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Erin Mellor '17

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# **WILLFUL IGNORANCE, EMBODIMENT, AND THE LIMITATIONS OF SYMPATHY: J.M. COETZEE ON ANIMAL CRUELTY THROUGH FICTIONAL INTERLOCUTORS**

**Erin Mellor**

Many animal rights activists agree that pain is universally felt, spanning human-animal barriers to encompass all living, or embodied, things. Elizabeth Costello, the aging female novelist central to J. M. Coetzee's novella, utilizes a series of metaphors in her lecture *The Philosophers and the Animals* to compare animal suffering to human suffering. Coetzee uses the character of Costello as a lens for addressing the ethical boundaries of horror and what it means to not only be cognizant of immense suffering, but to willfully ignore "places of death" as an entire community.<sup>1</sup> I will explore the ethical boundary between human suffering and animal cruelty as seen in the metaphors presented by Coetzee's Costello in her first lecture, *The Philosophers and the Animals*: the comparison of the meat industry to the Third Reich, and mass animal slaughter to the Nazi death camps. It is too reductionist to claim that Costello is a stand-in for Coetzee, yet they share similar life experiences and a pessimistic outlook on the ability of society to progress. The latter distances himself from his own beliefs by utilizing fictional interlocutors, allowing for an expansive examination of the multiplicities inherent in hege-

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<sup>1</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 35.

## *Furman Humanities Review*

monic evaluations of suffering, the nonpower inherent in power.<sup>2</sup>

Is it ethical, from a philosophical standpoint as well as a literary one, to draw upon the horrors of the Holocaust in a metaphor referencing the mass slaughter of animals? Are there specific moments in history that are too appalling and deeply personal to ever appropriately use as a point of comparison in a contemporary argument? Coetzee clearly takes the issue of human mistreatment of animals seriously, as his protagonist's chosen metaphors equate human cruelty towards animals with the calculated murder of millions of Jews in the Holocaust. Coetzee presented his pseudo-lecture, the novella itself, at the 1997-98 Tanner Lectures at Princeton University, both revealing and veiling his opinions on the way human beings treat animals in our capitalistic society.<sup>3</sup> Through Costello's chosen metaphors, we see Coetzee's own moral opprobrium with the meat industry, as well as his understanding of how audiences, representative of society in microcosm, perceive and respond to his arguments. The comparison between the victims of fascism and factory farms is not inherently objectionable when in the form of a literary device, solely because figurative devices in literature do not carry a burden of proof. They are meant to illustrate an idea, not substantiate it. It is too simple to claim that the comparison lessens the tragedy of the Holocaust and the pain felt; in fact, this line of reasoning precludes the

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<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 2 (2002): 396. Derrida explores multiple questions with the reader on the ability of animals to feel suffering. He asks, "What of the vulnerability felt on the basis of this inability? What is this nonpower at the heart of power? What is its quality of modality? How should one account for it? What right should be accorded it? To what extent does it concern us? Being able to suffer is no longer a power, it is a possibility without power, a possibility of the impossible." I think it is productive to engage the possibility that Coetzee used his lecture to respond to Derrida's ideas.

<sup>3</sup> Amy Gutmann, introduction to *The Lives of Animals*, ed. J. M. Coetzee (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 3.

acknowledgment that animals have souls and can thus suffer. However, what metrics exist for measuring the ethical applicability of figurative language, the level of sensitivity surrounding historically charged words and phrases? In what ways does Coetzee himself escape culpability because he presents the comparison through the words of a fictional lecturer?

Costello's metaphor in her lecture *The Philosophers and Animals*, while controversial, aptly illuminates the tragedy of the meat industry. It helps underline the gravity of how humans oppress nonhuman animals and escape culpability. However, one reason Costello's metaphor is so shocking—and can be argued insensitive—is because she does not assure her audience of the ways in which her comparison *could be* perceived as offensive. She fails to address the ways in which history integrates itself into present discussions, so that the Holocaust is not less important because it happened in the past and cannot be reconciled (as the meat industry of the present day can.) Her fatal flaw is in replacing an equal sign with a greater than sign, claiming that the meat industry is worse than what the Third Reich unrolled. She states that “an enterprise of degradation, cruelty, and killing” exists that “rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of, indeed dwarfs it” (21).<sup>4</sup>

However, Costello does not discomfit her audience because this correlation is ungrounded, or because she does not qualify her subject matter enough. Rather, Costello's lecture makes her audience uncomfortable because it “breaks with the expected academic norms” thus provoking “awkward emotional exchanges” as pointed out by Frances Mascia-Lees, an American anthropologist.<sup>5</sup> We can see this in the decisive letter Abraham Stern, a professor at Appleton College, sends to Costello, calling her out for trading “on the horrors of the camps in a cheap way” and insulting “the memory of the dead”

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<sup>4</sup> Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, 21.

<sup>5</sup> Frances E. Mascia-Lees and Patricia Sharpe, “Introduction to Cruelty, Suffering, Imagination: The Lessons of J. M. Coetzee” *American Anthropologist* 108 (2006): 84.

## *Furman Humanities Review*

(50).<sup>6</sup> Coetzee presents us with a protagonist who addresses her audience directly, claiming no pretense. She deviates from polite conversation with an apology that sounds much more like an indictment, asking her audience to “pardon the tastelessness of the following” before theorizing about the body fat of Treblinka’s victims being used as an ingredient in soap (21-22).<sup>7</sup> We are so shocked by her words that we cannot process the greater meaning behind them. The metaphor falls flat.

From a historical point of view, Costello’s metaphor is appropriate. According to Boria Sax, the term “Holocaust” originally denoted “a Hebrew sacrifice in which the entire animal was given to Yahweh to be consumed with fire” (156).<sup>8</sup> In a weird twist, a form of animal exploitation—animal killed for spiritual offering—became the chosen metaphor for the murder of millions of Jews by the Nazi Germans. The very term “Holocaust” alludes to and denotes animal suffering. And if literature seeks to illuminate the human experience and the ways in which we move through the world, metaphors help elucidate what lies within us. David Sztybel, a philosopher specializing in animal ethics, wrote an intriguing essay defending the metaphor of the Holocaust victims to animals in the meat industry. He claims that in asking if we dare point out “the chilling similarities between how Jews were treated in the Holocaust and how animals are treated in the present day” we are really asking if human beings are of “superior moral significance relative to nonhuman animals” (98).<sup>9</sup> Sztybel’s selected similarities stand the test: displacement, separation from family, voicelessness, unfathomable amount of deaths, namelessness, transported in confined places, and a disowning of responsibility by the perpetrators, coupled with conditioned

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<sup>6</sup> Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, 50.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-22.

<sup>8</sup> Boria Sax, *Animals in the Third Reich: Pets, Scapegoats, and the Holocaust* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 156.

<sup>9</sup> David Sztybel, “Can the Treatment of Animals Be Compared to the Holocaust?” *Ethics and the Environment* 11 (2006): 98.

indifference. This removes the systems of power that we see in differentiating “man” from “animal” and replaces both with the identifier of *sufferer*. And yet, instead of enumerating the horrors of the meat industry and its procedures, Costello discusses facts about the Holocaust and leaves it up to those in attendance to draw the parallels, the very people she earlier notes whom can only “comprehend the deaths of others” by thinking of the victims “one at a time” (19).<sup>10</sup>

Audience members at *The Philosophers and the Animals* lecture view Elizabeth Costello as removed from society, entertaining if not completely delusional. She does not really have much power in effecting change or elevating her audience to the state of heightened moral awareness that she herself inhabits because her uncomfortable pauses and alarming analogies alienate her. Thus, we see a correlation between an escalated sensitivity to animal abuse and a fall in social status, as Costello moves from expert to outcast, celebrated to criticized, influential to delusional. An element of attenuated agency exists within each listener, as they can visually see what happens to someone who has such an extreme aversion to the meat industry and its practices—you will be seen as strange, incoherent, and disorganized.

This begs the question, why did Coetzee make Costello his protagonist? Why give her such a weak voice, a voice that lacks gravitas and conviction in making her case against animal cruelty? An art critic, Ward Jones, argues that the main lesson of *The Lives of Animals* is how “the portrait that we have of an ethical informant” can contribute to the way we evaluate the argument at hand (209).<sup>11</sup> Costello begins her lecture asking her audience to “concede” to her “the rhetorical power to evoke these horrors and bring them home to you with adequate force” which is ironic as she is relatively powerless in evoking a good

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<sup>10</sup> Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, 19.

<sup>11</sup> Ward E. Jones, “Elizabeth Costello and the Biography of the Moral Philosopher,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 69 (2011): 209.

## *Furman Humanities Review*

response (19).<sup>12</sup> Why does Coetzee choose a voice that is elderly, scattered, and alarmist as the instrument for perpetuating his ideas? I agree with the literature arguing that “fictional narratives can possess ethical authority” but think that the choice to make that ethical authority questionable is an ingenious ploy by Coetzee (209).<sup>13</sup> Costello’s weak authority and flaws as a public speaker reflect the thoughts of an author who knows that his position is trivialized in and disruptive to popular thought. This shows that Coetzee does not believe society can recognize the severity or extent of this kind of mass cruelty and change. He concedes to the moral apathy of humans and the limited potential for an expansion of human empathy for animals, as they are non-human and thus other. Coetzee identifies with the futility of serving as a moral persuader, and turns to the use of interlocutors to stir the pot for him, to present ideas that resonate with both the pedagogue and the participant.

Coetzee develops these interlocutors to start a conversation on the concept of cruelty. If pain is a universal sensation felt, then cruelty inflicted on an animal is just as horrific as cruelty inflicted on a human. What does it mean to be a conduit capable of inflicting suffering and cruelty on other living creatures? It is hard to answer this question because a “uniform or ubiquitous cross-cultural concept of ‘cruelty’ towards animals” does not exist (129).<sup>14</sup> While global watchdogs for human rights operate around commonly accepted ideals of morality and justice, international organizations protecting the rights of animals find it much harder to make universal claims, as there is no cross-cultural acceptance of where animals stand

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<sup>12</sup>Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, 19.

<sup>13</sup>Jones, “Elizabeth Costello and the Biography of the Moral Philosopher,” 209.

<sup>14</sup>Agustin Fuentes, “The Humanity of Animals and the Animality of Humans: A View From Biological Anthropology Inspired by J. M. Coetzee’s ‘Elizabeth Costello’” *American Anthropologist* 108 (2006): 129.

in relation to humans. But what if we are not in the position of pain-inflictor, but in the position of pain-witness?

Costello makes it clear that the Germans who “lived in the countryside” around the Nazi death camps “could not afford to know” what took place within the camps (19).<sup>15</sup> They rejected a reality that was too painful to accept. But she does not disparage these people as uniquely immoral—rather, their actions were reflective of the average German citizen. Camps covered the Reich like sores. Just as the majority of Americans live in close proximity to places where meat is produced, distributed, or sold, Costello argues “few Germans lived more than a few kilometers from a camp of some kind” (20).<sup>16</sup> Evidence of immense cruelty and horror was in the air, swirled across some pathway of the conscious, even if it could not be fully explicated or clearly labeled. Costello claims that humans utilize ignorance as a survival mechanism when faced with mass-scale suffering. The actions of the Germans behind the camp were so appalling that the average German citizen needed to disassociate in order to keep his or her sanity. They chose to be willfully ignorant.

Costello’s lecture is ultimately an appeal to examine how human beings sympathize, or refuse to sympathize, with those they do not identify with, those that remain in the ambiguous category of *other*—or, more aptly—*nonhuman*. Costello associates willful ignorance with a purposeful refusal to acknowledge embodied-beings. She claims that merely being alive “is to be a living soul” (33).<sup>17</sup> Thus, animals, a domain encompassing human beings, all possess embodied souls. Through her dialogue on embodiment, we see glimpses of Coetzee’s philosophy emerging. He urges the reader to acknowledge that the majority of individuals fail to recognize the capacity of all embodied things to suffer, just as the fictional lecture attendees fail to recognize the magnitude of

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<sup>15</sup>Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, 19.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.



## *Furman Humanities Review*

Costello's argument. Jacques Derrida explores the idea of an animal's ability to suffer. If humans are the agents in power, and they define what is nonhuman, than asking the question, "Can animals suffer?" is analogous to asking if animals can *not* be able to suffer. He further probes, to what extent should we be concerned with the ability of an animal to suffer, if "being able to suffer is no longer a power" but a "possibility without power" (396).<sup>18</sup> Would not animals gain superiority over man if they were unable to suffer? And yet, this cannot be true. And it is problematic if individuals recognize this capacity to suffer. If an individual recognizes the capacity of all embodied things—creatures with a heart and soul—to suffer, then cruelty gains more weight. Animal cruelty moves from a necessary evil, something you grimace at but continue to ignore, to a grave injustice that *requires* action. Suddenly, the confinement of animals stuffed into boxes, pens, coops, and cages becomes as glaringly offensive as the confinement of humans in cattle cars.

I want to extend Coetzee's thinking and propose that Costello misses something crucial by making this a binary response—sympathizing or refusing to sympathize. A variety of obstacles to human sympathy for suffering exist: not knowing, willfully not knowing (as Costello highlights), compassion fatigue (the inability to invest the tremendous emotional energy that sympathy requires for every injustice), and apathy from the feeling of impotence in the face of overwhelming injustice or cruelty. Therefore, a lack of sympathy is not always a psychological defense on behalf of the person witnessing suffering. I believe people consciously or unconsciously place their psychological suffering on one scale with the ethical behavior they wish they could exhibit on the other scale. The scale tips towards the heavier desire. By ignoring all of these nuances, Costello simplifies the problem of animal cruelty to a point that can be easily dismissed by her audience. They perceive her points as both radical and irrelevant. This failure on Costello's part makes me question Coetzee's viewpoint, as he *created*

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<sup>18</sup>Derrida, "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," 396.

Costello's failure. Perhaps if we can recognize the earnestness in which Costello believes her moral knowledge to be true, we can also empathize with the frustration of a fruitless mission and the inability to will a group to action. And yet, identifying with Costello proves exceedingly challenging.

Costello's Holocaust metaphor, if it is to be viewed as a vehicle for illuminating commonalities, serves its purpose by highlighting a lack of sympathy for living beings deemed "nonhuman." Psychologists studying anthropomorphism elucidate this idea of nonhuman versus human by putting humanness on a continuum. They claim that through anthropomorphism "individuals can attribute humanlike capacities to nonhuman agents" and through dehumanization they can also "fail to attribute these same capacities to other people" (228).<sup>19</sup> While the former mode leads to more moral concern for the subject, the latter incites moral detachment. This process makes it easier to excuse immoral actions. Costello's lecture discomfits her audience not just because it centers on an analogy to the Holocaust, but because it suggests that human cruelty towards other humans is no worse than human cruelty towards animals. It is easy for us to see "animality in humans," as most people regard Nazi leaders in the Holocaust as morally repugnant and thus bestial, but it is harder for us to see the "humanity in animals" when this means an integral part of our everyday lives—eating meat—is rooted in the suffering of fellow creatures (130).<sup>20</sup>

Towards the end of her lecture, Costello returns to the death camps to discuss the true horror of the Holocaust—the inability of the German perpetrators to "think themselves into

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<sup>19</sup> A. Waytz, J. Cacioppo, and N. Epley, "Who Sees Human?: The Stability and Importance of Individual Differences in Anthropomorphism," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 5 (2010): 228.

<sup>20</sup> Fuentes, "The Humanity of Animals and the Animality of Humans: A View From Biological Anthropology Inspired by J. M. Coetzee's 'Elizabeth Costello,'" 130.

## *Furman Humanities Review*

the place of their victims” that rattle away in a cattle-car (34).<sup>21</sup> Just as the majority of Germans “closed their hearts” to the faculty of sympathy, so does Costello’s audience fail to imagine themselves in the body of Costello (34).<sup>22</sup> Her own son, whose thoughts Coetzee brings us into, thinks her lecture was a “strange talk” both “ill gauged” and “ill argued” (36).<sup>23</sup> He believes she should not be there. Norma, his wife, wants to publicly humiliate Costello by asking a malevolent question. Costello calls for sympathy, yet we see Coetzee’s two main characters deny her compassion. Her appeal is fruitless.

Just as the audience fails to sympathize with the speaker, so I believe that Coetzee satirizes the proclivity of humans to cling to ignorance rather than move to action. Costello claims that “there are people who have the capacity to imagine themselves as someone else” but the overwhelming majority of people “have the capacity but choose not to exercise it” (35).<sup>24</sup> Humans will choose being accepted over being ostracized, even if the choice compromises moral norms. History, as seen through the Holocaust analogy, continues to prove that those who challenge the status quo face ostracism while the ignorant remain safe in their country homes. Nazi rhetoric encouraged people to reject identifying with Jews. We are similarly conditioned to be entirely indifferent to animal suffering as it has become an integral part of our society, and those who reject it are cast out as pariahs.

Coetzee proffers an indictment on Elizabeth Costello to the reader as well. She alienates herself from her audience through her morally superior attitude, seen in moments when she claims that she can think her way “into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster” because they “share the substrate of life” with her (35).<sup>25</sup> She posits herself as a witness to a

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<sup>21</sup> Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, 34.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>25</sup> Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, 35.

holocaust who refuses to remain silent, rendering her audience members the German people of the countryside who witness horror and choose willful ignorance. She claims that “each day is a new holocaust” and yet “our moral being [remains] untouched” and we do not “feel tainted” (35).<sup>26</sup> Costello makes each new day a harbinger of horrific tragedy. Each day is a new holocaust. And each day, we shield our morality from affront, to the point where we are inoculated against the brutality. She suggests that her audience members are tainted—an affront to each member’s moral code that she herself evades.

In Costello’s voice and actions, we see Coetzee the author posing the question: Does individual awareness bring about any real change, especially if she or he takes an extremely isolating stance? There is power in his subtlety of narrative authority, and Coetzee’s prose reflects an acute awareness of the inherent animal suffering in the meat industry. His vision for audience response, both the fictional audience receiving Costello and the real audience of readers, is bleak—he packages a story in a lecture in which the majority of characters cannot change their mindsets or expand their perspectives. Beyond that, the individual is relatively weak in her power to effect change, especially because Costello’s main arguments remain rooted in a metaphor that links the meat industry to a dark, indisputably incomprehensible moment in human history. We think we have already been morally aroused after the horrors of the Holocaust, and that suffering of that magnitude cannot possibly be repeated. But just as incidents of genocide took place before World War II with the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire, and subsequently persisted throughout the twentieth century in Cambodia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Rwanda, so do grave injustices against living creatures exist in the present day.

The lecture ends abruptly: “We can do anything and get away with it... there is no punishment” (25).<sup>27</sup> But is not the calculated cruelty of a few at the top of the meat industry worse

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

## *Furman Humanities Review*

than the willful ignorance assumed by the majority of human beings towards animal cruelty? Coetzee's fictional scaffolding around the subject of animal cruelty in the meat industry allows for an inward turn; which character acts in a way I would? The reader is privy to the scene but not participating in it. You are not tasked with gauging your reaction because you are not acting—you are watching. It is almost as if Coetzee presents you with the choice between kindness and cruelty itself, knowing you will guiltily choose the latter, but from afar. You have the privilege of choosing from a private locale, away from the fictional group of people in attendance. He knows you will not change your perspective, even if a tinge of guilt leaks into your conscious. While we do not hold the knives that slit the throats of chickens nor press the buttons that systematically asphyxiate cattle, we do not question how our meat reaches our plates as perfectly symmetrical patties. When activism presses up against alienation, humans usually choose the status quo, if for nothing more than self-preservation. We willfully ignore the suffering of those whom we cannot identify with, feeling morally exempt from a murder we did not commit. For being the animals in power, humans are quite powerless in effecting change.

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