*Background*

The fact that we liken ourselves to animals, then try to differentiate ourselves from them, shows the fluidity of this category and that self-interest is involved. Through the character of Elizabeth Costello, Coetzee bring us into this dilemma. But also, the debate, in particular, brings to light an intellectual framework within philosophy (represented by Professor O’Hearne who draws on Aristotle, Descartes, etc.) built on a false dichotomy that fails to ask the right questions or that asks impossible questions. Questions about the essence of animals are not only philosophical, they are also scientific, poetic and commonsensical. Because of this, animal studies in its modern form is a multi-disciplinary pursuit.

*Goals*

There is a two-fold objective before us, 1) shed the old approach to the animal question which basically led to a dead end, involved incomplete information, was wed to colonialism and religion, and always used comparisons to humans, and 2) to envision a new form that draws on many disciplines (Coetzee would include literature and poetry) and acknowledges the implications (for law/rights, food production, medical studies, etc.) of accepting all beings into the fold and trying to live with *the other* as opposed to using animals for our own greedy purposes.

*Thesis*

We are asking the wrong questions, based on an old framework, regarding animals. There is a better starting point, but also, we must acknowledge the implications of what we already know. Does it matter if we are different? How has colonialism, classism, racism and sexism shaped our current approach to animals? Is anthropomorphizing used as a claim to backup unjust practices? Coetzee, through the character of Elizabeth Costello, offers us an alternative viewpoint that shakes off these assumptions and asks new questions.

THE CAT, THE RAT AND THE LOBSTER

Todd Fiorentino

Our deep desire is to have the animal issue work both ways for us. In *Zoobiquity* by Natterson-Horowitz and Bowers, we come to understand that veterinary science has much to teach us about human medical science. By extrapolation, animals are like us enough so that we can infer medical interventions for humans, from animals. However, because we must insist on animals being a lower form, we have to say they are unlike us in some substantial way. That is, they are not like us enough to give rights, for instance, but they are like us enough to prove useful.

Coetzee is an author who loves to operate in this conflicted space as there is fruit to bear from these contradictions. Here is one more example to drive the point home:

People claim we are justified in eating meat because animals eat eachother in the wild. But aren’t we separate from animals? We aren’t animals, right? So, we ARE animals when we want to eat meat, but we’re NOT animals if you want to talk about extending rights. The fact that our canines have blunted over evolution may be an indicator that our bodies -- over millions of years -- have adapted to a vegetarian farming lifestyle and away from our hunter-gatherer past. Eating meat at low populations was probably sustainable, but at our current population, it clearly isn’t.

Singer’s response to Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals* demonstrates this ambivalence toward the animal question. On the one hand, Singer is an advocate for animals, but he is also not willing to go all the way. When Singer points out that the Kahlua is more valuable to his daughter than the soymilk, he slips into hierarchical valuations: “But you’d care more about the Kahlua.” (Singer, 90) Singer has made his daughter the primary subject. Isn’t that arbitrary? Someone who doesn’t drink alcohol, would value the soymilk more. A second problem with Singer’s analysis is related to in-group bias. As an academic himself, he values his daughter’s education (and future prospects) more than his dog’s life. But many people try and fail in their professional altruistic goals; animals also have a future to consider.

*Abstractions and Fieldwork*

Barbara Smuts, in her response to Coetzee, came closest, I thought, to actually articulating the real issue that we struggle with regarding humans and animals. We are not “with” animals. We consider ourselves separate, and so, we notice all of the differences.

Even Smuts’ fieldwork still has science coming between the experience of togetherness that she is discussing. At times, she does put down the pen and notebook, but the scientific mission is still there. She is trying to figure out the other as an observer; it is this “observer” status that gets in the way of true experience. The baboon hug was perhaps the most poignant moment of her piece where we see genuine affection between the two. Each baboon has a unique personality, some playful and joking, others more serious or dominant. Sounds very much like people!

But what has fieldwork like this yielded in terms of concrete change on the animal issue? Many disciplines have engaged in observation, and noted incredible social behavior, emotion, bravery and courage (*Meerkat Manor* on Animal Planet documented remarkable intelligence and organization among the meerkats) as well as communication among species. Yet, all we have is some wildlife protection (development goals can still trump this; look at how many airports are built on wetlands, for instance) and some modest welfarist type reforms regarding the conditions for holding animals in CAFOs and labs.

To be fair to the documentarians and wildlife biologists, abstract philosophy also hasn’t gotten us where we need to go. And perhaps this is part of Coetzee’s point in pursuing literature as a vehicle. In the article, “Politics of Form” by Thomas Pughe, he discusses exactly this question and wonders, perhaps along with Coetzee, if a poetry class can change the world. In other words, we have poetry that speaks to animal nature, animal desires, animal being, and yet, we read it and move on. Are we failing to act on the implications of not just poetry, but a whole body of work on animals? What is behind this resistance?

Our legal system dismisses arguments for animals, or says they don’t carry weight. We can’t seem to figure out how to integrate consideration of animals into our legal system, which has excluded them for so long. Animals are considered property. And cruelty to animals is societal, that is, animals have become objectified. Even someone like Singer can’t seem to make the leap.

*Life Stratified*

Some years ago, I was in downtown Saratoga Springs, NY and noticed a musician playing on the street with a rat on his shoulder. The rat had no leash and clearly had decided to hang out with this person as he likely fed and pet him. They were buddies. This was an interesting challenge to the distinctions we insist upon as a society with regard to animals.

My son directed me to a video online where someone had bought a lobster from the supermarket, removed the rubberbands and put him in an aquarium at home where he did PT with him to rehab his claws. Grace Clement, in her article “Pets or Meat,” takes on these issues, discussing dogs versus pigs. She points out that while both make for intelligent pets, one is typically slaughtered while the other is endeared as our friend.

These challenges to our stratification of life can be seen globally. In Peru, Cuy, also known as guinea pig meat, is served in restaurants. The Canadians, in particular, eat various game meats, some of which we would consider pets (e.g. rabbit). Dogs and cats are eaten in certain provinces of China. The Russians slice up horse meat for sandwiches. Just yesterday, at Colonie Center in NY, I saw ostrich, kangaroo and wild boar jerky for sale. I list these examples not to shock, but rather to point out—the distinctions we’ve made about animals are not based on anything aside from our preferences.

This raises an interesting question: Do biologists or geneticists affirm that humans have a distinct taxonomy from Great Apes (bonobos or chimpanzees)? We are all hominids, but what does that really mean? Linnaeus, an early taxonomist, was highly influenced by religion and the church’s insistence that man is at the top, just beneath only God. It’s also not surprising that Linnaeus created a category called Africanus, which helped to justify Sweden’s involvement in the slave industry. Science is not free of value judgments. We must throw off concepts and language that had the colonial mission, or the church, in mind.

It's worth pausing here for a moment to discuss the impact of science on various disciplines since the animal question is slowly being answered in a multi-disciplinary fashion. The dominance of scientific thinking affected philosophy by raising questions about the problem of knowledge (how do we know something), empiricism and rationalism. For our purposes, it’s worth noting that during the 18th and 19th centuries, in particular, a model of how to conduct science was being born (observation, induction, logic, etc.) and that emotion or intuition were being called into question.

To this day, we see the residue of this movement in so many disciplines, but also, in politics. It’s not enough to say that we “know” animals want to be free; or that we “feel” animals are treated unjustly. We now have to prove it empirically, with logic, but are these the right tools? This is a question that Coetzee asks indirectly through his work, in my opinion. Given the baggage (church, colonialism and so on) that our systems, language, conceptions of life, carried throughout time, isn’t it time to update our views on being, sentience and obligations? Have we posed an impossible question with regard to animals, a question that can’t be answered with the tools we are using? Or, have we already discovered the essential truths related to animals, and the problem is more that we’re not realizing the implications? What truly sets us apart? Is there really an apart at all?

Elephants and whales have larger brains than humans. So it can’t be our larger brain. Morality can’t set us apart as we engage in war, killing civilians, enslaving animals, human trafficking. But rather than go through the list in this fashion, we should ask, why is this our starting point at all? If humans are, in fact, superior, what does that even mean? We’re better? We’re above? We’re of a higher order? According to God? According to ourselves (Singer’s Kahlua)?

Much of the abstract philosophy surrounding this issue has been geared towards the question of what really makes us human (if we could figure this out, perhaps it would shed light on what is essentially animal). I wonder if a different starting point would get us closer to the truth. Or, also significant, if we have asked an impossible question, or a question that we shift once answered, resulting in paralysis and the reinforcement of the status quo.

Does it matter if animals and humans are different? Difference is how we justified racial discrimination. Difference is how we justified sexism and chauvinism. Women were kept in the helping professions and steered away from science. African Americans were told to stick to singing and dancing. What is superior is a value judgment. It depends on who you are asking (think: Singer’s daughter). Our science on animals has been largely self-serving and industry based up until recent years; now, we have the opportunity to think anew.

*Personal Decisions*

At some point in our lives, we’ve probably all considered whether or not to eat meat. For years, I was a vegetarian and for years I ate meat. Currently, I don’t buy meat in the grocery store or at restaurants. I have developed a gradation or scale based on my conception of animals. It is imperfect, but at least it acknowledges the injustice of CAFOs.

We all have to come to grips with these questions. Yet, we are taught not to think about it. Meat is slipped into so many products sometimes as a very minor (and unnecessary) ingredient. Based on what I know, a vegetarian lifestyle is necessary in consideration of animals, to improve the environment, for my own health and to eliminate some animal suffering. It is true that dairy still involves the use of animals, but they are not killed, which is important. Still, it is a valid charge that cows should not be held captive and impregnated. In my efforts to not participate in this injustice, I drink oat milk and buy coconut ice cream whenever available.

When people defend eating meat, it’s sometimes said that animals eat each other, so why shouldn’t we eat meat? But there is a real problem with this argument. On the one hand, we want to distinguish between ourselves and animals (reminiscent of the *Zoobiquity* point). We are human and they are animal, which gives us special permissions. But on the other hand, we want to say that we are animals, we are like them, and so it’s okay to for us to act as they do. But we can’t have it both ways. We are like animals and so we can eat meat, but we are unlike animals so we don’t have to extend protections or rights.

*Animal Wants*

The fascinating world of marine life also warrants greater consideration and compassion on our part. Although it’s difficult to discuss as a category because there is so much diversity, we see expressive mammals, complex ecosystems, food webs, communities/families of beings and long daring migrations. Cephalopods (octopi, squid, etc.), seabirds, sharks, whales, seals, sea turtles, etc. all have interests, exhibit curiosity and feel pain. This being the case, I generally try to avoid eating fish of all types as I believe sentience is a strong criterion for greater consideration.

It is not anthropomorphizing to say that fish want to be free and swim in schools. They were born free. So when we walk into a Petco and see a solitary fish sitting in a small bag or a small cup, ready for individual sale, and the fish can’t even move, it’s cruel. Freedom was their natural state. (Now, I agree that what’s natural has become blurred in our society, but that’s a much larger question.)

Fish farming or aquaculture is certainly better than an aquarium, but that’s not saying much. Their will to swim in a particular direction and explore has been interfered with, which is negative. However, their ability to procreate or swim in a school of fish has not been thwarted. Still, aquaculture stymies enough of a fish’s natural drives to say it’s a negative overall, especially in the small pen type structures.

When considering these issues, I always think to myself: What does this particular animal want? For instance, regarding pets, if we look at the Australian Shepherd dog, he loves to herd. We don’t have to understand all of the intricacies of this instinct, but for whatever reason, DNA or otherwise, this breed likes to herd sheep. If we begin to pay attention to the natural desires of a given animal, we can see how our society is either facilitating or stymieing these drives. Sadly, in most cases, we stymie the desires of animals or manipulate them to fulfill our wants in the name of science, progress, food, labor, entertainment and other biopolitical goals.

It is not a projection or anthropomorphizing to say that an animal is bored behind bars in a zoo. It is not a theory to say that a social animal is damaged by isolating her in a lab. We should be leery of those who try to use “rationalism” or “logic” in order to convince us that abuse is justified, and try to call it something different. Although I challenge the arguments related to “lower” capacities of animals (I think they are just different), even if we granted such arguments, one would never claim that we should abuse less intelligent humans.

If animals are inferior, unthinking automata, without feelings, then why do we send them into space, write books about them and show such a fascination for them? Why do we need them in search and rescue missions, law enforcement, warfare or as service animals if they are inferior? And, why do animals show such curiosity about us if they basically just react to things? By seeing animals as a means to an end, we limit the possibilities for meaningful interaction. We also buy into a speciesist belief, which, at its core, is the same as sexism, racism and colonialism.

We’ve wrapped up being into layers, like a package. But somehow, we never reach the gift. We’ve covered animality with culture and dogma; we’ve even manipulated the package itself fundamentally (breeding). But that gift, the light, their stare, as some have put it, is the same as ours. If you grew up in a rural area, you may know this. But for folks like me, my experience of animals is primarily through my cat. To round out my animal stories, I’ll offer one more:

We recently rescued a new kitten, Sprinky, who was rambunctious and wouldn’t let us sleep. So, we put her in my daughter’s room and my daughter came to sleep in our bed for a while. But we didn’t isolate Sprinky; I went in and slept with her. She kept me up, attacking my feet and jumping and causing mischief. But I stayed anyway. Over time, she settled down (a bit) and she would come to me for affection or warmth. We formed a bond that continues to this day from those early experiences.

But what if we separated her and I did not go into the bedroom? What if we did isolate her? What if we removed positive stimulation? What if we couldn’t handle it anymore, and we put her outside to fend for herself? What I’m pointing out, is that behavior and possibility, is situational. If you believe that animals have nothing to offer—you will be right, because you will treat them in that way. If you believe that animals have a broad social life with intricate patterns of learning and development—you will also be right, because you will look for those things.

One might say, but how can you extrapolate from a cat to all animals? And actually, there is quite a bit of debate on exactly this point. The category of “animals” is problematic given how diverse animals are. Still, wildlife biologists and many others are doing this work of exploring each individual animal. Our job then is to be open to their findings, and consider how our society might need to be recast based on their results.

We know what thriving looks like. Anyone who has a dog or a cat knows if you give them good food, affection, freedom, etc. their whole demeanor and behavior improves. Don’t let people tell you that other animals are different or that we’re just anthropomorphizing when we call for the same things, for all animals. The claim of anthropomorphizing is often a smokescreen to hide abuse.

What I appreciate about Coetzee’s work is that he opens up a new lens of inquiry. It is not necessarily a scientific question, though science has a role to play. And it’s not necessarily a philosophical question, though our values are in the mix. What Coetzee is saying in works like, *The Lives of Animals*, I believe, is that we have to understand our motivations and our history; we have to be willing to unwind assumptions.

There’s no question that our approach to life has been based on the question of: How can I derive benefit? Or, how can the crown derive benefit in the colonial context. This was true of the slave trade (and is still true with human trafficking). This is certainly true of our approach to nature and animals. So we have to get out of that mode before we can SEE something for what it truly is. This is where philosophy may come into play with Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” from *The Republic* for instance. First, we have to realize that we are imprisoned by old ideas. Second, we have to realize that the shadows, the forms, our perceptions, are not the essence. There is a real identity there by the fire. But we have to reach out and touch it.

In becoming real, taking on a body (being “embodied”) and moving with it in space, we have willingly or unwillingly become something—a being. Why this form or that form, no one really knows. But we are connected by this shared truth among other living and breathing beings. We call them animals, but they don’t call us humans or persons. That was our creation. It was a useful creation. It gave us license. It allowed us to fulfill desires. But now, there is a wild imbalance. Now, there is technology. Now, the human population has grown out of control. Will we allow ourselves to be separated eternally from nature, the wild, the animal personality? Or, will we see what technology is doing to us and our children and start making the right decisions, the ones we know are true because they are the things we would want if we were in that body.

In closing, I had a discussion about animals with my brother-in-law who is an epidemiologist. I made the analogy that just as medical professionals encourage society to take vaccinations, once a disease process has been identified/studied and a cure exists, we are at a similar stage with the animal question. Especially if one considers zoonotic disease, we now know that our use and abuse of animals is creating new disease processes. It’s creating health and ecological problems. And for those of us who are spiritual, we are taking that pain and suffering into our own bodies. The medical and environmental argument for eliminating CAFOs (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations) and moving towards a vegetarian society has never been stronger. As provocateur, Elizabeth Costello via Coetzee has shown us the way. She is our moral conscience.

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