can intuit the nature of an animal's consciousness even though nonhuman consciousness cannot be understood rationally. In fact, she—and her creator—are claiming nothing of the sort. Rather, they argue that poets can create an imaginary mode of consciousness and attribute it to a nonhuman, nonlinguistic animal in a way that makes the reader feel as if she were experiencing the world as the animal experiences it. Costello praises poetry that “does not try to find an idea in the animal, *that is not about the animal*, but is instead the record of an engagement with him,” (*Costello* 96, emphasis added). Unfortunately, this “engagement” occurs exclusively in the poet's imagination; it has nothing to do with any living animal or her actual experience of the world, as Costello acknowledges when she says that this kind of poetry “falls within an entirely human economy in which the animal has no share,” (*Costello* 96). The word “engagement” is commonly understood to imply an “I and Thou” relationship in which at least two parties are actively involved. But for Costello, the poetic engagement is between her and her own fictional creation. There is no second party, and thus there is no genuine engagement, only a fantasy. Costello makes this clear when she invokes her most famous novel to illustrate her point:

There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination. If you want proof, consider the following. Some years ago, I wrote a book called *The House on Eccles Street*. To write that book I had to think my way into the existence of Marion Bloom. Either I succeeded or I did not. If I did not, I cannot imagine why you invited me here today. In any event, the point is *Marion Bloom never existed*. Marion Bloom is a figment of James Joyce's imagination. If I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed, then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life. (*Costello* 80, emphasis in original)

Taken at face value, this claim is nonsensical because its purported meaning depends on attributing reality to an unreal being. Sympathy is, I believe, an essential and fundamental ingredient in any valid ethical theory. But to be authentic, it requires two distinct (and real) consciousnesses, a subject consciousness and an object consciousness, both of which have actual experiences. If the object is imaginary, our “sympathy,” while it may

be real as an internal experience, is invalid as a way of understanding the world because it bears no relation to the world outside of our own minds. As in the case of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or *Bambi*, sympathy for a fictional creation can serve a valuable function by opening us to sympathy for actual living beings in similar extremities. But even here, its validity depends on the consciousness of those actual living creatures being neither alien nor unknowable, and in the sympathetic imagination being firmly anchored to a reality-based assessment of the actual experiences and needs of the living creatures (Donovan, Attention 149-152). As it stands, Costello's claim is a kind of pathetic fallacy. The statement "I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed . . ." is formally correct but substantively empty because a being who has never existed has no existence into which a poet can think her way. In this regard, it is analogous to the ontological argument for the existence of God. It is form of linguistic Three-Card Monte, and all Costello has actually done is imagine a new fictional creation that has enough points of contact with Joyce's original character that the reader can imagine they are the same person.

The only way that this passage can be meaningfully interpreted is to gloss it as, "I can imagine the interior life of another being so vividly and express it so convincingly that you can imagine that what I imagine is actually true." Costello is arguing for the superiority of verisimilitude over truth on the grounds that verisimilitude is limited only by the imagination and expressive powers of the poet; it never runs up against the blank wall of the limits of human knowledge and never finds itself held down by the shackles of reality. Her argument, in fact, has little to do with animals and a great deal to do with her creator's belief that poetry is superior to philosophy and poets are superior to philosophers, whom Coetzee appears to believe have been rendered obsolete by the collapse of the Enlightenment. He is reducing animals to pawns in a sectarian dispute within a provincial human academia. Just as the medieval schoolmen argued their theistic fantasies against the facts of Renaissance astronomy, Coetzee is arguing his poetic fantasies against the facts of contemporary ethology. If we can, indeed, empathize with the genuine consciousness of actual, living animals, then in Coetzee's eyes the poetic enterprise, his enterprise, has been devalued—just as the medieval schoolmen believed that science devalued their enterprise.

In contrast to Rilke's *Panther*, Costello heaps praise upon the Hughes poems (*The Jaguar* and *Second Glance at a Jaguar*). What so impresses Costello is that Hughes credits the jaguar with a reaction to being caged that purports to be radically different from that of a human being, a reaction that is supposedly a function of his jaguariness and alien to the human mode of experiencing life, which she pretentiously refers to in Heideggerian jargon as "being-in-the-world," (Costello 95)⁴. Not insignificantly, this mode of consciousness is primarily physical rather than mental. "In these poems we know the jaguar not from the way he seems but from the way he moves. The body is as the body moves, or as the currents of life move within it. The poems ask us to imagine our way into that way of moving, to inhabit that body," (Costello 95-96). This is a depressingly familiar theme. Traditionally, whites degraded blacks by imagining their mode of being as primarily physical; for black men, this took the form of raw strength and aggressive sexuality; for black women it took the form of wanton sexuality and prodigious child-

bearing prowess. In the same way, men traditionally degraded women by imagining their mode of being as primarily physical rather than mental, again in terms of sexuality and child-bearing. Costello's imagining of nonhuman animals' mode of being as primarily physical is equally degrading. And it equally leaves them vulnerable to the oppression that arises from fear, cupidity, and envy coupled with power in the service of arrogance.

When a member of the audience misreads her point and questions Hughes' empathy with animals on the grounds that he runs a sheep ranch from which the unfortunate creatures are presumably shipped to slaughter, Costello points out his error by launching into a silly buck-and-wing in praise of, among others, Gary Snyder and Ernest Hemingway (*Costello 97*). At first glance, this seems bizarre since Snyder defends hunting as an ecologically sustainable way of life and asks only that the hunter pay homage to the spirit of the animal he has murdered in a white man's arrogant burlesque of Native American rituals. As for Hemingway, he rarely met a form of animal cruelty that he didn't fall in love with, especially bullfighting, of which he is the Anglophone world's poet laureate. But there is a method to Costello's madness. She tells her audience that she finds Snyder and Hemingway admirable because they:

celebrate the primitive and repudiate the Western bias toward abstract thought. . . . Bullfighting, it seems, gives us a clue. Kill the beast, by all means, but make it a contest, a ritual, and honor your antagonist for his strength and bravery. Eat him too, after you have vanquished him, in order for his strength and courage to enter you. Look him in the eyes before you kill him, and thank him afterwards. Sing songs about him. We can call this primitivism. It is an attitude that is easy to criticize, to mock. It is deeply masculine, masculinist. Its ramifications into politics are to be mistrusted. But when all is said and done, there remains something attractive about it at the ethical level (*Costello 97*).

From a less "imaginative" perspective, to call the bull the "antagonist" of the bullfighter is to reverse the roles of aggressor and victim and to show how easily imagination can ignore the suffering of its object in the service of the poet's self-absorption. The bullfighter is the antagonist of the bull, who was simply grazing in a pasture minding his own business until he was pulled and prodded onto a truck and hauled to the bullring where men he had never met, much less antagonized, began taunting him and jabbing spears into his flesh for no reason at all that he could understand. And then, after inflicting more and more pain and exhaustion on him, they take from him his most precious possession, his life, still for no discernable reason. Bullfighting may be attractive to some at the esthetic level (which is to say, at the level of the poetic imagination), but at the ethical level (the level concerned with real suffering and real death), it is atrocity, pure and simple, and to claim otherwise is to willfully ignore the consciousness of the animal in favor of a delusion.

Bullfighting also demonstrates that when the poetic imagination pushes reality aside, it is very easy for aesthetics to be palmed off as ethics for the simple reason that the poetic imagination's focus of concern—at least as it is defined by Elizabeth Costello—is the

experience of the poet, not the experience of the living being who inspired the poem. The poem's subject is merely the occasion for the poetic experience, a screen on which the poet can see her imaginative powers displayed; in this process, a sentient, autonomous being is reduced to an instrument of the poet's narcissism. Narcissus, after all, had no interest in the true nature of water; his interest was in water's ability to display his beauty. And this approach to external reality—in Elizabeth Costello, as in Narcissus—is an esthetic experience that can masquerade as ethics by claiming to be an authentic encounter with life and death, good and evil. But in fact, it has no point of contact with ethics because genuine ethics is always concerned first and foremost with the other in his or her own right, not with the other as an instrument for defining or displaying oneself. Real ethics would be concerned with the plight of the suffering bull, not with the poetic imagination of Hemingway. Ethics is concerned precisely with the laws and proscriptions which in a moment we will see Costello dismiss impatiently, implying that they are too mundane to merit her concern. The poetic imagination, set free from the need to regard the *other* as real, can lead to *Death in the Afternoon* and *The Sun Also Rises* just as easily as it can lead to *Bambi* and *Black Beauty*. It is, perhaps, worth remembering that while Americans tend to think of bullfighting as a sport, the Spanish regard it as an art form, like ballet or flamenco.

While it is, or at least should be, self-evident that love and compassion—*caring*, in the sense that this word is used by feminist theorists (See Donovan, *Attention*; Adams)—must be the bedrock foundation of any valid approach to ethics, there is also an indispensable role for reason in the development and maintenance of methods by which compassionate *caring* can be translated into effective *care*. In other words, reason and rational constructions are essential in transforming the identification of ends, which is a function of compassion, into action that will achieve those ends as quickly and universally as possible (Donovan, *Attention* 158, 160-162, 165; Kelch 259 ff). Reason, in fact, plays two valid and indispensable roles as an instrument of compassion. In addition to translating compassion into protection, it can also give us a gauge by which to judge our emotional impulses, so that anger, pride, and other selfish emotions do not lead us astray. But Costello has no interest in going there because reliance on any form of reality-based thinking would undermine her primary enterprise, which is to establish the aesthetic and ethical superiority, not of emotion to reason, but of imagination to reason, of fiction to philosophy.

Left to Our Tender Mercies

There is no way to build a real animal protection movement on a purely imaginary foundation. Costello admits as much when she is asked if she can enunciate any principles that people who want to protect animals should follow. "If principles are what you want to take away from here, I would have to respond, open your heart and listen to what your heart says . . . I have never been much interested in proscriptions, dietary or otherwise. Proscriptions, laws. I am more interested in what lies behind them," (*Costello* 82). Unfortunately, there has been no progress toward social justice that has not been implemented by proscriptions and laws. After opening your heart, you have to use your head. Throughout human history, the still, small voice of the heart has been powerless to

protect human beings from oppression, slavery, and slaughter unless the wisdom it imparted was enforced by the very sorts of proscriptions and laws that Costello disdains to discuss. The heart inspires the laws and proscriptions, but it is the laws and proscriptions (or more precisely, the *enforcement* of laws and proscriptions) that actually protect the weak from the powerful. By rejecting such reality-based mechanisms for nonhuman animals instead of recognizing them as the tools by which caring is translated into care, Costello scorns the animals' only hope and condemns them to everlasting slavery and slaughter. Interestingly, her creator does seem interested in laws and proscriptions as protections for human beings, including himself. When Coetzee expatriated himself from South Africa in 2002, he said that he was doing so because President Thabo Mbeki had failed to control crime, presumably by failing to enforce laws and proscriptions (Pienaar).

Costello wants animals to depend on nothing more substantial than everyone imagining what it must feel like to be a nonhuman animal and drawing from that experience what she believes to be the natural ethical conclusion. (Although it is difficult to reconcile this view with her approval of Snyder and Hemingway. Consistency is a function of reason, not of the poetic imagination.) She asserts that the Holocaust was possible only because “the killers refused to think themselves into the place of their victims,” (*Costello* 79). But if thinking your way into the life of a nonhuman animal takes place, as Costello claims, “within an entirely human economy,” it can lead to an infinity of contradictory conclusions, as we saw in the cases of Snyder and Hemingway. Even when the objects are other humans, there is a grave danger that selfish and self-serving imaginings unrestrained by reality and reason may drive out genuine sympathy with catastrophic results. It could well be that the Nazi murderers did, in fact, “think themselves into the place of their victims” and used their imaginations to re-create Jews as depraved monsters, killers of Christian babies (to make matzoh), cultural polluters, thieves, and traitors who were not fit to live. In fact, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, one of the primary inspirations for Nazi anti-Semitism, was precisely an exercise on the part of its authors—unknown Russian anti-Semites writing around the turn of the 20th century⁵--in “thinking themselves into the place of” Jews, and imagining them as greedy, vicious misanthropes bent on world conquest. (*Protocols*) During the Nazi era, ideologues and propagandists such as Alfred Rosenberg, Julius Streicher, publisher of the anti-Semitic tabloid *Der Stuermer*, and of course, the master of Nazi propaganda Joseph Goebbels daily thought themselves into the place of Jews and concluded that they were not fit to live (see, for example, Patterson). Today, human chauvinists think themselves into the place of animals and conclude that they are an inferior category of non-linguistic, instinct-driven beings who exist only to serve our purposes.

Conclusion: Getting it Backwards

And so, Elizabeth Costello presents us with a paradox. On the one hand, she finds vivisection, factory farming, and animal slaughter so revolting that she is a vegetarian who describes human exploitation of animals as “an enterprise of degradation, cruelty, and killing which rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of, indeed dwarfs it, in that ours is an enterprise without end, self-regenerating, bringing rabbits, rats, poultry,

livestock ceaselessly into the world for the purpose of killing them,” (*Costello* 65). This is the aspect of Elizabeth Costello that has drawn so much attention. But there is another side to Elizabeth Costello that attracts less comment, perhaps because it is incomprehensible if one assumes—as most commentators do—that the vegetarian speaker of those words must be an advocate of animal rights on ethical grounds. What are we to make of the Elizabeth Costello who speaks appreciatively of Ernest Hemingway’s love of bullfighting, who explicitly refuses to endorse “laws, proscriptions, including dietary proscriptions” to protect animals from the enterprise she has just compared to the Third Reich, who explicitly denies that her vegetarianism is the product of a “moral conviction,” and who points out that she wears leather shoes and carries a leather purse, apparently with no qualms of conscience? (*Costello* 88-89)⁶

In her essay “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,” Cora Diamond provides a key to understanding this paradox. Unlike animal activists who try desperately (and futilely) to interpret Elizabeth Costello as one of their own, Professor Diamond places the emphasis not on Costello’s attitude toward animals, but on J. M. Coetzee’s attitude toward Costello. It is, she tells us, Costello who stands at the center of these two “Lessons,” rather than the animals on whom most interpreters want to focus. She draws our attention to “. . . the life of this speaking and wounded and clothed animal . . . that this story is about . . . the life of the speaking animal at its center,” (Diamond 47). A little farther on, she describes the Lessons as “centrally concerned with the presenting of a wounded woman” rather than “centrally concerned with the presenting of a position on the issue of how we should treat animals,” (Diamond 49).

I think that Professor Diamond is correct. Coetzee is writing about Elizabeth Costello and not about animal rights. And I would go further and say that his use of animal suffering to illuminate a phenomenon that takes place within “an entirely human economy” constitutes a form of human chauvinism. Costello, for her part, is horrified at our treatment of animals, but her horror is more important to her than the animal suffering that inspired it. Her primary interest is in her own mental states, not in the external world that occasions them. Thus, she can be horrified at our abuse of animals and at the same time be “not much interested in” laws and proscriptions that would mitigate the abuse. She can be disgusted at the idea of eating the flesh of murdered animals, but have no problem wearing their skin on her feet or carrying it on her arm; meat is the greater horror because it is the primary reason for which animals are slaughtered, and therefore, it suffices as the mirror for her sensitivity—no need to inconvenience herself any further. And she can deny—with considerable honesty and self-awareness—that her concern for animals is ethical. She is right. It is not ethical. It is esthetic.

As we saw in Costello’s appreciation of Gary Snyder and Ernest Hemingway, when Coetzee uses animals to illuminate the plight of his protagonist rather than *vice versa*, from the perspective of animal protection he gets things exactly backwards, and—naturally enough—so does she. When Coetzee and Costello ought to be looking at the suffering of animals, they look instead at Costello’s reaction to that suffering. When they ought to be concerned above all with the animals who suffer and die at our hands, they are first and foremost concerned with Costello’s “sympathetic imagination”. In fact,

Costello's denial that animals have language seems made to support her contention that animal consciousness is alien and unknowable, a claim that makes it possible for her to take the spotlight off the animals and shine it on her own imagination instead—which seems to be the point of the entire convoluted operation.

Professor Diamond describes Costello as being possessed by a “woundedness . . . a hauntedness . . . a terrible rawness of nerves,” (Diamond 47) brought on by our abuse and slaughter of animals, and she appears to regard this as an admirable trait; she seems to accept that it marks Elizabeth Costello as a superior person. To some degree, I suppose that she is right in this. But a woundedness caused by the wounds of others that does not motivate us to go out into the world and heal those wounds is self-indulgent. To use a word that I have used before, it is narcissistic. Except for the animals that she does not eat (although this is no small thing), animals are no better off for Costello being wounded. Woundedness is only the first step. When it is mistaken for the entire journey, esthetics and narcissism triumph over ethics and altruism, leaving the animals to suffer and die undefended.

Nothing I have said here is meant to imply that J. M. Coetzee's outrage at animal abuse and slaughter are insincere. Since the publication of *Elizabeth Costello*, for example, he has lent his name to an Australian animal protection group, Voiceless: The Fund for Animals, as well as to Rev. Dr. Andrew Linzey's Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics. For this he is to be applauded. We can also hope it is a sign that he is evolving toward an engagement with animals that puts them first and is genuinely supportive of animal rights. But in *Elizabeth Costello*, he shares in the failure of his fictional alter ego to transcend herself. And their failure is all the more bitter because their woundedness raises hope only to betray it. The horror and outrage that could have produced the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of the animal rights movement has given us *Elizabeth Costello* instead.

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¹ With the exception of Dr. Con Slobodchikoff's research into prairie dog language, which is directly relevant to Coetzee's claim that nonhuman animals lack languages of their own, a discussion of the findings of these scientists is beyond the scope of this essay. But see, for example, (in no particular order) *The Alex Studies: Cognitive and Communicative Abilities of Gray Parrots*, Irene Maxine Pepperberg, Harvard University Press, 2002; *Apes, Language, and the Human Mind*, Sue Savage-Rumbaugh, et al., Oxford University Press, 1998; *Mind of the Raven*, Bernd Heinrich, HarperCollins, 1999; *Next of Kin: My Conversations with Chimpanzees*, Roger Fouts, Avon Books, 1997; *Nim Chimpsky: the Chimp Who Would be Human*, Elizabeth Hess, Bantam, 2008; *Apes, Men, and Language*, Eugene Linden, E. P. Dutton, 1974; *The Parrot's Lament*, Eugene Linden, E. P. Dutton, 1999; *Animal Social Complexity*, Frans B. M. de Waal and Peter L. Tsvack (eds.), Harvard University Press, 2003; *Minding Animals: Awareness, Emotions, and Heart*, Marc Bekoff, Oxford University Press, 2002; *The Emotional Lives of Animals*, Marc Bekoff, New World Library, 2007; *The Human Nature of Birds*, Theodore Xenophon Barber, St. Martin's Press, 1993; *Pleasurable Kingdom: Animals and the Nature of Feeling Good*, Jonathan Balcombe, Macmillan, 2006; *In the Shadow of Man* (revised edition), Jane Goodall, Mariner Books, 2000; *Created from Animals: the Moral Implications of Darwinism*, James Rachels, Oxford University Press USA, 1991; and Darwin's

widely ignored *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, various editions, originally published 1872.

² *Elizabeth Costello* was published in 2003. These two chapters had been published previously, in 1999, together with essays by four other authors, including Peter Singer, under the title *The Lives of Animals*. The text is identical in both volumes, except that *The Lives of Animals* comes equipped with footnotes that identify the sources of Costello's references and support some of her contentions, although none report the findings of modern science regarding animal language or consciousness. Coetzee had also read these two chapters as the Tanner Lectures at Princeton University in 1998.

³ Strictly speaking, Coetzee is describing "Elegy No. 8" in Rilke's *Dunio Elegies*, but later in the paragraph he refers to "The Panther" as a poem that makes the same effort.

⁴ "Being-in-the-world" is a frequent translation of the German word *Dasein*, especially as it is used by Martin Heidegger. Broken down into its constituent parts and translated literally, "*Dasein*" would mean "being there." But in everyday German usage it simply means "presence," as in *im Dasein meiner Mutter*, "in the presence of my mother," or sometimes "existence" or "life," as in *der Kampf ums Dasein*, "the struggle for survival." In German phenomenology, however, it came to stand for the particular mode-of-being experienced by any given individual. This technical usage reached its apotheosis with Heidegger, who gave *Dasein* a meaning that approximates what Tom Regan means when he speaks of being "the subject of a life." I think it is fair to say that an individual who has *Dasein* is the subject of a life, while an individual who lacks *Dasein* is not. By using the term of art "being-in-the-world", Costello is announcing that she is working in the Continental post-modernist tradition.

⁵ Its first public appearance was in Russian in 1905, when it was serialized in the reactionary, ultra-nationalist St. Petersburg newspaper *The Banner*. Since then it has been translated into most European languages and has had an abiding influence on Western anti-Semitism. In 1923, Alfred Rosenberg, a leading Nazi ideologist and close friend of Adolf Hitler, published a German translation that was widely read by the Nazi leadership.

⁶ So far as I know, Coetzee has never claimed to be a vegan. I do not know whether he wears leather shoes or carries a leather wallet.