



HAL
open science

Living with animals, living as an animal

Anne Le Goff

► **To cite this version:**

Anne Le Goff. Living with animals, living as an animal. Language, Ethics and Animal Life : Wittgenstein and Beyond, Bloomsbury, pp.124-138, 2012. hal-03911470

HAL Id: hal-03911470

<https://hal.science/hal-03911470>

Submitted on 15 Feb 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - ShareAlike 4.0 International License

Le Goff, A., *Living with Animals, Living as an Animal*. In Forsberg, N., Burley, M., Hamalainen, N. (eds), *Language, Ethics and Animal Life: Wittgenstein and Beyond*. New York: Bloomsbury, 124-138

Living with Animals, Living as an Animal

Anne Le Goff

There is a whole bestiary to be found in Wittgenstein's writings. Grasshoppers, for example, appear in the *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* (II). The way they are used is quite representative for the part played in general by animals in Wittgenstein's writings:

23. "Human beings think, grasshoppers don't." This means something like: the concept 'thinking' refers to human life, not to that of grasshoppers. And one could impart this to a person who doesn't understand the English word "thinking" and perhaps believes erroneously that it refers to something grasshoppers do.

24. "Grasshoppers don't think." Where does this belong? Is it an article of faith, or does it belong to natural history? If the latter, it ought to be a sentence something like: "Grasshoppers can't read and write." This sentence has a clear meaning, and even though it is perhaps never used, still it is easy to imagine a use for it.¹

The point is not about grasshoppers themselves; rather, it is about human psychology and

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, vol. 2, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), p. 6.

language. Grasshoppers play the role of a “control group” that makes clear by contrast a feature possessed by human beings and not by grasshoppers, namely thinking. Animal forms of life in general constitute an “object of comparison” that helps us distinguish features of our language-games, or of our own human “form of life.”² “Where does [the statement ‘Grasshoppers don’t think’] belong” and what kind of knowledge is expressed by it? Wittgenstein suggests it might be pronounced as an article of faith – faith in a non-observable capacity of grasshoppers – but he does not endorse this thought. If it is to be a piece of natural history, we need to substitute for the original statement an observable version of it, such as: “Grasshoppers can’t read and write.” Though the sentence has a meaning and we can imagine a context where it could be used (for example, said to a child who tries to teach her captured grasshopper how to read), it does not tell us much about grasshoppers and can hardly be considered as a fact of natural history since it could be applied to an infinity of things, more exactly to anything that is not *us*. This kind of statement about the animal does not bring any knowledge to bear on the animal, it merely places it in comparison to us.

Yet, it is not by chance that a grasshopper and not a table, say, is taken as a comparison point. The proposition that “Human beings think, tables don’t” is just as true as the original one. To state the difference with grasshoppers defines our concept of a human being in a way that stating it in relation to tables would not. While one can easily imagine a context where it would be relevant to compare human beings to tables, this comparison is not obviously meaningful. It seems that it is at least in a minimal way relevant to compare ourselves to grasshoppers. The reason why Wittgenstein uses animals for the

2 However, the knowledge of the word “thinking” gained by the present contrast is quite limited, for there are many things that human beings do and grasshoppers do not do (for instance, to run). The contrast does not define the word “thinking.”

purpose of comparison is that they share something with us beyond the mere fact of being alive (which is, of course, also a status shared by plants); that is, they possess *forms* of life that are at least somewhat similar to ours. It makes them appropriate for contrasting with, and bringing out specific features of the human form of life. Animals are in a sense our privileged others.

Cora Diamond and John McDowell, both profoundly influenced by Wittgenstein's work, recognize the importance of the idea that a human being is an animal. For both of them it entails a reflection on animal life in general and leads them to face the question of what philosophy can say about animal life. I want to take a closer look at the competing understandings of these questions that they offer. McDowell thinks that a human animal life is to be conceived as radically different from all other animal lives. Human life is the subject matter of philosophy, whereas animal life is not. For Diamond, the idea of human beings as animals means that we share a great deal with animals. To conceive of one implies, for philosophy, to conceive of the other.

In exploring these two perspectives, I will focus on what Diamond calls a "difficulty of reality."³ Cases of extreme difficulty with reality reveal something of our ordinary way of being in the world, and particularly of our having a life. Diamond delineates the concept through a few literary examples and defines it in this way: such a difficulty arises in "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."⁴ In one of her examples, the difficulty directly concerns our relationship to animals. This example is the story by J. M. Coetzee, *The Lives of*

3 Cora Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," in Stanley Cavell, et al., *Philosophy and Animal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008). Diamond's essay was first published in *Partial Answers*, 1 (2003).

4 *Ibid.*, pp. 45–46.

Animals.⁵ The main character, the writer Elizabeth Costello, is horrified by the treatment we inflict on animals, to the point of being herself physically weakened. As in the other cases of difficulty of reality,⁶ her ordinary sense of reality collapses in front of something she cannot acknowledge as reality; this breakthrough casts light on a part of her that tends to be concealed: her being alive as an animal. McDowell has written a comment on Diamond's essay.⁷ It will be illuminating to consider both their accounts of this difficulty of reality, as it involves answering what it is to be a human animal or another animal. I will first briefly recall the main features of the example and how this difficulty of reality is also, according to Diamond, a difficulty of philosophy. At first sight, McDowell's understanding of the difficulty seems to match Diamond's. He develops a notion of the human animal as a rational or speaking animal. The crisis of one's ordinary relationship to reality results from one's inability to "capture" reality in language. Yet, to underline this feature leads one to undermine other crucial aspects of what it is to be a human (or nonhuman) animal. I will argue that McDowell's treatment of the difficulty is but another case of what Diamond calls a "deflection" of it: a deflection of our having a body, just like animals. Diamond opens another perspective for a philosophical conception of animal life in general through literature.

5 John Maxwell Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999). Republished as two chapters of the novel *Elizabeth Costello* (New York: Viking, 2003). I quote from the first edition, used by Diamond. The philosophical apparatus around the story in this edition is also part of her example.

6 I will not be able to broach here the other cases of difficulty of reality. Diamond takes as examples a poem by Ted Hughes that brings a sense of death at the core of life; absolute beauty; inexplicable goodness, as in Ruth Klüger's memoirs; a story by Mary Mann that brings "spikiness with morals"; Cavell's discussion of *The Winter's Tale* and *Othello* with respect to scepticism and knowledge of the other. Though Coetzee's story shows it the most clearly, all these cases are related to the fact of re-discovering one's being alive and the limitations it induces.

7 John McDowell, "Comment on Stanley Cavell's 'Companionable Thinking'," in *Philosophy and Animal Life*. As the title shows, McDowell's essay is actually a response to Cavell's essay on Diamond: Stanley Cavell, "Companionable Thinking," in *Philosophy and Animal Life*. Cavell's and McDowell's essays were first published in *Wittgenstein and the Moral Life: Essays in Honor of Cora Diamond*, ed. Alice Crary (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007).

1. Costello's example

In J. M. Coetzee's story *The Lives of Animals*, Elizabeth Costello, a famous writer, is invited to give two lectures at the University where her son is employed. The lectures are on our ill-treatment of animals in contemporary society, and especially in the meat industry. Costello's way of tackling the issue – on the basis of literary texts but above all in a very personal way – is disconcerting and embarrassing to her audience. The hostile reaction is at its most intense when she draws a comparison with the Holocaust.⁸

What is this story about? In the first edition, the story was published with the addition of scholarly philosophical comments.⁹ According to them, the story argues in favour of animal rights. Coetzee (who actually also read the stories as lectures) uses fiction to express arguments in order to vindicate a moral stance on a problem. The character of Costello is a literary device allowing him to embody a point of view that comes to expression during her lectures and her discussions with other characters. In that respect, Costello's own suffering could be interpreted as a rhetorical means of strengthening the argument. From this point of view, fiction is reduced to a "cloth[ing]"¹⁰ of ideas or arguments. Yet, such an interpretation does not make much sense from a literary point of view. Is *The Lives of Animals* simply part of an ideological novel like Voltaire's *Candide* or Diderot's *La Religieuse*? There is more to this story than an argumentative content, notably its complex characters (first of all, Elizabeth Costello) who are not reducible to mere mouthpieces for philosophical claims. Furthermore, it is not clear that Costello is providing arguments. Or if she tries to do so, she does not do a very good job of it. This

8 Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, pp. 19–22.

9 Comments by Amy Gutmann, Marjorie Garber, Peter Singer, Wendy Doniger, Barbara Smuts.

10 Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," p. 53.

becomes especially clear in her ambiguous use of the Holocaust comparison: though she thinks it allows her to ‘score,’ it attracts a great deal of hostility towards her. Even though she expected this reaction, she does not manage to make the others see the argumentative value of her point.¹¹ What we can see if we pay attention to the story itself is that Costello offers something: she lets her audience see *her*, as she is onstage, or rather she hands herself over to her audience, her person and her suffering *for* animals and (as Diamond points out) *as* an animal. While, according to certain academic conventions, the particular subjectivity of the speaker is expected to disappear behind the objective argument, Costello does not conceal herself behind the stories. She takes an emotional part in them. In the same way, the narrator lets us see her: he depicts her elderly body, the evident weariness of it.¹² In Diamond’s words, Coetzee’s lectures present “a kind of woundedness or hauntedness, a terrible rawness of nerves.”¹³ Costello is wounded by the perpetual wound we inflict on animals. As the notion of ‘wound’ makes clear, the difficulty is not only intellectual but it also affects her body. As the term ‘haunted’ suggests, it is not a problem she could put aside but it looms over her entire life.

What makes the wound terrible is her isolation: other people do not seem to feel the horror. Indeed, they can (or at least they think they can) deal argumentatively with it. As Diamond puts it, “one thing that wounds her is precisely the common and taken-for-granted mode of thought that ‘how we should treat animals’ is an ‘ethical issue’.”¹⁴ But to regard it as an ethical issue that can be argued for implies a distance between us, who

11 Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, p. 22: “Pardon me. I repeat. This is the last cheap point I will be scoring.” Why is it cheap scoring? Not because the argument is dubious, rather because her choice of weapon is not quite fair: it is a weapon her opponents do not agree on using. Still, she insists on using it for it is a valid, though unpleasant, argument.

12 See, for instance, the initial description of her in Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, p. 16.

13 Diamond, “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,” p. 47.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

reflect on and judge the issue, and them, the objects. The only possible response for Costello is, on the contrary, the absence of distance: the suffering with the animals as an animal herself. Though deeply ethical also, her words and attitudes do not constitute a response to an “ethical issue.” She rejects the argumentative discussion, regarding it as a way of avoiding the only correct response. This point comes sharply into view in her use of the analogy of the Holocaust. She embraces the inevitable consequence of being rejected by her interlocutors, of being isolated.

As Diamond shows, the commentators on Coetzee’s story miss the point just as Costello’s audience (Norma, Leahy...) miss it, building a sort of *mise en abyme* (mirroring effect). Inside the story, most of her interlocutors take Costello to be propounding arguments in an attempt to defend animal rights, while in fact she is doing something else. Similarly, commentators have generally taken Coetzee to be giving arguments, whereas *he too* is doing something else. Diamond describes these common forms of interpretation by invoking the Cavellian concept of deflection.¹⁵ Deflection is “what happens when we are moved from the appreciation, or attempt at appreciation, of a difficulty of reality to a philosophical or moral problem apparently in the vicinity.”¹⁶ The difficulty exemplified by Costello is not about an ethical problem that can be solved by taking into account the various requirements of all parties. It obtains at a much deeper level: it is not that something *in* reality is problematic (such as its being, or not being, morally wrong to eat animals); rather, reality itself has become a problem – our own existence has become a problem to us. To be deflected from the real difficulty means here not to take into account that we also have a body, that we also are animals. Commentators abstract themselves

15 Stanley Cavell, “Knowing and Acknowledging”, in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York: Scribner’s, 1969), pp. 247, 260.

16 Diamond, “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,” p. 57.

from their lives to reflect on an abstract question. By bringing the problem to a certain philosophical level, they avoid the real difficulty that is brought into view by the story, generically defined by Diamond as “the experience of the mind’s not being able to encompass something which it encounters.”¹⁷ The question is: in what exactly does the difficulty consist? Addressing this question will negatively provide an insight into our ordinary way of living and thinking. McDowell offers a serious philosophical account through his notion of the human being as a rational animal.

2. Speaking animals and “mere” animals

Human beings as rational animals

In the cases of difficulty of reality, McDowell glosses, “something we encounter defeats our ordinary capacity to get our minds around reality, that is, our capacity to capture reality in language.”¹⁸ The reason why these difficulties are so devastating is that language is our specific mode of being in the world. Reality is given to us in a linguistic shape. A difficulty of reality, in its resistance to our expressing it, puts in question our very existence as “speaking animals,” “The special kind of animal life we lead.”¹⁹ It is not only a partial failure; rather, our whole grip on reality – and, as a consequence, our conception of ourselves – is shattered. In another context, McDowell has expounded on this conception of the human being by means of the Aristotelian concept of a rational animal.²⁰ His idea is that becoming rational is “our way of actualizing ourselves as animals.”²¹ Our way of being animal is to be rational. Exercises of reason (or of “spontaneity,” in

17 Ibid., p. 44.

18 McDowell, “Comment on Stanley Cavell’s ‘Companionable Thinking,’” p. 134.

19 Ibid.

20 In John McDowell, *Mind and World*, second edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), Lectures IV and V, and in several subsequent articles and responses.

21 McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. 78.

McDowell's Kantian parlance) "belong to our mode of living."²² To put it differently, reason is a "second nature" to human beings. This idea of second nature aims to show how to understand rational capacities as autonomous (that is, non-reducible to physical or biological properties) and as natural: these capacities are natural in the sense that we have acquired them through our education without the intervention of any other (supernatural) factor. Language is the human being's way of existing, just as the beaver's own way of existing is to live in a semi-aquatic environment where, among other things, it builds dams. McDowell himself offers this analogy.²³ His point is not to claim that the beaver is like the human being. Quite the opposite; it is to show that the human being is like the beaver, in that she is also part of nature and inhabits the world in a specific way. This human way of inhabiting the world is language. The beaver acquires certain practices and abilities in response to the demands of its environment and in interaction with its congeners. In the same way, the human (rational) environment (with fellow humans) exerts a determining influence on the child's development. At the same time as the child learns how to behave in this world, she learns how to talk and think.

The examples identified by Diamond as "difficulties of reality" bring to view, in a negative light, that language and reason are our second nature. Costello lost her ordinary grip on reality through language. This is clear in the dialogue with her son at the very end of the text. Her son says he has not "had time to make sense of why [she has] become so intense about the animal business." Costello replies: "A better explanation ... is that I have not told you why, or dare not tell you. When I think of the words, they seem so outrageous that they are best spoken into a pillow or into a hole in the ground like King

²² Ibid.

²³ McDowell, "Comment on Stanley Cavell's 'Companionable Thinking'," p. 134.

Midas.”²⁴ Her familiar words, her life-long allies, have become “outrageous”, unrecognizable. What she sees and tells is the horrible way in which we daily treat “our fellow creatures” (as Diamond puts it in another context)²⁵. But, obviously, no one else understands the words she pronounces: she does not speak the same language as the others. Her own son does not understand her in this last discussion, as his choice of neutral words such as “the animal business” proves. They do not talk about the same thing. As Costello loses common language, the world collapses for her – the only possible world, the one of shared meanings. She faces the sort of difficulty of reality that, as McDowell puts it, “dislodges us from comfortably inhabiting our nature as speaking animals”.²⁶ This is all the more true of she who is an aged writer: her familiar world is language. She is no better than the king made donkey who, despite his looks, lost his own humanity. Costello is “unhinged,” says McDowell.²⁷ In this word, we can hear Wittgenstein's concept of hinge propositions.²⁸ Hinge propositions are the certainties around which all our other beliefs revolve, precisely because they remain fixed and never questioned. Costello's most intimate certainties collapse as she witnesses “a crime of stupefying proportions” being committed with everyone else's agreement.²⁹ All that is left to her is to note with despair: “I no longer know where I am.”³⁰

Difference from other animals

24 Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, p. 69.

25 Cora Diamond, “Eating Meat and Eating People,” in her *The Realistic Spirit* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 319–34, at pp. 328 ff.

26 McDowell, “Comment on Stanley Cavell's ‘Companionable Thinking’,” p. 134.

27 Ibid., p. 136. Diamond first uses this term in connection with Hughes' poem, in “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,” p. 58.

28 See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, translated by Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), §§341–346, 150–153.

29 Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, p. 69.

30 Ibid.

McDowell's use of the idea of second nature allows us to understand our possessing *logos* (i.e., both reason and language) as well as our being animals. Yet, if we are animals, it has to be in a very different sense from what he calls "mere" animals. Our specific (rational) capacities, though perfectly natural, dramatically distinguish our mode of life from the one of other animals. We need to resist the temptation to assume that there is a continuity between two kinds of animality, human animality and (so to speak) animal animality, a temptation voiced by John (Elizabeth Costello's son): "isn't there a position outside from which our doing our thinking and then sending out a Mars probe looks a lot like a squirrel doing its thinking and then dashing out and snatching a nut?"³¹ John's wife Norma, a philosopher, replies that such an idea, to the effect that "rational accounts are merely a consequence of the structure of the human mind ... is shallow relativism that impresses freshmen."³² This also is McDowell's stance: we need to resist jumping to identities from such similarities. The point of the analogy between the human being and the beaver needs to be carefully dissected: the analogy shows that it is as natural (in the full sense of the term) for the human being to talk and think as it is for the beaver to build dams. It does not show that reason or linguistic capacities are *of the same nature* as the beaver's dam-building abilities. The beaver is an animal adapted to its environment; the dam-building technique aims to provide a solution to a precise issue. Language-use is a wholly different ability that lets us access a wholly different space, the "space of reasons" or meaning.³³ McDowell makes use of a distinction he finds in Hans-Georg Gadamer: submission to an environment vs. orientation to the world.³⁴ Human beings differ from other animals

31 Ibid., p. 48.

32 Ibid.

33 McDowell borrows the concept of the "space of reasons" from Wilfrid Sellars; see McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. 5.

34 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, revised translation by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall (New York: Crossroads, 1992), pp. 438–56; in *Mind and World*, pp. 115–19.

because their education, instead of giving them control over their environment, opens the world to them. The world is the objective reality, while the environment is merely a source of satisfaction of subjective needs. “[M]erely animal life is shaped by goals whose control of the animal’s behaviour at a given moment is the immediate outcome of biological forces.”³⁵ Only rational human beings act under reasons and can thus be free of “enslavement to immediate biological imperatives.”³⁶ Of course, McDowell does not pretend that human actions would always result from a conscious weighing of reasons. But the point is that human beings can give a justification for their actions if required, while mere animals cannot.

Our having such different kinds of life means that we do not share anything with animals that could be understood as a ‘highest common factor.’³⁷ McDowell elaborates on this claim in the case of perception. While he acknowledges that we share with animals perception or a “perceptual sensitivity to our environment,”³⁸ he denies that we possess it in the same sense. As our perception “is taken into the ambit of the faculty of spontaneity,” we have it “in a special form,” – that is, a conceptual form.³⁹ The content of our perception is already conceptual, whereas it cannot be for animals since they do not have concepts. He gives the following example: a cat and a human being find on their way a wall with a hole in it.⁴⁰ Both will view the hole and both will be able to use it to go through to the other side of the wall. However, although it is the same thing that the cat and the human

35 McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. 115.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 117.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 113. McDowell uses this expression in the context of a defence of disjunctivism in perception. This supposed “highest common factor” is the “experiential content of a kind we share with mere animals”, that is “non-conceptual” content (*Ibid.*, p. 114).

Though he does not use it in his reflection on animal perception, the problem is similar: is there a basic “intake” (i.e., non-conceptual, or “given,” mode of experience) shared by animals and humans?

38 *Ibid.*, p. 64.

39 *Ibid.*

40 John McDowell, “What Myth?” in *The Engaged Intellect* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), pp. 314 ff.

being perceive, their perceptions of it differ. The description according to which they perceive the hole is true for both only at a superficial level. The cat's perception and my perception are only homonyms. The same concepts (of hole, wall, etc.) are not in play in both of the descriptions that we may give. In such a case, "[m]y experience [as a human being] would be world-disclosing and so conceptual in form," while "[t]he cat's perceptual intake" would not be an experience of the world, only a mere response to an affordance.⁴¹

Accordingly, philosophical remarks about animals can only be of the type exemplified by Wittgenstein's remark on grasshoppers: negative remarks in comparison to us. This is all that McDowell offers (animals don't have a world, they don't perceive or act in the full sense of these terms, etc.). He concedes that concepts like "orientation" or "proto-subjectivity" can be useful to make sense of animal behaviour, but only in cognitive science and not in philosophy, where they should be reserved for describing the life of the beings who can access reasons.⁴² Reality is divided into two realms: the realm of so-called first nature, defined as the domain of the natural sciences, and the realm of reasons. As animals are fully contained within the so-called first nature, they are apt to be studied by certain of the natural sciences (such as zoology, cognitive ethology, and comparative psychology). Philosophy, meanwhile, is competent only to investigate second nature.

Yet, this radical gap among living beings sounds unfair both to animals and to human beings. It is first to be noticed – though I will not develop this line of criticism here – that McDowell's distinction is based on a very questionable picture of animal life as enslaved to life-pressure, and hence is hardly able to account for the creativity and intelligence displayed in many animal behaviours. Moreover, to identify our specific mode of living

41 Ibid., p. 321.

42 See McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. 121.

with our possessing language as McDowell tends to do is itself questionable. I will develop this second line of criticism below.

3. Living animals

Bodies

McDowell is right to underline that at the core of our contingent, animal existence there is language. However, he tends to go beyond this fruitful thesis to claim that exercises of reason *make up* our mode of living. This claim is made at the expense of acknowledging what we might share with animals. According to him, our being animal is precisely our *not* being animal in the sense of the other animals. This picture of human life leads him to overlook the complexity of the cases of difficulty of reality. The difficulty faced by Costello is not only an intellectual but also a physical experience. McDowell agrees to a certain extent when he writes: “For Costello, it becomes a problem to live her particular case of the lives of animals: a life in which words are not just a distinguishing mark, as they are for human animals in general, but the central element. Her being as the animal she is, which is her bodily being, becomes a wound.”⁴³ On the face of it, McDowell agrees with Diamond: Costello does not only suffer *for* the animals but also herself *as* an animal. But what does the wound consist of according to him? The wound is inflicted upon her as a speaking being, and is all the more severe for Costello who is a writer, an extreme form of a language-using animal. It is because the wound touches her at the core that her being as a whole is affected. In McDowell’s reading, it is only because she *also* is an animal that Costello consequently and secondarily is hit in her body and life. She suffers as an animal, not because she shares something with the other animals, but, on the

43 McDowell, “Comment to Stanley Cavell’s ‘Companionable Thinking’,” p. 134.

contrary, because she differs from them and suffers as a linguistic being.

This is not what Coetzee's text says. Costello's wound is not a consequence of her linguistic incapacity. The wound is double-edged: it encompasses her whole being in the world, both as bodily and linguistic – her whole life. As Diamond remarks, Elizabeth Costello is a wounded animal *herself*. “She describes herself as an animal exhibiting but not exhibiting, to a gathering of scholars, a wound.”⁴⁴ The text repeatedly lays bare her animality and her non-metaphorical wound. For instance, the initial description of her only mentions her being “fleshy” and “white-haired.”⁴⁵ The text shows us a woman who looks more and more fragile as the story goes on, “the woman with the haunted mind and the raw nerves.”⁴⁶ In the end, she cannot but collapse in tears. To be sure, part of her suffering is her inability to find herself in language. But this inability is inseparable from her vulnerability as an animal. A strong moment in her lecture is when she says:

“For instants at a time ... I know what it is to be a corpse. The knowledge repels me. It fills me with terror; I shy away from it, I refuse to entertain it. ... The knowledge we have is not abstract: ‘All humans are mortal, I am a human being, therefore I am mortal’—but embodied. For a moment we *are* that knowledge.”⁴⁷

Even though words are failing her, she has a knowledge and a particularly clear one. It has the devastating clarity of pain. It is too hard to examine it by thought, words are weak; but she can undergo it – more exactly, she cannot help undergoing it, to the point of *being* this knowledge. Instead of mastering her knowledge, she is possessed by it, as by a demon

44 Diamond, “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,” p. 47.

45 Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, p. 16.

46 Diamond, “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,” p. 48.

47 Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, p. 32.

that annihilates everything else in her.

Deflection

McDowell, though he would of course not deny that their having a body is important to the existence of human beings, regards it as a mere fact. This is only a contingent fact because it does not define us; what defines us is our reason. Though our bodily makeup imposes some constraints and limits on our perception and action in the world, it does not contribute to defining them. Our perceptual and active capacities are appropriately described as rational. Accordingly, Costello's bodily pain is merely a collateral consequence of her existential suffering, not a part of it. But to make "our own bodies mere facts," Diamond claims, is a deflection from the real difficulty into a well-delimited philosophical problem.⁴⁸ Whereas McDowell claims that where we are "at home" is "in the space of reasons,"⁴⁹ "Coetzee's lectures ask us to inhabit a body."⁵⁰ Our body is one (not the only one) of the places where the never-ending debate between the animal and its world is at play. We cannot understand what is at stake with the difficulties of reality if we do not take the body into account. Diamond underlines "how much this coming apart of thought and reality belongs to flesh and blood."⁵¹ If the life and death of animals can "unhinge" our reason, it is not as facts that will be judged relevant or not, but as presences one cannot escape.

The philosophers criticized by Diamond are deflected from the real difficulty by moving it to the level of ethical issues and attribution of rights. They make the animals they are concerned with into abstract "living beings," rather than real-life pigs, apes, or

48 Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," p. 59.

49 McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. 125, *et passim*.

50 Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," p. 59.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 78.

pandas. Each abstract living being possesses sentience (in Singer's Utilitarian perspective)⁵² or is a "subject-of-a-life" (in Regan's Kantian perspective).⁵³ McDowell is deflected in another way: he is deflected from the questions raised by animals (about our relationship to them and about ourselves) by problems in the philosophy of perception and action. The only issue for him is whether we should grant perception and action to animals in the same sense as that in which we grant them to ourselves. As his answer is negative, philosophy's task is to ground the claim of the anthropological difference. Yet, McDowell would not acknowledge that he is deflected. He would simply reply that he and Diamond deal with different philosophical issues and that our having a body in the sense emphasized by Diamond, and our being animals as such, are not *his* problems. Animal life is not a topic of its own in his work, it only comes about as a possibly problematic consequence of his philosophy of perception. But this is exactly what Diamond describes as 'deflection': the deflected problem does not come into view at all as something relevant and that needs to be faced. McDowell's case is all the more interesting because, contrary to many philosophers, he does pay attention to our animality and strives to take it into account. Yet, he does not manage to grasp the whole extent of it.

Exposure

What we are deflected from is, in a general sense, our "exposure." Diamond borrows this concept from Cavell.⁵⁴ "Being exposed," regarding a concept, means that "my assurance

52 See Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: Random House, 1975).

53 See Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

54 Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), pp. 433, 439.

in applying the concept isn't provided for me."⁵⁵ There is no authority to which we can appeal to guarantee that we are applying it correctly, besides that of our own judgement. McDowell's idea that we are at home in the space of reasons is our ordinary illusion. The cases of difficulty of reality reveal how this "being at home" is precarious. They are a "repudiation of the everyday."⁵⁶ The failure of our common ways of thinking and talking reveal their deep and usually invisible fragility. We are always at risk of losing our (bodily as well as linguistic) grip on reality.

Diamond applies Cavell's concept to the case of one's relationship to animals. Circumstances entitle me to treat a certain concept of animal as relevant rather than another one (rabbit as a pet or rabbit that is raised for food). Nothing or no one else can guarantee that I am applying the correct concept of animal in the particular situation I am in. No general principle is available to me, nor are any essential properties to be found in the animals that would *tell* me what to do. This leaves us with only our own responsibility to act in the appropriate way, "our own making the best of it."⁵⁷ It does not mean, however, that nothing is justifiable and therefore everything is permitted. The point is that there is no justification outside of the particular non-ideal context, which means there is no ultimate justification. It also entails that our attitudes are bound not to be fully consistent: "it may at best be a kind of bitter-tasting compromise."⁵⁸ Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello is an example of someone who acknowledges her exposure. She feels very strongly – even too strongly for her own well-being – her responsibility towards animals as she explicitly expresses in her lectures and personal discussions, and implicitly in her whole attitude. Nevertheless, her awareness does not allow her to fully escape her exposure; even she

55 Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," p. 71.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid., p. 72.

58 Ibid.

compromises: as she herself points out, she carries a leather purse and wears leather shoes.⁵⁹

There is also what I would call a second-order exposure, felt by Costello and made reflectively obvious by the difficulty posed by our relationship to animals: namely, our having bodies. Our exposure lies in the fact that our animal life is by definition vulnerable. We discover it when “we find ourselves ... in a shuddering awareness of death and life together.”⁶⁰ As Diamond puts it: “The awareness we have of being a living body, being ‘alive to the world’, carries with it exposure to the bodily sense of vulnerability to death, sheer animal vulnerability, the vulnerability we share with them.”⁶¹ This exposure lies at the bottom of the difficulty of our relationship to animals. Costello’s special difficulty does not arise only from a failure of understanding or conceiving (as McDowell implies), nor from a sense of her absolute responsibility in defining who should die or live (as Diamond’s above definition of the concept of exposure suggests), but rather from her being *both* the animal that kills and the animal that is killed. In this connection, a passage from which I quoted earlier is relevant:

“For instants at a time,” his [i.e., John’s] mother is saying, “I know what it is to be a corpse. The knowledge repels me. It fills me with terror; I shy away from it, refuse to entertain it.

All of us have such moments, particularly as we grow older. ... For a moment we *are* that knowledge. We live the impossible: we live beyond our death, look back on it, yet look back as only a dead self can.”⁶²

59 Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, p. 43.

60 Diamond, “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,” p. 73.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 74.

62 Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, p. 32.

Knowledge of death in the strong sense is not factual knowledge of something that befalls people we know or love and that will befall us one day. It is knowledge of one's death as a premonitory experience of death in life. From these instants, Costello⁶³ has gained knowledge of what it is to be a living being that is dying, like the cattle in the slaughterhouse. In the same way, she says about Hughes' poem, "The Jaguar:"⁶⁴ "When we read the jaguar poem, when we recollect it afterwards in tranquillity, we are for a brief while the jaguar. He ripples within us, he takes over our body, he is us."⁶⁵ Literature allows one to experience another being's life, in this case the imprisoned one. But her tragedy – "difficulty" seems too weak a word – is that she also is the perpetrator of their death or ill-treatment inasmuch as she belongs to the community of human beings. She is both the killed pig and the killer; she stands inside the jaguar cage and outside it.⁶⁶ As Diamond puts it, "she describes herself as an animal exhibiting but not exhibiting ... a wound which her clothes cover up, but which is touched on in every word she speaks."⁶⁷ Though she feels a kinship with all these suffering animals, she cannot deny she belongs to the human community that is the author of their ills. She accepts it, putting on clothes to conceal her body. Her language is by definition a human language; it fails to articulate what she means to say and yet she has no other way of expressing herself.

Can philosophy say anything about animals?

This exposure, so vividly exemplified in the character of Elizabeth Costello and in the

63 She is here designated, not by her name, but by "his mother." The mention of her relation to her son highlights her being a living being, in lieu of her role as a great writer and speaker, a mind.

64 Ted Hughes, "The Jaguar," in *Ravens* (London: Rainbow Press, 1979), cited in *The Lives of Animals*, pp. 50 ff.

65 Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, p. 53.

66 Guard and onlooker, a standpoint brought to view by another poem she mentions, Rilke's "The Panther." Rainer Maria Rilke, "The Panther," in *New Poems*, translated by Edward Snow (San Francisco: North Point Press, 2001), mentioned in *The Lives of Animals*, p. 50.

67 Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," p. 47.

difficulties of reality in general, is something difficult to contemplate, let alone to think through. What if, as Diamond puts it, philosophy “does not know how to treat a wounded body as anything but a fact[?]”⁶⁸ It seems that philosophy, as a production and use of concepts, will only miss what is “flesh and blood,”⁶⁹ emotions and feelings: that is, not only the wounded body, but the body per se. In that case, there would indeed be nothing more for philosophy to say about animals than something like “Grasshoppers don’t think.” Not because to say something more would be the task of cognitive science, as McDowell suggests, but because what is to be thought slips out of the hands of philosophy.

Diamond is well aware of this difficulty of philosophy and she gives Simone Weil as an example of a philosopher who maintained an awareness of something that should not be treated as a fact, namely affliction.⁷⁰ Diamond herself gives another example of how philosophy can gain this awareness through literature. Writers and poets let us “inhabit” the body of “an imagined other,”⁷¹ and such a feat is particularly relevant in the case of animals. Costello tries to let her audience come into the body of the jaguar through Hughes’ poem or into the body of Kafka’s Red Peter. Coetzee invites us to be in another animal’s body, namely Costello’s. Yet, the purpose of literary imagination is not to fully identify with the animal in question, not with Costello and even less with the other nonhuman animals. In Diamond’s words, we have “a sense of astonishment and incomprehension that there should be beings so like us, so unlike us.”⁷² This sense of astonishment is also part of the difficulty of reality concerning animals. McDowell (for

68 Ibid., p. 59.

69 Ibid., p. 78.

70 Ibid., pp. 74–76. See *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, ed. Siân Miles (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1986).

71 Diamond, “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,” p. 59.

72 Ibid., p. 61.

instance), in insisting on a radical difference between speaking human beings and merely biological animals, strives to remove this sense of astonishment. Literature, on the other hand, does not deny this sense of astonishment; rather, it helps us cultivate it. When the jaguar “ripples within us,” he comes for a brief while, thanks to poetry, and then goes. We do not entirely become the jaguar. Literature allows us to move in the in-between: to enter someone else’s emotions, hopes, fears, etc. – almost to be someone else – for a little while. This idea of “beings so like us, so unlike us” is implicit in Wittgenstein’s remark about grasshoppers. The remark highlights the radical difference between two forms of life – one that involves thought and the other that does not. But this difference takes place against the background of a deep similarity – namely, the having of a life. While Wittgenstein’s observation is bound to be merely negative and non-informative about grasshoppers, literature offers the opportunity for positive statements besides those made by biology or ethology. Such statements need a context in which to be made, literature provides it.

Let us consider as an example the poem “Titmouse” by Walter de la Mare, commented on by Diamond.⁷³ The poet finds in the bird a “happy company.” He has made a birdhouse for the titmouse to “take his commons there.” They both share housing (“commons”) and, in the etymological meaning of “company,” break bread together. The bird takes part in these basic features of social life. As Diamond puts it, the titmouse is a “fellow creature” for the poet. He calls him “this tiny son of life,” bringing into view their kinship, the kinship of two sons of life in different guises. It will probably be objected that such characterizations of the bird are nothing but anthropomorphic. It may seem to some that by referring to a titmouse as “company” we are merely projecting a feature of our form

73 Diamond, “Eating Meat and Eating People,” pp. 328 ff.

of life onto it. It does not bring us any further from ourselves nor closer to the animal than “grasshoppers don’t think.” But this critique proceeds from a view similar to the one implicit in McDowell, a view that the only legitimate perspective on animals is a natural-scientific, biological, one. Yet, Diamond remarks: “it is not a *fact* that a titmouse *has a life*; if one speaks that way it expresses a particular relation within a broadly specifiable range to titmice. It is no more biological than it would be a biological point should you call another person a ‘traveller between life and death’: that is not a biological point dressed up in poetical language.”⁷⁴ It is clear that the concept of life with respect to human beings is not merely (nor mainly) a biological one. In most of our usual practices towards animals and ways of considering them we do not treat them as mere organisms. This conception of animal life as biological actually begs the question. An illustration of this prejudice was given by ethology. Jane Goodall, a pioneer of field ethology, broke one of ethology’s long-standing customs by giving names instead of numbers to the Gombe chimpanzees she was observing.⁷⁵ She knew she would be accused of anthropomorphism and sentimentality, and of engaging in “non-scientific” behaviour. It should first be noticed that it is probably quite illusory to believe that an observer would feel nothing for the individuals she or he observes, but this is not what she said in her defence. She said that it was easier for her work. It is easier, indeed, because the chimpanzees are individuals, and not merely specimens of a species. In order to observe their personalities and relationships with each other, she needed to be able to recognize them. Nothing prevents us from using non-biological concepts to conceive of animal life, such as “company,” and it even seems necessary sometimes to use such concepts to accurately describe animal life. To call the titmouse a “son of life” is not merely to use a metaphor.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 330.

⁷⁵ See Jane Goodall, *In the Shadow of Man* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988), p. 32.

It expresses a kinship between the human being and the animal, such that there is something one can share with a bird or another animal that one cannot share with a piece of furniture or a rock. The bird is not only there, he is alive and unpredictable; this is why he can be company.

Though it truly is a challenge for philosophy to conceptually grasp animal life without distorting its meaning, it is both necessary and possible to try. Necessary, firstly, because even when philosophy does not mean to say anything about animals, it cannot help doing so in connection to human life. This is what McDowell's example reveals. No full understanding of human life can be achieved without taking into account what human beings share with animals. Secondly, Diamond has shown that a philosophical thinking of animals is not impossible, provided philosophy makes good use of other perspectives on animals. Literature, in particular, offers a very fertile resource⁷⁶.

⁷⁶ I warmly thank the editors for their very helpful input.