
THE DIFFICULTY OF ANIMAL QUESTION

V o j k o S t r a h o v n i k

“But your own vegetarianism, Mrs. Costello,” says President Garrard, pouring oil on troubled waters: “it comes out of moral conviction, does it not?”
“No, I don’t think so,” says [... Elizabeth Costello – n. V.S.]. “It comes out of a desire to save my soul.”
*(J. M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, p.43)*

At the centre of this discussion is going to be J. M. Coetzee’s story *The Lives of Animals*¹ because it offers a very complex, inclusive, dialogical, and subtle insight into the animal question. The storyline opens up several dimensions and levels of thought about our relationship with nonhuman animals and our own nature, especially aspects of livingness, vulnerability, death, and relationality. The main facet of the story aims to evoke what is the most human inside of us in order to bring us nearer to nonhuman, and to sense this closeness in order to recognize the distance. Another reason to focus on this story is that it has evoked two quite disparate and incongruent responses or echoes in philosophy. The first response is represented by the more traditional approach to animal question, which is based on the rejection of speciesism and framing of key issues in terms of interests or rights of animals with an aim to improve how we currently treat them in many of our practices.² The second, contrasting response³ is more radical in its understanding of Coetzee’s book. It differs from the first response mainly regarding two key points. First, while the first response primarily understands *The Lives of Animals* as being about nonhuman animals and the way we treat them,

¹ J. M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*. Princeton University Press, Princeton 1999. The book represents the *Tanner Lectures* (1997–1998) that Coetzee has delivered and decided to frame them as a story itself encompassing academic lecture and a seminar by the main character, an author Elizabeth Costello, as a part of visiting her former college.

² This first group is most directly characterized by Peter Singer and other authors that have published reflections on Coetzee’s story in the book itself.

³ S. Cavell et al., *Philosophy and Animal Life*. Columbia University Press, New York 2008.

the second approach understand it as essentially a story about us, human animals, and about our understanding of ourselves and our condition. Second, while the first response understands Coetzee's work as providing us with philosophical arguments and reflections⁴ in a form of a fictional story (and therefore in a not fully committed way), the second response sees it more as a demonstration of the difficulty or powerlessness of arguments or philosophy itself regarding the animal question. Cora Diamond describes the main character in the story in the following way: "In the life of the animal she is, argument does not have the weight we may take it to have in the life of the kind of animal we think of ourselves as being. She sees our reliance on argumentation as a way we may make unavailable to ourselves our own sense of what is to be a living animal".⁵

In the book Coetzee presents a story about Elizabeth Costello, an established author, who is being honoured by her former university by way of inviting her to hold a lecture and a seminar about her work. Instead of discussing her works Elizabeth chooses to speak about another topic, namely about our (or as it turns out mostly just hers) relationship with and treatment of nonhuman animals. The story evolves in a multifaceted way and can be interpreted on several levels. The first, basic level is descriptive or factual. It contains the recognition and awareness of facts and descriptions of our treatment of nonhuman animals, their suffering, and of our needs and our possibilities to bring about a change in the current state of affairs. This can be seen as the foundation for the debate and for the search for answers to the animal question. The second level is philosophical; it pertains to evaluation and attribution of moral status or standing. Elizabeth's story comprises of several well known philosophical discussions, arguments and strategies of traditional approaches to animal question, which are connected and intersect in various ways. But as we will see later, one would miss a very important dimension of this question if one would merely reduce the story or the animal question itself to the status of the argumentative or even philo-

⁴ P. Singer, [Reflection], in: J. M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*. Princeton University Press, Princeton 1999, p. 91.

⁵ C. Diamond, The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy, in: *Philosophy and Animal Life*, Columbia University Press, New York 2008, p. 53.

sophical debate. The third level is emotional, or even better, poetical.⁶ Here, Elizabeth reveals her vulnerability; her wound that is hidden and revealed at the same time. In her address to the audience she says: “I am not a philosopher of mind but an animal exhibiting, yet not exhibiting, to a gathering of scholars, a wound, which I cover up under my clothes but touch on in every word I speak”.⁷ Her vulnerability, fear and detachment can be sensed in her relationship with her son and his family and with society in general, from which she feels isolated and battles with expressions of contempt, leading up to her tiredness and not being able to reconcile herself with life. This is a level of establishing both full humanity and full animality. The questions about our status and moral standing get intertwined here with our doubts about such a status itself. The fourth level is meta-level, the level of (meta)narrativity, where all other levels are traversed and reflect each other; as such this gives us an opportunity to really pose the animal question in all its complexity. We will return to these levels in the final part of the paper. For now we will focus a bit on the first response mentioned above.

Suffering

Probably the most direct way to approach the animal question is by acknowledging the needless suffering that the animals undergo due to many of our practices. The most basic train of thought in this regard has been expressed by Jeremy Bentham, when he said that concerning nonhuman animals “the [relevant] question is not, Can they *reason?*, nor Can they *talk?*, but, Can they *suffer?*”.⁸ Henry Salt added to this that “[p]ain is pain ... whether be inflicted on man or on beast; and the creature that suffers it, whether man or beast, being sensible of the misery of it while it lasts, suffers *evil*”.⁹ Similar ethical considerations can be traced

⁶ The second and third level are explicitly present even in the titles of Coetzee's lectures since the first is titled *The Philosophers and the Animals* and the second *The Poets and the Animals*.

⁷ J. M. Coetzee, *op.cit.*, p. 26.

⁸ J. Bentham, A Utilitarian View, in: T. Regan and P. Singer (ed.), *Animal Rights and Human Obligations*. Prentice Hall, Engelwood Cliffs 1998, p. 26.

⁹ H. Salt, *Animals' Rights: Considered in Relation to Social Progress*. George Bell & Sons, London 1892, p. 24.

back into the history of philosophy, e.g. to Pythagoras, Plutarch, and Porphyry, which stressed characteristics that nonhuman animals share with humans, in particular sentience, followed by a fact that humans can refrain from eating meat and that it is a matter of justice that we withhold from causing nonhuman animals unnecessary suffering.¹⁰

This aspect of the prevention of needless suffering of nonhuman animals is best accommodated within a broadly consequentialist or utilitarian considerations, since the very foundation of them gives us little space to exclude the pain and suffering of animals from our understating of utility or welfare and its relation to the moral status of actions. The only possible way that would prevent such a result is an overt exclusion of nonhuman animals from the moral sphere of beings that deserve to be at least minimally taken into account. This would be a sort of ethical humanism, which Engel and Jenni define as consisting of two central claims, namely that “(i) all and only all human beings deserve moral consideration and (ii) all human beings deserve equal consideration”¹¹, which results in a “sad” consequence that nonhuman animals lack moral standing and that moral status of our actions remains unaffected by more or less anything we do to them. The prevalence of ethical humanism, understood in this way, throughout most of history of our moral thought and practices, results in a state we are facing today, where over 70 billion animals are killed annually, predominantly for food and as part of various testing and experimenting methods, having to endure a sorry, painful, and frustrating existence before their gloomy end.¹²

In *The Lives of Animals* Elizabeth in her lecture avoids the direct referencing to all the suffering in food production facilities and other horrific experiences that nonhuman animals have to endure and that are being continuously inflicted to them by humans. She takes our acquaintance with the facts more or less as given and “spares” her audience of listing and exposing all the horrors that nonhuman animals must go through

¹⁰ M. Engel and K. Jenni, *The Philosophy of Animal Rights*. Lantern Books, Brooklyn, 2010, pp. 9–12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹² P. Singer, *Animal Liberation (Updated ed.)*, Harper Collins, New York 2009; P. Singer, *In Defense of Animals. The Second Wave*. Blackwell, Malden 2006; J. Mason and P. Singer (eds), *The Ethics of What We Eat*, Emmaus: Rodale, 2006.

as part of our food production and other practices. On this, factual or descriptive level it only amazes her, how we are able to sustain the illusion of innocence and remaining morally immaculate at the same time; “that we can do anything and get away with it; that there is no punishment”.¹³ This can be seen as a direct consequence of ethical humanism. Elizabeth sees it as a consequence of closing our hearts as seats of sympathy before these horrific “places of death”. Cavell notes that we might understand this as a particular form of “soul-blindness”, related to the notion of “seeing something as something” in a sense that this variation in responses surprisingly “is not a function of any difference in our access to information; no one knows, or can literally see, essentially anything here that the other fail to know or can see”.¹⁴

Interests

Probably the most famous and influential upgrade of this approach can be found in the work of Peter Singer who frames the debate in terms of interest of sentient beings. His book *Animal Liberation* launched him at the forefront of the animal welfare or liberation movement and still remains the main reference point for it.¹⁵ It has importantly shaped both public and academic debates. This approach can be characterized as a combination of the utilitarian view on moral status of actions as closely connected with interests and a moral criteria, that tells us whose interests count and to what extent. The foundation for it is the universal nature of ethics; our moral judgments must be universalizable in the sense that they can be accepted or endorsed from an impartial point of view, which puts the “I” perspective in the brackets. From the point of view of attaining good it is irrelevant whether the good attained is mine or someone else’s. Or to put in another way; my interests are not more important as (equal) interests of others just because they are mine (principle of equal consideration of interests). When I contemplate how

¹³ J. M. Coetzee, *op.cit.*, p. 35.

¹⁴ S. Cavell, Companionable Thinking, in: S. Cavell et al., *Philosophy and Animal Life*, Columbia University Press, New York 2008, p. 93.

¹⁵ P. Singer, *Animal Liberation (Updated ed.)*; P. Singer (ed.), *In Defense of Animals. The Second Wave*.

to act, I must consider the relevant interests of all involved in the same way. Given this I must also follow the regulative principle to act in a way and choose an action that has the best consequences overall (maximal satisfaction of interests), and best increases the utility for all involved.¹⁶ This effectively means universalization of beneficial decision making and action that Singer sees as the most pretheoretically acceptable ethical position to take. Principle of equal consideration of interests is thus basic. But whose interests must we consider? Who belongs inside the sphere of moral consideration? Which creatures are part of such moral community? Singer argues that although “the principle of equal consideration of interests provide the best possible basis for human equality, its scope is not limited to humans. When we accept the principle of equality of humans, we are also committed to accepting that it extends to some nonhuman animals”.¹⁷

A prejudice that interests or wellbeing of at least some nonhuman animals do not count is for Singer analogous to e.g. racial prejudices, which would grant non-equal treatment and consideration of members of particular races by disregarding their interest and wellbeing. The characteristic of those nonhuman animals that can feel pain and pleasure (sentience) represents an important ground for the attribution of interests to them, especially the interest to avoid pain and suffering. Sentience is thus the most sensible and at the same time also the sole acceptable characteristics for drawing the line around a set of beings whose interests count morally.¹⁸ All other basic criteria (e.g. capability for reasoning, speech, colour of skin, intelligence, species membership etc.) must be discarded. A sentient being is a being capable of feeling pleasure and pain and is thus having at least a minimal interest to avoid pain; if a being is not sentient and cannot feel pleasure or pain, it cannot be hurt or harmed by our actions. All this result into a conclusion that as far as the suffering of animals is concerned – even in the absence of a precise standard of how to compare and weight different interests of human and nonhuman animals – we should substantially change our

¹⁶ P. Singer, *Practical Ethics – 3rd Edition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2011.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 48

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

practices (meat production, intensive animal breeding, experiments on animals, uses of animals in zoos, etc.) that involve the latter. The same goes for killing animals, which is (given the majority of the actual practices) morally wrong. This does not mean that we have to treat all sentient being alike or ascribe them equal rights, but merely to give their suffering and pain an equal consideration in contemplating the consequences of our actions.¹⁹

Rights

An alternative approach to the animal question, which is close to Singer's in sharing with it the rejection of ethical humanism, is an approach defending animal rights. Its most prominent advocate is Tom Regan.²⁰ With the mentioning of rights we must first and foremost emphasize that the rights in question are rights in the moral sense and not (necessary or normally) also rights in the legal sense. Legal rights are closely connected with legal orders and systems, while moral rights belong to their bearers independently of those systems, based on a posit, that bearers of such rights are beings or other entities that have the necessary morally relevant characteristics as a basis that those rights then belong to them. Regan argues that (at least some) nonhuman animals have negative rights of non-interference, such as the right not to be killed, not to be harmed or not to be tortured. Most of our existing practices involving nonhuman animals involve at least some kind of serious violations of such rights and are in this regard considered wrong and unacceptable. This rights-based approach is not utilitarian at its core, since it only accepts (in some form) a principle of equality of interests, at the same time rejecting a view that we can reduce our duties to maximizing the satisfaction of those interest or wellbeing in a more general sense. At the bottom of this rejection are supposedly unacceptable consequences of the mentioned view, resulting in regarding an action that would maximize utility e.g. by sacrificing some innocent life as morally right.²¹

¹⁹ M. Engel and K. Jenni, *The Philosophy of Animal Rights*, pp. 22–23.

²⁰ T. Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights*. University of California Press, Berkeley 2004.

²¹ M. Engel and K. Jenni, *op. cit.*, pp. 24–26.

Regan's approach is based on the ascription of intrinsic (inherent) value to all sentient beings, that is living beings that are experiencing subjects of a life (e.g. with perceptions, beliefs, wishes, motives, memories, etc.) and whose lives can fare well or bad over time. As such they have "an individual experiential welfare, logically independent of their utility relative to the interests or welfare of others".²² This is then a foundation for their rights and morally obliges us to abstain from actions that would importantly hamper the lives of such beings.

Similarly, Paola Cavalieri presents her case for the extended or expanded theory of human rights. Within this model the standard for (at least minimal) moral status is a possibility of (at least primitive) sentience or conscious experience of the world (which at the same time means the ability to experience pleasure and pain). That provides us with a proper footing for talk about interests, benefits, and harms of beings that meet this standard. The distinguishing feature of her approach is that "it persistently defies all attempts to introduce some kind of hierarchical order into this amorphous, undivided, egalitarian moral community".²³ In this sense regarding direct duties of humans towards non-human animals, the latter have – insofar as they are intentional beings with goals they are trying to achieve²⁴ – at least minimal "human" rights.

Although there are several important differences between the presented interests- and rights-based approaches the practical consequences of both are or should be very similar. Both Singer and Regan use the same (or at least very similar) criterion for the inclusion into the moral community in its widest sense and regarding the normative implications both approaches see the majority of existing practices involving nonhuman animals as unacceptable and unjustifiable, since we mostly appeal only to arbitrary and ungrounded differences about the status

²² T. Regan, Ill-Gotten Gains, in: G. Langley (ed.) *Animal Experimentation: The Consensus Changes*. Macmillan Press, London 1989, p. 38.

²³ F. Klampfer, Paola Cavalieri in kritika dvojnih moralnih standardov v odnosu ljudi do živali [Paola Cavalieri and a Critique of Double Standards of Humans in Relation to Animals], in: P. Cavalieri, Živalsko vprašanje. Za razširjeno teorijo človekovih pravic [*The Animal Question. Why Nonhuman Animals Deserve Human Rights*]. Krtina, Ljubljana 2006, p. 225.

²⁴ P. Cavalieri, *The Animal Question. Why Nonhuman Animals Deserve Human Rights*. Oxford University Press, New York 2001.

of sentient beings to justify unequal treatment.²⁵ So even the rights-based approach could be understood as broadly falling in the first kind of response to animal question in the sense that it is focused mostly on securing the wellbeing of nonhuman animals (experiences of pleasure and pain) and sees the attribution of protective rights to them as the best way to implement this general aim.

The question of distinguishing characteristics

Within both positions discussed the crucial point in their rejection of ethical humanism is the search for distinguishing characteristics that supposedly define the set of beings that share equal minimal moral status. The problem arises when we appeal to some morally irrelevant characteristics or differences as relevant and justifying our behaviour towards e.g. members of other species. This should be rejected and such approaches claim that “in our attitude to members of other species we have prejudices which are completely analogous to the prejudices people may have with regard to members of other races, and these prejudices will be connected with the ways we are blind to our own exploitation and oppression of the other group. We are blind to the fact that what we do to them deprives them of their rights; we do not want to see this because we profit from it, and so we make use of what are really morally irrelevant differences between them and ourselves to justify the difference in treatment”.²⁶

This is a basis for an argument from analogy that puts speciesism on a par with racism or sexism. But the analogy alone is not enough to discard ethical humanism, since its proponents might appeal to some other characteristic other than a mere species membership to justify the inequality between human and nonhuman animals. In the discussion we can locate several alternative candidates, e.g. linguistic abilities, language and/or speech, rationality, reasoning and responsiveness to reasons, ability to agree to social and moral rules, possession of the immortal soul,

²⁵ M. Engel and K. Jenni, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

²⁶ C. Diamond, *Eating Meat and Eating People*, in: C. Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1991, p. 319.

life in the “biographic sense of the word”, moral autonomy, the capacity to reciprocity, empathy, the desire for self-respect.²⁷

All such attempts fall prey to the following simple dilemma. They face a very difficult task to find and defend a distinguishing characteristic such that either (i) only human beings have it (in this case many human beings will actually not have it, as it is the case with moral autonomy, rationality, etc.) or (ii) actually all human beings have it (in this case also at least some nonhuman animals will have it, e.g. capacity for sentience). Since there seems to be no convincing candidates such an argument from analogy indeed refutes ethical humanism.²⁸

Abolition of (use of) animals

Besides the two mentioned approaches to the animal question the approach of animal abolitionism²⁹ could also be seen as part of this wider approach defined by opposing ethical humanism. At least in one aspect Singer’s and similar approaches defending and advocating animal wellbeing, liberation and their rights are seen to be deeply mistaken from the point of view of animal abolitionism. The main issue is that they merely focus on how we should treat animals, and not on a more pressing issues that we should not treat and use them at all. In the consumer society such a misguided perspective gives rise to the talk about “happy meat”, “natural meat” and alike. The final purpose of such movements is a better treatment of animals. Abolitionism takes a more radical stance of seeing any use of animals as morally unacceptable and claims that any “humane treatment” or “humane consumption” is merely an illusion. Avoiding causing “unnecessary suffering” of animals is a very vague notion, even though it is reflected in many of our practices.

Abolitionism also appeals to sentience and consciousness of beings (noting that we must interpret it benevolently and use a precautionary principle in borderline cases) as setting the limits for our use of animals

²⁷ M. Engel and K. Jenni, *op.cit.*, 19.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 20–21.

²⁹ G. L. Francione, *The Animal Rights Debate: Abolition or Regulation*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2010; *Animals as Persons: Essays on the Abolition of Animal Exploitation*, Columbia University Press, New York 2008.

as a mean or a resource. It advocates a full abolition of any use of sentient animals following the “zero tolerance” principle. It also notes how the so-called humane treatment of animals in food production goes in many cases hand in hand with economic interests of food industry, since the facts reveal that certain measures that are part of the more “animal-friendly” production processes are actually reducing the costs (less dead animals as a result of diseases and aggression between them, reduced costs for medical treatments, etc.) and offering an opportunity to sell the meat at increased prices (since environmentally aware consumers are prepared to spend more). But the important question is not whether animals suffer less because of this, but is it morally acceptable that they suffer at all. Abolitionism also advocates the abolition of most domestic pets, since in many cases we are providing them with a merely sad existence given their nature, making them dependent on us, and – in the case of carnivorous pets – there is a question of the use and suffering of other animals raised to become pet food. The main impediment in all this seem to be that we regard animals as property, therefore as things, while we should move towards considering them as persons in the sense that they deserve a proper kind of moral consideration.³⁰ Thus, if we really are morally concerned with animals, we should neither eat or wear, nor use them in such ways.

Common sense approach and consistency

The approaches discussed are based upon various moral theories and assumptions that are probably not going to be universally shared or accepted. In contrast to them a common sense or consistency approach is not based upon the presupposition of a certain moral theory to be true or our acceptance of its posits. It uses beliefs that are (almost) universally shared by all (at least minimally) morally decent people. Since the consequences of this approach logically follow from such premises, we are faced with a dilemma to either accept its conclusions or reject the

³⁰ That would secure them from manipulation and instrumentalization. See B. Žalec, On not knowing who we are: the ethical importance of transcendent anthropology, *Synthesis philosophica* 26 (1), 2011, for elucidation of these concepts as related to the concepts of person(hood) and identity.

starting premises. As such it represents a minimal basis for discussing the animal question.

Mylan Engel³¹ designed the following argument from consistency. The starting set of statements includes the following widely shared beliefs. It is morally wrong to cause pain to a conscious sentient being for no good reason. It is morally wrong to cause harm to a conscious sentient being for no good reason. It is morally wrong to kill a conscious sentient being for no good reason. These are statements that more or less all moral theories would cohere with and are accepted even by the opponents of animal liberation or rights movement. Now we can formulate the following argument.

A. Step 1

1. It is morally wrong to cause pain to a conscious sentient animal for no good reason.
2. It is morally wrong to cause harm to a conscious sentient animal for no good reason.
3. It is morally wrong to kill a conscious sentient animal for no good reason.
4. Raising animals intensively and in inhumane, overcrowded confinement facilities harms them physically and psychologically.
5. Mutilating animals without anaesthesia harms them physically and psychologically and can cause them to suffer severely.
6. Slaughtering animals kills them.
7. Slaughtering animals inhumanely kills them and in addition harms them and makes them suffer.
8. Rearing animals and slaughtering them as part of existing food production practices necessarily harms them, makes them suffer or kills them.
9. Therefore rearing animals and slaughtering them as part of existing food production practices is morally wrong unless there is a good reason that would justify this.

³¹ M. Engel, Do Animals Have Rights, and Does It Matter if They Don't?, *Rocky Mountains Ethics Congress*, August 2012.

B. Step 2

This step of the argument comprises of assessing possible justifying reasons for our treatment of animals, the most common candidates that we tend to appeal to being nutrition, cost, convenience, and taste. But it can easily be shown that actually none of those represent a good reason. Firstly, human being are in general in no way dependent on our consumption of meat, even more, research show that alternative vegetarian diet actually benefits our health in many important respects and prolongs our life. Secondly, the costs (both economical and environmental) of meat production are much higher than costs of plant-based food production. Thirdly, plant-based vegetarian diet is in no way less accessible than meat-based food. And lastly, plant-based food is diverse, rich and full of taste, especially when we really give it a try. It follows that there never or hardly ever (the exception being cases where eating meat would save our life and alike) exists such a reason that would justify our existing practices involving animals in food production.

C. Conclusion

“The Carnivore’s Dilemma”: If one accepts the case for animals rights then one must see the existing practices as violating them and therefore unacceptable. But even if one does not accept negative rights of non-human animals, one is committed by rationality (consistency) itself to a view the rearing and killing animals for food is (with the exception of extreme cases) morally unacceptable.³²

Alternative approaches and meta-questions

There are several other approaches to the animal question that fall outside of the broadly utilitarian or rights-based approaches. Most of these approaches focus on changing our relationship towards non-human animals and eliminating some deeply rooted posits that stand in

³² Ibid.

the way of such a change. In this respect e.g. Mary Midgley³³ argues for the elimination of barriers that our culture has put between humans and nonhuman animals and are the foundations of our mostly unacceptable attitude to them. Those central barriers include a conception of behaviourism that leads to scepticism about animal minds, a confusion in our understanding of concepts like belief, emotion, understanding, language and relations between them, a distorted view on morality that includes concentric circles of ethical importance of others and our relation to them, where we are at the centre, an excessive abstraction in moral thinking and reasoning, and a oversimplified view that compassion and empathy are limited in “volume” and that we have to conserve it only to the ones near and dear to us. From such a perspective both the proponents of animal liberation movement and their opponents fall prey to a common mistake of excessively generalizing the issues, leading to reduction of all of our moral relations to a simple and abstract model or ethical relevance. Animal liberation, equality of interest perspective, and animal rights movement can be successful only in combating some of our excuses for our current treatment of animals, but they cannot on the whole represent an new basis for establishing an inclusive model of ethical community with a radical change of our beliefs and attitudes. The way to achieve this is to develop an enhanced concern for nonhuman animals based on our common evolution and different ways of our living together.³⁴

Similarly, ethics of care approach emphasizes that our concepts of duty, moral principles, autonomy and individuality must be replaced with morally even more central concepts of relationship, sensitivity for the world around us and care. Authors such as Josephine Donovan and Carol J. Adams call attention to the importance of our focus and sensitivity for the suffering of animals, which is being inflicted to them as a consequence of our social and economic system. We need to reject an image of a autonomous, isolated, independent moral agent with rights and freedoms that was formed in the Enlightenment period – both Singer’s and Regan’s approach remained committed to such an image

³³ M. Midgley, *Animals and Why They Matter*, University of Georgia Press, Athens 1983.

³⁴ M. Engel and K. Jenni, *op.cit.*, pp. 33–34.

– and replace it with a notion of a mutually depended and interconnected beings. This also means a rejection of approaches that overlook the importance of emotions and tend towards moral abstraction and formalism, which go against our being genuinely sensitive to a particular situation.³⁵

After this presentation of various approaches we can return to the initial framing of the animals question as present in *The Lives of Animals*. As we saw one of the marks of this framework is that it is inclusive in the sense that it tries to combine several approaches at the same time also revealing vast gaps among them and their insufficiencies. Such gaps are not unimportant since they also point to a similar gap between the power of moral theory and our actual practices.

The Lives of Animals

A story about Elizabeth Costello in *The Lives of Animals* can be read as an interlacement of above mentioned approaches and ideas regarding animal question, but taken as a whole it is much more than that. Philosophical questions on whether animals have rights or what duties we humans have towards them are marked with a sort of duality. On the one hand Elizabeth's story makes it clear that they are in most situations powerless; the search for rational, justified evaluative answers seems in vain. On the other hand Elizabeth does not abandon them completely and returns to them repeatedly. If philosophy is being powerless against an absence of established compassion towards nonhuman animals, do we then need a radical turn to a different philosophy, which would establish such moral sensitivity? Does it mean that we should go beyond arguments and philosophy towards emotional or personal level? If we read Elizabeth story carefully we can notice that even this level reveals itself as powerless; Elizabeth feels uneasy, wounded and excluded from the circle of people around her, even from those close to her like her son and his family. What are the causes for the insufficiency of this level? We will return to these questions in the concluding section, after exposing

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 35–36.

some of the moments in *The Lives of Animals* that can be particularly revealing in this regard.

At the beginning of Elizabeth's first lecture two aspects are especially central. She begins by an allusion to the Kafka's story *A Report to an Academy*³⁶ about Peter Red, an ape, who learned human language and conduct, and addresses – all dresses up and with exquisite words – the gathered audience about his previous life as an ape and experience of coming to the world of human animals. It seems like Elizabeth is also trying to open a similar passage between her world and a world of her audience, and there is a striking difference between the ease with which seemingly Peter Red succeeds in this and the difficulty Elizabeth has in establishing common ground with the audience. That is part of the difficulty of the animal question. Elizabeth decides to omit describing or citing all the horrors of practices involving animals and just evokes to the audience that they could bring them to their minds. As it is the case with Peter Red, which explicitly states that he only reports (in a pure, almost scientific language) and is not interested in any judgment. The second moment in the talk is the analogy between how we treat animals and the Holocaust in the image of a death camp Treblinka, which remains central in the story. “We have only one death of our own, we can comprehend the deaths of others only one at the time. In the abstract we may be able to count to a million, but we cannot count to a million deaths”.³⁷ Since we can only apprehend one death at the time the phenomenon of several billion deaths of nonhuman animals every year related to meat production and experimentation either resist our moral sensitivity or strikes us as unimaginable evil. Elizabeth wonders how is it that if the Germans after WWII felt ashamed, polluted and full of remorse related to their loss of full humanity, then where is a similar feeling in us in regard to what we do to animals. Is that a consequence of the victory of reason, the reason that appeals to our likeness of God and our special place in nature; the victory of reason over nonhuman animals? “Each day a fresh holocaust, yet, as far as I can see, our mor-

³⁶ F. Kafka, *Ein Bericht für eine Akademie*, 1917.

³⁷ J. M. Coetzee, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

al being is untouched. We do not feel tainted. We can do anything, it seems, and come away clean".³⁸

Elizabeth continues that we have taken away power from the non-human animals, and all there is left for them is the silence, with which they face us. They do not "speak" with us any more, except for Peter Red, who has become a human animal and is all dressed up to do that. "Today these creatures have no more power. Animals have only their silence left which to confront us. Generation after generation, heroically, our captives refuse to speak to us."³⁹ She sees our experiments with primates exhibiting the achievements and limitedness of their intelligence rather as an insult of their intelligence. The character of being alive and vulnerable, and not reason or developed consciousness, are the pathways towards nonhuman animals. Elizabeth therefore opposes those conclusion from the famous Nagel's paper "What Is it Like to Be a Bat?"⁴⁰, which point towards the limit of our imagining the phenomenal aspects of bat's experiences. If we can imagine our own death; what is it like to be a corpse, why then we could not imagine, what is it like to be a non-human animal. Being an animal is to be embodied, being full of joy and full of life. Intellect alone does not mean being full of life. It is therefore futile to search for common or distinguishing characteristics of human and nonhuman animals, until we are able to feel with them and develop a compassion that has no limits.

The first part of Coetzee's story finishes along similar lines, exposing the difficulty of philosophy and reason to penetrate to others. After Elizabeth's lecture the evening ends with a dinner, at which the air is full with feelings of embarrassment, discomfort, guilt, and shame. At some point in the dinner table discussion being a vegetarian, refusing to eat animals, emerges as predominantly a form of superiority over others and a display of strength.

Coetzee continues the story with the second part titled "The Poets and the Animals", which promises to overcome those difficulties of philosophy and philosophical language framed in terms of pain, interests,

³⁸ Ibid., p. 35.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 25.

⁴⁰ T. Nagel, "What Is it Like to Be a Bat?", *Philosophical Review* 83(4), 1974, pp. 435–450.

consciousness, rights, soul, and differences, and providing a resolution. This second part of the story opens with a letter that Elizabeth receives from a poet Abraham Stern, explaining his absence at the dinner after the first lecture. In the letter he strongly objects to the analogy Elizabeth has made between holocaust and animal farms and slaughterhouses. He sees it as a “trick of words”. He writes to Elizabeth “You misunderstand the nature of likenesses; I would even say you misunderstand wilfully, to the point of blasphemy. Man in made in the likeness of God but Got does not have the likeness of man. If Jews were treated as 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”.⁴¹ In the story Elizabeth goes on with issues from the lecture in her seminar and addresses the notion of animality as embodied existence that is full of life (using the differences between Rilke’s poem on panther and Hughes’ poem on jaguar). The key dimensions seems to be what it is like to inhabit a body, and not merely what it is like to inhabit a particular aspect of mind. She exposes a confusion embedded in the kind of ecological philosophy that preserves some kind of an idea of a natural order, as a dance of life, in which every being, every species has its place, function and role, and that is placed above the beings themselves. In since such an ordered character of nature is accessible to humans only, we stop understanding ourselves as proper part of it. Elizabeth notes that we actually do no treat nonhuman animals as objects, but more like war prisoners.⁴² Her seminar again ends with the exposed limitation of power of reason to penetrate to an answer to the animal question. The story itself ends with feelings of powerlessness, tiredness, and Elizabeth’s isolation from other people. Her son, escorting her to the airport comforts her that it will all soon be over. But what will be over and in what way?

Several aspects of Coetzee’s story expose powerlessness of reason and philosophy. This is reinforced when we consider the rather convincing philosophical cases for a radical change in our practices regarding non-human animals. In a way this powerlessness is inherently present even

⁴¹ J. M. Coetzee, *op.cit.*, pp. 49–50.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 58

within the so-called second wave of the animal liberation movement⁴³, in which on the one side there is triumph and optimism given the achievements and at least some secured better treatments of nonhuman animals at farms, reduced suffering and limits put on experimentation with nonhuman animals, and on the other side a felling that we cannot really declare any sort of victory, but merely note the vastness of suffering animals still endure and the practices that almost completely disregard them a worthy of moral consideration. To what extent does such impressions arise out of powerlessness of philosophy and can we bypass it by some more radical shift in our approach to the animal question?

The difficulty of philosophy and the difficulty of reality

In this concluding section we will turn to approaches to animal question by Cora Diamond and Stanley Cavell. Both also responded and reflected on Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals*, so we will be able to draw some conclusions in regard to questions exposed above. The animal question seems to defy attempts to articulate and pose it in its full perplexity. Diamond therefore relates this with the notion of "the difficulty of reality", which she understands as "experiences in which we take something in reality to be resistant to our thinking it, or possibly to be painful in its inexplicability, difficult in that way, or perhaps awesome and astonishing in its inexplicability. *We take things so*. And the things we take so may simply not, to others, present the kind of difficulty, of being hard or impossible or agonizing to get one's mind round".⁴⁴ We can clearly see how this is related to Coetzee's story, where Elizabeth is agonized by the way she perceives the suffering of animals and the responses of people around her to it. It also exposes the inability of reasoning and argumentation to arouse the relevant shift of the perception. Diamond's approach proceeds in a way in which the difficulty of animal question "itself expresses a mode of understanding of the kind of animal we are, and indeed of the moral life of this kind of animal".⁴⁵

⁴³ P. Singer (ed.), *In Defense of Animals. The Second Wave*.

⁴⁴ C. Diamond, *The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy*, pp. 45–46.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

In her earlier paper “Eating meat and eating people”⁴⁶ Diamond seeks to find grounds for a novel approach to the animal question. A classical approach, framed in the language of interests, rights and species, introduces confusion in the relationship between human and non-human animals on the one hand and one the other hand between humans themselves. Diamond argues that the fact that we refuse to eat human meat (or that we at least we find the idea extremely repulsive) is not a simple consequence of our non-readiness to kill or torture people, or to be persuaded by their rights and interest. The wrong that we perceive in such action is not a mere consequence of being a violation of rights or disregard of interests. For Diamond the fact that we think that it is wrong to kill a person in order to eat it and our belief that a person is not something to eat are deeply connected. A classical approach can only make sense of the analogy that just as it is wrong to kill a person for meat it is wrong to raise and kill an animal to eat, but it sees nothing inherently wrong in eating animal meat (e.g. in the case of a painless death of a wild animal or alike). For Diamond the analogy should be the same in the case of nonhuman animals, which is to see how the fact that we refuse killing and eating nonhuman animals is related to the sense that a nonhuman animal is not something to eat.

In answering the animal question we should not reduce our answers to just a single morally important or decisive relationship. There is a plurality of morally relevant relationships and each has its meaning inside a particular form of life.⁴⁷ For Diamond our relationship with non-human animal can be framed as a relationship of our fellow creature or a companion, which may be sought as company.⁴⁸ Such a notion of a creature is not a biological one, but a moral one, and one that is crucially connected with our understanding of ourselves. “The response to animals as our fellows in mortality, in life on this earth [...], depends on a conception of *human* life. It is an extension of non-biological notion of what human life is”.⁴⁹ As such it takes us beyond moral notions of

⁴⁶ C. Diamond, *Eating Meat and Eating People*, pp. 319–334.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 325.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 328–329.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 329.

rights, justice or interest, towards respect, dignity, pity, companionship and mutual dependence.

What establishes this relationship between us and nonhuman animals is a sense of vulnerability and mortality, which we share with them as connected to being a living body.⁵⁰ When we perceive and treat nonhuman animals as objects, we fail to see injustice as injustice on the level of relationship with them and we stick to interests and rights. We can shift this perspective only by recognizing our common vulnerability (remember Elizabeth and her wound that she hides beneath her clothes, a wound that is inherent in her having a body), which emerges on the most raw and direct level. In the case of Elizabeth Costello there is a striking rawness “that pushes her moral response to our treatment of animals beyond propositional argument – and sometimes beyond the decorum of polite society”.⁵¹ “The awareness we each have of being a living body, being ‘alive to the world’, carries with it the exposure to the bodily sense of vulnerability to death, sheer animal vulnerability, the vulnerability we share with them. This vulnerability is capable of panicking us. To be able to acknowledge it at all, let alone as shared, is wounding; but acknowledging it as shared with other animals, in the presence of what we do to them, is capable not only of panicking on but also isolating one, as Elizabeth Costello is isolated. Is there any difficulty in seeing why we should not prefer to return to the moral debate, in which the livingness and death of animals enter as facts that we treat as relevant in this or that way, not as presences that may unseat our reason?”⁵² Animal question is thus genuinely marked with the difficulty of reality that “lies in the apparent resistance by reality to one’s ordinary mode of life, including one’s ordinary modes of thinking: to appreciate the difficulty is to feel oneself being shouldered out of how one thinks, how one is apparently supposed to think, or to have a sense of the inability of thought to encompass what it is attempting to reach.”⁵³ The prevalent approaches in moral theory establish a too wide gap between

⁵⁰ C. Diamond, *The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy*, p. 74.

⁵¹ C. Wolfe, Introduction: Exposures, in: *Philosophy and Animal Life*. Columbia University Press, New York 2008, p. 12.

⁵² C. Diamond, *The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy*, p. 74.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

rights and related justice on one hand and compassion, love, pity and sensitivity on the other. The very notion of (in)justice requires a level of established compassion and a loving relationship towards a being that can suffer injustices. The talk about right is sensible to institute when we fail to establish that.

Similarly Cavell discusses the same difficulty of reality and we saw in the case of Elizabeth, how this is related to the difficult of experienced reality around her.⁵⁴ Commenting Diamond Cavell says that he sees her “as raising a question of [...] inordinate knowledge, knowledge whose importunateness can seem excessive in its expression, in contrast to mere or unobtrusive knowledge, as though for some the concept of eating animals has no particular interest (arguably another direction of questionable – here defective–expression)”.⁵⁵ He too notes the perplexity and anxiety that can arise due to the gap between philosophy and practices. His expression of scepticism about other mind is in a way central to his thought,⁵⁶ and at this point we can link his thought to the animal question. If scepticism about other minds is connected with our own barriers and failures to acknowledge their reality,⁵⁷ then the link with morality is maintained, since there remains an important connection between responsibility and illusion or self-deception. When the later persist we are seemingly relived of any responsibility, but this is not really so, since we ourselves are to be blamed for such self-deception. It is not a case of a simple mistake about the nature of reality around us. And addressing the animal question in the most direct way, just like Elizabeth does, helps in elimination of this self-deception. Is this what Elizabeth’s son John has in mind, when he promises her that it will soon be over? Or is it that her feelings of estrangement and inability to reconcile with the world around her will be over with her death? Given the persistence of

⁵⁴ I. Hacking, Conclusion: Deflections, in: *Philosophy and Animal Life*. Columbia University Press, New York 2008.

⁵⁵ S. Cavell, *Companionable Thinking*, 95.

⁵⁶ S. Cavell, *The Claim or Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.

⁵⁷ R. B. Goodman, “Encountering Cavell: the Education of a Grownup”, in: N. Saito and P. Standish (eds.): *Stanley Cavell and the Education of Grownups*, Fordham University Press, New York 2012, p. 61.

the way we (fail to) see nonhuman animals, we should be afraid that in this regard death prevails over words and powerlessness of philosophy.

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