**Thesis Statement**:

Coetzee in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *The Lives of Animals* makes a dual point: 1) There is viciousness inside of us—the will to dominate, consume and kill (e.g. Joll’s character). 2) This desire stands in the way of change, is tied up in language and sometimes involves a failure of imagination (to sympathize with “the other”). In exploring these two issues, I draw on Gabardi’s *The Next Social Contract* which envisions a kind of animal communitarianism as a means to overcome what Coetzee has identified as obstructions to justice for animals.

LIFE IS LIFE IS LIFE

*Todd Fiorentino*

Although much has been written trying to illuminate what Coetzee is *really doing* in his fiction, it was a very brief essay in *The Death of the Animal* that touched off the thesis of this paper. In this book, Paola Cavalieri writes a conversation between two philosophers on holiday in Greece. This conversational setup, between academics, is, of course, familiar to us from Coetzee’s *The Life of Animals*. Following the story, a number of prominent figures in academia and animal ethics write responses.

While most were of the ilk you might expect (the problems of perfectionism, Continental versus analytical philosophy, etc.), Coetzee’s response seemed almost unserious. He writes of our true base desires: “These are people… to whom brawling and guzzling and fucking represent, if not the highest activities of life, the activities during whose performance they feel most themselves—the activities that allow them to live out their being-in-the-world most fully.” (Cavalieri 86). This was not just a flip remark by Coetzee. It reveals a belief that philosophy alone will not solve the animal question.

Why the obfuscation, mystery, even coyness, in Coetzee’s writing? He knows the political implications of his work, but refuses to go there directly. Perhaps he has come to think that progress on this issue has to come on a personal level first. No one can become king for a day and suddenly stop all animal suffering. It will require a change in how we think, how we see ourselves in the world—more than just theorizing. Animal ethics has been around a long time and all that we have are some modest improvements in animal welfare to show for it. In that sense, Coetzee may be right.

Beyond this, Coetzee is acknowledging a viciousness within the human animal. That is, on some level, we like the blood; we like the domination; we want to become our full animal selves while still hiding behind civility. This comes very close to Coetzee's forays into colonialism, which feature prominently in many of his works. There seems to always be a conflicted character at the center. Someone who doesn’t know himself or herself. Someone who is wrestling with an idea, but in an unconscious way. Someone who is limited, or feels limited in choices, by the society that surrounds the character.

Since Cavalieri’s short story deals with perfectionism, we should ask why Coetzee doesn’t even approach the subject. I believe Coetzee sees that as a failed strategy. We have stacks of reports and databases brimming with science showing so many of the special abilities that animals possess, yet, still, it’s not convincing to the public (or they are not following the implications). These specialized conversations will not change society because there is an education gap; a failure of the “poetic imagination” as Coetzee speaks to; and, culture, politics, self-interest and tradition stand in the way. Let me give a few examples.

I gave an animal rights talk at my college some time ago at a graduate symposium, and, at the end, a few faculty members who had been sitting in, gave their thoughts. The one academic basically framed what each speaker had done. He said, of my talk, “you are making an argument,” but went no further, and simply talked about the WAY in which the speakers approached their issue. (After the talks, everyone had cold-cut sandwiches). We are very uncomfortable talking about these issues because they contain judgment. I’ve seen individuals get personally offended by vegetarian discussions, feeling they are being accused of something, which, on some level, they are.

Or, another example, when I returned from undergrad in Boston, I sat down to a big Italian meal with my grandmother, my nana. I told her I didn’t want the sausage or meatballs because I was vegetarian. She scoffed, remarking, “the Boston religion…” I love my grandmother, but here, we see culture in the way; tradition in the way; and ethnic heritage in the way. So, how do we talk about these issues? Coetzee has decided that fiction is perhaps the best way. Because we get to try out different beliefs; see the reactions of others to them; and, put forth analogies such as a Holocaust of animals, without really stamping our name on it. It’s submitted for our consideration.

To return to Coetzee’s comment, which really speaks to our true hidden desires, it reminds me of an interview that I saw with a boxer. The boxer said, [paraphrased quote] ‘people who don’t box, or don’t like boxing, they don’t deserve to understand.’ He went on to talk about what it’s like, the first time you step into the ring. (I’ve heard hunters speak in a similar way.) This kind of man against nature epic battle, where you’re fighting yourself and fighting the opposing force, both at once. I believe this is what Coetzee was talking about. There is sickness in our heart.

The vegetarian, then, is pretending to be something he is not. Of course, these sensibilities may change or evolve as we age. In the case of the magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, he sees himself as a young man, hungry to kill and hunt, and then, as an old man, realizing his error. He wants to break out of the colonial system, but finds it futile at every turn. He has internalized the idea that the barbarians are child-like, animal-like and need the white man, even when he is presented with evidence to the contrary (self-sufficient barbarian life, fishing and hunting). In many ways, the magistrate is the “vegetarian” (internally) pretending to be the carnivore or hunter.

There may be other reasons why Coetzee abandons the strategy of philosophical papers even though he is an academic. I believe he senses an impossible question; an unanswerable question that can only result in paralysis of the movement if we try to answer it. That plays right into the hand of the interests who wish to exploit animals. Perfectionism is an ever-shifting playing field (tons of species, some not even discovered yet… insects, amphibians, reptiles, mammals, etc.) each with different characteristics. One can never really talk succinctly about “animals.” The idea of saying, let’s give dolphins and great apes rights (which is where perfectionism may land) is precarious. We know 98% of our DNA matches that of chimpanzees, yet still, we use them as test subjects. So, there is self-interest here.

But also, and I think Coetzee would agree, we’ve given our answer to the animal question, long ago, and we gave the wrong one. Now, we are left with a society built around that wrong answer. We’ve failed to update it as science and ethics progressed.

To make an analogy, I have many weeds in my garden at home. Some are quite beautiful—flowering weeds. I’m not an expert gardener by any stretch. I’ve chosen to leave the flowering weeds that, I think, look nice, and pull out the others. But what is a “weed,” really? A weed is just a plant that we have decided is undesirable, much like a “pest” species. It’s completely arbitrary. There is nothing essential that makes a plant a weed. It is all our biases and preferences. I think you see where I’m going with this.

The animals we’ve chosen to save, exploit, kill, test, etc. were chosen based on our own biases and preferences, nothing more. In the same way that slave owners did not want to give up their slaves during the American Civil War, large industrial meat interests will not want to give up their “property.” But there is a deep failure of language here that, I believe, is at the core of this issue. Rather than try to make problematic perfectionist arguments or seek “personhood” in court cases, we should instead be thinking strategically, as Coetzee does, in his fiction.

We have already established “wildlife” as a category. Actually, it is a protected category, not in an absolute sense, but in a situational sense. Like the weeds of the garden, we must acknowledge that all animals are wildlife. Once the names of “livestock” and “seafood” and even “pests” and “pets” have fallen by the wayside, we see a non-anthropocentric picture emerge. There would certainly be disruption to society, but that is not a reason to hang onto a colonialist approach to life. In court cases over animal personhood, justices are sometimes hesitant to make animal rights rulings because of the perceived chaos that might result. So, let’s consider this.

Wildlife is protected in a general sense. That is, you can’t go into your backyard and shoot a blue jay. However, we do issue hunting licenses for certain animals. The desire to eat meat and butcher cows, pigs or chickens could still be permissible, even as wildlife, by utilizing the same permit system that local authorities currently use. And, there are many interesting advantages to such a smaller scale, localized approach to the animal question.

For one, shutting down the major Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) in the Midwest would be a huge victory for environmentalists, health advocates, animal rights activists and welfarists, as well as those interested in worker rights and safe working conditions. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has never been able to effectively manage these CAFOs. We just have to admit that massive scale high efficiency slaughter of animals is unethical. The reforms we’ve seen amount to better trickery of the animals, so they don’t see it coming. The circular walk line that leads cattle to follow each other as one is plucked from the pack and sent down a chute… the electrification of chickens hung up on the line—it’s akin to a slasher film.

When brought to a local level, first we would see a reduction in animals killed because operations are limited and small scale. A permit could be given to a local farmer or butcher operation for 30 or 50 animals at a time; basically allowing the person to help feed their community. Worker injuries would be reduced. Vulnerabilities such as what we saw with COVID would lessen. Inhumane treatment would be far less likely as farmers tend to small groups of animals that they know individually. One could see a hypothetical high school field trip to such a farm whereas one could never imagine kids visiting a CAFO. The children would leave traumatized.

In regard to pets who would become “wildlife,” little would change. These animals continue to have a guardian. In the case of pests who become “wildlife,” again, it is permissible to kill wildlife, but local authorities would have to deem it a public health issue and set guidelines. We coexist until populations get too high. In the case of lab animals who become “wildlife,” they are allowed to live out their lives in their natural habitat free from experimentation.

We currently protect wetlands even though a bog does not have any perfectionist characteristics nor is it a “person.” The assumption in wetlands law is that, yes, we are protecting the land, but also, we are protecting the reptiles, amphibians and fish who live in the wetland. It’s a kind of backdoor animal rights protection, that simply appears in law as protection of the land. Fish can still be taken from the waters and eaten, in the same manner as deer are hunted. But wildlife hunting and fishing must be permitted and the amount of catch and method must be regulated to avoid overfishing and habitat damage to preserve the commons for everyone.

None of this extends absolute rights to animals. Though one might say that such protections are an intermediary step to rights, which could be. While we have the UN Human Rights Declaration to protect people (although routinely ignored during war), we don’t have anything comparable for animals. Also, this Declaration had the effect of reinforcing the language of human vs. animals (despite Darwin) and excluding other life forms by drawing a circle in the sand. Although admirable in its thrust, it can be reduced to people protecting people, that is, more anthropocentrism, more speciesism.

By separating ourselves from the animal world, we give license to corporations to treat animals as property. While the dialectical problem is old, the practice of CAFO’s only began in the 1950’s. In my mind, this means there is still hope to rewind it. Given overpopulation, however, it will take a combined effort to 1) change the minds of the public through discourse, fiction, etc. so more people become vegetarian, and 2) implement small-scale local farming to take back control of our food, stop Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs), reduce chemical use, antibiotics, runoff and hormones.

To summarize the arguments in the first half of my paper, Coetzee is fighting a battle in fiction because he believes readers are more open to the ideas he’s presenting in that form; it’s a more winnable battle; and, it’s a piece of the puzzle in terms of answering the animal question. It allows for objection, seeing from multiple sides and shows the inner conflict of the issue. Whereas imagining a new world order, or trying to play king for a day in philosophical papers, looks removed from reality. Additionally, Coetzee believes (this is my interpretation) that many philosophers are barking up the wrong tree.

In the second half of this paper, I lay out what a society would actually look like which has undergone the changes that Coetzee is imagining with characters like Elizabeth Costello. Let’s say half of the population is now vegetarian; lab experimentation has been pared down to only that which relates to lifesaving drugs or life-threatening diseases. Toxicity; purely academic; or, nonlife-threatening disease testing has been done away with. Animals now enjoy the basic protection of wildlife with a local permit system in place to allow farmers to kill a designated number of pigs, chicken or cattle for food. The same is true for fishery licenses. Certain technologies that are used to maximize the catch, like trawling nets, longlines, radar or spotter planes, are banned.

This is very close to the scenario that Wayne Gabardi discusses in *The Next Social Contract*. In the first 63 pages, he lays out with incredible detail the ecological crisis before us, covering issues ranging from extinction to coral reefs to Big Agriculture, the USDA and climate change. (In my view, this should be required reading for every high school senior.) Anyone contending that the environmental crisis can be dealt with using minor interventions, really should read this book.

Gabardi’s assertion is that we need human and animal relations to develop through experience, and he uses the phrase communitarianism to describe what he is proposing. While he laments some of the issues with “contact zone” animal encounters, he largely attributes this to habitat loss (we have encroached on many species’ land) and failure to take precautions like locking dumpsters. Contact zone encounters, is not what Gabardi has in mind for a new understanding of animals in the future.

Instead, Gabardi supposes that animals could be incorporated into our lives more, not just as pets, or “wildlife,” but as experiences and encounters outside of the zoo. I remember hiking through the Ecuadorian Cloud Forest when I was in my 20’s and coming upon a horse. The horse had fairly large hooves and long hair; she was quite beautiful. The reason I mention this is that in the U.S., if one encountered a horse in the woods or hiking in the plains, one can be sure that an “owner” is nearby. Horses can be $20,000 or more to buy and raise up.

However, here, in Ecuador, there was no owner in sight. The few native Ecuadorians that I did encounter in the forest, were miles from the horse, wearing no shoes and seemed to be either peasants or foragers. So, how can animals be integrated back into our lives in an informal way such as this? The lack of knowledge that so many young people (and older) have of animals is astounding. Do they know the difference between a store bought egg and a fertilized egg from a hen? Do they understand that the milk they drink is the result of impregnating a cow over and over again to get them to keep producing? Do they know many pigs are castrated as standard procedure?

This lack of knowledge translates into a bizarre obliviousness where we take these farm items for granted and never question it. When I lived in Saratoga, NY, my neighbors had chickens that roamed free among the houses. They were pretty funny to watch and I didn’t notice any issues with this, even with my cats. There was a fox den up the road, but remarkably, perhaps because chickens can fly a little bit or maybe because my neighbor had a shelter, she didn’t lose any to the foxes. I mention this because often people can't imagine a chicken, cow or pig roaming around the neighborhood, and yet, they can, and, in fact, do, in some places.

Charles Dickens famously wrote about the hog “trash collection” in the streets, which was a fairly common sight in the early 1800s in Manhattan, for instance. If the animals have a job, that certainly helps in terms of integrating them into communities, not as food, or test subjects, but as life on this earth.

I could see various rural neighborhoods in the U.S. having a community cow or chicken or pig, and letting it roam. I’m sure certain locals would enjoy it and maybe even take up some of the caretaking in a volunteer fashion. Perhaps compost could be gained from the cow; or, the intelligence of pigs might fascinate school children. In the same way that volunteers in neighborhoods engage in beautification projects, I’m sure there would be some fun animal activities that result. Featuring the local animals at events, naming them and basically coexisting, could be great fun, and, I believe, this is the kind of communitarian vision that Gabardi is endorsing, although he never fully maps it out.

This may sound fantastical or utopian, or a hearkening back to an earlier day, but I would argue—it’s not. Animals could be integrated into our lives in a non-colonialist, non-exploitative, non-hierarchical manner that does not involve killing or maiming them.

The communitarian approaches of Gabardi in *The Next Social Contract* could be implemented as a form of community-based experiential education. Relations could develop in a fun educational way, which could lead to further conversion to vegetarianism as people come to really SEE the other, and KNOW the other, and RELATE to the other devoid of killing machines, huge corporations, mass breeding programs, crowding or chemicals.

In this next section of the paper, I seek to discuss a trend in Coetzee’s books where a main character is unable to grasp what is happening—wrestling with an idea. This state of unease may be a precursor to change, and so, this relates directly to the previous discussion. As with apartheid in South Africa, Coetzee understands his privileged position, and knows he can never completely grasp or comprehend the oppression of an entire race of people. But also, he feels implicated in it. So, perhaps through ‘poetic imagination,’ he seeks to put himself or his characters in the role of colonizer and colonized.

We see this in various forms, in various books, but *Waiting for the Barbarians* has this dynamic center stage. When I read *Barbarians*, I was reminded of Simone Weil’s essay, “Human Personality,” where she discusses the expectation of good. Although I realize there is a tendency to search for redemption in fiction, when sometimes it’s not there, in discussing *Barbarians,* Durrant, in his book *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning*, points to the appearance of children as possibly signaling something about time and hope. Quoting Coetzee in *Barbarians*, Durrant writes, “children ‘come into the world bringing with them the memory of justice.’” (Durrant 41) When the magistrate goes unconscious, at various times, it is as if he must be out of culture, out of time, in order to truly understand what the Empire is doing to the barbarians. Because he is within himself, as a privileged white man, he can’t seem to access his own true thoughts in his waking life; it is an attempt by Coetzee to have the magistrate’s subconscious speak to him. Children act in a similar way—they are pre-enculturation. They have not absorbed all of the prejudices of society yet.

For many readers, this may feel unsatisfactory—a main character who can never really self actualize; an evil force that is never truly stopped; a character who feels guilt but does not identify it as guilt, or does, but dismisses the thought or conceals it. Or, in the case of Elizabeth Costello in *The Lives of Animals*, the focus is on a society that is dismissive of sympathy, and that has come to tolerate torture and death by labeling the victims as ‘other.’

It is this space of conflict that Coetzee operates in. It could be the moment of looking through the bars into an animal’s eyes at the zoo. It could be the moment of killing an animal at a shelter, as in *Disgraced* by Coetzee. It could be the moment of turning away from any being with less rights than yourself. By operating in a space of conflict, Coetzee forces the reader to approach these questions in their own life. When, and under what circumstances, do we experience these moments, and in what guise?

What are the conditions under which injustice occurs? Why are Coetzee’s characters unable to step out of their roles and confront injustice? In Amir Ahmadi’s book *Then The Fish Swallowed Him*, there is a poignant scene where the interrogator or torturer stops for a moment, takes a phone call, and talks kindly to his wife about their evening plans. This casualness and kindness, while he is ‘doing his job,’ is stunning in that it shows the human personality as a kind of prism where we compartmentalize our feelings and act in our roles. I would argue that many of Coetzee’s characters exhibit this tendency. Toward the end of the story, in *The Lives of Animals*, Elizabeth Costello remarks that she might somehow be mistaken, “I look into your eyes, into Norma’s, into the children’s, and I see only kindness, human-kindness,” (Coetzee 69) and that John’s family can’t also be perpetuators of this Holocaust against animals. John, her son, responds, “it will soon be over.” (Coetzee 69)

We also see resignation in the magistrate when he has drinks with a new young officer who has come to the frontier. Mention is made of the War College that the officer attended, and so, we get some indication that the magistrate knows the futility of his argument though he can’t help but make it. He tells the officer that the barbarians are best left alone; they are fishermen and trackers, nothing more. The officer is, of course, unconvinced. Like so many of Coetzee’s characters, the magistrate is doomed to fail. In another instance, the magistrate “wisely” tears up a letter in which he sought to object to Colonel Joll’s treatment of the prisoners.

Institutionalized torture remains with us. Guantanamo Bay serves as the most salient example with hardly any accountability to this day. Importantly, we saw the manipulation of language to serve specific interests with “enemy combatant” used as opposed to POW. This threw open the legal door. So, we see duplication, historically, in society, with different players and different situations, but the same themes coming back to haunt us. Colonel Joll acts for the Empire, to protect the settlements from the barbarian terrorists.

In this, I see Coetzee examining the very terrain of injustice. What is the context? What are the messages? How are good people made to do evil? For money? For country? What are the mistaken pretenses? And how can we come to identify injustice, in all of its forms, rather than fall into becoming an agent of injustice? I find these to be essential questions in many of Coetzee’s works.

In closing, I have examined the strategy of fiction by Coetzee with equal treatment of animals as his subject. Through Elizabeth Costello’s character there is a call for greater sympathy and consideration. However, Coazee acknowledges a form of human viciousness and drive to dominate that operates in the background and deserves our interrogation. As sex, colonialism and otherness, factor heavily into Coetzee’s work, only by unwinding these issues can we truly grasp the author’s intentions.

I’ve focused on animal communitarianism as discussed in Gabardi’s *The Next Social Contract*. While I agree with his perspective that such a scenario would create a more just world by including animals in our social lives (not behind bars in zoos, labs or CAFO’s), Gabardi does not elaborate on what this would truly look like in practice. This paper has sought to describe how human-animal interactions might actually take place on the town level (this would be more difficult in cities). It is this exposure to animals, in a more regular casual way, that could hold the key to a greater sympathy and consideration for them.

Through this, we would gain a greater sense of individualization, rather than thinking always in terms of faceless groups or species or herds. People would see the individual personalities of various animals. Also, they would not be hidden away from sight, which is key. I’ve discussed using a system similar to the hunting permits used for deer, for chickens, pigs and cattle, to make sure that if killed for food, there are limits, and that it’s done on a more localized small-scale basis. I feel this is a more honest approach, to have contact with the animal, and take responsibility; it is my hope that this is a step towards increased vegetarianism and less killing. Such a system would put more pressure on local governments, as opposed to the USDA (federal money now going to the USDA would be redirected to local authorities). But it offers flexibility for towns to come to terms with this issue based on their topography, resources, needs, beliefs and culture.

Lastly, I’ve pointed out an important aspect of Coetzee’s characterization method—showing inner conflict and social pressure as factors in the evolution of his main characters throughout various works. I’ve shown how Coetzee makes the point, through his prose, that enculturation and privilege are difficult things to internalize, understand and come to grips with; that society may stand in the way of true understanding; that false messages abound.

I have used literary analysis to show the themes that crosscut so many of Coetzee’s novels. These include how to gain a true understanding of “the other,” whether the category of other is even real, dominance and advantage, sex, racism and how we turn away from the truth, sometimes in order to not be implicated ourselves. We engage in mistakes of language and misinterpret; we get lost in specialized discourse. We stand in our own way when it comes to self actualization. By not truly seeing the other; by not really knowing the other, we carry on this colonial history in various forms. We cheat ourselves by viewing animals through a pre-set filter. We imprison ourselves in the lie of a better life—built on animal suffering.

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Endnotes: Perfectionism, Impact, Enforcement

While I agree that it’s a false framework we’ve developed for discussing these matters, I will give a couple of examples (reason, communication) of how animals, regardless, do stand up to **perfectionism**:

There is learning among animals. Just like humans, animals often copy their mother as a form of learning—the fawn discovers where to forage and what foliage to eat. What is learning but an act of reason? There is also kinesthetic learning, as when my kittens wrestle, training their muscles and reflexes, which is not dissimilar to my son who wrestles in high school. There is communication of all kinds among animals. When my cat steps outside, the forest comes alive with birdcalls, squirrel vocalizations and other warnings.

If anything, I find that, I, as a human, act primarily on instinct. I exhibit minimal self-awareness, often lose track of time, make irrational decisions, and mainly seek food, warmth, sex, sleep and other “instinctive” drives throughout the day. I also look for entertainment and try to amuse myself.

I recently visited the San Diego Zoo. Although I’m not a believer in zoos, I found myself in the *conflicted* position of wanting my child to see the animals of the world, but being unable financially to travel so extensively. So, the zoo becomes the only option in the society we’ve designed. In any event, the only animal who showed excitement in their confines, was the orangutan who tried to walk on stilts, do cartwheels and otherwise ham it up for the crowd. This was in stark contrast to an elder great ape, who had lost much of his hair making him look even more human, who stood with his back to the public/glass and refused to look at us. (Monbiot, in his book *Ferile,* talks about “ecological boredom” in that we have killed off so many species, or pushed them into corners, to the point that, most peoples’ experience of animals involve only deer and squirrels as I just noted.)

One often repeated perfectionist claim is: We *suppose* that animals don’t have (full?) self-awareness and therefore exploitation is justifiable. In other words, because we *think* animals don’t realize what is going on completely (even if taken at face value, this overlaps with infants, those with cognitive disabilities, etc.) we can kill or experiment on them. How sick. This reduces to: We can take advantage of animals because they don’t know we’re taking advantage of them (can you imagine this as a legal defense for x, y, z crime?). But perhaps more to the point is the arbitrariness and ever-changing nature of the criterion. If an alien being dropped from the sky with a special power called emoti-sense, that is, the ability to sense others’ emotions just by looking at them, and then enslaved us because we didn’t have this power, we would certainly find the alien immoral.

The **impact** of the system envisioned in this paper could be critically looked at in terms of meat essentially just becoming more expensive, for the rich, or entangled in lots of regulations. I think this is a fair critique, but I want to point out the following: The presumption is that vegetarianism rates must go up first; I understand that given the world population, it’s difficult to do away with high yield agriculture, fishing and meat production. However, we also don’t pay the real price of meat, if we were to account for environmental impacts, subsidies and so on.

Population would have to level off or decline; vegetarianism would need to increase; and the Federal government would have to be willing to cede some authority to localities who can better manage farmers, hunters and fishermen/women. While I might agree that subtler persuasion like Coetzee’s fiction is an important strategy, I also think that it’s necessary to lay out what an animal-friendly world might look like.

Societal change regarding animals is dependent on good **enforcement** measures. As we saw with the International Whaling Commission, loopholes for “research” were taken advantage of or fleets simply ignored the new mandates. Backing up new laws with strong enforcement and making sure the regulations are not subject to industry review/lobbyists are key considerations for expanded animal protection.