ALL ANIMALS ARE WILDLIFE

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**Summary**

Human exceptionalism as well as anthropocentric and speciesist views have led to widespread exploitation of animals. If humans are superior, we may do as we wish with animals. But this conception of animals as lesser is not based on any fundamental truth discovered within Biopolitics or any other discipline. Actually, the more we learn about animals, the more we realize that in some cases, they have superior abilities—they design social structures, show love for their families, exhibit ingenuity, problem-solving. It is our own self-interest, inability to grasp the suffering of other sentient beings, artificial constructs of language, colonialist and capitalist approaches to life and the advantages derived that has led to animal imprisonment, testing, breeding and slaughter.

In Coetzee’s book, *The Lives of Animals*, we hear various claims about the inferiority of animals. John’s mother, Elizabeth Costello, is a novelist and intellectual who has come to give a talk at his college; she is less well-known for her animal activism. John and his wife Norma lay awake in bed talking about his mother. Norma, who is skeptical of Elizabeth’s point of view on animals, considers animals to be almost entirely instinctive. John replies, “So Descartes was right, animals are just biological automata.” (48) This exchange shines light on a belief that many people hold, that is, animals don’t plan or think about the past or future. But simple observation of birds migrating south or building a nest for their young shows the fallacy of this.

As Coetzee’s narrative progresses, Elizabeth Costello enters into a debate with Professor O’Hearne. O’Hearne states, “You can be friends neither with a Martian nor with a bat, for the simple reason that you have too little in common with them.” (65) Here, we are to assume, that saving a species is contingent on whether humans can relate to it, which is a fallacy in itself. But secondly, contemporary movies like, “My Octopus Teacher,” produced by Craig Foster, demonstrate that we can become known to animals, and connect with them in sometimes emotional, even intimate ways. There is nothing more “alien” than a squid-like creature with a beak. Thinking as O’Hearne does in this story is a failure of imagination. As many people would attest, pigs and chickens are actually great pets and they do connect with humans; actually, chickens can be quite comical. And certainly, although few and far between now, folks who still live on small farms, may have a favorite cow in the pasture whom they visit and know.

Some of the very same points used against women and African Americans, before they gained rights, have been recycled for use against animals. We were told that women lack intellect (animals lack reason); we were told that African Americans are just good at singing and dancing (animals used for entertainment). The claims against activists also sound familiar. Women’s rights activists were labeled white elites.

This damaging viewpoint, that fuels so many of our actions, has been surprisingly resilient. Covid should’ve been a massive wake up call. Most credible sources trace the origins of Covid to a Wuhan live animal market in China. It turns out that keeping animals in inhumane conditions is not only bad for the animals, it sets the stage for transmission of viruses. Butchering, in particular, can be the gateway for blood to blood transmission allowing sickness to jump from animal to human. Even if we have become desensitized to animal suffering, one might think that our new awareness of zoonotic diseases might lead to societal change.

If we are to reach a new biopolitical understanding of our place in the world, it will involve sacrifice: confronting cultural practices around food, medicine and entertainment; acknowledging our role in pushing species to the brink; and, learning to value individual members of a species. It will also mean breaking free from a capitalist approach to living things, that is, not holding efficiency as a guiding principle when it comes to biological life. Striking false dichotomies in language that offer implied permissions (“livestock,” “seafood,” “natural resources”) and realizing that we are just one species on earth, with the very same claims to life as the others, will be key.

It may be stunning to think about, but we can release the animals from labs, factory farms, zoos and circuses given the political will. India is a fantastic example of a large populous country that bans cow slaughter in the majority of its states. Nature balances itself. Some animals survive; some die-off; some become food for others. But every living being should be given this fighting chance. We are not stewards of the earth. Life does not need our management. It needs our restraint. Perhaps most remarkably, I believe that if we do find it in ourselves to make the changes outlined in this paper, we may just save ourselves in the process.

**Introduction**

Although Biopolitics has come to mean many things, the question of how to organize, utilize and safeguard life (for our own consumption in many cases) seems to be at the core. Since division of church and state is not a given throughout the world, and even in the U.S., it’s a modern phenomenon, a look at religion is warranted. What religious traditions put humans at the center? Do Bible stories constitute a “knowing” or fact that we can rely on?

But also, we must look at the economy since it has become so intertwined with politics. From an economic standpoint, it’s obvious that life forms are sold to generate wealth; or, in the case of humans, their labor creates wealth. Food, medicine and consumer products may be derived from biological sources. Given our self appointed status as “stewards,” life forms require “management.” (Rarely is it explained that species need management mainly because of human overpopulation.)

Add to this our penchant for carving up territories/property, and we begin to see just how complicated a job we have before us. So, how do we resolve the inevitable conflicts that result? And since it is primarily the wealthy who have the money to consume these “resources,” what are the implications of directing all of this biological wealth to the rich?

In this paper, I will look at biopolitics using the following categories or frames of reference: Views of the World; Moral Relativism; How Should We Live; Individuals, Groups and Data; Choosing Winners and Losers; Buddhism; Literature; and, Biopolitics of the Future. The first part of my thesis is that releasing all animals from medical/behavioral testing laboratories and factory farms is necessary because animals are sentient beings, that reason, have families, show emotion, problem solve and feel pain. Drugs are successfully tested on humans every day in America using volunteers for clinical trials. Protein can be easily derived from other sources (calling animals “protein” is another way to sidestep their intrinsic worth and define them in regard to what they can provide us). The second part of my thesis is that releasing all animals from factory farms would have the additional benefit of safeguarding human life (climate change, worker injuries, cardiology issues, toxic runoff, antibiotic resistance, zoonotic disease, salmonella 1, etc.). Although the pendulum is swinging away from a strong hand of government, we saw how menthol cigarettes, for example, became too damaging of a product to leave on the market and production was halted. The same could be done for factory farmed meat.

Culture can evolve. The same reverse logic that allowed Americans to keep slaves and withhold rights from women is now used to enslave animals. We derive benefit from these practices and so we try to develop a rationale and justification. We take away the freedoms of humans for committing heinous crimes, but in the case of animals, they are locked up behind bars for life without cause.

**Views of the World**

In Michel Foucault’s lectures, *Security, Territory, Population*, he discussed a marked shift from government taking responsibility for safeguarding human life (from pestilence, war, etc.) to now trying to improve the health of the populace:

What can the end of government be? Certainly not just to govern, but to improve the condition of the population, to increase its wealth, its longevity, and its health. (105)

This shift gave the government entrance, using the tools of statistics, data, group identity and security, to a wide variety of subjects related to modern life. Since government relies on taxes to fund itself and needs healthy vibrant workers to wind up the economy, this change makes sense. All groups try to perpetuate themselves.

Foucault is surveying the 16th-18th centuries so it’s worth noting two important backdrops. One, this is towards the end of the Renaissance, a time in which various ideas about our true mission in life, philosophy, governing and art were being reshaped. But also, by this time, we are well into the Western colonialist period where massive numbers of sailors, tradesmen and explorers were mobilized for overseas adventures promising spices, slaves, land, and a new way of life.

This view of the world as something to be conquered and enslaved, certainly played into our future biopolitics. In Yuval Noah Harari’s *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind,* he points out that carnivores, in the new world, were the first object of our contempt as they competed with us for food and, at times, threatened us. The indigenous people whom the colonialists encountered throughout the world also could pose a threat—perhaps seeing the colonialists as invaders. In some cases, the colonialists lived alongside the indigenous; in others, the indigenous were enslaved and used.

Using human life for our own ends is an important aspect of biopolitics. At its foundation, biopolitics is concerned with how, when, and to what end, the state can use life. What are the restrictions on this? What are the requirements? In Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, he discusses a human life that “...cannot be sacrificed, yet may, nevertheless, be killed.” (10) This notion, which goes back to ancient times, may help explain how early colonialists saw Native Americans. By illuminating this example, Agamben hopes to uncover something fundamental about totalitarian and democratic governments alike—that bare life can be pulled into the jurisdiction of state power.

In contemporary times, we can look at this and acknowledge that sometimes human life is, in fact, sacrificed. For instance, Putin marching twenty-year-old conscripts to war against its neighbor, was a form of sacrifice. While my sympathy is certainly with Ukraine, the future of these young Russians swept into war by their dictator, is also of concern. Such oversteps point to the importance of a clear understanding of rights within biopolitics.

In fact, the whole modern tradition of essentially wanting to dial back the role of government could perhaps be traced back to the very period Foucault discusses. Many believe we are at a point now where we should be ripping up a law every day instead of making more regulations. We have given government permissions into too many aspects of our lives and now live in a kind of “nanny-state.” The dynamic here is that either we worry about our neighbors in a state of less laws, or we worry about the police in a state of more laws. For minorities, in particular, they would often choose the former.

Another aspect of biopower has to do with the super-judicial aspect of the state. We allow a U.S. president to pardon someone who has been convicted by jury of a crime. We allow the state to kill (war, death penalty, etc.), but individuals may not kill—that’s murder. In fact, suicide is a kind of ‘taking back’ of responsibility for one’s own life, from the government. One effect of anti-suicide laws, is that the government now holds power over your life—we have even been excluded from our own lives.

So, if government ultimately presides over life, it follows that this would extend to animals, marine life, plants. These life forms have even less rights than humans and can not push back against poor treatment because they don’t speak English; when they do fight back, they are euthanized. We are given distinctions of wildlife/pets/livestock, each with varying degrees of protection. When a species is pushed to the brink, we may suddenly try to protect it, but that reactionary approach has often meant extinction.

By creating these artificial constructs, we give ourselves permission to use life as we would like. We create theories to justify these uses. But aren’t all animals wildlife? The tendency towards domesticity for some animals is an evolutionary process based mainly on survival. But it doesn’t change what that animal is; domesticity is a behavior, not a state of being. Yet, these false distinctions result in a pet owner showing great love for their dog or cat then returning home to eat a big juicy steak. It also causes researchers and experimenters to chuckle at dinner parties as they discuss the lab animals they’ve tortured, in the name of science and human advancement, because “it” is a “thing.”

Universities and drug companies are major culprits of animal experimentation. There are catalogs where researchers can simply order boxes or crates of living beings. Zoos, circuses or marine life adventure parks show the same approach to biological life—as beings to be enslaved and used, not dissimilar to the colonialists who came before them. Factory farms treat animals as objects to be sacrificed for our consumption.

It is interesting to note—animal industries are often secret. There are no student field trips to slaughterhouses; instead, we get a sanitized version in the supermarket, typically with no blood or bone, wrapped neatly in plastic. We never see the face; we never see the babies born in captivity. In labs, it’s only the scientists who see the suffering of animals and they seem perfectly willing to check their humanity at the door. The fact that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) finally, this year, agreed that animal tests are not necessary for new drug development, shows that medical research can continue without it. Just think of all the animals who suffered in bizarre behavioral research so someone could get their PhD. Think of the moment those animals were plucked from the wild.

Typically, when someone makes the argument against animal testing, the response is, ‘Well, if you had a relative with cancer, you would feel differently; you would want animal testing if it could lower the incidence of cancer.’ But consider the theoretical mistake in this thinking: We could lower the incidence of cancer right now, if the political will existed, by removing carcinogens and suspected carcinogens from the market. This does not involve injuring, maiming or killing any living being.

What is perhaps most fascinating, is that so many progressives, or those who espouse anti-imperialist/colonialist views, freely eat meat and/or do not feel strongly about animal testing. This shows that power has successfully parsed out the debate regarding sentient beings from that of historical struggles such as slavery or child labor. That was all in the past; we are a better society now; we know it was wrong; there is no relationship. Internalized control, that is, getting the populace to believe they arrived at their own conclusion about something, is yet another state goal related to biopower. It is how capitalist production avoids disruption.

**Moral Relativism**

When government lays back, and simply presents choices, this is a strategy, too. Doing this can foment desire in the people for regulation and government involvement, which is exactly what the state would like. Issues ranging from the Internet to fetal tissue experiments to euthanasia all show this kind of laying back, waiting for opinion to reach a rancor or critical mass, and then the state can act with authority.

This laying back may be a kind of tacit acknowledgment that many laws and regulations are just the biases of society (e.g. judges issue “opinions” that are, of course, based on law). This process of interpretation calls on the background and experiences of the justice who may have strong political leanings one way or another. In the same manner, thinktanks start with their conclusion (often based on politics) then select information sources. This is a far cry from ‘seeing where the data leads us,’ an approach that Foucault notes with the rise of modernity (late 1600s, early 1700s), but that we don’t always follow.

Given the moral relativism of the current day, where marijuana is now legal after being illegal for decades; euthanasia is legal in some states; gambling and sports betting is legal; one has to wonder what is driving this? Certainly, the government wants the tax revenue generated from these activities, with the exception of euthanasia which generates no money and so the government continues to lay back on this.

The format of government where it rarely produces anything, but always wants its cut, is a driving reason for the anti-government sentiment in our society today. The state may sell a “permit,” the right to do something, but the production of valuable goods is left to industry. During Covid, it was the private sector that innovated vaccines with incentive and support from government. Some might point out that the government does not invest in the kind of public relations that private companies do, and so, this perception of industry as savior is not entirely accurate. This is true, but regardless, had we left the vaccine solely to government, Covid would likely still be ravaging our country.

Given that collections is a primary goal of government, and this often leads to moral relativism and resentment of the populace paying that bill (often, simply for permission to engage in the economy), a better use of government resources would be to recast its role towards education. If we are to accept Foucault’s premise that government is now in charge of the improvement of human life, and not just the protection of it, then it follows that education will yield the desired result.

One might counter, well, look at population and poverty, how has education safeguarded the population there? And, in fact, Foucault writes on sexuality and such issues. It is true that many poor people have large families and many wealthy people have small families or no children, so there is an argument to be made. Any psychologist would point out that people don’t always make rational decisions. Culture, emotion, childhood—all factor into our decision-making. But given the misinformation problem we face, partly linked to the Internet, it would bode well for the health and wellbeing of the populace if the government took on more of an education role.

The government has waded into sexuality: AIDS/HIV and other STDs, teen pregnancy, prostitution, abortion, birth control, LGBTQ issues, etc. Sometimes there is an easy solution to these fights, such as creating an individual bathroom with the sign “Humans.” This tendency we have towards contentious debate is often unwarranted given the commonground that exists. With all of the school shootings this year, we could’ve created closets full of bulletproof shields in every school in America; instead, we embarked on a highly contentious debate around gun control, which was a stalemate. A realist would say, ‘people can think whatever they want,’ but let’s at least implement solutions in the meantime.

Of course, public policy must come down on one side or the other. One thing that’s obvious is that in a world with 8+ billion humans, the chatter about our Puritanical beliefs is quite disingenuous. As politicians moralize and put on a show, the reality is that humans are, in general, highly sexual beings. From a government standpoint, sex is of interest as population crashes affect the economy and increases require planning and resources. But with abortion, in particular, government is failing to consider ecology and overpopulation, and has dipped into a much broader set of issues.

To facilitate this broadening role, government sometimes creates new agencies, such as Homeland Security when terrorist threats heightened. But we already had the CIA and FBI. This approach leads to more emphasis on collections, fines, permits and exactly the type of government that the people don’t want. It also means that government will be engaging in the system of picking winners and losers with even more horsepower than before.

Our subsidy system has fallen prey to lobbyists and is often geared towards harmful businesses. Meat is a heavily subsidized industry. Yet, we know that high meat consumption is linked to cardiology problems and cancers later in life. Meat is highly polluting (runoff from excrement, methane release, pesticide use); has led to destruction of the rainforest in Brazil and elsewhere; carries a high worker injury rate; involves the use of antibiotics which is causing resistance. Still, we subsidize it. Energy is similar. We still subsidize gas and oil. Instead of a geographic or weather-based approach to energy, we have liberal Northeast states installing solar, because of their politics, while the South and Midwest, which gets far more sun, sticks with gas and oil. It’s not logical.

If we are looking at creating more agencies (which I’m not an advocate of), if anything, we should have a Department of Ecology (or simply strengthen and expand the Environmental Protection Agency), so issues like microplastics in our oceans, or the decline of bees/pollinators, can be truly addressed. The average Joe does not understand what a two degree change in the climate really means or why it matters that bees are declining. They grab their RoundUp 2 and spray the weeds even though table salt, which is much cheaper and inert, also kills weeds.

Culture is a big part of this. But culture can be wrong. For instance, now, many countries look back on whaling as a grim period of history; still, Japan, Norway and Iceland continue the hunt. Many were able to look closely at this cultural practice and realize that killing such a majestic animal is wrong, especially when pregnant whales are taken. Whales have the very same right to life and enjoyment and family that we do. But changing culture involves a hard look in the mirror. Sometimes it involves saying, ‘What my parents, and their parents did, was wrong.’ Or, even, ‘What I did growing up was wrong.’ Many people will shy away from this. So, what will be the catalyst for introspection?

During the 16th and early 17th centuries, most of the information and orders came from the sovereign (king and queen). Now, information does not simply flow from the top down to the masses. There are grassroots movements and voices that were previously marginalized, that have a forum. We have seen large movements to live off the grid. During Covid, we saw a renewed interest in gardening for one’s own food because of prices and scarcity. Mason jars for bottling, canning and saving food were always sold-out during this time. Crisis can yield greater self-sufficiency. The move off the grid, in particular, may be related to government taxes, insurance and various other expenses that have people feeling as if they are on a treadmill.

While it may sound sci-fi, one could certainly imagine a future where there is an Ecological Suicide Hotline that counsels people on how to end their lives with real finality for the benefit of the planet. This would be in stark contrast to Foucault’s assertion that government is now in charge of not just the preservation of your life, but actually the full development of it. Although, Foucault also points out that taking life is so often equated with trying to save life, as justification, so maybe this isn’t contrary.

Choosing hospice-care, DNR orders, euthanasia and suicide are all examples of the public desperately trying to take back control over their own lives—from institutions of power and “experts.”

**How Should We Live?**

In many cases, the state is trying to save you from yourself. We saw this with the move towards universal healthcare. Because of the cost of insurance, people were risking it and going uninsured. The uninsured would get sick and the price was so high that charity care programs would have to cover it, hospital bills went unpaid or the patient would end up in the emergency room spending even more resources. We also see it with such things as motorcycle riding. That is, people like to take risks. It’s part of life.

This raises the question: ‘Do we have the right to make the wrong choice?’ The answer, I think, is ‘yes,’ but the complication is where society must then pay the price for that wrong choice. No one wants to live in a highly restrictive police state loaded with regulations and signs saying, “No-Not Allowed-Stop-Don’t...” People want freedom. But what if that freedom infringes on other life forms? What if that freedom causes harm, not just to yourself, but others?

Given how interconnected we are, the harm, in some cases, is global now. This is true for the international toxics trade; it’s also true for the illegal wildlife trade. If we fill the world with poison or if we demand the tusks of elephants for “medicine,” this has impacts elsewhere. Yes, we are free to shop the aisles of Home Depot and buy herbicides, pesticides, PVC pipes or oil-based paints and stains. We are also free to believe in superstition and witchcraft if we like. But at what expense?

If we felt the effect individually rather than as a community, society or world, one could definitely argue that a given action should be allowed. This is the case for euthanasia or suicide. The government loses a tax payer; hospitals don’t get to bill, but the effects are almost entirely personal or familial. However, for most decisions about how we should live, it’s typically not the person making the choice who suffers the repercussions. Instead, it’s the weaker, the poorer or those in the developing world (selling organs, accepting toxic trade, losing rainforests).

This inequality plays out in environmental issues and medicine. Choices that may be beneficial for an individual may not be helpful to the society as a whole. In medicine, which causes get medical research dollars is a major source of inequality. But also, orthopedic advances like Tommy John surgery have made it possible to enhance a damaged joint. The reconstruction can actually give a movement advantage. We are also on the edge of major in vitro innovations that could slip into enhancements.

One can easily envision a future where parents must choose whether to enhance their child, far beyond brown or blue eyes. One might be seen as irresponsible for not enhancing, or the child might be left behind in school or sports as a result. We’ve also seen interesting developments regarding the malleability of sex. In various sports, we’ve seen men who become women compete in the women’s sections. With that malleability, the major sports associations have had to use testosterone levels as the criterion since sex can be changed.

Just as we seek to reel in the political machine, many want controls on technology. We can go too far with technology. Nuclear is the case in point. We have some very unreliable people in control of world-ending nuclear technology—one or two mentally unstable people in office could destroy everyone. We must learn to show restraint with technology. Every advance is not a good one. Applying technological effiency principles to animals is an idea that has yielded massive pain and suffering. From rainforest logging to radar for fishing and bottom trawling, technology has led to destruction.

But there are different models that would ameliorate this. Imagine a world where an entrepreneur has created a new product and she seeks to bring it to market. She fills out paperwork for the government with her answers to the following questions: 1) Are there toxics within this item? 2) If yes, what alternatives have you tried in place of these toxics? 3) Are these chemicals suspected carcinogens or carcinogens? 4) What is your disposal, recycling or reuse plan for this product?

These four simple questions would go a long way towards tackling contamination. When remote corners of the globe can be tested, and there is still microplastics content, even in the most pristine setting of the Arctic seas, for instance, it becomes obvious that we are poisoning ourselves and marine life. When bureaucrats tell us not to worry, that we aren’t at the proper threshold (yet) to cause harm, we should just believe them, I guess.

Locally, consider the recent perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) discovery in Hoosick Falls, NY. It was a local resident, Michael Hickey, not the government, who broke that story simply by considering the industrial history of a site then accessing a lab. (What to test for is a key consideration. When a local government declares water safe, what they mean is: Your water is below the threshold that we think is dangerous regarding various chemicals/contaminants, and, we have omitted testing for a variety of chemicals/contaminants.)

PFOA, which is part of a class of chemicals called per-and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) is a fascinating example because we never needed many of the products designed with PFOA. There is plenty of water in the Northeast—no need for firefighting foam. And, we’ve cooked with stainless steel and cast iron for centuries before Teflon.

On a personal note, when my wife and I went to buy a water filter given our proximity to Hoosick Falls, it was the very same companies (3M, GE, etc.) who created the problem on a nationwide level that were then cashing in on filtration products; more locally, Saint Gobain Plastics and Honeywell were the culprits. This is the circular nature of capitalism. A current example is Occidental Petroleum’s plans to suck carbon from the sky, but then use the CO2 to squeeze out more oil. (NPR) They make money on the problem and the solution.

The massive departments and agencies like NY State Department of Conservation and the EPA, plus local water authorities, finally caught up with this one resident, with no specialized training, who simply took a water sample and sent it to a lab:

Nearly a year and a half passed from the time the chemical was discovered in the water by Hickey to when the warning from state health officials told residents to avoid drinking it. (PFAS Project Lab)

Right here in Albany, NY, the EPA Toxics Release Inventory states that formaldehyde, a known carcinogen, makes up 14% of the discharges to water and air. We issue permits to pollute then spend billions on brownfields programs/cleanups and cancer treatment. If we continue on this track, people will have to start using pesticide test strips to choose produce at the supermarket; or, litigation may be pursued based on elevated toxics levels in blood tests. This slow poisoning is difficult to track because of the way chemicals move through the environment so it goes on sleepily in the U.S. ABC News reported on September 7, 2023 a 70% rise in cancers among people under 50 years old; environmental exposure (such as legal chemical discharges) was only mentioned in passing.

A core issue with the environment, is that much of it is based on the honor system. And I’m afraid we have some dishonorable people out there along with a government that is all too ready to use public money to bail out failed capitalists (car-makers, insurance, banks and Wall Street). If someone tosses a lithium battery in the trash or uses contaminated fill, it’s unlikely this will ever be traced. If we consider the billions of tons of medical waste generated during Covid, with medical professionals donning new plastic PPE for each patient, it’s not an overstatement to say that in our attempts to save life, we are taking it:

COVID-19 induced the disposal of plastic products and created multiple types of risks (carcinogenic, neurotoxic, and mutagenic) to living organisms that can be mediated through oxidative stress and hormonal imbalance. Inadequate plastic management techniques such as landfilling and anaerobic digestion produce hazardous leachates and antibiotic-resistance genes can perturb environmental quality.

([Prabhat Kumar Rai](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/?term=Rai%20PK%5BAuthor%5D) et al, Nat.l Library of Medicine)

**Individuals, Groups and Data**

While medical ethics calls for restrictions on using human life in certain experiments, the use of animals is still common practice. Further, in a global economy, if it’s difficult to get approvals in Europe or the U.S., researchers always have the option of simply conducting their experiments abroad. As a result, we have a system of pain that is hidden, and just like slaughterhouses, there are no field trips to the research labs. Because children still perceive the world in a sensitized way. Just as roadkill is shocking to a child, but not an adult, growing up in this system dulls our humanity.

A major failing in our thinking has to do with trying to preserve the group while devaluing the individual when it comes to animals. We can easily see why this approach was developed. It gives us license to do almost anything. A species can be pushed to the brink of extinction, then our Endangered Species Act suddenly kicks in and offers protection because now the group is threatened. It also gives zoos their “conservation” justification.

Another failure of thought (and empathy) has to do with numbers. When avian or swine flu numbers are discussed, as in 50 million chickens were killed or 200 million pigs were killed (the media likes to say, “culled”), we can not really comprehend those numbers. Statisticians know this and try to give spatial examples such as: ‘Fill the state of Maryland with animals then kill them all’ and that’s the impact of zoonotic disease, but still, we often fail to grasp it.

Decisions about animals rarely take into account the animals’ demeanor or character. What I mean by this is, some animals are secretive and want to live in the wild away from humans. For instance, I visited a small park in Spain where a fox was in a cage on display; the fox paced back and forth incessantly, in a never-ending state of panic. Why do we put secretive animals in zoos?

Other animals seek out humans for the advantages we provide. For instance, rats have been wildly successful mainly because of their willingness to accompany humans on our adventures and evolutionary track. From the hulls of ships to farms to cities where rats found their ultimate pleasure space, humans provided the food and shelter they needed. Actually, if it weren’t for their “ugly” pink tails and desire to chew everything in site, they would’ve likely become domesticated due to their social nature.

The aesthetics of animals is a key determinant to their survival, given that humans choose who lives and dies in a kind of unnatural selection. Cute and fluffy is the best; most marine animals tend to take a backseat. However, many of our development decisions have actually favored parasitic animals (protozoan from factory farms; fleas/rodents drawn to food waste in cities, etc.). Fragmenting habitat, urbanization and a throwaway consumer society have favored cockroaches and rodents, both of which can carry parasites. This leads people to spread poison which then washes into our sewer grates and waterways. Or, if the rodent doesn’t die quickly enough, predatory birds eat it.

Rodents present a fascinating quandary. We desperately want to use intelligence as a criterion for which animals to save because we feel only humans possess this. But it’s well-known that rats (and pigs, for that matter) are highly intelligent. So, those who favor continued exploitation of animals, tend to add more criteria to the mix. Given the research into various types of intelligence, it’s clear that animals may simply be exhibiting different kinds of intelligences. There are many stories of animals demonstrating emotional intelligence, for instance, with regard to their young. In the movie, “Blackfish,” the orca pod tries to protect their babies and communicate during the abduction of Tilikum. Jane Goodall’s work with chimpanzees is full of stories of emotional intelligence. Sea otters also show intelligence by using rocks, as tools, to open clams.

The uncomfortable truth is that many of us are about three missed paychecks away from devolving into a state of nature ourselves. Despite the sports cars and makeup and fancy clothes—in sex, eating, grooming, playing, using the facilities, and so many other activities, we can never really get away from our animal selves. If suddenly the economy collapsed and there was mass homelessness, we would see a strong resemblance. Yes, we are so highly evolved, in fact, that we shoot each other in cities across America for a pair of sneakers or a gold chain. This is the counterexample to Coetzee’s character, Norma, who states, “Human beings... they press a button, and, bang, Sojourner lands on Mars...” (48)

The homeless and unemployed provide an interesting case in point. These are people who have rejected the urgings of power and remain outside society on the fringes. Why? In the current version of our world, most of the U.S. is experiencing about 3% unemployment, which many economists consider full employment, that is, we will always have about 3% of the population who actually chooses not to work, can’t work for whatever reason or their skills are a mismatch for the economy. In some cases, drugs are the issue.

Drugs act as another vehicle by which the populace essentially rejects the dominant message of power. It is not surprising that the drug problem in the U.S. has reached epic proportions. In fact, drug counseling services have proliferated to the exclusion of other types of therapy in many parts of the U.S. Drug users, whether they realize it or not, have basically rejected the ‘improvement of the body’ message that Foucault describes as coming from power. 17th and 18th century police become interested in “... more than just living,” but rather, “...as Montchretien said... ‘well-being.’” (334) The physical fitness challenges of various past presidential administrations is a clear example of Foucault’s observation.

**Choosing Winners and Losers**

The federal government has been exploring the idea of a cashless economy for years now. Similar to gambling and marijuana, they realize tax money is evaporating as a result of cash currency. Many people use cash in order to escape taxes. But a complete reliance on digital currency is also a vulnerability so we still have cash and gold bars and diamonds. I mention this because it’s difficult to discuss biopolitics without talking about money as it relates to life.

The desire of Monsanto to patent entire plants and animals (that it has altered), if granted by the courts, may be a slippery slope that we are unable to crawl back from. While the crops farmers are spraying may be “RoundUp ready,” I question whether the humans, animals or insects eating those crops are equally resistant. “The International Agency for Research on Cancer categorizes glyphosate as a probable carcinogen for humans.” (Robinson, WebMD) Perhaps Monsanto can alter our DNA (and the Monarch butterfly) so we are unaffected by herbicides, too.

Still, the government tolerates and even supports GMO crops as well as the meat industry. The subsidies given to the meat industry, in particular, are baffling. Meat consumption is linked to heart disease, the #1 killer of Americans, not to mention other cardiology issues. The runoff from factory farms is toxic and ends up in wells, streams, rivers and the ocean. Vast swaths of land must be co-opted for corn production to feed cattle; antibiotic use; pesticide use (dunking the animal before slaughter); climate change from methane release (surgical portholes are cut into cattle to study this); plus, dangerous worker conditions. Still, we support it and eat it.

A more worthy industry would be botanicals or seed banks. According to the National Library of Medicine, “Up to 50% of the approved drugs during the last 30 years are either directly or indirectly from natural products.” (Veeresham) That’s botanicals. Yet, on a global level, we continue to cut down the rainforest to create cattle lots for meat production such as Brazilian corned beef. The rainforest (and, quite likely, coral reefs), hold fascinating keys to the future life of humans, animals and maybe the entire ecology of earth. To throw that away because we want to eat cheeseburgers is absurd.

If Foucault is correct and the state is now in charge of improving our lives, it’s falling short on zoonotic diseases and ecological protection. Perhaps we will reach an equilibrium. Before, there was not enough state involvement. Now, there is too much in our personal lives (e.g. recent moves to make abortion illegal), but not enough on the ecology front. Maybe what we’re seeing today is a kind of correction regarding government control. The Defund the Police Movement is but one example of people rising up and trying to take power back. Certainly, Donald Trump stoked this anti-government sentiment for his own purposes.

Trump, and Putin, for that matter, are both remarkable examples of biopolitics run amuck. Trump, and many other U.S. presidents, utilized pardons to get people off. Despite a judge and jury convicting someone, the state can swoop in and reverse the decision because the laws the state creates, do not apply to the state. And we see this concept in the literature of Biopolitics.

The twisted logic of using a life to save a life, documented within biopolitical philosophy, has been used by authorities to justify atrocities. Putin claims he’s fighting skinheads and racists in Ukraine, not committing fratricide. He claims Ukrainians are really Russian. So, he’s trying to protect Russians. But it is eminently clear that the claim about racism is just to try and distance himself from the sick history of WWII and Hitler. The meat industry is also supposedly using life to save life by feeding people.

Putin is, of course, a very rich man. Trump is a rich man as well. Wealth buys control of life as we said at the start. And the political structure is ready to accept your “donation.”

**Buddhism**

Aside from the dogma of capitalist wealth creation, we have spiritual belief. The Christian traditions of the West have fueled the mistaken conception of humans at the center of the world with animals/beasts for our use. Cosmically, we used to think the sun revolved around the Earth. We thought we were at the center and everything revolved around us. This has not only been disproven, it’s been shattered. We now know that we are just a blip, not even a speck of sand, in a vast universe.

Yet, still, this idea of humans as the ultimate prevails. We selectively choose a criteria. We, as humans, happen to, by pure chance (wink, wink) meet that criteria for superiority. Then, we rarely question the arbitrary nature of that criteria.

The only tradition that I am aware of that actually gives equal weight to all life is Buddhism. In that system, everything is life, all with equal claim. And we should try not to trample on others.

Religion could be a powerful force in destroying the capitalist production of meat and releasing lab animals. It could be done on spiritual grounds. We could ask ourselves: How would an enlightened society treat animals? India is an example of how religion can inform biopolitics. Cows have been spared in the majority states in India. Once the mass breeding programs are stopped, it turns out, cow populations balance themselves.

As a final note on spirituality, what does it mean when a species like dolphins, who are highly intelligent, trusting and inquisitive, tries to make contact with humans? It is stunning to think that our response is to hunt or imprison them. What does this say about us?

**Literature**

Literature, like Buddhism and the protection of cows via Hinduism, has the power to change minds. Peter Singer’s *Animal Liberation* and Daniel Quinn’s *Ishmael* are powerful books that can change minds. In *The Lives of Animals*, Coetzee discusses poetry, imagination and a sort of thinking yourself into the life of another via his character, Elizabeth Costello. Elizabeth is engaged in a personal struggle in this book—to save her own soul. Although she goes public (outward) with her message, this inward quest is still the backbone of the story.

Coetzee understands that his topic, or, the question he is starting with, is very troubling and personal for many people. But also, that we have learned not to interrogate the issue of animals. Eating and using animals in our society is a given. It’s as natural as waking up and brushing our teeth. Animals are everywhere: the products we use every day, as we slip on our shoes, put on a belt or order a sandwich. It’s almost inescapable.

The question of *how* to talk about animals is fundamental. Using literature as a method puts us in the realm of imagination and poetry, but also, perhaps, entertainment, information and knowledge. By writing a fictional story, Coetzee makes it less personal and essentially presents a situation and characters for us to consider. There is hardly any plot or action in *The Lives of Animals*, but it works as a character study. We get the responses from society (academics, intellectuals, etc.) and family (John and Norma) to Elizabeth’s “coming out,” which are just as critical as her message.

By weaving this into fiction, Coetzee presents a complicated and qualified approach, with many voices, which leaves it open to interpretation. It is true that people don’t appreciate being told what to do; they don’t like being hit over the head with opinions; and, often, they’ve considered these issues before on their own. So, here, literature is a vehicle for showing a new way of thinking, offering ideas for our consideration via characters and situations. Instead of animals being a settled issue, literature can help unwind cultural assumptions.

In Agamben’s *Homo Sacer*, we see an early clue regarding these assumptions. Agamben shines the light on an old term, that harks back to the Greeks, and before that, the Romans—Homo Sacer. This is a sacred person who can be killed but not murdered or sacrificed:

This violence – the unsanctionable killing that, in his case, anyone may commit – is classifiable neither as sacrifice nor as homicide... this violence opens a sphere of human action that is neither the sphere of sacrum facere nor that of profane action. (82-83)

Although it sounds paradoxical, this concept is a very early sign of hierarchical thinking, or an attempt to stratify society. In other words, there is “us,” and there is “them.” Yes, “they” are part of society and subject to it, but “they” are also outside of certain protections or rights.

Although Homo Sacer pertained to humans, we can see how the concept has survived and morphed in modern life. We do not afford everyone the same rights; we have created categories of life. And the state and religion (through sacrifice) are not the only entities involved in killing. It’s hard not to consider the rise of the modern corporation, and the resulting violence against life, in hearing this quote.

**Biopolitics of the Future**

I have identified the factory farm system and lab-testing on animals as the two biggest challenges before us as it relates to Biopolitics. Of course, there are many issues worthy of our attention: Trade of wildlife products, abortion, prisons, the death penalty, war, euthanasia, suicide, etc. All of these issues involve the state or corporations trying to get control of human life or the life of animals.

My hope is that this research paper leads others to follow the call and openly discuss how the meat industry can be dismantled and research labs shut down. We must commit to saving animals; we must give them their own place in this increasingly crowded world that we are filling with humans; we must preserve their habitat, food and space. We must commit to saving individual members of a species. We must have empathy, like our children, and acknowledge the pain we are causing. Killing to save life is an ironic mantra.

One way forward would be to create “Animal Safe City” (or town) designations by passing local bylaws. Mayors and city councillors would commit to never hosting animal testing labs, slaughterhouses or pet stores with live animals or marine life. Veal and foie gras production would be banned. Grass-covered underpasses and overpasses would be built to prevent roadkill. This could be duplicated on the county or state level. The public could then vote with their feet in terms of where and how they want to live. Towns and cities on decline may find this to be a remarkable branding strategy (as a side effect) that draws young urban professionals to live there.

One response to Animal Safe Cities, is that most of the slaughterhouses are in the Midwest, and so, it wouldn’t have much impact. Cities in the Northeast and West Coast could pass such bylaws and factory farms would continue to operate. That is true, but it would start to squeeze the industry and create a movement, even if the effect is largely symbolic at first. And, labs run by universities and private drug companies, which are common in the Northeast and West Coast, would certainly feel this. Going on record, and preempting the siting of these facilities is important.

Another strategy is to buy and support the development of alternative products like oat milk or tempeh. We know that people don’t like being preached to; we practice selective hearing or seek out information that already aligns with our beliefs. Actually, Coetzee’s book, *The Lives of Animals*, did a good job of presenting the issues around factory farming within the vehicle of fiction. If he had written a philosophical paper containing these same ideas, it probably would be collecting dust.

For intellectuals who choose to battle it out in philosophy journals, we must stop sniping at each other. The eco-feminist vegan anarchist is fine as are those who have only made moderate adjustments to their diet, like eating less meat. We need to support those people to get to where we need to go. While we divide ourselves, those who kill animals and put carcinogens in our air and water are laughing.

One might say, what about all of the meat-related jobs? For this, let’s start with who actually does the work. Most slaughterhouses run on immigrant labor; it is a filthy disgusting job; worker injuries are common. In the same way that we moved away from coal (and black lung disease/CWP), we can move away from meat. Those workers can be retrained and given jobs in the new economy. They can work on farms. They can grow fresh fruit, grains and vegetables. Work conditions would improve. These workers could also be recruited to aid in seed banking, preserving the genetic diversity of flora and crops. Foraging in the wild and sowing seeds in greenhouses could have implications not just for food in the future, but also medicine.

The researchers involved in animal tests can continue their research—many patients with serious diseases volunteer for clinical trials. This is the best case scenario because even when animal tests are successful, there is always the question of whether this will translate to humans. In the case of voluntary human subjects, we know the results apply. There is no reason to maim, mutilate, blind, or make deaf, an animal. Aside from medical testing, there is toxicity testing, which is also grim. We must limit toxics on the market and proactively plan for disposal.

We can create a biopolitics of the future. But first, we have to acknowledge our real place in the world and the universe. First, we have to decolonize our minds. Rewrite the false language that surrounds animals. Acknowledge that culture, and our parents, and their parents, were not always right. Renew our humanity. Show restraint regarding technological power. Take back control of decision-making, but also accept the role of government as a voice for education. Make the world a safe place, where animals can live free, and humans can enjoy safety and health, free of fear. We can abandon hierarchical thinking. We can become friends with animals.

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Notes

1. Centers for Disease Control states on their website, “...about[1 in every 25 packages of chicken](https://www.fda.gov/animal-veterinary/national-antimicrobial-resistance-monitoring-system/2018-narms-update-integrated-report-summary-interactive-version) at the grocery store are contaminated with Salmonella.”

2. RoundUp is a Monsanto glyphosate herbicide; though there are many glyphosates on the market, RoundUp is the most commonly used in the U.S.