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# THE LIVES

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# ANIMALS



J. M. COETZEE

# *The Lives of Animals*

❖ J. M. COETZEE ❖

MARJORIE GARBER

PETER SINGER

WENDY DONIGER

BARBARA SMUTS



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THE LIVES OF ANIMALS

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THE LIVES OF ANIMALS





## INTRODUCTION



*Amy Gutmann*



“SERIOUSNESS is, for a certain kind of artist, an imperative uniting the aesthetic and the ethical,” John Coetzee wrote in *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship*. In *The Lives of Animals*, the 1997–98 Tanner Lectures at Princeton University, John Coetzee displays the kind of seriousness that can unite aesthetics and ethics. Like the typical Tanner Lectures, Coetzee’s lectures focus on an important ethical issue—the way human beings treat animals—but the form of Coetzee’s lectures is far from the typical Tanner Lectures, which are generally philosophical essays. Coetzee’s lectures are fictional in form: two lectures within two lectures, which contain a critique of a more typical philosophical approach to the topic of animal rights. Coetzee prompts us to imagine an academic occasion (disconcertingly like the Tanner Lectures) in which the character Elizabeth Costello, also a novelist, is invited by her hosts at Appleton College to deliver two honorific lectures on a topic of her choice. Costello surprises her hosts by not delivering lectures on literature or literary criticism, her most apparent areas of academic expertise. Rather she takes the opportunity to discuss in detail what she views as a “crime of stupefying proportions” that her academic colleagues and fellow human beings routinely and complacently commit: the abuse of animals.

Coetzee dramatizes the increasingly difficult relationships between the aging novelist Elizabeth Costello and her family and professional colleagues. She progressively views her fellow

human beings as criminals, while they think that she is demanding something of them—a radical change in the way they treat animals—that she has no right to demand, and that they have no obligation or desire to deliver. In the frame of fiction, Coetzee's story of Elizabeth Costello's visit to Appleton College contains empirical and philosophical arguments that are relevant to the ethical issue of how human beings should treat animals. Unlike some animals, human beings do not need to eat meat. We could—if only we tried—treat animals with due sympathy for their “sensation of being.” In the first of her lectures (the main part of Coetzee's first lecture), Costello concludes that there is no excuse for the lack of sympathy that human beings display toward other animals, because “there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination.” Yet most human beings do not stretch the bounds of our imaginations with regard to animals, because we “can do anything [with regard to animals] and get away with it.”

We have closed our hearts to animals, Costello concludes, and our minds follow our hearts (or, more strictly speaking, our sympathies). Philosophy, she argues, is relatively powerless to lead, or in any event to lead in the right direction, because it lags our sympathies. This places the burden on something other than our rational faculties, to which philosophy typically appeals. Our sympathetic imaginations, she argues—to which poetry and fiction appeal more than does philosophy—should extend to other animals. The fictional form, in Coetzee's hands, therefore appears to have an ethical purpose: extending our sympathies to animals. If fiction does not so extend our sympathies, then neither will philosophy. If it does, then perhaps philosophy will follow.

Costello's lectures within Coetzee's lectures therefore ask their audience to “open your heart and listen to what your heart says.” Do animals have rights? Do human beings have duties toward them regardless of whether they have rights? What kind of souls do animals have? What kind do we have? Costello does not answer these questions in her lectures, because they are too philo-

sophical for the immediate task at hand. They presume that the mind can lead the heart, a presumption that Elizabeth Costello's experience has led her to reject after a long life of trying to convince other people of her perspective on animals. In any case, as Costello tells her audience at Appleton, "if you had wanted someone to come here and discriminate for you between mortal and immortal souls, or between rights and duties, you would have called in a philosopher, not a person whose sole claim to your attention is to have written stories about made-up people."

Coetzee stirs our imaginations by confronting us with an articulate, intelligent, aging, and increasingly alienated novelist who cannot help but be exasperated with her fellow human beings, many of them academics, who are unnecessarily cruel to animals and apparently (but not admittedly) committed to cruelty. The story urges us to reconceive our devotion to reason as a universal value. Is the universe built upon reason? Is God a God of reason? If so, then "man is godlike, animals thinglike." But Elizabeth Costello vehemently dissents from this anthropocentric perspective: "reason is neither the being of the universe nor the being of God. On the contrary, reason looks to me suspiciously like the being of human thought; worse than that, like the being of one tendency in human thought."

Does Costello protest too much? Although she argues that philosophy is totally bankrupt in its ability to make our attitudes toward animals ethical, Costello also self-consciously employs philosophy in her lectures, often to demonstrate the weakness of those philosophical arguments that consider the lives of non-reasoning beings less valuable by virtue of their being less reasoning. "What is so special about the form of consciousness we recognize that makes killing a bearer of it a crime," she asks, "while killing an animal goes unpunished?" Unlike philosophers, poets begin "with a feel for" an animal's experience. That leads them to recognize the crime of killing any animal that can experience the sensation of being alive to the world. Costello urges us to recognize the accessibility of such sympathy for the fullness of animal being. "If we are capable of thinking our own death," she asks,

"why on earth should we not be capable of thinking our way into the life of a bat?"

What, then, is the motivation for thinking our way into the lives of animals, if not morality? By her own account, however, Costello is motivated not by moral conviction but rather by "a desire to save my soul." She is not so presumptuous as to think that she has succeeded in saving her soul, although she does treat her critics as if they had lost sight of their souls. She refuses to accept the compliments of the president of Appleton College, who (in an apparent attempt to defuse the mounting tension) says that he admires her way of life. In response, Costello points out that she wears leather shoes and carries a leather purse. "Surely one can draw a distinction between eating meat and wearing leather," the president offers in her defense. "Degrees of obscenity," is Costello's uncompromising reply. The president has succeeded only in increasing the tension. Costello refuses to take admiration for an answer. Her sensibilities and actions may be superior to those of her fellow human beings, but they remain nonetheless a source of internal agony.

Costello is self-aware. She anticipates her most antagonistic critic by saying that she knows "how talk of this kind polarizes people, and cheap point-scoring only makes it worse." The kind of talk to which she refers is an analogy, which she draws again and again, between the way her fellow human beings treat animals and way the Third Reich treated Jews. "By treating fellow human beings, beings created in the image of God, like beasts," she says of the Nazis, "they had themselves become beasts." She continues: "we are surrounded by an enterprise of degradation, cruelty, and killing which rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of. . . ."

The comparison with the Holocaust cannot go unchallenged. In fact, the challenge to Costello is delivered not by a philosopher but by Costello's academic equal, an aging poet, Abraham Stern. Stern refuses to attend dinner with Costello not out of disrespect but because he is deeply affronted by her first lecture.

Stern delivers a letter telling Costello why he cannot break bread with her:

You took over for your own purposes the familiar comparison between the murdered Jews of Europe and slaughtered cattle. The Jews died like cattle, therefore cattle die like Jews, you say. That is a trick with words which I will not accept. You misunderstand the nature of likenesses; I would even say you misunderstand willfully, to the point of blasphemy. Man is made in the likeness of God but God does not have the likeness of man. If Jews were treated like cattle, it does not follow that cattle are treated like Jews. The inversion insults the memory of the dead. It also trades on the horrors of the camps in a cheap way.

Just as Stern is too offended by Costello's moral sensibilities to address her in person, so too Costello does not answer Stern's critique. Each is offended by the other's sensibilities, and they have little willingness or ability or time in their lives left to bridge the ethical and aesthetic divide between them.

*The Lives of Animals* drives home how difficult it can be for morally serious people to sympathize with, or even understand, each other's perspectives. The distance between the two aging writers in the story, Costello and Stern, does not narrow as a consequence of their taking each other seriously. Quite the contrary, at the end of her visit to Appleton (and the end of the story), Costello invokes the Holocaust analogy yet again. Speaking to her son about how radically disoriented she feels in this world, she imagines going into the bathroom of friends and seeing a soap-wrapper that says, "Treblinka—100% human stearate." Imagine feeling this way about our fellow human beings who eat animals, yet also seeing human kindness in the very same people's eyes. "This is life. Everyone else comes to terms with it," Costello reminds herself, "why can't you? *Why can't you?*"

Should Elizabeth Costello have come to terms with the way her family and friends treat animals, or should she have converted them—should she convert those of us who do not begin where

she begins—to her position? Coetzee does not answer these questions for us. The story leaves us with a vivid sense of conflict among morally serious people over the mistreatment of animals and the apparently correlative conflict over analogizing that treatment to the most heinous crimes committed among human beings themselves. Central among the questions Coetzee leaves us with is whether there is any way—whether philosophical, poetic, or psychological—of resolving these ethical conflicts or reconciling these competing sensibilities.

Four prominent commentators—the literary theorist Marjorie Garber, the philosopher Peter Singer, the religious scholar Wendy Doniger, and the primatologist Barbara Smuts—discuss the form and content of Coetzee's lectures. Like previous volumes in the University Center for Human Values Series, *The Lives of Animals* draws upon the insights of diverse disciplinary perspectives that too rarely engage with one another. Garber, Singer, Doniger, and Smuts do not share a single academic discipline, nor are they even members of neighboring disciplines, but their commentaries together help constitute a more complete understanding of how human beings can and should relate to animals.

At the same time as she compares *The Lives of Animals* to the academic novel, Marjorie Garber highlights its distinctiveness. It is “suffused with pathos” rather than the comedy that is typical of the academic novel. Its analogies pose “some of the most urgent ethical and political questions” of our times. Garber questions the way in which serious analogy—as between “the murdered Jews of Europe and slaughtered cattle”—functions in fiction and literary criticism. She notes that although the appropriateness of the Holocaust analogy is hotly debated, it is regularly used, both obliquely and not so obliquely, as in the popular (and relatively uncontroversial) children's film *Babe*. Garber explores the disadvantages as well as advantages of the ubiquitous use of analogical arguments like these in literature. Fiction far more than philosophy has the “art of language” to offer, and that art is put to

expert use by Coetzee in his effort to provoke us to pursue an ethical issue that would not otherwise capture some people's attention or imagination. *The Lives of Animals* is therefore, as Garber suggests, as much about the value of literature as it is about the lives of animals.

In a commentary that is written in the form of a fictional dialogue between an animal rights philosopher and his daughter, Peter Singer, the most eminent philosophical defender of animal rights, imagines himself in the unusual position of confronting someone like Elizabeth Costello who is more unconventional with regard to animals than even he is. "There is a more radical egalitarianism about humans and animals running through her lecture than I would be prepared to defend," the philosopher says to his daughter. When his daughter takes Costello's side in the argument, the philosopher responds, "I feel, but I also think what I feel." The fact that human beings think—think about their pain, their future, and their death—adds value to their lives, according to the philosopher. "The value that is lost when something is emptied depends on what was there when it was full, and there is more to human existence than there is to bat existence." The value that is lost in the killing of a human being is therefore greater than the value lost in the killing of a bat. It also follows for Singer's philosopher that to the extent that animals are "self-aware" and have "thoughts about things in the future," there is "some reason for thinking it intrinsically wrong to kill them—not absolutely wrong, but perhaps quite a serious wrong."

Singer's philosopher defends philosophy against Costello's attacks upon it. "We can't take our feelings as moral data, immune from rational criticism," the philosopher says in response to his daughter's horror at his suggesting that their dog Max's life might not be intrinsically valuable. Painless killing of those animals who do not anticipate their death would not be in itself morally wrong, or at least not as heinous a crime as the painless killing of an animal who is self-conscious about life and death. If Singer's philosopher is right, then the morality of vegetarianism under

circumstances where the consumed animals are painlessly killed can be distinguished from the morality of compassionate treatment of animals.

Wendy Doniger's commentary explores the distinction between practicing vegetarianism and being compassionate toward animals, a distinction that she suggests is implicit in many religious traditions. Different religions have reasoned about how to treat animals in seemingly contradictory ways. "The argument that humans (but not animals) are created in the image of god is often used in the West to justify cruelty to animals," Doniger points out, "but most mythologies assume that animals, *rather than humans*, are the image of God—which may be a reason *to eat them*." Whereas in some religions, vegetarianism is connected to compassion for animals, in others it is more intimately connected to self-identity and the search for human salvation, as seems to be the case with Elizabeth Costello.

Barbara Smuts, who has spent much of her professional life working and living with baboons and other animals, notices a "striking gap" in Coetzee's text. Elizabeth Costello says little about "real-life [human] relations with animals." As a primatologist, Smuts knows what it is like to live with animals, but she speaks in her commentary less as a scientist than as an ordinary human being who likes to live with animals. "Entering territory where, perhaps, Costello (and maybe even Coetzee) feared to tread," Smuts writes, "I will attempt to close this gap, not through formal scientific discourse, but rather, as Elizabeth Costello urges, by speaking from the heart." What follows in Smuts' commentary is an account of the individuality of animals who befriend and are befriended by human beings. Smuts vividly presents a narrative case for regarding nonhuman beings as persons and for believing in friendship between human beings and animals. She revises as she reinforces Elizabeth Costello's claim that "there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another."

In the pages that follow, philosophers and poets, novelists and scientists, deans and presidents, parents, children, and friends all



grapple with how human beings should treat animals and should treat one another in the midst of the deep disagreement that will no doubt continue to brew over this issue for some time to come. Coetzee's story ends with the ambiguously consoling words that Costello's son voices to his aging mother, "There, there, it will soon be over." By contrast, these moral matters will not soon be over. They remain ever more disconcerting, in no small part owing to the words of Coetzee's characters.