

Framing Humanity by Framing Nature: John Maxwell Coetzee's Disgrace in the Context of Kant's Theory of Morality

Kamil Michta
University of Warsaw

Abstract



The essay discusses the correlation between Immanuel Kant's ethics, especially his views on human duties toward animals, and John Maxwell Coetzee's literary depiction of man's struggle to rediscover the meaning of humanity by tending unwanted animal corpses. Hence, it firstly concentrates on the key issues concerning Kant's moral philosophy, placing particular emphasis on the third formula of his categorical imperative, the so-called formula of humanity as an end in itself, and on elucidating the thinker's contention that good treatment of animals, that is, as if they were moral agents, improves in humans the propensity to treat other people well. The essay argues that the manner in which people treat animals, approached from the Kantian perspective, partakes in the duty to improve their own morality and, thus, their humanity. After examining Kant's outlook on animals, the essay discusses Coetzee's 1999 novel *Disgrace*. In particular it scrutinizes the figure of an aging literature professor, David Lurie, who, having been expelled from his university for sexual abuse, moves to the country. Here he engages in putting down unwanted animals and also in taking personal care for incinerating their bodies with decency and respect. Adopting the perspective of Kantian philosophy, the essay argues that Lurie's concern for animal corpses, despite its apparent pointlessness, can be seen as indicating the renewal of his humanity. In a sense, then, it is nature (unwanted animals and their corpses) that makes Lurie rediscover his humanity. The essay concludes by maintaining that *Disgrace*, when coupled with Kant's moral theory, is a novel conveying the (Kantian) idea that the manner in which people frame nature, that is, how they relate to it, is formative of the manner in which they frame their own humanity.

Keywords: Coetzee, Kant, animals, humanity, ethics, difficulty of reality.

Resumen

Este ensayo analiza la correlación existente entre la ética de Immanuel Kant, especialmente sus opiniones sobre las obligaciones de los seres humanos hacia los animales, y la descripción literaria que hace John Maxwell Coetzee de la lucha de un hombre por redescubrir el significado de su humanidad ocupándose de cadáveres de animales no deseados. Se centra, por ello, en su primera parte en los temas clave de la filosofía moral de Kant, haciendo especial hincapié en la tercera formulación de su imperativo categórico, es decir, la llamada formulación de la humanidad como un fin en sí misma, y en la elucidación de la controversia kantiana de que el buen trato dado a los animales, o sea, el hecho de tratarlos como si fueran agentes morales, mejora la propensión del ser humano a tratar bien a las demás personas. El ensayo sostiene que la manera en que la gente trata a los animales, examinada desde una perspectiva kantiana, contribuye al deber de mejorar su propia moralidad y, con ello, su humanidad. Tras la parte dedicada al punto de vista kantiano sobre los animales, el ensayo examina la novela Desgracia de Coetzee, publicada en 1999, y, en particular, el personaje de un profesor de literatura cincuentón, David Lurie, quien, tras haber sido expulsado de su universidad por acoso sexual, se traslada al campo donde se dedica a eutanasiar e incinerar con decencia y respeto a animales no deseados. Desde la perspectiva de la filosofía kantiana, el ensayo argumenta que la preocupación de Lurie por los cadáveres de animales, a pesar de su aparente falta de sentido, podría ser considerada como un signo de la renovación de su humanidad. En cierto modo, es la naturaleza (los animales no deseados y sus cadáveres) la que hace redescubrir a Lurie su humanidad. El ensayo concluye sosteniendo que *Desgracia*, combinada con la teoría moral de Kant, es una novela que transmite la idea (kantiana) de que la forma en que los seres humanos encuadran a la naturaleza, es decir, su forma de relacionarse con ella, configura la manera en que encuadran a su propia humanidad.

Palabras clave: Coetzee, Kant, animales, humanidad, ética, dificultad de la realidad.

The aim of the essay is to demonstrate that the human-animal relations depicted by John Maxwell Coetzee in his 1999 novel *Disgrace* correlate with Immanuel Kant's understanding of humanity as well as with his views concerning human duties toward nonhuman animals. The essay will firstly concentrate on Kantian ethics; in particular, it will investigate the third formulation of Kant's categorical imperative, the so-called formula of humanity as an end in itself, with a view to elucidating the philosopher's ideas about the correspondence between reason and morality, the role of morality in defining humanity, and mankind's moral obligations toward animals. In the second part of the essay, this exposition of Kantian ethics provides the theoretical background for explaining how in *Disgrace* Coetzee, an author known for his concern about the ethical status of animals, approaches the role of the human-animal relations in improving one's humanity. Thus, on the basis of Kant's reflections about humanity's moral duties to non-human creatures, the essay argues that for Coetzee the manner in which humans treat animals can be conducive to improving their morality and, by implication, their attitude to both human and non-human beings. Accordingly, the essay concludes by arguing that Kant's views on nonhuman animals, however problematic they might be, help to better understand how Coetzee frames humanity.

In his theory of morality, elucidated in *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, the *Critique of Practical Reason* and *Doctrine of Virtue*, Kant argued against treating humans instrumentally. He expressed that view in the third formula of his categorical imperative, according to which humans should always "[act] in such a way that [they] treat humanity, whether in [their] own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means" (*Grounding* 36). In the Kantian ethical system, then, the human is always the ultimate goal of action; thus, to treat humans instrumentally, that is, as means to some other goals, such as fame, money or entertainment, must be perceived by a Kantian as unethical.

Kant ascribed this special status of humans to their faculty of reason. He argued in the *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* that reason was a self-legislating faculty, which means that those who possessed it, e.g. humans, were necessarily free, that is, they could act in accordance with their own independent decisions. Since morality, as Kant further argued, did not mean unconditionally following pre-given laws and maxims, but, on the contrary, involved an independent, conscious and free choice to follow such laws and maxims, only those who were free, that is, who possessed reason, could be regarded as moral agents. Kant also claimed that, in addition to this ability to set and follow ends, "rational nature exists as an end in itself" (*Grounding* 36). In the Kantian paradigm, then, only those that possessed reason, and for Kant those were only humans, could be perceived as ends in themselves (*Grounding* 36-42).

As for nonhuman animals, Kant believed them to be non-rational and, therefore,

he denied their moral considerability. Animals could not be then regarded as moral ends. He expressed this idea in the *Doctrine of Virtue*, in which he claimed that “no better other than man [...] would be susceptible of obligation (passive or active),” to which he further added that “man can have no [moral] duties to beings other than man” (237). The thinker is hence often thought to have regarded animals as mere things (Broadie and Pybus 337).

Despite such a strong and one-sided, if not entirely speciesist claim, Kant claimed that humans did have indirect duties toward nonhuman animals because, although animals as such did not necessitate any moral consideration, what humans did to them did necessitate such a consideration. In his 1775-1780 *Lectures on Ethics* Kant made the following remark:

If a man shoots his dog because the animal is no longer capable of service, he does not fail in his duty to the dog, for the dog cannot judge, but his act is inhuman and damages in himself that humanity which is his duty to show towards mankind. If he is not to stifle his human feelings, he must practice kindness towards animals, for he who is cruel to animals becomes also hard in his treatment of men. (240)

A close reading of this passage reveals that the Kantian indirect duty toward animals actually derives from the direct duty that people have toward humanity in themselves and in other people. Kant specified this direct duty in *The Metaphysics of Morals* where he maintained that man had an obligation “to raise himself from the crude state of his nature, from his animality [...] more and more toward humanity” (191). He clarified this idea in the following manner:

violent and cruel treatment of animals is far more intimately opposed to man's duty to himself [...] for it dulls his shared feeling of their pain and so weakens and gradually uproots a natural predisposition that is very serviceable to morality in one's relations with other men. (*Metaphysics* 238)

Kant did then acknowledge that man could “raise himself [...] more and more towards humanity” through moral treatment of animals. The reason for it, as he explained, was twofold: on the one hand, respect toward animals partook of the human duty to have regard for one's own person and one's own moral development,¹ and, on the other, it was possible because, as Kant argued, “[animal] nature has analogies to human nature, and by doing our duty to animals in respect of manifestations which correspond to manifestations of human nature, we indirectly do our duty towards humanity” (*Lectures* 239-240).

In Kant's view, then, although animals were non-rational, and, as such, did not directly necessitate any moral regard, it can still be argued that moral treatment of animals, that is, as if animals necessitated such a treatment, led to or at least provided grounds for improving one's morality and, so, one's humanity. Accordingly, the thinker argued in *Lectures on Ethics* that “[tender] feelings towards dumb animals develop human

¹ Kant mentioned this idea in the *Critique of Practical Reason* in the following passage: “The action by which someone endeavours at the greatest peril to his life to rescue people from shipwreck, at last losing his life in the attempt, is reckoned on one side as duty, but on the other and for the most part as a meritorious action, but our esteem for it is greatly weakened by the notion of *duty to himself* which seems in this case to be somewhat infringed.” (343)

feelings towards mankind" (240). He upheld this view in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, a relatively late work, in which he asserted that "gratitude for the service of an old horse or a dog (as if they were members of the household) belongs indirectly to man's duty with regard to these animals" (238).

Thus, those who respect animals implement some of the most important of Kant's ethical requirements: the duty to strive for self-perfection (in humanity), the duty to constantly develop one's morality and, eventually, the duty to respect the humanity in one's own person. A continual effort to fulfill these obligations is what Kant referred to as virtue, that is, "the strength of human being's maxims in fulfilling his duty" (*Metaphysics* 197). However, for some a virtue defined in such a way would be difficult if not impossible to achieve because, as it happens, Kant's argumentation suffers from a number of faults. The analogy between humans and animals, which for Kant amounted to the fact that both humans and animals followed *a priori* laws, is still speculative and scientifically unproven. Good treatment of animals does not necessarily lead to equally good treatment of people; it is enough to think of some Nazi commanders of the WWII death camps who were reported to care a lot about their pets and who at the same time had no qualms about condemning thousands of innocent people to gas chambers. Maltreating animals does not necessarily mean developing in oneself cruelty to people and other animals: there are butchers and hunters who have no problem in carrying out their professional duties and at the same time loving and caring about their families, other people and even pets. When reversed, Kant's reasoning suffers an even more serious difficulty. Admittedly, if bad treatment of animals were conducive to good treatment of people, according to the Kantian stance, bad treatment of animals would have to be deemed advisable. Few people, even those not particularly concerned with animal welfare, would consent to that. Kant's argumentation is further problematized by experiments on animals, for in the Kantian paradigm it is permissible to cause animal distress during medical or scientific tests as long as it is beneficial to people. Today, hardly anyone would agree to unrestricted experimentation on animals just because it improves the quality of human life.

Apart from these, there are a number of more nuanced reservations about Kant's suitability, indeed usability, for animal studies. One of the difficulties is that Kant makes moral value conditional on acts of pure reason. That limits ethical considerations solely to humans and renders nonhuman animals unworthy of moral regard. In a sense, then, Kantian ethics differentiates between rationally-induced agency and the sphere of desires and animalistic drives. Currently, however, especially in the context of human rights, at least certain aspects of human biological nature, such as the need to eat and move, must be recognized as morally binding. Thus, as the Northern Illinois University Professor of Political Sciences, Larry Arnharts suggests, the human rights paradigm invalidates Kant's fact-value dichotomy and, at least potentially, allows room for nonhuman animals in the ethical discourse (Brown 73-75). Otherwise, according to Mark Rowland, a Welsh writer and philosopher, human rights would not hold for people with impaired mental abilities (120, 134-135).

Peter Singer, often considered a key figure in animal studies, discards Kantian free

will and reason, and instead advocates the ability to suffer and avoid pain as the ultimate measure of moral value (36-38). He presented his ideas in *Animal Liberation* (1975), his canonical work, and set out to popularize them together with Tom Regan, an American philosopher, with whom he coedited a 1976 collection of critical essays *Animal Rights and Human Obligation*. Soon, Singer and Regan parted; Regan rejected the former's denial of natural rights and decided to advocate basic moral rights of at least some animals. In his main work, *The Case for Animal Rights* (1983), Regan replaces Kant's attributes of moral agency, such as free will and reason, with the idea of "inherent value." Moreover, he introduces the so-called "respect principle," by which he means an obligation to treat all those equipped with inherent value as "subjects of life," that is, with respect and equal moral demonstrability (243-248). Regan advances these categories in order to rectify the selective character of Kant's argumentation, which he identifies in the philosopher's objection against bad treatment of animals solely for fear that it might lead to an equally bad treatment of humans, and not also because abstaining from animal maltreatment may persuade humans to resign from animal abuse (180). The reason for Kant's disregard of nonhuman animals is, in Regan's understanding, his belief that they should and must be treated instrumentally. Accordingly, maltreatment of animals should be seen as morally reproachable because it diminishes animal usability to humans. For Regan, then, Kant's prohibition of animal cruelty is motivated by human interest and not by care for animal welfare, and is therefore unacceptable (183). Similar arguments are advanced by Gary L. Francione, an American philosopher and lawyer, for he identifies Kant (with Aristotle and John Rawls) as the source of human crypto-sadism against nonhuman animals, legitimized by the pleasure of eating meat, medical advancement and resulting comfort. He calls such an attitude "moral schizophrenia" (1-30). Donna Haraway refers to Kant's views on animals as his "scandalous best effort on the topic" (78), accusing the philosopher of devaluing animal death. She calls upon Jacques Derrida who in his essay "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)" questioned Kant's silencing of nonhuman animals by relying the ability to respond solely on rationality-guided verbal language (400).

It would then appear that numerous difficulties follow from Kant's philosophy, especially in the context of animal studies, and they become even more problematic when radicalized or when applied to the cases of extreme animal abuse that are motivated by human welfare. Although it is not the intention of the present essay to discuss or to resolve these difficulties, Kant can be defended on the grounds that his moral philosophy was intended not so much to supply rational beings, such as humans, with a set of *a priori* laws to be followed unreflectively, as to recognize people's freedom about the laws that they chose to abide by. Kant did not claim the right to establish any laws, then, but he assigned that right to every human being, founding it in their faculty of reason, freedom and good will, and only then he provided each one of them with a set of tools (known as the categorical imperative), so they could check if the law they had devised was morally acceptable. Such is at least the ground on which the influential French 20th-century thinker, Jean-François Lyotard tried to mitigate the categoricalness of

Kant's imperative. He argued in *Just Gaming* that the "so that" (*so dass*) of Kant's categorical imperative "marks the properly reflective use of reason. It says: Do whatever, not on condition that, but in such a way as that which you do, the maxim of what you do, can always be valid" (Wolfe 85). Approached from this angle, despite his faults, Kant can still be viewed as a reliable source for ethical guidance or, at the least, for an assessment of human conduct.

Bearing in mind the above reservations about Kantian ethics, Kant's ideas about morality and, especially, about human duties to animals, however problematic they appear to be, will henceforth be adopted as the working hypothesis for analyzing the manner in which Coetzee, a contemporary South African author, frames in *Disgrace* the moral dimension of human dealings with animals. The novel revolves around a character named David Lurie, an aging literature professor at the Technical University in Cape Town, who uses his position to seduce and sexually abuse his students. One day, however, one of the students reports him to the university authorities and, after a trial, he is forced to leave his post. He travels to the home of his lesbian daughter, Lucy, who owns a small farm in the Eastern Cape. He hopes to seek refuge in the countryside but, instead, he experiences harsh living conditions, violence and much confusion about what he should do. He also finds it difficult to fit in in the rural society.

At the beginning of his stay in Salem, Lurie has no interest in animals. He seems insensitive to their lot and he instrumentalizes them. On seeing some sheep set aside for slaughter, he recalls the speciesist view that animals, sheep included, "do not own themselves, do not own their lives. They exist to be used" (123). When asked if he likes animals, he sarcastically answers, "I eat them, so I suppose I must like them, some parts of them" (81). Having been enticed to work at an animal shelter, he declares: "All right, I'll do it. But only as long as I don't have to become a better person. I am not prepared to be reformed. I want to go on being myself" (77). He upholds that the Church Fathers did not believe in the souls of animals and, so, neither shall he. In addition to such anthropocentric views, he stereotypes animal advocates as sentimentalists; he describes the women working at the shelter as "animal lovers" whose devotion, although harmless in itself, is unlikely "to whip up an interest in the subject" (72-73); and he remarks that those who believe that animals can smell thoughts talk "nonsense" (81). However, there comes a moment when his speciesist outlook begins to evolve toward being more compassionate.

Lurie falls victim to a brutal attack during which the assailants set him on fire, rape his daughter and kill all the dogs kept in the kennels. At the burial of the dogs he wonders at the unfairness and senselessness of the killing. He recalls the sheep meant for slaughter and realizes, although distrustfully, that the fate of the dogs and the fate of the sheep do not differ a lot. They were all killed at a whim. In her essay, "Coetzee and Alternative Animal Ethics," Elisa Aaltola refers to the change which has come over Lurie in the following manner:

The lives of these animals cannot be hidden. Instead, the relationship with the sheep deepens, and suddenly Lurie describes the countryside treatment of animals as 'indifferent' and hardhearted' (125).

The change is becoming evident: Lurie is no longer in the speciesist club. He is starting to grasp his own ignorance. (129)

For no exact reason, Lurie is overcome by sympathetic emotions toward animals. He even begins to think of them as fellow beings. He recognizes that his own fragility and helplessness, which he has experienced during the assault, are similar to the vulnerability of animals, their need for comfort and care, which he sees while working at the shelter. He wonders whether the goat examined during the first day of his stay at the facility "felt the same peacefulness" as he does when the owner of the clinic, Bev Shaw, tends his own burns. He also starts to see animals as individuals. Helping at the shelter he grows attached to some dogs. As he himself admits at the end of the novel, he has developed toward the animals "what he no longer has difficulty in calling by its proper name: love" (219). Thus, he visits the clinic more and more often. There, he assists Bev Shaw in putting down unwanted animals, especially dogs, and this exerts a significant effect on him. Leaving for home, he cries, his hands shake and he feels that the animals sense his shame for the atrocity he helps to condemn them to. Appalled by human insensitivity, he decides to at least burn the corpses in what he thinks is a decent manner. He takes them to an incineration facility and watches that their stiffened limbs are not broken before being put into the furnace; he also makes sure that the bodies are entirely burnt so that, later, they are not knocked around half-burnt. He wishes to save them from what he describes as the "dishonor" of being "muddled" with "the waste from the hospital wards, carrión scooped up at the roadside, malodorous refuse from the tannery" (144). However odd his motivations, then, Lurie has eventually become "an animal lover" and, indeed, "a better person."

Lurie cannot explain why his attitude toward animals has changed so much. Coetzee describes the situation in the following way: "[a] bond seems to have come into existence between him and the two Persians [the two sheep singled out for slaughter], he does not know how [...] suddenly and without reason, their lot has become important to him" (126). Subsequently, Lurie does not want to attend the party at which the dead sheep are being served because, as he says, their lives have "disturbed" him (127). Astonished by his own words and feelings, he further remarks: "I never imagined that I would end up talking this way" (127). He also cannot explain his reasons for taking care of the dead animals. As he himself admits, he must be foolish to do this. When he reflects on his motivations, he concludes, rather self-disparagingly, that he "saves the honor of corpses because there is no one else stupid enough to do it. That is what he is becoming: stupid, daft, wrongheaded" (146). Accordingly, confused by his own motives and, so, unable to provide any rational explanation for the sources of his growing compassion for the underprivileged animals as well as for their seared bodies, Lurie is close to admitting that he has turned insane.

In order to understand the nature of Lurie's confusion, it seems advisable to concentrate for a moment on another of Coetzee's characters, Elizabeth Costello, who suffers a very similar state of confusion and a feeling of loss. Often believed to be

Coetzee's mouthpiece (Head 82),² Elizabeth Costello is the protagonist of the 1999 novella entitled *The Lives of Animals*, composed of two short stories "The Philosophers and the Animals" and "The Poets and the Animals," in which she gives two lectures on the rights of nonhuman animals and the artistic ways of imagining for oneself what it means to be an animal. During the lectures, and at the lunch after the first of them, she advances very controversial views. For instance, she compares slaughterhouses to Nazi death camps, she equates human insensitivity to slaughtered animals with the ignorance of the people who did not react against the Holocaust, and she says she believes that poets can successfully sympathize with animals and even transmigrate into their lives. At a family dinner, she argues with her son's wife, Norma, a philosopher of mind, that in human dealings with other creatures reason emerges as an obstacle for the "sympathetic imagination" to approach them in a genuine way, that is, as they really are and not as humans would like to see them. As she expects, she is much criticized for her views both by the academic society and by her daughter-in-law. Faced with so much disapproval and, in particular, a lack of understanding, she doubts whether she is not mistaken, misguided by her own feelings, and naive. She shows symptoms of an emotional breakdown. Toward the end of the second short story she bursts into tears and makes the following confession to her son:

It's that I no longer know where I am. I seem to move around perfectly easily among people, to have perfectly normal relations with them. Is it possible, I ask myself, that all of them are participants in a crime of stupefying proportions? Am I fantasizing it all? I must be mad! Yet every day I see the evidences. The very people I suspect produce the evidence, exhibit it, offer it to me. Corpses. Fragments of corpses that they have bought for money.

"Yet I'm not dreaming. I look into your eyes, into Norma's, into the children's, and I see only kindness, human-kindness. Calm down, I tell myself, you are making a mountain out of a molehill. This is life. Everyone else comes to terms with it, why can't you? *Why can't you?*" (69)

At the end of this emotional disclosure, John tries to comfort his mother with a hug. He does it because she seems lost and ridden by doubt. The last image of Costello reminds us of a helpless child lost in her own thoughts.

In his in-depth study of Coetzee's work, *The Wounded Animal*, Stephen Mulhall argues that "what wounds [Elizabeth Costello] most deeply is not the likelihood that her comparison [of slaughterhouses to the Nazi death camps] or her charge [against reason] will be thought morally incompetent and intellectually disreputable to the point of insanity; it is the fact that the position into which she places herself by making both is one that makes *her* seriously contemplate the possibility that *she is going mad*" (56). Accordingly, the source of Costello's distress is a contradiction she experiences in herself. On the one hand, when she thinks of her family, of her friends, in fact of all the decent and loving people in the world, she cannot look at them and think of heartless meat-eaters

² Both Coetzee and Costello are vegetarians, they are concerned with animal rights, they are world-acclaimed novelists and they are both rather reclusive. However, there are also a number of significant differences between them, the most obvious being the difference of sex, which makes it irresolvable whether Costello really is Coetzee's alter ego.

who do not mind animal suffering; but, on the other hand, when she remembers what happens in the abattoirs around the world, and that all those who eat meat (indirectly) consent to that, her belief in human decency begins to falter. These two mutually exclusive feelings are equally well-founded in her experience. She encounters them in the kind eyes of people who are capable of love and compassion but who nevertheless treat her to parts of cooked animal corpses purchased for money. She cannot decide which of these feelings is more legitimate, however, for she has sensed both of them equally often in her life. Hence, she must endorse the two of them, although she cannot reconcile herself with the apparently self-contradictory nature of such an endorsement. Her most intimate experience of the human world is thus seamed, internally conflicted, divergent at the points where it should converge. So, as Mulhall suggests, it makes her slowly go insane (57).

Faced with such profound inconsistencies in human behavior, Costello wonders why other people do not go mad too. She mentions the Poles, Germans and Ukrainians who lived close to the Nazi death camps, who could not possibly not have known what atrocities took place there, and who nevertheless chose to stay ignorant, not to know, or at least to pretend that they did not know. She further wonders whether "people who did not know (in that special sense) about the camps can be fully human" (21). Yet, while approaching those people in these terms, that is, as living out a contradiction due to their (willed) ignorance of the camps, the real question is, as Mulhall maintains, whether we actually understand them, or whether we fail to do so. When Costello perceives the Nazis and those who ignored their actions as polluted, does she understand them, that is, does she express an understanding for what they did and why; or, on the contrary, does she say that she has reached the limits of human understanding because what they did (or failed to do) is beyond human comprehension—or indeed does she say that those people were in fact not human beings, for no human being could have ever done anything as atrocious as they did? She could also be saying that they were human beings who it is simply impossible to comprehend because their actions extend beyond the potential of human understanding. Any attempt to answer these questions seems to produce more confusion than understanding. However, the resulting uncertainty about our modes of knowing actually turns out to be a sign of genuineness. Accordingly, as Cora Diamond argues in her 2002 paper, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," to understand reality as it really is means the following:

[to accept] 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 [and at the same time accepting that] the things we take so may simply not, to others, present that kind of difficulty, of being hard or impossible or agonizing to get one's mind round." (45-46)

Thus, as Mulhall argues, "if contradiction, impossibility, and resistance or refusal are marks of genuine understanding, then their presence in our attempts to understand modes of animate life may indicate their success rather than their failure" (49). Indeed, Costello is confused by her feelings, she seems more and more detached from life, but, in fact, she gets closer to life's real nature, which does happen to be contradictory, confusing,

irrational and illogical for most of humans.

Lurie's sense of wrongheadedness seems similar to Costello's. He does not understand his motives, he gets more and more confused, and, hence, similarly to Costello, he begins to trust his feelings rather than his reason. He is driven by emotions and most of his decisions are based on intuition. Coetzee thus writes: "Why has he taken on this job? To lighten the burden of Bev Shaw? For that it would be enough to drop off the bags [with corpses] at the dump and drive away. For the sake of the dogs? But the dogs are dead; and what do dogs know of honor and dishonor anyway? For himself, then. For his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing" (146). Although perplexed by his own conduct, Lurie still behaves in the manner Kant argued for, that is, he reflects on his humanity, he tries to improve it through examination, exposure to otherness and a deeper insight into its contradictory nature. Accordingly, he does get confused, but being confused, as Mulhall shows in the case of Costello, is actually a symptom of comprehending the incomprehensible in humans; it is a sign of deeper understanding of and for their irrationality; it results from embracing the "difficulty of reality" and also from trying to reconcile its internal contradictions.

Kant argued that any way to understand what it means to be human, and so to improve one's humanity, was welcome as long as it accorded with the categorical imperative. It seems that for Lurie animals and, especially, tending dead animal corpses, constitute such a way. He apologizes to the girl he abused; he visits her parents; he faces the shame of pleading guilty; he slowly begins to accept his daughter's decision to keep the child conceived during a rape; he begins to respect Bev Shaw and what she does. He learns how to make a new start in life, to respect other people's feelings, and to take responsibility for his own actions. Lurie has then gone through a long journey of personal improvement, which Aaltola compares to the journey of a character from a Greek tragedy. She argues that "Lurie finds himself fighting a battle, going through a catharsis, and finally achieving virtue and humanity" (130). Similarly, Anton Leist, despite his critical stance regarding the quality of Coetzee's moral thinking, admits in "Against Society, Against History, Against Humanism" that Lurie, being exposed to animals, gradually enlarges his sympathies and eventually becomes "more human" (217). The fact that Lurie improves his humanity through his dealings with animals is also brought up by Ido Geiger, who argues in his "Writing the Lives of Animals" that Lurie's care for dead animals is "an act of sympathy mercilessly purged of any possibility of reward" (180). He further adds that "[the] dead dogs can give the broken teacher [Lurie] absolutely nothing in return, not even a friendly lick on the face. And yet he [Lurie] feels compelled to honor their dignity nonetheless" (180). Taking into account the foregoing, it can hence be argued that Lurie, in order to improve his humanity, abides by Kant's emphasis on morality being motivated solely by one's internal respect for what one believes is right, and not by some external influence.

However, despite his growing sympathies with the animal world, at the end of the novel Lurie decides to sacrifice a dog, Driepoot, which he seems to like more than any

other dogs. He could postpone the animal's death by a week or two. Instead, he gives it up without prolonging its life any more. Admittedly, he takes the responsibility for killing the animal on himself. Significantly, "he brings [the dog] in on his arms like a lamb" (220) to the surgery where Bev Shaw administers the injection he himself asks for. He shows through this gesture that although this dog cannot be saved, there can still be, if he cares, love and compassion for it. The dog must die but its death does not have to be disgraceful. This is the moment when Lurie seems to embrace the contradictory nature of the world. It is also the moment when he embraces the full scope of humanity because, allowing for the dog's death, he does not look for easy and immediate solutions to what are complex problems, as he does not try to belie the reality with gestures that only mute real violence and anesthetize feelings, and, most importantly, he takes responsibility for his deeds, however much it may hurt. As Geiger concludes, "*Disgrace* ends like an open wound" (159). Nothing is resolved. There is no easy way out. Now, it is the task of the reader to be left "disturbed" to probe his/her ignorance, to reflect on his/her humanity, and eventually to find out what Lurie means when, just before killing the beloved dog, he speaks of love.

The remaining question is whether, instead of reconciling the contradictory nature of the world, people such as Lurie are only trying to hide man's depravity, his congenial violence and cruelty by masking his true nature with staged care and respect for animal rights. Admittedly, maybe the fact that Lurie so devotedly clears the area of half-burnt animal corpses should be taken at face value, that is, as an actual attempt at hiding the visible proofs of human wickedness from people's sight. In order to sustain such a reading of Lurie's conduct, it is worthwhile recalling Albert Camus and his story of a hen which he saw being killed. When he still lived in Algeria, his grandmother asked him to fetch one of their hens, then she slit its throat, and as she was doing it, she held a bowl under its throat so no blood would get spilled and besmirch the floor. What struck Camus in the event was the naturalness of his grandmother during this extremely violent act. It evinced an obvious contradiction: on the one hand, the manner his grandmother held the bowl was tender and practical, but, on the other, she was being simply brutal. This "grotesque delicacy," as Mulhall writes in a comment on Camus's story, "exemplifies the ways in which human civilization can sometimes be seen as dressing up the horrifying realities of its practices in ways that are so blatantly concerned with the appearance of cleanliness that they betray a lingering sense of the underlying uncleanness of what is actually being done" (75). In other words, the more one tries to conceal and deaden oneself to the brutality of one's actions, the more blatant and perverse these actions become, although in a manner that is not always easily acknowledgeable.

When Lurie refers to what he and Bev Shaw do in the clinic as *Lösung* (solution/dissolution), apart from the obvious Nazi connotation (*Endlösung*= final solution), there also comes to mind the Camusian sense of cleanliness. Like Camus's grandmother, concerned about not soiling the floor with blood, Lurie cares about keeping the area unspoiled by half-burnt and smelly animal corpses. Viewed from such a perspective, his concern for the dead dogs appears utterly perverse; his apparent decency, which he shows when explaining his actions with the idea of "a world in which

men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing" (146), turns out to be rooted in a disgust-ridden desire to dress up human depravity.

Such a reading of *Disgrace*, while not unfounded, is an allegory of the world in which, as Camus had remarked in his story, people smokescreen their corruption in culturally approved ways so as to deaden their self-disgust. Yet, in the same novella in which Coetzee mentions Camus' story, *The Lives of Animals*, he also implores us to read his work in a non-allegorical way, that is, literally (32). Furthermore, Derek Attridge, an acknowledged critic of Coetzee's work, also urges us to read the novelist in a literal manner, because "allegorizing reading," that is, the type of reading that stems from "the urge to apply pre-existing norms and to take fixed moral judgements" (54), disturbs the originality and inventiveness of the message that the writer seeks to put across in his novels. Following this path of interpretation, Lurie's concern for the dog corpses must be taken at face value, that is, the way it is stated in the novel, without any allegorical implication. So when Coetzee writes that the dogs must die (for there are too many of them) and that there is nothing one can do to change the situation, the question raised is thus not why they must die but, rather, what people do about their deaths. Rather than exposing human insensitivity to the misery of living animals, otherwise a very important and disturbing issue, it seems that in *Disgrace*, interpreted literally, Coetzee wants his readers to focus on people's relation to the already killed animals, to their bodies, to how their corpses are processed, and not why the corpses are there in the first place. What he thus aims at is the idea that humanity can also be measured according to the manner in which people treat dead bodies of unwanted animals. For some, such an idea might seem unacceptable, even blasphemous, or at least hardly credible, but taking into consideration the fact that people's decency is often associated with the way they treat their dead, Coetzee's postulate should not seem as preposterous as it initially might.

There is one more sense in which Coetzee's novel should be read literally, one that is elucidated by Costello when she speaks about her bafflement at the passivity of those who witnessed the Holocaust and ignored it, and of those who know about the brutality of the meat industry and are not appalled by the horror of the slaughtered animals. As already mentioned, she feels confused due to her contradictory reactions to what she observes in her own and other people's everyday conduct. Like Costello, Lurie is also confused, especially when he admits that he is wrongheaded, but toward the end of the novel, contrary to Costello, he seems to have reconciled himself with the world by acknowledging its puzzling contradictions. When he sacrifices the dog he loves, one of the many dogs that must be put down owing to sanitary measures, in the allegorical reading he could be accused of ignorance, insensitivity or at least of callous practicality, in the same way in which Costello accuses the silent witnesses of the Holocaust; but on literal reading, that is, by recalling the actual circumstances depicted in the novel, Lurie could be said to accept the reality in the same way in which mankind had to accept the fact of the Holocaust in order to come to terms with itself, with its own depravity, and to start work on self-improvement. In this sense, Lurie does not agree to what he has to do, he does not approve of it, but he also does not try to hide it or to dress it up. He solely

admits to being implicated in this shameful affair. He tries to make sense of the incomprehensible and to live as decently as possible. Therefore, Lurie seems a step further ahead of Costello who does not manage to embrace the encountered contradictions and, thus, to keep her senses sane so as to begin conscious work on self-improvement. She does not even seem ready to do something as small and as insignificant as taking care of dead animal corpses for, it could be argued, she would be too perplexed about their presence. In this view, the literalness of Lurie's stance emerges in his practicality: he cannot do anything about the dogs not being put down, but he can do something about their corpses not being knocked around, and so he does do it. Contrary to Costello, he does not let the grief over the things he cannot change (killing, violence, indifference to innocent suffering) immobilize his sympathy, decency, his sense and indeed his humanity.

Coetzee conveys this deeply humanistic vision of life and human difficulty at making sense of it by means of depicting his characters within the framework of human-animal relations. In a sense, then, he frames humanity by framing nature. And since it was Kant who argued that human decency could be conditioned by the manner in which people treat animals, it can be argued that Coetzee's way of depicting the human-animal relations in *Disgrace* and their impact on the life of man epitomizes a substantial part of Kant's ethical teachings. Incorporating Kant in animal studies, and especially in discussion about the grounds for (potential) animal ethics, may seem a risky endeavor, given Kant's declared anthropocentrism and his overt denial of animals' moral considerability. Singer, Regan, Derrida, Haraway and Francione are some of the most pronounced critics of an ethics in which solely rational beings necessitate moral regard. Even Coetzee is critical of Kant. As he writes in *The Lives of Animals*, he "would have expected better [of Kant]," specifying that "Kant does not pursue, with regard to animals, the implications of his intuition that reason may be not the being of the universe but on the contrary merely the being of the human brain" (23). However, when approached favorably, although not uncritically, Kant can prove inspirational for numerous animal rights proponents, especially for those of them who wish to extend human ethics to nonhuman animals. Coetzee seems one of such a group, and Kant, despite problems, assists him in the struggle towards a reliable, inclusive rather than exclusive ethics of animality.

Submission received 1 October 2014

Revised version accepted 1 March 2015

Works Cited

- Aaltola, Elisa. "Coetzee and Alternative Animal Ethics." *J. M. Coetzee and Ethics*. Eds. Anton Leist and Peter Singer. New York: Columbia State University, 2010. 117-144. Print.
- Arnhart, Larry. *Darwinian Natural Right: The Biological Ethics of Human Nature*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998. Print.
- Attridge, Derek. *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004. Print.

- Broadie, Alexander and Elizabeth M. Pybus. "Kant's Treatment of Animals." *Philosophy* 49.190 (1974): 375-383. Web. 19 Nov. 2013.
- Brown, Donald. *Human Universals*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia University Press, 1991. Print.
- Coetzee, John Maxwell. *Disgrace*. 1999. London: Vintage, 2000. Print.
- . *The Lives of Animals*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999. Print.
- Derrida, Jacques. "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)." 1999. Trans. David Wills. *Critical Inquiry* 28.2 (2002): 369-418. Web. 22 Feb 2014.
- Diamond, Cora. "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy." *Reading Cavell*. Eds. Alice Caray and Sanford Shieh. London: Routledge, 2006: 98-118. Print.
- Francione, Gary L. *Introduction to Animal Rights: Your Child or the Dog?* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000. Print.
- Geiger, Ido. "Writing the Lives of Animals." *J. M. Coetzee and Ethics*. Eds. Anton Leist and Peter Singer. New York: Columbia State University, 2010. 145-170. Print.
- Haraway, Donna J. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008. PDF.
- Head, Dominic. *The Cambridge Introduction to J. M. Coetzee*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Print.
- Kant, Immanuel. *The Critique of Practical Reason*. 1788. Trans. Thomas Kingsmill Abbott. Project Gutenberg Ebook. Web. 10 March 2014.
- . *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*. 1785. 3rd ed. Trans. James W. Ellington. Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hockett Publishing Company, INC, 1993. PDF.
- . *Lectures on Ethics*. Trans. Louis Infield. New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1963. Print.
- . *The Metaphysics of Morals*. 1797. Trans. Mary J. Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. Print.
- Leist, Anton. "Against Society, Against History, Against Reason: Coetzee's Archaic Postmodernism." *J. M. Coetzee and Ethics*. Eds. Anton Leist and Peter Singer. New York: Columbia State University, 2010. 197-222. Print.
- Lyotard, Jean-François and Jean-Loup Thébaud. *Just Gaming*. 1979. Trans. Wlad Godzich. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985. Print.
- Mulhall, Stephen. *The Wounded Animal*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009. Print.
- Regan, Tom. *The Case for Animal Rights*. Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983. Print.
- Rowlands, Mark. *Animal Rights. A Philosophical Defence*. New York: Macmillan/St. Martin's Press, 1998. Print.
- Singer, Peter. "Practical Ethics." *The Animal Ethics Reader*. Eds. Susan J. Armstrong and Richard G. Botzler. 2nd ed. London and New York: Routledge, 2008. 36-46. Print.
- Wolfe, Cary. *Animal Rites*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003. Print.