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Animals, Empathy, and Anthropomorphism The Limits of Imagination

Carlo Salzani

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The Palgrave Macmillan Animal Ethics Series

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In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the ethics of our treatment of animals. Philosophers have led the way, and now a range of other scholars have followed from historians to social scientists. From being a marginal issue, animals have become an emerging issue in ethics and in multidisciplinary inquiry. This series will explore the challenges that Animal Ethics poses, both conceptually and practically, to traditional understandings of human-animal relations. Specifically, the Series will:

- provide a range of key introductory and advanced texts that map out ethical positions on animals;
- publish pioneering work written by new, as well as accomplished, scholars;
- produce texts from a variety of disciplines that are multidisciplinary in character or have multidisciplinary relevance.

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Carlo Salzani

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and
Anthropomorphism

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SERIES EDITORS' PREFACE

This is a new book series for a new field of inquiry: Animal Ethics.

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the ethics of our treatment of animals. Philosophers have led the way, and now a range of other scholars have followed from historians to social scientists. From being a marginal issue, animals have become an emerging issue in ethics and in multidisciplinary inquiry.

In addition, a rethink of the status of animals has been fueled by a range of scientific investigations which have revealed the complexity of animal sentience, cognition, and awareness. The ethical implications of this new knowledge have yet to be properly evaluated, but it is becoming clear that the old view that animals are mere things, tools, machines, or commodities cannot be sustained ethically.

But it is not only philosophy and science that are putting animals on the agenda. Increasingly, in Europe and the United States, animals are becoming a political issue as political parties vie for the “green” and “animal” vote. In turn, political scientists are beginning to look again at the history of political thought in relation to animals, and historians are beginning to revisit the political history of animal protection.

As animals grow as an issue of importance, so there have been more collaborative academic ventures leading to conference volumes, special journal issues, indeed new academic animal journals as well. Moreover, we have witnessed the growth of academic courses, as well as university posts, in Animal Ethics, Animal Welfare, Animal Rights, Animal Law, Animals and Philosophy, Human-Animal Studies, Critical Animal Studies, Animals

and Society, Animals in Literature, Animals and Religion—tangible signs that a new academic discipline is emerging.

“Animal Ethics” is the new term for the academic exploration of the moral status of the non-human—an exploration that explicitly involves a focus on what we owe animals morally, and which also helps us to understand the influences—social, legal, cultural, religious, and political—that legitimate animal abuse. This series explores the challenges that Animal Ethics poses, both conceptually and practically, to traditional understandings of human-animal relations.

The series is needed for three reasons: (i) to provide the texts that will service the new university courses on animals, (ii) to support the increasing number of students studying and academics researching in animal related fields, and (iii) because there is currently no book series that is a focus for multidisciplinary research in the field.

Specifically, the series will

- provide a range of key introductory and advanced texts that map out ethical positions on animals;
- publish pioneering work written by new, as well as accomplished, scholars; and
- produce texts from a variety of disciplines that are multidisciplinary in character or have multidisciplinary relevance.

The new Palgrave Macmillan Series on Animal Ethics is the result of a unique partnership between Palgrave Macmillan and the Ferrater Mora Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics. The series is an integral part of the mission of the Centre to put animals on the intellectual agenda by facilitating academic research and publication. The series is also a natural complement to one of the Centre’s other major projects, the *Journal of Animal Ethics*. The Centre is an independent “think tank” for the advancement of progressive thought about animals, and is the first Centre of its kind in the world. It aims to demonstrate rigorous intellectual enquiry and the highest standards of scholarship. It strives to be a world-class center of academic excellence in its field.

We invite academics to visit the Centre’s website www.oxfordanimalethics.com and to contact us with new book proposals for the series.

Oxford, UK

Andrew Linzey
Clair Linzey

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I presented some ideas and arguments related to this book at various seminars and conferences, several times not only in Vienna (both at the Messerli Research Institute and at the University of Vienna) and Innsbruck, but also in Barcelona, Rovereto, Porto (twice), Vigo, and Split. I thank the organizers of these events for inviting me and the audiences for their questions and comments, which certainly helped me refine my arguments.

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PRAISE FOR *ANIMALS, EMPATHY, AND ANTHROPOMORPHISM*

“In this bracing book, Salzani assays the prime methods ushered in by the affective turn in animal ethics, namely imagination and empathy, and sets their appropriate scope. He also makes a significant contribution here to the long-lasting discussion in animal studies on anthropomorphism. Using philosophic theory and literature as touchstones, the book brings home the enabling yet finite preconditions of thinking and feeling animality in ontology and ethics.”

—Ralph Acampora, *Professor of Philosophy, Hofstra University, USA*

“In this remarkably engaging new book, Carlo Salzani appreciates (and integrates) the rich ethical strains of anthrozoology – as developed by Thomas Nagel, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Lori Gruen and Josephine Donovan, Emmanuel Levinas, and many more – but plants his feet in the more free-ranging realm of imaginative discourse. He does not construe philosophical and creative writing as antithetical, as indeed they are not, but he does find them different, and privileges the imagination while still thoughtfully attending to the theorists.

Salzani warns that we “sometimes have to take a great leap indeed” when we springboard out of the imaginative inquires and inspirations he shares from Margaret Atwood, J.M. Coetzee’s Elizabeth Costello, Iris Murdoch, Kafka’s “A Report to an Academy,” D.H. Lawrence’s “Snake,” and Craig Foster’s *My Octopus Teacher*. These leaps are exactly what make his project so exciting.

The book has no conclusion – which I like because it reminds me of the ending of my own *Introduction to Animals and Visual Culture*: “Why did the chicken cross the road? I don’t know.” While profusely descriptive of the various pathways he creates, Salzani remains admirably openminded in declining to delineate the ultimate answers. “Negotiating the limits of imagination is an open-ended endeavor that needs to be continuously renewed and reinvented,” he explains, and I can think of no better guide for that project than *Animals, Empathy, and Anthropomorphism: The Limits of Imagination*.”

—Randy Malamud, *Regents’ Professor of English, Georgia State University and author of Reading Zoos: Representations of Animals and Captivity.*

“Carlo Salzani’s focus on the underexamined role of the moral imagination in ethical knowledge fills a void in ethic-of-care theory. Erudite, deeply researched, and gracefully written, *Animals, Empathy and Anthropomorphism: The Limits of the Imagination* opens up important new ways of thinking about ethical comprehension. I highly recommend it.”

—Josephine Donovan, Author of *Animals, Mind, and Matter*; *The Aesthetics of Care: On the Literary Treatment of Animals*; and other works.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Limits, Possibilities, and Bats

IMAGINING LIFE AS A BAT

Margaret Atwood's 1992 short story "My Life as a Bat" is written in the first-person perspective of an unnamed and ungendered human narrator who claims, matter-of-factly, that in her previous life she was a bat. With the customary Atwood irony, the narrator reverses the common view of reincarnation into a "lower" animal as a punishment and argues that "perhaps it is a reward instead. At least a resting place. An interlude of grace" (Atwood 2011, 109). The narrator reverses all expectations and parodies the customary, negative portrayals of bats, taking the bat's standpoint and describing instead the humans as "monsters" and "evil" for what they do to bats (2011, 111, 116). The irony of a bat speaking through a human mouth is of course aimed (among other things) at "punctur[ing] absolutist religious and cultural mythologies" (Wilson 2003, 36–37) and at debunking so many wrong assumptions about bats, but the poetic force of Atwood's descriptions at times converts sarcasm into wonder, as when the bat-in-human-form evokes, in the fifth and final section titled indeed "Beauty," the sensuous beauty of bat life:

The quickness of heartbeat, the vivid plunge into the nectars of crepuscular flowers, hovering in the infrared of night; the dank lazy half-sleep of daytime, with bodies rounded and soft as furred plums clustering around me, the mothers licking the tiny amazed faces of the newborn; the swift love of

what will come next, the anticipations of the tongue and of the infurled, corrugated and scrolled nose, nose like a dead leaf, nose like a radiator grille, nose of a denizen of Pluto. (2011, 115)

The writer's words manage, in few exceptional moments of artistic grace, to transmit to the reader some sensations, feelings, images, emotions that can bring them closer to imagining what life as a bat could be. Or can they? Aren't these just metaphors? Isn't the artist just projecting human experiences onto nonhuman animals?

In his renowned 1974 article "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" (2024), Thomas Nagel famously argued that this kind of projections—those we find in Atwood's story, for example—can at most tell us what it would be like *for us* to be a bat, but not what it is like *for the bat herself*, which will be always inaccessible to us due to the radical differences between the human and the bat sensory apparatus. Nagel in fact chose bats for his thought experiment because they move and hunt at night using a form of sonar (echolocation), which is utterly foreign to human experience and therefore beyond the reach of human imagination. Note, however, that in her story Atwood does not mention echolocation, or hanging upside down from the ceiling, or other experiences "inaccessible" to our imagination, but evokes instead bodily sensations—the vivid feeling of sweetness in one's mouth; dozing in daytime; the soft warmth of bodies clustering together; the mother's physical symbiosis with her baby—that are common to all mammals and can thus be easily understood and grasped by human imagination. These bodily sensations do indeed establish a *sympathetic* connection between bodies, human as well as nonhuman, which can even lead—and this seems to me the clear intent of Atwood's story—to a critique of anthropocentrism and to feelings of empathy toward the bats' predicament in the human world.

But this is ultimately *just* literature, some will retort, flights of fancy the writer can freely engage in because she is not bound to the scientific rigor necessary to achieve "truth." When putting human words into the mouth of a bat—even if through the clever stratagem of her reincarnation into a human body—the writer inevitably (but unabashedly, it seems to me, in Atwood's case) strays into anthropomorphism, the worst *sin* for a proper, "scientific" approach to nonhuman beings. Atwood seems to hint at the anthropomorphic "sin" when, at the end of the story, she mentions a bat religion and a "Goddess of caves and grottoes": in the evening, the narrator poetically recalls, bats sing their "supersonic hymn of praise" to their

Creator “who appears to us in the form of a bat and who gave us all things: water and the liquid stone of caves, the woody refuge of attics, petals and fruit and juicy insects, and the beauty of slippery wings and sharp white canines and shining eyes” (Atwood 2011, 115–16). This description goes back to the origins of the term anthropomorphism, which was supposedly coined by the Greek philosopher Xenophanes in the fifth century B.C. to censure Homer’s portraying the gods in human form. Mocking this practice, Xenophanes argued that if horses had hands, they would draw their gods in their own image—just as bats do in Atwood’s story.

In the past few decades, however, many ethologists, naturalists, and science writers have broken the straitjacket of twentieth-century behaviorism and have attempted to convey in human words the sensuous, emotional, and cognitive richness of nonhuman experiences with the pathos and wonder of fiction writers. A very good example, with regard to bats, is Merlin Tuttle’s 2015 memoir *The Secret Lives of Bats*, whose words, if free from Atwood’s sarcasm and most of all of her fantastic stratagem (reincarnation), come close to her intention—but also to her expression—in the attempt to transmit to the reader the great and complex beauty—the “truth”—of bat worlds. Imagination, empathy, and even anthropomorphism play important roles in these endeavors, and it is this interplay that this book intends to explore.

LIMITS AND POSSIBILITIES

Nagel’s question is, in a sense, the *fil rouge* guiding and holding together the various chapters of this book. My starting point, however, is to call into question the answer he gives (“we will never know...”), which constitutes, at best, a defeatist attitude. So, I oppose to Nagel’s excessive pessimism with regard to the powers of imagination the contrary, excessively optimistic position embodied by Elizabeth Costello, the main character of J.M. Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals*, who, against Nagel, forcefully claims that “there are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination” (Coetzee 1999, 35). Costello’s criticism of Nagel in *The Lives of Animals* is the core of her whole argument in favor of an imaginative and sympathetic approach to nonhuman otherness and spurred many lively discussions in different fields, from literary studies to animal ethics and beyond. Nagel’s and Costello’s opposite positions represent in fact the two poles of a force field encompassing much of the debates on the powers of imagination, and their names and theses are indeed cited in so many discussions, almost to

mark, as it were, the limits and boundaries of these debates. Since these debates are far too broad and complex to be thoroughly analyzed in one single book (even devoting one volume to each debate would probably not be enough), I will take here Costello's criticisms of Nagel, and more in general the questions raised in *The Lives of Animals* and in other Costello's stories,¹ as a general *frame* which will enable me to present and explore some central and salient issues.

The central question I will explore from many possible angles is therefore: What are the limits of imagination? And I will focus in particular on what it means to imagine animal otherness, epitomized by Nagel's bat, because this focus allows for probing the limits of imagination to the extreme. But it also confers an ethical dimension to the question, which is absent from Nagel's thought experiment but is in fact the central issue in Costello's rejoinder, and constitutes therefore also the main perspective of this book. This is then a book on (among other things) animal ethics, but it will not adopt, define or propose a precise and consistent ethical theory. On the one hand, Costello's argument is an attack to *traditional* (animal) ethics, which, if powerfully manages to show the latter's limits, also fails (or refuses) to propose a positive and solid alternative. But, on the other, the main conclusion my explorations will lead to is that no last word can be written on these issues also because of the terminological and conceptual ambiguity and confusion marking the debates on imagination, empathy, and anthropomorphism. Therefore, a series of heterogeneous explorations through many different ethical routes and theoretical standpoints appears to me the best-suited approach to the question.

So, the book proposes some possible paths to test the limits of imagination in our interactions with the nonhuman world(s). I want to emphasize, however, that looking for its "limits" is not a way to downplay or undermine the role of imagination in our ethical encounters with nonhumans—a conclusion that follows, in a sense, from Nagel's own answer to his question. The guiding thesis of this book is *not* that imagination is *limited* in the negative sense of the term. To the contrary, the adoption of

¹ Besides *The Lives of Animals*, I will look at *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), which includes the two stories making up *The Lives of Animals*, and at the other Costello's stories that Coetzee wrote in the 2000s and 2010s and published first in Spanish translation in 2018 (in *Siete cuentos morales*) and then, only partially, in English in 2023 (in *The Pole and Other Stories*). The character of Elizabeth Costello also appears in Coetzee's 2005 novel *Slow Man*, but since here she does not address imagination or animal otherness, this novel will not be part of my "frame."

Elizabeth Costello's overstated claims as a general frame for my explorations is, in a way, a "declaration of intents" stating my support for those theories affirming and upholding the importance of imagination and emotions in our ethical life. Imagination, I will argue, is indeed much *less limited* than many philosophers, in Nagel's wake, would have us believe, and much *more interesting* for the exploration of our ethical life than most Western traditions accept. But, unlike Costello, I believe that this support must be qualified, nuanced, and justified. The notion of "limit" must be therefore positively understood here as *condition of possibility* for a fruitful and constructive—as opposed to romantic or delusive—imaginative approach to animal otherness. The "form" and "structure" of human imagination and its relation to experience, embodiment, society, culture, etc., create both constraints and opportunities, and it is by knowing these conditions of possibility that imagination can be understood, appreciated, and creatively deployed.

Finally, as Atwood's story shows *in nuce*, probing the limits of imagination in animal ethics also means exploring its connections to empathy/sympathy and anthropomorphism. The imaginative attempt to understand another's life comes often under the label of empathy (or sympathy), a topic which has generated very complex and even intricate debates throughout the twentieth century that are today livelier than ever. When the "other" is nonhuman, the argument almost necessarily ends up in a discussion of anthropomorphism, which in recent decades has been partially re-evaluated as an imaginative and sympathetic attempt to understand nonhuman animals. Just like imagination, empathy and anthropomorphism are often ill-defined and the appreciation of their role, advantages and limits depend, from time to time, on the meaning the terms are given in the discussion. One of the main goals of this book is therefore to try and bring some clarity to this often-confused theoretical landscape.

IMAGINATION, EMPATHY, ANTHROPOMORPHISM

Costello's theses emerge against the background of, and are powered by, a series of theoretical shifts that in the past few decades literally rattled the cage of traditional (animal) ethics, bringing (relatively) to the fore a heterodox tradition that recognizes and appreciates the contribution of imaginative and emotional factors, not only to ethics but also to cognition. With no claims of completeness, the chapters of this book will explore and

analyze some of these shifts that appear to me fundamental not only for understanding Costello's arguments but also for a general (and, for me, desirable) reshaping of contemporary (animal) ethics. Although linked to and cross-referencing each other, the chapters constitute thus quasi-independent examinations of particular theoretical problems and positions.

Since the book has three (intertwined) foci, it is divided into three parts, each comprising three chapters. Part I focuses on "The Limits of Imagination" and starts with a chapter, titled "The Challenge of Otherness: J.M. Coetzee vs Thomas Nagel," which presents the general frame of the book, i.e., the contraposition between Elizabeth Costello and Thomas Nagel on the limits and possibilities of human imagination. The chapter presents first Costello's and Nagel's positions and illustrates then many of the criticisms that have been moved against both. It then complicates Costello's position through a reading of Coetzee's novel *Disgrace*, which produces a more articulated and complex concept of sympathetic imagination as a movement that brings the subject outside itself and toward the other.

Chapter 2, "The Just and Loving Gaze of the Poet: Animals and Poetry," focuses on Costello's main argument: that only poetry, and not philosophy, can provide true access to animal life. It first presents the background of Costello's argument, that is, the so-called literary turn that took place in the last decades of the twentieth century and was championed by thinkers such as Martha Nussbaum and Richard Rorty, who argued for the need to support and complement philosophical (and especially moral) arguments with the imaginative élan of literature. It then complicates these theses with the positions proposed by Cora Diamond and Iris Murdoch. In particular, Murdoch's definition of "attention" as a "just and loving gaze" is adopted as the gaze of the poet. With this theoretical frame, the chapter proposes then a brief examination of animal poetry and analyzes the poems cited by Costello in *The Lives of Animals*, Rilke's "The Panther" and Ted Hughes' two "Jaguar" poems. The chapter concludes proposing a poetical "ecology" whereby human language renounces its colonizing attempt to "capture" animal otherness and helps instead its emergence by emptying out the human subject and welcoming otherness in all its resistance to human imagination.

Finally, Chap. 3, "The Pitfalls of Embodiment: Imagination, Disability, Animality," centers on another key claim made by Costello in her praise of poetry: that the understanding of the animal other needs to be *embodied* and not abstract. This claim informs some important trends in

contemporary animal ethics, which usually look back at Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment to support it, so the chapter proposes first a summary of Merleau-Ponty theses and adds to them some ethical claims. The question of embodiment, however, is accompanied by the differences that inhere to different forms of embodiment, both animal and human (in disability, for example), so the chapter looks at the links between animality and disability and the problems they generate in the contemporary debate. This analysis leads to acknowledge the limits of any epistemology and ethics based on embodiment, which are illustrated through the example of blindness and John Hull's autobiography, *On Sight and Insight*: different forms of embodiment generate different "worlds," and this places real constraints on our capacities to imagine ourselves otherwise. The chapter closes with a call to "crip" both phenomenology and animal ethics, i.e., to imaginatively open them to the experiences of non-normate bodies.

Part II, "The Limits of Empathy," moves the focus to the first part of Costello's signature concept of "sympathetic imagination," i.e., sympathy (and empathy), and Chap. 4, titled "Sympathy, Empathy, & Co.: Moral Sentimentalism and Its Discontents," starts by providing an overview of the intellectual background of these concepts in ethics and especially in animal ethics. It first provides a brief history of sympathy and empathy and emphasizes the semantic and conceptual problems that marked these concepts from the very beginning, especially with the "invention" of empathy at the end of the nineteenth century. It then analyzes some theories about the differences between sympathy and empathy, concluding that, in the end, the meaning and import of these concepts is always a matter of stipulation. The same holds for those theories which criticize sympathy and empathy and oppose to moral sentimentalism a rationalist view of ethics. The chapter ends by analyzing Costello's reconsiderations about her early theories in some new short stories that Coetzee published first in Spanish (2018) and then, only partially, in English (2023). The bottom line is that Costello's much-criticized vagueness and imprecision is a feature marking the whole debate on sympathy and empathy.

Chapter 5, "Feeling One's Way in an Intersubjective World: Phenomenology of Empathy," narrows the focus to the phenomenological view of empathy and sympathy, which was bracketed in the previous chapter. The phenomenological view seems more attuned to Costello's emphasis on embodiment, but it also problematizes some of her assumptions, still rooted in an intellectualized view of the sympathetic

imagination. The advantage of the phenomenological theories of empathy and sympathy is that they reject any projection/imitation presuppositions and understand empathy/sympathy as the direct and pre-reflexive experience of another's subjectivity, whereby it is not necessary to know "what it is like" to be another's subject—human or animal—to empathize/sympathize with them. Although both the classic phenomenologists and the contemporary proponents of the so-called Direct Perception Theory are hardly interested in nonhuman animals, their theories have been adopted and adapted by some interesting trends in animal ethics. The chapter closes with Costello's brief criticism of Heidegger (traditionally a critic of empathy) in one of her new short stories (2023).

The final chapter of Part II, "Listening to What the (Animal) Other Is Saying: Empathy and Care," analyzes the contemporary ethical position possibly most close to the one proposed by Costello, i.e., feminist ecocriticism, which deploys in animal ethics the so-called ethics of care. The chapter problematizes Coetzee's "performing" of a female voice but also finds many correspondences between Costello's position and contemporary ecofeminists working in animal ethics. It also presents the criticisms these theories have attracted, since they are very similar to, and at the same time help contextualize, those moved against Costello, and assesses them in light of the analyses of the previous two chapters. Particular attention is devoted to two scholars who have centered their theories on empathy and sympathy, Lori Gruen and Josephine Donovan, and the chapter concludes with the latter's call to adopt and adapt standpoint epistemology in animal ethics. As their critics emphasize, these theories walk a fine line between listening to the other and projecting one's voice, and constitute therefore a good bridge to Part III, focused on "The Limits of Anthropomorphism."

Chapter 7, "If a Chimpanzee Could Talk: On the Advantages and Limits of Primatomorphism," begins the analysis of anthropomorphism starting from Costello's discussion of Wolfgang's Köhler's experiments with chimpanzees. It first reads Köhler's book, *The Mentality of Apes*, in the context of the "birth" and development of behaviorism at the beginning of the twentieth century (Thorndike, Watson, Skinner), sketching the history of the contemporary opposition to any anthropomorphic language. It then briefly discusses the reappraisal of (some forms of) anthropomorphism at the end of the twentieth century in light of the paradigm shift operated by cognitive ethology, and notes how primatology and the study of chimpanzees worked as a sort of "bridge" to challenge the behaviorist dogmatism. It then compares, on the wake of Costello's reading, Köhler's experiments

and Kafka's story "A Report to an Academy," to argue that Köhler's "scientific" ethos is still informed by an anthropomorphic drive in looking for human characteristics (intelligence) in nonhuman animals, whereas Kafka's explicit and unabashed literary anthropomorphism can help building a bridge to animal subjectivity and true otherness.

After analyzing in Chap. 7 anthropomorphism in the case of a nonhuman animal very similar to us, the chimpanzee, Chap. 8, "Tentacular Logocentrism: Octopus Minds and Human Imagination," looks instead at how it works with an extremely "alien" species, i.e., the octopus, since Elizabeth Costello argued that the sympathetic imagination could get us access even to mollusks. After reviewing some recent literature about octopuses and the issues that are raised about their intelligence and consciousness, the chapter analyzes Craig Foster's 2020 documentary *My Octopus Teacher* and Ray Nayler's 2022 novel *The Mountain in the Sea*, showing how this form of "alien" intelligence has captured contemporary imagination. However, it is finally argued that, despite the enormous differences separating octopuses from humans, the fact of their vivid intelligence pushes us to try and bridge the great gap separating us from them—an effort that we are not ready to make for other species much more similar to us, like, for example, bats. Our new fascination for octopuses is yet another instance of a hidden anthropomorphism.

The final chapter, "The Back of the Snake, or, Face to Face with the Other," focuses neither on similarity (as in Chap. 7) nor on an "elective affinity" (as in Chap. 8) but on true otherness, exemplified here by the snake. The focus on the snake truly puts to the test the power of the sympathetic imagination, and moreover allows me to look at a last philosophical perspective, that of Levinas. This is particularly relevant because some preliminary notes show that Coetzee was reading Levinas when writing *The Lives of Animals*, and moreover he comes back to the Levinasian theme of the face in a later Costello story, "The Old Woman and the Cats" (2023). The chapter analyzes therefore Levinas' ethics of the face and his refusal to grant a face to nonhuman animals. It then looks at some criticism of Levinas' position and concludes with a reading of D.H. Lawrence's poem "Snake," on the wake of Derrida's late seminars. However, unlike Derrida, the chapter argues that the search for a face, the most significant human trait, still betrays an anthropomorphic drive, and only in the confrontation with the back, the site of outmost vulnerability and unrecognizability, will true ethics emerge.

The book has no conclusion, since it has been designed as a partial and open-ended exploration of three interconnected debates, those on moral imagination, empathy, and anthropomorphism, which is far from comprehensive but only highlights some issues and problems. And this because the most disappointing trait of these debates is that they fail to establish a paradigmatic use of the terms and concepts they center on, and make it therefore (almost) impossible to draw clear conclusions and to propose a final “theory of imagination” (or “... of empathy” or “... of anthropomorphism”). The book does not aim at putting forward the “right” theory (or theories) that would “end” these debates and does not fully endorse any specific position (although care ethics is perhaps the one I personally favor). What it does is to explore the advantages and problems of some ethical positions that use and focus on imagination (and empathy and anthropomorphism, which are interconnected but present their own advantages and problems).

Moreover, negotiating the limits of imagination is an open-ended endeavor that needs to be continuously renewed and reinvented, and thus the only possible conclusion is an invitation to keep pushing against what, each time, we think or believe are the limits of the imaginable. However, a brief epilogue, titled “Batmom’s ‘World’-Traveling in Nonhuman *Umwelten*,” aims at giving a sense of “closure” by proposing one last image and one last *poetic* metaphor which resonate very well with the spirit of Elizabeth Costello’s interventions: The image is that of Batmom, a Polish pensioner who transformed her apartment into a bat sanctuary, and the poetic metaphor is that of “world”-traveling as developed by María Lugones. The concept of “world”-traveling, of a continuous work of modestly learning, respecting and embracing the otherness of the other, is proposed therefore as a final emblem of the whole work of the sympathetic imagination.

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PART I

The Limits of Imagination



CHAPTER 2

The Challenge of Otherness: J.M. Coetzee vs. Thomas Nagel

The main issue this book will address can be summarized as follows: The otherness of other beings creates a major tension in ethics, that between the demand to respond by understanding them and their needs, and the obligation to respect their very otherness. To do justice to the other we have to assume them as knowable—we need to understand what they feel, what they need, what they want—while simultaneously acknowledging the limits of such knowledge. To act ethically we need to understand the other’s desires and expectations, but believing that we can do this we risk projecting and imposing our own desires and expectation onto the other. The conceptual categories we are obliged to employ to understand the other are molded by the very language we use and by multiple other factors such as our experience, beliefs, culture, and education, and therefore can be themselves an obstacle to understanding. This tension between the assumption of knowability and transparency and the assumption of unknowability and opacity is ultimately irresolvable: to claim that the other is fully knowable is as problematic as to claim that the other is unknowable (cf. Attridge 2019, 48–49).

This tension becomes extreme—and therefore paradigmatic—when the other is a nonhuman other: to what extent can our understanding bridge the species gap? And how are we to do justice to the individuality of the nonhuman other considering the relative opacity of their lives? An imaginative leap is, to some extent, always required when we are

confronted with otherness, but how far can imagination leap? And how far can our responsibility (as *ability* but also as *demand* to respond) go? These questions are presented with exemplar clarity and insight in J.M. Coetzee's 1997–98 Tanner Lectures, later published as *The Lives of Animals* (1999a), which will therefore constitute the frame for all the explorations of this book. This first chapter will propose an analysis of this text to help laying out and introducing the problems and issues at stake.

THE SYMPATHETIC IMAGINATION

In *The Lives of Animals*, Coetzee presents a fictional Australian fiction writer, Elizabeth Costello, giving two lectures at a fictional North American university, Appleton College. Costello's two lectures (which correspond to Coetzee's two Tanner lectures-in-the-form-of-stories at Princeton University) focus respectively on "the philosophers and the animals" and "the poets and the animals," and put forward the following thesis: whereas philosophers miss a true encounter with nonhuman otherness because they remain confined to the straightjacket of disembodied reason, writers and poets can on occasion manage to inhabit and represent this otherness by conveying the embodied fullness of animal (or human) life. Costello mentions and criticizes many philosophers in her lectures, but in a way her argument revolves around the challenge she moves against Thomas Nagel for his notorious thesis—which he proposed in his 1974 paper "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?"—that humans will never be able to know what it is like to be another kind of animal because of the constraints of our imagination, which is strongly limited by our own experience.

Imagination for Nagel (who admittedly focuses on the nature of consciousness and on the mind-body problem and not on human-animal ethics) can only tell me what it would be like *for me* to be a bat, but not what is it like *for a bat* to be a bat. For this task, the resources of our mind are inadequate since our sense-modalities are too different from those of a bat. But for Costello this view is "tragically limited" and sends us "down a false trail" (Coetzee 1999a, 31). To Nagel's fundamental defeatism Costello opposes the power of imagination: to be a living bat, she argues, is to be full of being, which is also what it is to be a living human: "being fully a bat is like being fully human, which is also to be full of being"; this fullness essentially expresses the embodiedness of living beings, the sensation "of being a body with limbs that have extension in space, of being

alive to the world” (Coetzee 1999a, 33). And it is therefore a sensation that the human mind is perfectly able to imagine and understand. As examples, Costello brings the fact that she can imagine what it is like to be a corpse, but more essentially that she, as a fiction writer, “thought her way” into the existence of her characters:¹ “If I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed,” she says, “then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life.”² Therefore, she affirms, “there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination” (Coetzee 1999a, 35).

This claim about the power of literature is restated in Costello’s lecture on “the poets and the animals”: unlike philosophers, (some) poets—sometimes even despite themselves: “writers teach us more than they are aware of” (Coetzee 1999a, 53)—can teach us “to imagine our way” into another body, to “inhabit” another (animal) body (and, importantly, not only another *mind*; cf. Coetzee 1999a, 51³). Poetic invention “shows us how to bring the living body into being within ourselves” (Coetzee 1999a, 53) and thus demonstrates that it is possible, for a brief while, to feel and know what it is like to be another being, even one belonging to another species. Literature seems to present a “passage out of reason” (Durrant 2006, 129), out of the straitjacket of disembodied (and anthropocentric) abstraction and into the sensuous, trans-species embodiment of the material world. Or, better, a passage beyond this very dualism and opposition (Funk Deckard and Palm 2010, 348). And this passage is charged with an

¹ Indeed, Costello emphasizes that her only position of authority is that of a writer of fiction, of someone “whose sole claim to your attention is to have written stories about made-up people” (Coetzee 1999a, 22). This claim of authority is fundamental in her project of the sympathetic imagination.

² This point about the power of fiction is also emphasized in the first story Coetzee wrote on Elizabeth Costello (in 1997), later featuring as the first chapter (or “lesson”) of the book *Elizabeth Costello*. Here her son says to another character: “‘But my mother has been a man,’ he persists. ‘She has also been a dog. She can think her way into other people, into other existences. I have read her; I know. It is within her powers. Isn’t that what is most important about fiction: that it takes us out of ourselves, into other lives?’” (Coetzee 2003, 23).

³ This kind of understanding, Elisa Aaltola argues (2010, 139), takes the mind (= consciousness, the capacity of having experiences, a point of view) as a starting point and not as the conclusion of an inferential process; in the words of Dale Jamieson (2002, qtd. in Aaltola 2010), it replaces the “inferential view” with an “affective stance.”

ethical and pedagogical value: literature enriches and enlarges the power of imagination and consequently our moral capacity, which has a narrative form and is shaped by stories.

Literature, Costello declares, enriches our moral world, bringing us outside of ourselves and in contact with other beings—human and nonhuman alike. Despite Costello’s apparent and overstated naiveté, this claim is far from ingenuous: she simply affirms that nonhuman life is not much more (but certainly also no less) resistant to human understanding than human life, and that resistance, contradiction, and paradoxes should not prevent but rather encourage and impel the deployment of our imaginative capacities (Mulhall 2009, 47). Literature—a literature that acknowledges and incorporates this resistance, contradiction, and paradoxes—can supplement, correct, and prevent the failures of imagination *à la* Nagel and help in the imaginative, “empathic leap of faith” (Doniger 1999, 103) necessary to overcome our destructive anthropocentrism.

AN OBJECTIVE, UNIMAGINATIVE PHENOMENOLOGY

Nagel’s paper has been described as the “most widely cited and influential thought experiment about consciousness” (Dennett 1991, 441) and has generated a vast number of commentaries, exegesis, and criticism. His basic position is that “[o]ur own experience provides the basic material for our imagination, whose range is therefore limited” (2024, 8). Though he concedes that the imagination is “remarkably flexible” (2024, 58n8), Nagel argues nonetheless that it cannot go “very far” (2024, 9) and therefore that the understanding of other forms of life “may be permanently denied to us by the limits of our nature” (2024, 12). Adopting a “crudely mathematico-physical model” (Mulhall 2009, 45), he contends that we cannot understand what it is like for a bat to be a bat “either by imagining additions to [our] present experience, or by imagining segments gradually subtracted from it, or by imagining some combination of additions, subtractions, and modifications” (Nagel 2024, 9).

Nagel does not argue that a point of view is accessible only to a single individual (which would amount to solipsism): experience is a “type,” he writes, and therefore, in a sense, “phenomenological facts are perfectly objective”; but an objective ascription of experience is possible only for someone sufficiently similar to be able to adopt the point of view of the other (2024, 14–15). The distance between oneself and others falls on a

continuum stretching from humans to Martians (with bats closer to the latter than to the former), where extrapolation is increasingly limited and incompletable the more we move away from the human continent, and understanding is always intrinsically partial (2024, 58–59n8). And the sympathetic imagination, which Nagel defines as putting ourselves into a state that mentally resembles the state of the other, necessarily fails without the associated brain state (2024, 61–62n11). He concludes therefore his paper with a speculative proposal: to devise “an objective phenomenology not dependent on empathy or the imagination” (what he will later call the “view from nowhere”; see Nagel 1986) that could “describe, at least in part, the subjective character of experiences in a form comprehensible to beings incapable of having those experiences” (2024, 28).⁴ That is, to discard imagination altogether from the investigation of consciousness and experience.

Costello’s criticism of this position amounts to asking whether the limits Nagel imposes on imagination are the limits of the human mind as such or rather the limits of Nagel’s own mind; that is, whether the human mind is really unable to take different and alien points of view or whether Nagel (with many others) is *unwilling* to do so and refuses to acknowledge the very possibility of it, conveniently disregarding, for example, the power of the poetic imagination. It is perhaps this unwillingness that ultimately leads Nagel to emphasize the discontinuity between different modalities of life at the expense of the commonality of living and of embodied existence, which is instead Costello’s perspective (Mulhall 2009, 43–45). Stephen Mulhall remarks that Nagel’s bat is merely the character of a thought-experiment about consciousness and, as such, is not in any way intended to provide an accurate representation of bat reality. Thought-experiments in philosophy are constructed in such a way as to abstract from the complexity of real-life situations and isolate a single issue in order to make a specific point, and therefore “the actual reality of bat-life is of precisely no relevance to Nagel’s bat” (Mulhall 2009, 24). However, Mulhall wonders, Nagel’s claim is precisely about the human capacity to understand *real* forms of conscious life, so what worth is it if it abstracts

⁴However, for Nagel objectivity remains a challenge and an approximation: “In speaking of the move from subjective to objective characterization, I wish to remain noncommittal about the existence of an end point, the completely objective intrinsic nature of the thing, which one might or might not be able to reach. It may be more accurate to think of objectivity as a direction in which the understanding can travel” (Nagel 2024, 19).

from the true nature of bat consciousness? (2009, 33–34).⁵ Costello’s position, to the contrary, emphasizes the responsibility of using the imagination to address the actual reality of the creatures to which it refers.

Moreover, there are no value-neutral accounts (Mulhall 2009, 27) and Nagel’s thought-experiment is designed with a specific purpose. Nagel states that he chose “bats instead of wasps or flounders because if one travels too far down the phylogenetic tree, people gradually shed their faith that there is experience there at all.” Bats are mammals and are thus related to us, but they have a sensory apparatus so different from ours that makes them a “fundamentally *alien* form of life” (2024, 7).⁶ But, interestingly, he did not choose dolphins, who, like bats, are also mammals using echolocation to move around and hunt, and moreover live in water and sleep with only one brain hemisphere at a time. As Wendy Doniger remarked, Nagel chose bats “to make the point of noncommunication more dramatic, because we don’t *love* bats” and thus we *don’t want* to understand them (1999, 102; see also Hacking 2001, 706–7; Laird 2018, 144). Bats, unlike dolphins, evoke unconscious images of darkness, frenzy, fright, and even fantasies of blood-sucking vampires (although of the 1331 known species of bats only 3 feed on blood; Laird 2018, 40), so that we psychologically not only refuse to bridge the gap between us and them but even widen it.

This unwillingness to understand is accompanied by a self-defeating attitude toward investigation as such. Donald Griffin, the American zoologist who, together with Robert Galambos, discovered echolocation in bats in the late 1930s and early 1940s and coined the very term “echolocation,” takes Nagel to task because his positing the impossibility of

⁵ As it has been noted (e.g., Laird 2018, 7–8), the order of Chiroptera is the second-largest order of mammals after rodents, including minuscule, nocturnal, insectivores mini-bats as well as giant, diurnal, fruit-eating flying foxes (who do not use echolocation), so that talking about “bats” and their sense-modalities in general makes little sense. Richard Dawkins (1986, 23) stated that speaking of bats as though they were all the same would be like speaking “of dogs, lions, weasels, bears, hyenas, pandas and otters all in one breath, just because they are all carnivores.”

⁶ More specifically, Nagel writes that “anyone who has spent some time in an enclosed space with an excited bat knows what it is to encounter a fundamentally *alien* form of life” (2024, 7). The image we have of bats is *a priori* that of an excited, terrified, and alien form of life, as captured in a few verses from Rilke’s Eight Duino Elegy: “And how bewildered is any womb-born creature / that has to fly. As if terrified and fleeing / from itself [*Wie vor sich selbst / erschreckt*], it zigzags through the air, the way / a crack runs through a teacup. So the bat / quivers across the porcelain of evening” (2009, 42).

knowing something (e.g., what it is like to be a bat for a bat) unless totally perfect data are clearly in view ultimately inhibits or even prevents investigation. Griffin calls this attitude “paralytic perfectionism” because it paralyzes scientific exploration and works as a potent excuse not to face a scientific problem. There is probably nothing that we can ever know with complete perfection and total certainty, Griffin argues, but this does not diminish the possibility and the importance of significant if incomplete understanding (Griffin 2001, 32). Partial understanding and informed inferences are the basis and workings of scientific inquiry, and Françoise Wemelsfelder (2001) adds that the knowledge acquired through painstaking observation and study, though remaining incomplete, is neither arbitrary nor indirect: though both people and animals frequently misunderstand each other, experience and study can discriminate meaningful categories and use them reliably.

Griffin (1958, 297; cf. also 2001, 257) proposed that in bats listening takes the place of seeing, and Richard Dawkins (1986, 24) picked up and developed this thesis, arguing that probably bat brains can use echoes to do something akin to “seeing” images. Dawkins’ argument is that bats use sound information for the same purpose as we use our visual information: “Bats and we need the same kind of internal model for representing the position of objects in three-dimensional space. The fact that bats construct their internal model with the aid of echoes, while we construct ours with the aid of light, is irrelevant. That outside information is, in any case, translated into the same kind of nerve impulses on its way to the brain” (Dawkins 1986, 34). So, Dawkins concludes, bats “see” in much the same way as we do, even though the physical medium they use for “seeing” is different from the one we use—hence we can, if only approximatively, know what it is like to be a bat. As proof, Griffin (2001, 256–57) and Dawkins (1986, 23) bring the fact that blind people also carry out a form of echolocation, detecting objects by hearing echoes of sounds they make. Human echolocation was initially called “facial vision” because blind people reported that it feels a bit like the sense of touch on the face, until it was demonstrated, in the early 1940s, that, like bats, they use a form of sonar—and thus bats are not such alien creatures as Nagel thinks.⁷

⁷In a footnote, Nagel seems to concede this point: “blind people,” he writes, “are able to detect objects near them by a form of sonar, using vocal clicks or taps of a cane” (2024, 58n8). However, he soon restates his thesis that the experience of a blind person is not accessible to a sighted person and vice versa (2024, 12).

This argument is debatable and has been challenged, for example, by Kathleen Akins (1993a, 1993b), who, *contra* Dawkins and Griffin but also *contra* Nagel, argues not only that bat perceptions are neither imagistic nor three-dimensional, but also that bats probably have no point of view at all—that is, they have no consciousness: in sum, there is nothing it is like to be a bat. Akins adopts an extremely mechanomorphic perspective that reduces bats to machines, and quite elemental ones at that, and rehearses the argument of her mentor Daniel Dennett, for whom we should be interested in “what we can know about the bat’s consciousness (if any), not whether we can turn our minds temporarily or permanently into bat minds” (1991, 442). For Dennett as for Akins, science can tell us a lot about what it is like to be a bat, since the “structure of a bat’s mind is just as accessible as the structure of a bat’s digestive system” (Dennett 1991, 447) and there is no need to postulate any further inaccessible entity. Nagel’s question, for Dennett, does not even make sense and is merely a smokescreen that gives too much credit to the (inexistent) mystery of animal minds (cf. also Dennett 1996, 159–60).⁸

Opposite to this thesis of the scientific accessibility of forms of life, there also exist the thesis of the absolute opaqueness of consciousness, animal and human alike. Nagel’s question is wrong, Eric Schwitzgebel and Michael Gordon write, because humans themselves are grossly and systematically mistaken about their own current conscious experience. As proof they take the case of human echolocation: the example of the “facial vision” shows that human beings are unaware of their actual sensory experience, let alone of their moods and emotions, their imagery and dreams, their cognition and desires. Sighted human beings, not just bats and dolphins, do echolocate as part of their normal intercourse with the world and have a sense of the acoustic space they occupy. Even though we too echolocate, Schwitzgebel and Gordon conclude, “Nagel may still be right that we cannot know what it is like to be a bat; we hardly even know what it is like to be ourselves” (2000, 244). For a post-Freudian psychology, what it is like to be us is independent of our beliefs about what we are like: the knowledge we have of ourselves is not better than the one we have of others. We always imagine, we always project, we always serve our purposes (Kornblith 1998).

⁸ Griffin (2001, 34–36) coined the term “mentophobia” to describe this resistance to the idea of animal consciousness.

THE FRUSTRATION OF PHILOSOPHICAL FUZZINESS

Like Nagel's, also Costello's theses have come under harsh criticism, and not only at the hands of mentophobic thinkers like Dennett. Even the most sympathetic reader must acknowledge that her arguments do not necessarily hold up to scrutiny. Despite moments of sharp and surprising insight, the sympathetic reader feels frustration at Costello's theoretical shortcomings and is left wishing that her arguments were "a little better than they are" (Kite 2005, 13). Less sympathetic (and more philosophically scrupulous) readers have criticized her arguments for being sloppy, incomplete, contradictory, and inadequate to the task of teaching empathy and "correct thinking."

Anton Leist and Peter Singer (2010, 10–11), for example, point out that her questioning of rational argumentation forces her to shun the more stable position of sound philosophical arguments, which, in turn, leaves her with no clear positive ethics. A central axis of Costello's theses is in fact a caustic critique of philosophical language and of reason itself, which she dismisses as "simply a vast tautology" (1999a, 25). Against the whole Western tradition, Costello describes reason as "not the being of the universe but on the contrary merely the being of the human brain [, ...] the specialism of a rather narrow self-regenerating intellectual tradition whose forte is reasoning, in the same way that the forte of chess-players is playing chess, which for its own motives it tries to install at the center of the universe" (1999a, 23, 25).⁹ For Leist and Singer, Costello "literary pathocentrism" is in need of further sound argumentation, of the support of a rational justification, and her opposition to this very support undermines the very purpose of her sympathetic identification. Deprived of the clear light of reason, the poet's imaginative identification with the other is "morally blind."

Andy Lamey (2010, 187) concurs that it is neither desirable nor possible to fully separate sympathy from reason in the way Costello suggests.

⁹And she continues: "Both reason and seven decades of life experience tell me that reason is neither the being of the universe nor the being of God. On the contrary, reason looks like the being of human thought; worse than that, like the being of one tendency in human thought. Reason is the being of a certain spectrum of human thinking" (1999a, 23). In a later discussion with a philosophy professor, Costello calls the unimaginative use of reason "imbecilic" (1999a, 62), giving as an example the scientific experiments on animals (she refers specifically to Wolfgang Köhler's experiments with chimpanzees that I will analyze in Chap. 7) that force onto the animals the "less interesting thought" (1999a, 29).

Acts of sympathetic identification intrinsically need and presuppose reason as a guide to discriminate, adjudicate, and classify the objects and the direction of our sympathies, which are therefore the product of reason as much as sympathy. Costello's own sympathies prove the point, as she avows that she has difficulty in sympathizing with Aquinas and Descartes because of their positions on animals (Coetzee 1999a, 35). Moreover, as Mulhall notes (2009, 48–49), the parallel she establishes between animal agriculture and the Holocaust (which is itself very problematic and, as Costello herself admits, perhaps even a “cheap point”; cf. Coetzee 1999a, 23) reveals not only the lack of sympathetic imagination in the perpetrators and the indifferent, but also the cooperation of understanding and emotion in our judging them. Lamey argues therefore that Costello falls prey to oversimplification, and her simplistic dichotomies misconstrue the constitutive role of reason, in the wake of Adam Smith (who coined the expression “sympathetic imagination”) and the tradition of the Scottish Enlightenment, failing to take adequate note of the negative side of imaginative identification. Her oversimplification is ultimately a “factitious, sentimental caricature” of genuine sympathetic understanding (Mulhall 2009, 48).

Moreover, her examples of the sympathetic imagination are extremely problematic and logically weak: does thinking oneself into a corpse or into the life of a fictional character really have anything to do with imagining oneself into the—embodied, corporeal, sensuous—life of a bat or of another nonhuman animal? Early on, Singer (1999, 90–91) deemed the latter comparison simplistic and shallow, and subsequent commentators including Derek Attridge (2019, 44) (who is otherwise a sympathetic reader), point out that imagining ourselves into the lives of human (or anthropomorphized) literary characters is one thing, while imagining ourselves into the lives of other species quite another: the literary imagination depends on nothing but the author (Aaltola 2010, 138–39).¹⁰

A popular approach to explaining Costello's philosophical unsoundness is to fit her opinions into a Bakhtinian polyphonic staging of different and contrasting positions: Coetzee, the argument goes, follows Bakhtin's notions of polyphony and dialogism (cf. Bakhtin 1984) and lays out many different philosophical options before the readers, leaving the final choice

¹⁰For Anat Pick (2018), all these features make Coetzee's text “vulnerable,” although this vulnerability is not negatively understood but rather interpreted as acknowledgement and reflection of the vulnerability of the human and animal condition.

to them. In *The Lives of Animals*, it is not Costello who narrates her stories but she is rather presented to the reader from a number of different perspectives and through the eyes of other characters, from her estranged son John to her hostile daughter-in-law Norma (a philosopher of mind), who analyze, criticize, and question her positions and arguments.¹¹ For Michael Kochin (2007, 89), Coetzee resists taking stands and giving idealistic or ideological lessons, and when he has Costello take stands in her lectures, interviews, or conversations, he makes them intentionally confused and disconnected from reality (cf. also McAdams 2014).¹² And, for Richard Alan Northover (2012), Costello's stories resemble Platonic dialogues, where Costello plays the Socratic figure (in a Bakhtinian setting). For philosophers, this "experimental openness" is simply "irritating" (Leist and Singer 2010, 11; cf. also Singer 1999, 91), since Coetzee seems to refuse to take responsibility for the ideas he puts forward, but even for more indulgent readers the ethical uncertainty and sloppiness are frustrating (Kite 2005, 13). The question is, however, whether Coetzee really refuses to take a stand or whether a different strategy is instead at work in his fiction.

THE FAILURE OF SYMPATHY

Many commentators have noted that Coetzee's position is ultimately irreducible to Costello's and that what his fiction presents to the reader is less a justification of Costello's argument than a revelation of the very failure of the project of the sympathetic imagination. As Sam Durrant remarks (2006, 119), against Costello's claim of the unboundedness of the sympathetic imagination, Coetzee's books usually depict acts of sympathetic imagination that continually encounter their own bounds. And this not

¹¹ It is worth noting that for Bakhtin sympathy and empathy are incompatible with polyphony and dialogism, since, he argued, they involve the projection of the self into the other, the usurpation of another point of view, and ultimately the obliteration of otherness (cf. Boobar 2009).

¹² Derek Attridge (2004, 197–98) seems to take a similar position (without mentioning Bakhtin) when he argues that Coetzee does not present philosophical *arguments*, which lay claim to a timeless, spaceless, subjectless condition, but rather *arguings*, utterances made by individuals in concrete situations, that is, "events staged within the event of the work" which "invite the reader's participation not just in the intellectual exercise of positions expounded and defended but in the human experience, and the human cost, of exposing convictions, beliefs, doubts, and fears in a public arena."

only because of the inherent limits of sympathy as such,¹³ but also, and perhaps most of all, because of the dogged resistance of the other to the acts of sympathetic attention. A typical Coetzee plot includes characters trying and failing to sympathize with figures of (mostly underprivileged, foreign, even abject) otherness, whereby alterity is systematically pushed beyond the reach of the sympathetic imagination (Travis 2010, 232; Attridge 2004, 168). On the other hand, readers are nonetheless assigned the impossible task of sympathizing, an imperative that the narrative does not foreclose but rather forcefully sustains and pushes forward (Marais 2006, 80; 2011, 95). Failure and impossibility, Durrant argues, are however the precondition for a “new kind of ethical and literary relation” (Durrant 2006, 120).

The paradigm of this paradoxical ethical and literary stance is *Disgrace*, the Booker Prize-winning novel that Coetzee published the same year as *The Lives of Animals* (1999a) and that therefore can be and has been read as a sort of companion piece to it. The question of sympathy is also central to this novel, where it is questioned and deconstructed in subtle ways rather than explicitly and overtly analyzed. The main character, David Lurie (perhaps the most unsympathetic and unpleasant of Coetzee’s characters; Baker 2005, 47n7; McInturff 2007, 8; Travis 2010, 238), is a narcissistic, self-centered, even sexist literature professor who, early in the novel, in one of his last university lectures, explicitly belies Costello’s credo, but by using language that closely matches it and could be seen as a kind of reply to it. Commenting on the figure of Lucifer in Byron’s poem “Lara,” he says to his class:

Note that we are not asked to condemn this being with the mad heart, this being with whom there is something constitutionally wrong. On the contrary, we are invited to understand and sympathize. But there is a limit to sympathy. For though he lives among us, he is not one of us. He is exactly what he calls himself: a *thing*, that is, a monster. Finally [...] it will not be possible to love him, not in the deeper, more human sense of the word. (Coetzee 1999b, 33–34)

Lurie loses his job at the university because of his affair with a student, Melanie (with whom he seems unable to sympathize), and at a dinner he

¹³These inherent limits partially vindicate Nagel’s position, which remains nonetheless defeatist in its implications.

is told by his ex-wife: “Don’t expect sympathy from me, David, and don’t expect sympathy from anyone else either. No sympathy, no mercy, not in this day and age” (1999b, 44). He then moves to the country with his estranged daughter Lucy, where he experiences the racial tensions and violence of a newly post-apartheid South Africa. He is assaulted and Lucy is raped by some local rogues, and when she refuses to press charges, he again feels unable to sympathize with his horribly traumatized daughter. When he tries to understand, he muses: “he can, if he concentrates, if he loses himself, be there, be the men, inhabit them, fill them with the ghost of himself. The question is, does he have it in him to be the woman?” (1999b, 160). He seems unable to do it, sympathy fails him in this crucial moment, and the very sympathies of the readers are tested at every turn of the narrative (McDunnah 2009, 16). In depicting sympathy at its most troubled (Baker 2005, 50), *Disgrace* functions therefore as a counter-melody to Costello’s contrived theory.

Disgrace seems to stage the failure of sympathy at a universal level, since its absence, as Lurie’s ex-wife states, is what characterizes “this day and age.” A pressing question (not only in *Disgrace* but in Coetzee’s fiction more in general) is that of sympathizing with the victims of oppression and violence but, simultaneously, also of understanding the perpetrators: not only in Costello’s example of the Nazi criminals and in Lurie’s attempt to understand his daughter’s rapists, but also in Lurie’s inability to sympathize with the victim of his own sexual harassment. Though trying to disavow the term, he is nonetheless aware of the violation he is inflicting on her student: “Not rape,” he tells himself, “not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core” (Coetzee 1999b, 25). Lurie, moreover, seems to think that he could perhaps understand persons of his own sex (he could “be the men,” he thinks, he could “fill them with the ghost of himself”), but he doubts—or at least wonders—whether he could understand “the woman” (Lucy, but also Melanie). His sympathies progressively seem to grow for the animals of his environment (the dogs at Lucy’s farm, killed by the rapists; the sheep of Lucy’s neighbor, destined to slaughter; and the dogs of an animal shelter he starts helping to take care of, and finally euthanizing, toward the end of the novel), but these sympathies contrast with his inability to sympathize with the humans. Based on these examples, Mike Marais (2011, 101–4) thus summarizes the conundrum of sympathy: sympathy must be unconditional, it must go

beyond the limiting position of individuality, this is its imperative; however, it is always inadequate to this task, and perhaps it is precisely the restless dissatisfaction of this inadequate sympathizing that spurs us to do more.

Lurie (and sympathy) is granted a sort of “redemption” (if there is such a thing in a Coetzee novel) in his work with the unwanted dogs at the animal shelter at the end of the novel. He becomes progressively attached to the fate of these unwanted animals and goes as far as processing himself the corpses of the euthanized dogs at the incinerator so that the workmen there will not beat them into pieces that are easier to fit into the machine. Disgraced and even abject, it is in his dismal and stupefying work with animals—even with their corpses—that Lurie finally manages to forfeit his egocentric and narcissistic tendencies and experience raw, unfiltered sympathy. And this is the form that true sympathy seems to take for Coetzee.

THE OTHERING OF THE SELF

Lurie’s transformation corresponds to what Dominick LaCapra has called “empathic unsettlement,” an unsettling of the closure of identity that makes one responsive to the traumatic experience of others, while resisting full identification with, and appropriation of, this experience and also taking responsibility for the very failures and perversions of imagination (LaCapra 2001, 79; cf. Koopman 2010). True sympathy, therefore, is far from an imaginative *projection* (what Nagel calls “putting ourselves in a conscious state resembling the thing itself” and Lurie describes as “filling someone else with the ghost of oneself”); if anything, as Durrant notes, it is a sort of *abjection* in which the subject is thrown outside or beside itself, is divested of all subject positions, and is thus brought into bodily proximity with the other—especially an other who has never been granted a subject position, such as an animal (2006, 130–31). Durrant explicitly refers to Kristeva’s theorization of abjection, which is described precisely as “plac[ing] the one haunted by it *literally* beside himself” (Kristeva 1982, 3). True sympathy is thus an othering of the self, a loss of the self, a forfeiture of subjectivity, an emptying out of oneself rather than a projection of oneself onto another being (Marais 2006, 81, 85; Travis 2010, 240; Attridge 2019, 49). As Costello’s son John says in another story: “Isn’t that what is most important about fiction: that it takes us out of ourselves, into other lives?” (Coetzee 2003, 23).

This is ultimately not so different from what Costello argues. The fullness of being she opposes to the disembodied *cogito* of the Western tradition is identified with “joy” (Coetzee 1999a, 33), which Durrant (2006, 128) describes as a feeling *without content*, a feeling that empties consciousness of its content and is therefore opposed to *self*-consciousness. Joy is not a mental thought but a bodily sensation, and, paradoxically, the joy of embodiedness is simultaneously the joy of living outside oneself. Another image Costello uses is that of a “wound” (Coetzee 1999a, 26) that she, referring to the character Red Peter of Kafka’s story “Report to an Academy,” feels in herself and exhibits to her audience: sympathizing with the embodied fullness of another life also means feeling a gaping hole in oneself that brings one outside the borders of subjectivity (Geiger 2010, 159). Finally, this forfeiture of subjectivity is also what it means to imagine one’s own death, to imagine oneself as a corpse, as not full but rather empty of being, that is, entirely outside of subjectivity (cf. Durrant 2006, 128–29).¹⁴

For Coetzee, therefore, the failure of the sympathetic imagination opens the way to a more attentive and noncoercive relation to the other that, while upholding the ethical imperative of sympathetic attention, also recognizes and respects the other’s fundamental alterity and lets the other be other (Durrant 2006, 120–21). And this is, ultimately, the task of imagination. In an interview collected in *Doubling the Point* (1992, 68), Coetzee states that the task of literature is that of imagining the unimaginable (the context is the unrepresentable history of colonialism, apartheid, and violence in South Africa). This imagination, however, just like the sympathetic imagination, is already described in *White Writing* (in a similar context) (1988, 9) as a humble, lower-case, “listening imagination,” in opposition to a “historical imagination” that is assertive and projective rather than open and hospitable (and as such ultimately fails) (cf. Woessner 2017, 147). The novel, Marais glosses (2006, 89), must enable to reader

¹⁴Jonathan Lamb (2011, 79) notes that Adam Smith already argued that it is possible to have sympathy for a corpse: “We sympathize even with the dead,” Smith wrote, “and overlooking what is of real importance in their situation, that awful futurity which awaits them, we are chiefly affected by those circumstances which strike our senses, but can have no influence upon their happiness” (2002, 16). But Kai Wiegandt (2019, 147) finds also a very interesting correspondence in Ecclesiastes 3:19: “Man’s fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; man has no advantage over the animal.”

to encounter what exceeds the limits of their cognitive categories, while experiencing at the same time the aporetic nature of this endeavor.

This is simultaneously an ethical and a literary relation, or rather the coincidence of the two: in a more recent exchange with psychologist Arabella Kurtz, Coetzee contends that “our sympathetic identifications have a fiction-like status, and that our sympathetic intuitions can be relied on only to yield fictional truths” (Coetzee and Kurtz 2015, 134). Our sympathetic identifications are always fictional accounts, stories about what it is like to be someone else. This in a sense vindicates and clarifies Costello’s argument (sympathy works the same way in reality and in fiction), though also grants a point to Nagel (sympathy is fiction). A few lines later, however, Coetzee reaffirms his disagreement with Nagel, this time not through an alter ego but as himself and in his own words: though the truth about the other (human and nonhuman¹⁵) afforded by the sympathetic imagination is indeed a fictional truth, he says, it is the only truth we have (Coetzee and Kurtz 2015, 136). And this also holds for the truth about oneself: in a 2001 interview titled “The Sympathetic Imagination” (where the topic of the sympathetic imagination is not discussed at all), Coetzee says that “[w]hat is self-delusional is to imagine that you can tell the truth about yourself, that it merely takes a certain frankness with oneself and a certain boldness in putting things down on paper and revealing them to other people” (Wachtel 2001, 45).¹⁶

Thus, the gap between the author and his character is perhaps not as wide, or at least not as unbridgeable, as it appeared to be to some critics. Attridge (2019, 51) even finds an important moment of identification between Costello and Coetzee. The character of Elizabeth Costello had already appeared in print before the publication of *The Lives of Animals* and all the Costello stories were collected and supplemented with new stories (called here “lessons”) in the 2003 book *Elizabeth Costello*. In the first “lesson” (which is also the first story that was published—in 1997) Costello is being interviewed for a radio program and is asked about a

¹⁵The context of this exchange between Coetzee and Kurtz is not animal ethics, in fact, but the experiences of human babies and children as discussed in particular by psychoanalyst Melanie Klein.

¹⁶This point converges with some of the above-mentioned criticisms of Nagel’s position, which counter that the knowledge we have of ourselves is not better than the one we have of others (cf. Kornblith 1998; Schwitzgebel and Gordon 2000).

novel she wrote from the perspective of a man. When the interviewer asks whether it was easy to write from that point of view, she answers: “No. If it were easy it wouldn’t be worth doing. It is the otherness that is the challenge” (2003, 12).¹⁷ The otherness is the challenge of ethics as much as of literature; taking on this challenge is the task of both.

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¹⁷The same question—the question David Lurie also asks himself—could be asked to Coetzee about his many and central female characters, most notably, but not exclusively, Elizabeth Costello: “does he have it in him to be the woman?” That Coetzee is not unaware of the gender problems in writing from the perspective of a female character emerges, though indirectly, from a short chapter of his *Diary of a Bad Year*, in which the main character (an aging writer with many features in common with Coetzee himself) receives a letter from a reader declaring that he does “understand nothing about women [...], particularly about a woman’s sexual psychology” (2007, 161). The gender issues are of course fundamental for an analysis of the limits of the sympathetic imagination and a whole recent collection has been devoted to its centrality in Coetzee’s fiction (Kossew and Harvey 2019).

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The Just and Loving Gaze of the Poet: Animals and Poetry

Elizabeth Costello's unsparing condemnation of philosophy opens up the space for her equally unconditional upholding of poetry: unlike philosophers and their lifeless and disembodied abstractions, she says, (some) poets are able to return "the living, electric being" of human and animal lives to language (Coetzee 1999, 65). Hence, she urges us to read the poets, who can nurture our sympathetic imagination and help us grasp "fullness, embodiedness, the sensation of being – not a consciousness of yourself as a kind of ghostly reasoning machine thinking thoughts, but on the contrary the sensation – a heavily affective sensation – of being a body with limbs that have extension in space, of being alive to the world" (1999, 33).

The strife between philosophers and poets dates of course at least to Plato's harsh condemnation of the latter in his political utopia (*Rep.* 607b5–6) and has been revived many times throughout the ages. But the specific context of Coetzee/Costello's variation on it is the new emphasis on the role of literature and narrative in the very shaping of the humanities and social sciences (and beyond) that Richard Rorty (who certainly had a penchant for naming academic "turns") called "narrative turn."¹ In the

¹ Rorty in fact called it "a general turn against theory and toward narrative" (1989, xvi). Another name for this "turn" is "literary turn" (cf. e.g., Stow 2007). The question whether these two labels cover or not the same semantic and theoretical space exceeds the scope of my analysis. I will treat them hereafter as equivalent.

last two decades of the twentieth century, a new intellectual fashion sought to mend the old strife by underlining how literature and narrative are constitutive components of intellectual inquiry as such and should be given their due in the assessment and structuring of all disciplines. In particular—and of central importance for an inquiry about the limits of imagination in ethics—a number of scholars and philosophers have emphasized the role of literature as essential in ethical deliberation, and, importantly, in teaching and promoting empathy, thereby paving the way for Costello’s harangue.

That Costello’s words cannot be taken at face value does not mean that her arguments are not valid or do not hold. On the contrary, the link between nonhuman animals and poetry, i.e., the power of poetry to really return animal life to language (and hence also support, perhaps, a more inclusive and compassionate ethics), has been proposed and upheld in many quarters. Perhaps poetry—unlike philosophy—is what can truly inspire that more attentive and noncoercive relation to the other that results from the simultaneous impelling demand and inevitable failure of the sympathetic imagination. This chapter will probe this hypothesis by contextualizing and unpacking Costello’s theory.

THE LITERARY IMAGINATION

The idea of literature as educative tool is of course not new, and here I certainly cannot summarize its history or its renewed actuality in the debates of the past forty years. But the argument proposed by John Kekes can be taken as a good, representative example. Borrowing the expression from Wallace Stevens, Kekes names the task and potentiality of literature as “the enlargement of life” (Stevens 1951, viii, qtd. in Kekes 2006, xi): literature (which for Kekes includes fiction but also history, ethnography, biographies, etc.) makes us acquainted with possibilities other than those present in our environment, time, and culture. Through reading we come to appreciate that the possibilities available to us do not exhaust the possibilities of life, and thereby our moral capacities grow in depth and breadth through understanding, contrast, and comparison. We learn to see the virtues and the limits of our own culture (from an outside vantage point, as it were) and of other cultures distant in time and space from us

(Kekes 1991, 2006, 2010).² And that is precisely why, for Susan Sontag (2004), we need fiction: “to stretch our world.”

This “enlargement” through literature has been historically the case: according to Lynn Hunt (2007), for example, eighteenth-century novels strongly contributed to the emerging language of human rights, and, in the case of animal ethics, the enormous success of Anna Sewell’s 1877 novel *Black Beauty* in the late nineteenth century raised awareness and compassion for the plight of animals and spurred the movement for their humane treatment (cf. e.g., Nussbaum 2001, 342).³ Presenting and unrolling before the reader some “moral archetypes,” literature can contribute to moral evolution and progress (Gibert 2014, 184–86), and this is particularly relevant for animal ethics: “In order to become possible,” Steve Cooke writes, “a future vision of justice must first be imaginable” (2017, 17), and literature that shows us not only the cruelty and suffering animals are subjected to, but also the richness and diversity of animal life can help us look at nonhuman animals and at our relationships with them in a new light (cf. e.g., Balaska 2016).

Martha Nussbaum, one of the most famous and vocal proponents of this thesis, makes here a fundamental point: in *Love’s Knowledge*, she claims that “only the style of a certain sort of narrative artist (and not, for example, the style associated with the abstract theoretical treatise) can adequately state certain important truths about the world, embodying them in its shape and setting up in the reader the activities that are appropriate for grasping them” (1990, 6). That is, literature is capable to express “certain important truths” that escape the “abstract theoretical treatise” of philosophy—and this is precisely Costello’s point: the embodied joy of animal life cannot be fully captured by and conveyed in the language of conventional philosophical prose, but only in poetry. Style or form is not separable from content; style, Nussbaum insists, “makes, itself, a statement: [...] a statement about what is important and what is not, about what faculties of the reader are important for knowing and what are not.”

² Martha Nussbaum writes (1990, 48): “literature is an extension of life not only horizontally, bringing the reader into contact with events or locations or persons or problems he or she has not otherwise met, but also, so to speak, vertically, giving the reader experience that is deeper, sharper, and more precise than much of what takes place in life.”

³ In *Frontiers of Justice* (2006, 354), Nussbaum restates the point: “Good imaginative writing has been crucial in motivating opposition to cruelty toward animals.”

Hence, “for an interesting family of such views, a literary narrative of a certain sort is the only type of text that can state them fully and fittingly, without contradiction” (1990, 7).

As opposed to abstract reasoning, which fails to engage real human beings (i.e., the “particular”), the literary imagination plays back and forth between the general and the concrete, constructing thereby “a paradigm of a style of ethical reasoning that is context-specific without being relativistic, in which we get potentially universalizable concrete prescriptions by bringing a general idea of human flourishing to bear on a concrete situation, which we are invited to enter through the imagination” (Nussbaum 1995, 8). If this can hold true for many literary genres (or even for all the arts; Nussbaum 1997, 86), for Nussbaum it is specifically an essential and constitutive characteristic of the novel: the novel as a genre, in its very structure and aspiration, is able to engage with concrete and specific moral questions and can be therefore “a paradigm of moral activity” (1990, 148). In particular, by naturally drawing the reader’s attention to those characters who suffer and fear, the novel *structurally* promotes habits of mind that lead toward concern for the disadvantaged, compassion, empathy and social equality (2001, 45–46, 87, 92–93).⁴ And this empathetic concern can even cross the species boundaries: in the account of her capability approach in *Frontiers of Justice*, Nussbaum emphasizes the need for the (literary) imagination to investigate the “texture of [animal] life” and interspecies relationships—and explicitly refers to Costello’s plea (2006, 354–55).

Unlike Costello, however, Nussbaum does not devise an opposition between philosophy and literature, between reason and feeling, but rather envisions a collaboration and a partnership. The correct perception of a practical situation requires both emotional and intellectual engagement, both reason and feeling. Philosophy needs to turn to literature in order to find an essential ingredient of moral life, but imaginative intuitions are, in turn, in need of theoretical corroboration. For Nussbaum, “The literary imagination is a part of public rationality, and not the whole,” and an emphasis on the literary imagination “is not meant to displace moral and political theory or to substitute emotions for principled arguments” (1995, xvi, 12; cf. also 1990, 143, 290). There is no “disparagement of

⁴This argument sustains Nussbaum’s plea for a humanistic education in books such as *Cultivating Humanity* (1997) and *Not for Profit* (2010).

reason” in Nussbaum’s theory and no “naïve uncritical reliance on the literary work”; “our literary experience,” she concludes, “needs the continued critical scrutiny of moral and political thought” (1995, 44, 76).

More akin to Costello’s “substitution thesis”—the claim that moral philosophy should be replaced by literature (Cordner and Gleeson 2016)—is the argumentation of the late Rorty. Philosophy, Rorty came to argue, is a “transitional genre,” a steppingstone between the religious sermon and the imaginative approach to truth that can be found today in literature: “Intellectuals of the West have since the Renaissance progressed through three stages: they have hoped for redemption first from God, then from philosophy, and now from literature” (2007a, 91). “[T]he novel has become the central vehicle of moral instruction,” Rorty concludes, not because it proposes more “accurate” and “precise” answers, but because it can better (i.e., more imaginatively) reply to the question “how to live?” (2007a, 94). As far back as *Philosophy as the Mirror of Nature* (1979), Rorty had criticized philosophy’s (especially in its “analytical” form) downward spiral toward a narrow and aseptic self-image as “science,” but at the end of his career he identified a true opposition between reason and imagination, between philosophy and literature: “Rationality is a matter of making allowed moves within language games,” he concludes, but “Imagination creates the games that reason proceeds to play.” Hence, “imagination has priority over reason” (2007b, 115). And, as for Nussbaum and others, for Rorty literature structurally and intrinsically will lead people to “imagine themselves in the shoes of the despised and oppressed” and is thus a vehicle for empathy and for an Enlightenment utopia (1998, 179).⁵

These theses have been widely discussed and criticized from many angles and with many counterarguments. The list of criticisms starts with the fact that the correlation between fiction reading and prosocial behaviors (which has been even shown—or perhaps sought—in some empirical studies; see, e.g., Kidd and Castano 2013) does not imply a causality: Do empathetic people make good readers, or do good readers become empathetic people? The role of affective responses to fiction in shaping the reader’s behavior cannot be—or hasn’t yet been—proven (Gibert 2014, 255; Keen 2007, xv). Suzanne Keen also points to the fact that the unquestionable emotional contagion elicited in fiction reading is free from any

⁵ On Rorty and Costello, see Woessner (2010, 2017), to whom I owe these insights.

practical obligation: the impossibility of reciprocation which inheres to the very nature of fictionality provides for the reader a “safe zone” free from real social demands (Keen 2007, 4, 16). Keen also questions Nussbaum’s and Rorty’s claim that the novel *structurally* promotes compassion and empathy for the disadvantaged characters: the content of stories is not a neutral matter, and it is an easy job to counter that, for example, powerful stories about the racial supremacy of Aryans and the contaminating presence of Jews provided a rationale for genocide (Keen 2007, 25), or, as Mary Midgley pointed out, that “Fascism established itself in Italy largely by means of bad poetry that sold bad visions” (by romanticizing hatred and violence and distorting historical truths) (Midgley 2001, 39). Diego Rossello adds an important point: the stories that humanity has been telling through the ages about itself and about what counts as “human” have been instrumental not in enlarging our moral universe, but instead have been complicit precisely in hindering this very expansion. Anthropocentrism (as much as sexism, racism, ableism) is built on a series of myths and stories that shrink rather than enlarge our imagination (Rossello 2016, 754–55). The danger of manipulation is an essential and inherent aspect of both fiction and empathy.

Coetzee thematizes precisely this danger in one of the “lessons” of *Elizabeth Costello* titled “The Problem of Evil.” Invited to speak at a conference in Amsterdam, Costello plans to talk about a (really published) novel by the (really existing) writer Paul West, *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg* (1991), and is troubled and put off balance by the (fictional) presence of the writer himself at the conference. The argument she puts forward, however, appears almost as an objection to her own theses about the literary imagination in *The Lives of Animals*. She no longer believes, she says, the liberal truism (the one asserted by the supporters of a humanist education *à la* Nussbaum and Rorty) that people are always improved by what they read, “she no longer believes that storytelling is good in itself” (2003, 167): once venturing into the “darker territories of the soul” (in this case the brutal and cruel assassination of the conspirators of the 20 July 1944 plot against Hitler), she is not sure that one can “return unscathed” (2003, 160). Writing and reading also have “the potential to be dangerous”: “if what we write [and read] has the power to make us better people then surely it has the power to make us worse” (2003, 162, 171).

THE DIFFICULTY OF REALITY

Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* also thematizes another common objection to the arguments of Nussbaum, Rorty and other supporters of a liberal humanist education: their fundamental bias toward *realist* fiction and canonical works (e.g., Keen 2007, 18; Mahon 2017, 104). In the first story/lesson, titled indeed "Realism" (but which only indirectly and enigmatically talks about realism in literature and ethics), Costello is awarded a prize at another fictional American college, this time called Altona College, and in her acceptance speech she says:

There used to be a time when we knew [what is really going on in a story]. We used to believe that when the text said, "On the table stood a glass of water," there was indeed a table, and a glass of water on it, and we had only to look in the word-mirror of the text to see them. But all that has ended. The word-mirror is broken, irreparably. (Coetzee 2003, 19)

At least since the modernists rejected the traditional structures, functions, and purposes of art (and especially its appeal to sympathy: Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* is only the most obvious example), the "word-mirror is broken, irreparably," and after poststructuralism revolutionized literary criticism, the plea of the liberal intellectuals appears naïve. The realist text seems today unable to engage with the complexities of reality, and the true, *sympathetic* response to any text is to be mistrustful of its words and aware of the aporetic nature of the very act of reading (Marais 2011, 102, 2006, 89).⁶

A more interesting response to Costello's claims came thus from another philosopher also engaged in the "literary turn" in moral philosophy: Cora Diamond. Diamond takes Costello's "terrible rawness of nerves" (Diamond 2008, 47) as the mark of an experience that traditional moral philosophy fails to address: the mind's inability to encompass something it encounters, and which she, borrowing a phrase from John Updike, calls "the difficulty of reality" (2008, 45). Reality is unyielding, resistant to our thinking, and this resistance, its fundamental inexplicability, translates into painfulness and astonishment: the "torment of reality" (2008, 71) that turns into a "fight against reality" (Woessner 2017, 153). Costello is in fact haunted and wounded by what she cannot comprehend and

⁶On Coetzee and the question of realism see, for example, Engélibert (2007), Cornwell (2011) and Woessner (2017).

explain (the horror of what we do to animals), a wound that marks and isolates her. The difficulty of reality pushes us beyond what we can think and say, and consequently our thinking comes unhinged and our language faces the “trauma of the unspeakable” (Mahon 2017, 104). Traditional philosophical responses, when they flatten out this difficulty into “mere facts” which may or may not be thought of as morally relevant according to general principles (Diamond is particularly critical toward the utilitarianism *à la* Peter Singer or the animal rights theory *à la* Tom Regan; cf. Diamond 1995a), resort to what she calls “deflection” (a term borrowed from Stanley Cavell), a failure to appreciate and engage with the “truth” of reality (Diamond 2008, 58–59). For Diamonds, philosophy must therefore “accept back” imagination in order to be enabled to also “inhabit” our continued astonishment in the face of the difficulty of reality (this is “the difficult of philosophy”); philosophy must “accept back” poetry (2008, 76).

To honestly engage with the difficulty of reality is for Diamond what it means to be *realistic*:⁷ this involves both the acknowledgment that this engagement is tortuous and painful, and the appreciation of the *limits* of what we can think, know, and capture in language (cf. Mahon 2017, 108–9). Like Nussbaum, Diamond argues that the literary imagination—which she names “creative imagination” or “imaginative reading” (Diamond 1993, 143, 144)—must supplement (and not substitute⁸) abstract philosophizing with the “language of particularity” (1993, 153), with the expression of the “unique” that the account of principles and rules cannot but miss. But unlike Nussbaum and others, Diamond does not conceive this attitude as a mere “enlargement of life”: it consists rather in perceiving reality and its difficulties in new ways, renouncing the traditional, dichotomous fiction of an impersonal investigator and an object of investigation that lies still, and creating new, imaginative responses that might give us access to the “texture of being” (Diamond 1993, 144,

⁷ Her 1995 collection of essays on Wittgenstein and other themes, including the animal question and the need of imagination in moral philosophy, bears the Wittgensteinian title *The Realistic Spirit*.

⁸ Diamond does not subscribe to Costello’s and Rorty’s “substitution thesis.” On the wake of Diamond, Alice Crary interprets Coetzee/Costello’ position (and philosophy’s need for literature in general) as a sort of “enlargement of rationality,” “a conception of rationality capacious enough to include literary speech, taken as such, in its inventory of rational discursive forms” (Crary 2010, 265; cf. also Crary 2016, 203–254).

1995c, 375). This is a phrase Diamond borrows from Iris Murdoch (Hepburn and Murdoch 1956, 39) and that can help bypass the tendency to see moral philosophy merely as the realm of fixed possibilities, judgments, and justifications (Diamond 1995b, 312). Like the “difficulty of reality,” the “texture of being” spells embodiedness, messiness, unyielding, infinite complexity, and potential painfulness, but also suggests the image of something continuous, interwoven with various strands and various patterns, in which active and passive are mixed together in ways that only a creative imagination can begin to glimpse (Diamond 2022).

Murdoch is an important influence for Diamond, and a concept in particular seems fundamental for her: attention. The new ways of perceiving the difficulties of reality that the creative imagination can provide (and which Diamond also recapitulates under the label “improvisation”; 1995b, 309) are based on a heightened attentiveness that allows to see, read, and learn “with a different sort of eye, attentive to different sorts of things” (Diamond 1993, 137; cf. also 1995c, 375; and Bale 2016). Murdoch borrowed the concept of attention from Simone Weil (Murdoch 2014, 33)⁹ and deployed it to counter the prevalent emphasis on “choice” in moral philosophy: “I can only choose within the world I can *see*,” she wrote in “The Idea of Perfection,” “in the moral sense of ‘see’ which implies that clear vision is a result of moral imagination and moral effort” (2014, 35–36). What moral life demands is above all “clarity of vision” (2014, 66), and this implies “the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality” (2014, 33). For Murdoch, “clarity” of vision involves thus not merely a heightened attention to “details,” as, for example, Julia Driver (2014) argues, but rather a—much more important and difficult—gaze that be “just and loving.” Just and loving seeing is more than just seeing; it is a seeing that includes justice and love, which in turn produce a greater receptiveness to reality with its difficulties. In *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Murdoch writes, again referencing Weil: “Moral change comes from an *attention* to the world whose natural result is a decrease in egoism through an increased sense of the reality of, primarily, other people, but also other things” (1992, 52, emphasis in the original).¹⁰

⁹In “Against Dryness” (1961, 20) Murdoch wrote: “Simone Weil said that morality was a matter of attention, not of will. We need a new vocabulary of attention.”

¹⁰On Murdoch and attention, see Caprioglio Panizza (2022).

In a recent essay on Murdoch, Nussbaum adds an important point to this definition of the gaze.¹¹ Recounting an encounter with Murdoch in which she felt somehow pierced by Murdoch's intense gaze, Nussbaum adds:

But I think that there is something more to loving vision than just seeing. There is, for example, a willingness to permit oneself to be seen. There is also a willingness to stop seeing, to close one's eyes before the loved one's imperfections. There is also a willingness to be, for a time, an animal or even a plant, relinquishing the sharpness of creative alertness before the presence of a beloved body. (2014, 152)

From this passage Christopher Corder (2019) extrapolates the essential features of the "just and loving gaze": not an objectifying and penetrating gaze (that of the scientific tradition, or of the Western tradition more in general), but, on the contrary, a gaze that also includes "a willingness to permit oneself to be seen," "a willingness to stop seeing," and even a "relinquishing [of] the sharpness of creative alertness" before the presence of another body. An "increased sense of reality" is produced by attention as an "attending on" the other, as a "waiting on" the other, which, instead of trying to grasp and possess the object, is even capable and ready, at times, to relinquish alertness and stop looking. This, I will argue, is the gaze of the poet.

KINETIC ENGAGEMENTS

For Nussbaum, Rorty, and others, it is the novel the literary form that can at best, for its very structure, nurture the sympathetic imagination and teach prosocial attitudes, which for Nussbaum can also cross the species boundaries (Nussbaum 2006, 354–55).¹² Costello argues instead that only poetry can aspire to properly engage with the animal embodied singularity.¹³ This thesis is not new. Diamond, for example, as far back as the late 1970s and without theorizing the contrast, counterposed to the abstract

¹¹Nussbaum's remarks on Murdoch soften somewhat the quite reductive summary of her position that I proposed at the beginning of this chapter.

¹²In her polemical sketch about contemporary literature, "Against Dryness," Murdoch also agrees with Nussbaum and calls for prose to "recover its former glory" (1961, 20). When I use her notion of attention to uphold poetry against prose I am therefore going against Murdoch's view.

¹³Kari Weil (2019, 127), using, among others, Coetzee's novella as illustration, argues however that the novel, as a hybrid genre, can be "poetry and philosophy, lyricism and realism, narrative and lesson," and thus blurs the division lines Costello instead seems to draw.

philosophical arguments of Singer and Regan the more authentic thinking of animals as “fellow creatures” she found in poems by Jane Legge and Walter de la Mare (1995a, 327–30). And this thesis was also famously proposed, albeit cursorily and without any support or analysis, by Derrida, who at the beginning of *The Animal That Therefore I Am* wrote:

For thinking concerning the animal, if there is such a thing, derives from poetry. There you have a thesis: it is what philosophy has, essentially, had to deprive itself of. It is the difference between philosophical knowledge and poetic thinking. (2008, 7)

Like Diamond, Derrida seems to subscribe to Costello’s opposition between philosophy and poetry: only poetry can authentically “think” the animal (perhaps, we may elaborate, because it can engage with the animal’s individuality and physicality), whereas philosophical knowledge, in order to arrive at an abstract “concept” of the Animal, must precisely deprive itself of this kind of thinking (cf. Strømmen 2017, 408; Oerlemans 2018, 16–17).

Like her critique of philosophy, Costello’s treatment of poetry is however “patchy”: she never spells out a theory and offers only some unsubstantiated definitions and unsystematic readings of a few poems (Malay 2018, 15–16). This might be because, in “The Poets and the Animals,” Coetzee does not present to the reader Costello’s actual seminar on the poets and the animals, but only a fragment as recounted by Costello’s son, who arrived late and witnessed only some of the questions the audience posed to his mother. However, as Michael Malay (2018, 16) points out, a clear definition would be antithetical to her purposes, because the characteristic of poetry she wants to emphasize in contraposition to philosophy is precisely its indefinability and resistance to conceptualizations and theorizations. As a novelist, moreover, she admits that she lacks the power of the poetic word: “my words, here, lack the power to bring home to you the wholeness, the unabstracted, unintellectual nature, of that animal being. That is why I urge you to read the poets who return the living, electric being to language” (1999, 65).¹⁴

¹⁴Some critics (e.g., Weil 2019, 129) have pointed out that this applies to Coetzee himself: *The Lives of Animals* never presents Costello engaging with animals and feels thus closer to philosophy than to poetry. Costello’s lessons and Coetzee’s book *Speak about* animals rather than engaging with their “living, electric being,” and thus do not meet the requirements that Costello sets for a true engagement with animal life.

In the wake of Costello's remarks, a number of scholars have attempted to develop a "theory" of the relation between poetry and animal life. Unlike other literary genres, the argument goes, poetry offers an engagement with language that allows for peculiar encounters with nonhuman animals. Here I shall confine myself to briefly list some of the characteristics adduced by these scholars: the use of metaphors and similes and the manipulation of sound and rhythm (the "music" of poetry) (Malay 2018, 3);¹⁵ the resistance to rules and codes (poetry's "inherent playfulness") and the openness of forms of expression (Oerlemans 2018, 20); the gesturality that allows to re-enact, re-create, mimic, or respond to the gestures of animals (Moe 2016, 11–12). This linguistic freedom allows to invent new forms of contact with the nonhuman other, with the embodied reality of the individual being—"a shock of surprise, recognition, joy, or fear"—which in turn involves a transcending of one's individual humanity (Oerlemans 2018, 152). Importantly, in the true successful shaping of this contact, the poetic animal is allowed to remain itself, as opposed to become a symbol for something else (Oerlemans 2018, 31). Such contact can, at times, produce, shape, and feed forms of sympathy and care for the live presence of other bodies, human and nonhuman alike. And this is not an exclusive feature of poems as such, as Malay emphasizes (referring to Derrida; Malay 2018, 3; cf. Derrida 1991): the "poetic" is an attitude, a sensibility, a mode of *attention*, an open-ended relationship with the world and with other beings which involves unpredictability, wonder, surprise, perhaps also fear, but most of all self-estrangement and a desire to reach beyond the self.

Of course, there are many types of poetry, many different kinds of poetic intention, and many levels of success or failure, and Coetzee's presentation of Costello's position begins indeed with this very differentiation. When Costello's son arrives at the seminar, his mother is replying to a question, and a girl sitting next to him passes on a photocopied sheet with three poems, Rilke's "The Panther" and Ted Hughes' "The Jaguar" and "Second Glance at a Jaguar." Costello is criticizing Rilke's poem, which describes a restless and tired animal in the Paris Zoo of the Jardin des Plantes (cf. Rilke 2011, 186–87). "In that kind of poetry," Costello says, "animals stand for human qualities," and in Rilke's poem "the panther is there as a stand-in for something else. He dissolves into a dance of

¹⁵Randy Malamud (2003, 59) also writes that "poetry is in some ways closer to music than to speech" and with its rhythm, like music, establishes connectedness and flow.

energy around a center, an image that comes from physics, elementary particle physics” (1999, 50). It is the energy and not the animal that is the subject of Rilke’s poem (Malay 2018, 17). The poem was written when Rilke was studying in Paris under the sculptor August Rodin and is strongly influenced by Rodin’s ideal of sculpture: what the poet aims at is to achieve a “sculptural stillness” (Freedman 1998, 172) and to transform the panther into a *Kunst-Ding* (art-thing). The function of art in this phase of Rilke’s poetical career is to provide a beautiful and idealized (indeed *sculptural*) image of an otherwise intolerable reality, and in order to do so it must *negate* and *kill* its object: the true intention of the poem is therefore to “hide the real panther from the viewer” (Broek 2013, 237). In the poem we have no access to the real panther, and this is indeed the essence of Rilke’s *Dinggedicht* (object poem). What the reader encounters is ultimately an “iconically reductive cultural representation” of the animal, sentimental and uncritical (Malamud 2012, 48; cf. also Malay 2018, 16–19).¹⁶

To Rilke’s modernist panther-*Ding*, Costello counterposes Hughes’ primitivist jaguars, described in two poems written ten years apart (cf. Hughes 2003, 19–20; 151–52). According to Costello, Hughes’s poems are intentionally opposed to Rilke’s. Hughes uses the same staging (the zoo) and a similar big feline restlessly prisoner in a cage, but inverts the relation between the poet and its subject: whereas Rilke tames its subject by reducing it to a *Kunst-Ding*, Hughes is “entranced and horrified and overwhelmed” by it, “his powers of understanding pushed beyond their limit”; whereas Rilke’s panther is but a sentimental cultural representation, Hughes’ jaguar is “kinetic rather than abstract” (Coetzee 1999, 50–51). Like Rilke’s panther, Hughes’ jaguar is a concentrate of powerful and unbounded energy; this energy, however, does not hide the animal from the viewer but, on the contrary, actually reveals it and let it emerge

¹⁶Kári Driscoll (2018) proposes the opposite reading of Rilke’s *Dinggedicht* and of “The Panther” in particular, arguing that Costello’s argument depends on a “willful misreading” that “effectively replicates the standard, anthropocentric reading of the poem even as she appears to be advocating a different kind of poetry that allows the animal to ‘be itself’” (2018, 32). Instead of a search for detached objectivity, Driscoll reads the emphasis on the *Ding* in *Dinggedicht* as an attempt to represent things “in their own right.” Drawing from Heidegger’s interpretation of the *Ding*, Driscoll sees it as a “gathering,” an “assemblage,” and an “entanglement” in which the subject become dynamically implicated with its world. Hence Rilke’s “thing-poems project their own worlds, but these worlds are the product of a multiperspectival co-shaping,” and the panther effectively emerges as embodied reality (2018, 44–45).

as a living being (Dienhart 1989, 249; Hong 2011, 43; Oerlemans 2018, 25–26). Unlike Rilke, Costello argues, in his poems Hughes “is feeling his way toward a different kind of being-in-the-world,” and this is what Costello, too, calls Hughes’ *poetic “attentiveness”*: “In these poems we know the jaguar not from the way he seems but from the way he moves. The body is as the body moves, or as the currents of life move within it. The poems ask us to imagine our way into that way of moving, to inhabit that body” (Coetzee 1999, 52, 51). The point here, she insists, is not that of “inhabiting another mind” (which was Nagel’s definition of the “sympathetic imagination”), but of “inhabiting another body”: Hughes’ poetry “does not try to find an idea in the animal, [it] is not about the animal, but is instead the record of an engagement with him” (1999, 51). Hence,

By bodying forth the jaguar, Hughes shows us that we too can embody animals – by the process called poetic invention that mingles breath and sense in a way that no one has explained and no one ever will. He shows us how to bring the living body into being within ourselves. 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. (1999, 53)

Hughes attempts to grasp the powerful bodily presence of the jaguar, his materiality, his kinetic pacing, his sounds, movements, body parts (Strømme 2017, 412). His language, Malay argues, “strains towards a verbal sensuousness in his attempts to figure the animal in verse, a rhythmic tactility” intended to “conjure up animal life by becoming expressive instances of the energies they invoke.” Language is “tuned to the energies of the more-than-human world” through the “kinetic responsiveness” of rhythm and sound, and is thus “refreshed” (2018, 99–100). If Rilke’s panther is reduced to a *Ding*, Hughes’ jaguar is vitally alive in his own right.

Critics have noted that Costello conflates Hughes’ two jaguar poems and treat them as one single instance, whereas in fact they present quite different relations to the animal. If the first poem celebrates the animal’s enraged vitality, Claire Heaney argues, the second presents the jaguar as a painfully vulnerable creature (2018, 80; cf. also O’Connor 2018, 63; Panecka 2018, 42; Malay 2018, 128–29). Moreover, the second jaguar is transformed into a supernatural animal totem of unbounded energy, but also into a frustrated god, and perhaps even into a metaphor for the soul-state of post-industrial humanity (Hong 2011, 43; Heaney 2018, 81; O’Connor 2018, 64; Mulhall 2009, 114). Ultimately, even Hughes’

poetry might be unable to escape the allegorization of the animal, reducing it to a romantic vision of freedom and uncontrollability, and thereby even deepening, according to Danny O'Connor (2018, 56), the abyss between humans and nonhumans.¹⁷ The ambiguity in Hughes's animals notwithstanding, the point Costello wants to make is that these poems seek an engagement with animal life that comes from a deeper source than our rational mind, not rooted in intellect but in affect, involving the wholeness of the body and not the disembodied abstraction of the mind, and thus possibly leading to a transformation of the human self (Heaney 2018, 75–76; Malay 2018, 213).

Hughes' and Costello's ambiguities point to the limits of human language, which this poetry however does not lament as a loss but rather celebrate as a more authentic engagement with otherness. These poetic engagements always leave a remainder, a "mystery" (Oerlemans 2018, 26), and ultimately question the ability of representation and spell the impossibility of capturing objective reality in language (Heaney 2018, 76). Costello explicitly emphasizes this point: "when we divert the current of feeling that flows between ourself [*sic*] and the animal into words," she says, "we abstract it forever from the animal" (Coetzee 1999, 51). Malay (2018, 17) relates this point to Diamond's "difficulty of reality": the animal's presence both confronts and resists our ordinary forms of thought and expression. But this kind of poetry embraces this difficulty with a way of seeing animal presence that exceeds the limits of language, acknowledging the ways in which it eludes us: these poems do not pretend to fully understand what they see and to transform it into an object of knowledge, but try to meet its embodied presence halfway. They frustrate the power of the human observer over the animal, the domination of the seeing subject over the seen object, not privileging knowledge as the final arbiter of our relationship with animal presence—the poem, Malay quotes from Derrida, "always interrupts or derails absolute knowledge" (Derrida 1991, 235)—but rather situating our encounters in an interplay of knowledge and ignorance. Acknowledging the "excess" of animal presence, these poems bring us in contact with—and simultaneously keep alive—the *vitality* of other lives (Malay 2018, 18, 20, 221, 223–24).

¹⁷ For Claire Broek (2013, 236) Rilke's panther is an allegory of the lone poet moving in his solitary circle, and for Danny O'Connor (2018, 64), Ewa Panicka (2018, 43), and Claire Heaney (2018, 79–80) Hughes' jaguars also allegorize the poet as an undomesticated outcast, a visionary and a shamanic healer.

FOR A POETICAL ECOLOGY

Costello acknowledges the shortcomings of Hughes' poetry: in its celebration of primitivism and its rejection of Western bias toward abstract thought, Hughes' poetry is "deeply masculine, masculinist." Moreover, looking for the "jaguariness embodied in this jaguar" as a merely "transitory occupant" of the jaguar-life, this poetry retains "something Platonic." It is the kind of poetry hunters and "ecology-managers" feel comfortable with, and Costello is particularly acrimonious toward the second category: (traditional) ecology remains Platonic because it always appeals to an "idea," that "of a higher order than any living creature." And this idea only humans, "the managers of the ecology," can comprehend ("Animals are not believers in ecology"): only "we managers understand the greater dance," the "idea" of ecological balance, hence we can make sovereign decisions on the life and death of the other species (Coetzee 1999, 52–54).

However, a different ecology can be extrapolated from what Costello finds in Hughes' poetry: an engagement with animal life that goes beyond the traditional idea of knowledge as mastery that marks the Western tradition and its ecological thought. Randy Malamud has particularly insisted on this point: in the arts as in the other realms of knowledge, nonhuman animals are mostly seen according to a paradigm of exploitation, an "imaginatively impoverished discourse" that is imposed onto all living and non-living beings alike (2003, 9). Nagel's question is, for Malamud, paradigmatic in this sense: knowing what it is like to be a bat for Nagel means to master the experience of batness in the way we master (or think we master) our own experience, but the question forecloses this very knowledge instead of giving access to the fullness of this experience (2003, 9–10). The same holds for the arts, including most poetry, which approach animal life as an "object" to be described, explained, known, mastered—even to death (2003, 34, 39). Knowledge, in this tradition, equals control, "knowing all there is to know," a "heroic march toward omniscience and unbounded experiential conquest," which inevitably becomes exploitation and constraint—even in the arts, which are also guilty of the presumption of aesthetic-cognitive entitlement and mastery (they aim to "capture" the animal, even if figuratively) (2003, 39, 40, 42; cf. also, e.g., Donovan 2016).

A better ecological vision can be nonetheless offered by poems which make explicit their *inevitable failure* to represent the animal. Poems such as Hughes' acknowledge, in their incessant recalibration of words, images, and sounds, that their subject is "always seemingly one pace ahead" of

them (Malay 2018, 129), that it cannot be “captured” and fully “possessed” as an *object* of knowledge. But their point is precisely that what is at stake is not success or failure, but the ethics of the imaginative effort itself: “There is a richness to the attempt which stands independent of its success,” Malay argues (2018, 2), and thus, Malamud emphasizes, “simply the expression of wanting to know what it is like to be a bat is the beginning of actually achieving that knowledge,” it is a step toward experiencing batness (2003, 7). This is however a knowledge that does not grant the human subject power and control over the object, but rather brings the subject *outside itself*, outside the sphere of power and control, and into a contact zone with the nonhuman other. In this respect, Malamud deploys Deleuze and Guattari’s trope of “becoming animal,” which is composed by “lines of flight” from traditional, possessive subjectivity and ferry the human across the abyss of difference and unintelligibility (Malamud 2003, 7).

Pace Nussbaum and Rorty, poetry is more amenable to this kind of experience than the novel or other literary genres: poetry is the farthest from “normal” human modes of expression and thereby can bring us outside our everyday kind of experience and toward a different, more open and equitable encounter with nonhuman otherness (Malamud 2003, 58). Poetry offers a more ecological, more “sustainable” kind of encounters (Scigaj 1999) precisely because it is willing to acknowledge the limitations and hubris of human knowledge, because, to use Nussbaum’s intuition about Murdoch’s mode of attention, it understands the relation with the other as also including modalities of relinquishing: “to let oneself be seen,” “to stop seeing” and “to relinquish the sharpness of creative alertness.” The gaze of the poet can be “just and loving” when it is also willing to stop seeing, to compromise, to accept less than we have become accustomed to have, and to come to terms with a necessary retrenchment of our cultural expectations (Malamud 2003, 41). Attentiveness is a stretching toward something else (this is the meaning of the Latin verb *ad-tendere*; Moe 2016, 24), a going out of oneself to “attend on” the other, on its embodied presence, on its needs, which also implies a waiver of the hubris of complete knowledge. What the challenge of otherness primarily demands is respect, a forsaking of colonizing modes of knowledge which constrain the other within the cage of our knowledge system. Honoring the opaqueness of other lives involves a “caring” that also means knowing when to be satisfied with not knowing (Weil 2019, 132).

After the seminar on “the poets and the animals,” Costello’s son John asks his mother: “Do you really believe, Mother, that poetry classes are going to close down the slaughterhouses?” “No,” she answers. “Then why do it?” (Coetzee 1999, 58). Because, we could supplement Costello’s response, the just and loving gaze of the poet is what can remind us, when it succeeds, to attend on the other with kindness.

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The Pitfalls of Embodiment: Imagination, Disability, Animality

Costello's attack on philosophy and her upholding of poetry are based on a contrast between the abstractness of the former and the capacity of the latter instead to "body forth" the animal (Coetzee 1999, 53). The question of embodiment, of an embodied approach to the animal other through the sympathetic imagination, constitutes indeed the pivot of her entire argument. As Kai Wiegandt writes, "Belief in the body is the rock upon which she builds her anthropology and her ethics" (2019, 150). "To be alive is to be a living soul," Costello claims. "An animal – and we are all animals – is an embodied soul" (1999, 33), hence we, as animals, can understand, at times, what it is to be an embodied other: "we too can embody animals" and "bring the living body into being within ourselves" (1999, 53). Embodiment constitutes the pre-reflexive and pre-philosophical basis and foundation for an ethical approach to otherness.

At the same time, however, Coetzee's novella also presents, as a sub-text, a critique of the ways philosophy, science, and Western culture in general conceive different, nonhuman forms of embodiments as *defective*. The capital sin of Western philosophy, even of those currents that argue for granting rights to nonhuman animals,¹ is to always equate them to

¹Coetzee provides a concrete reference to a chapter by Gary Francione included in *The Great Ape Project* that argues that the great apes "are to be treated as children or mental incompetents" (Coetzee 1999, 26n8; Francione 1993, 256).

“mentally defective specimens of the species *Homo sapiens*,” to “simpletons,” and hence to “second class” beings, a “depressing human subcategory” (1999, 26, 33, 62). The human form of embodiment is taken as standard measure and then compared to other forms of embodiment in search for commonalities and differences, with the result that difference inevitably becomes lack and defect. “The best performance the higher apes can put up,” says the philosophy professor Thomas O’Hearne in Costello’s final debate at Appleton College, “is no better than that of a speech-impaired human being with severe mental retardation” (1999, 62). Costello responds that “the program of scientific experimentation that leads you to conclude that animals are imbeciles” is not only profoundly anthropocentric but itself “imbecile” and “self-stultified” in the way it recoils from the complexity of life (1999, 62–63). A true sympathetic approach to animal otherness must therefore take into account the complexity of different forms of embodiment.

Marie Houser also identifies a third level of critique in Elizabeth Costello’s own form of embodiment: aged, fragile, and permanently exhausted—a “wounded animal” —, Costello also provides a critique of human “exceptional” embodiment with what Houser calls “a disabled rhetoric and a disability rhetoric” (2020, 242). Her often-confused arguments are simultaneously confusing for those who expect “a certain spectrum of human thinking”; but if her ethical lessons lie, as Wiegandt argues (2019, 149), not in the propositional content of her theories but in “performing Costello’s own embodiedness,” then her non-normate, singular bodiliness is itself an epistemic strategy aimed at “making strange,” and it is this estrangement and this “aesthetics of disability” that allows her to identify with Kafka’s Red Peter and Wolfgang Köhler’s Sultan and to call for a different approach to animal otherness (Houser 2020, 240, 242). This chapter will analyze the potentialities of embodiment for an ethical approach to nonhuman otherness but also the limits it imposes on any attempt to sympathetic identification with the other, human and nonhuman alike.

THE ETHICS OF EMBODIMENT

A focus on body and embodiment as alternative to the traditional recourse to ratiocentrism/logocentrism in interspecies ethics has been gaining traction in the past couple of decades, and the most common strategy in this new emphasis on embodiment is a recourse to Merleau-Ponty’s

phenomenology of the body. The phenomenology of the body appears to support Costello's arguments against traditional, disembodied philosophy and to offer potential openings for an interspecies ethics; a cursory look at Merleau-Ponty's philosophy will be therefore the starting point for an inquiry about the ethics of embodiment.

Developing Husserl's analysis of embodied self-experience and his differentiation between *Körper*, the body as physical object, and *Leib*, the lived body as animate being, Merleau-Ponty rejects the Cartesian epistemology of the body as object and demonstrates that there is no ontological separation between subject and body, that one is one's body and the body is the condition of possibility for perception and action and for any and all subjective experiences: "I am my body" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 231). *Leib* is a difficult term to translate—it is difficult in other languages to differentiate between the lived-through experience of oneself and one's physical appearance—and Merleau-Ponty renders it alternatively as *corps propre*, *corps sujet*, and *corps vécu*: the body (including, and not separated from, the mind: a unitary self) as subject and as source of the meaningful interactions with the world. The rejection of the Cartesian mind/body dichotomy also undermines the sharp distinction between subject and object and between first-person and third-person perspectives of traditional philosophy: there is not first a body which then interacts with the external world, but rather a constitutive, inborn intertwining that shapes both body and world (Morris 2008, 113–14).

This means that *the body opens up a world*: "the body is not merely one expressive space among the rest," Merleau-Ponty writes; "It is the origin of the rest, expressive movement itself, that which causes them to begin to exist as things, under our hands and eyes." Hence, "The body is our general medium for having a world" (1962, 169). Or, with a poignant image: "Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system" (1962, 235). The image of the heart in the organism emphasizes the "organic relationship" that ties together body and world (1962, 176), whereby the body is molded into the world and in turn molds the access to it, it is shaped by its dwellings and takes shape by dwelling. This intentional opening to the world is pre-reflexive and bodily, a "motor intentionality" (1962, 127), a "bodily intelligence" (Salamon 2012, 246), so that Merleau-Ponty claims that the Cartesian *cogito*, "I think," as foundation of subjectivity should be replaced by a bodily "I can": "Consciousness is in the first place not a matter of 'I think

that' but of 'I can'" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 159). As the perspectival opening to the world, as the basic scheme of orientation and center of one's system of coordinates, the body has a "transcendental" status, it is the very condition of possibility of experience (Slatman and Widdershoven 2015, 95; Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, 135).²

The co-penetration of and pre-reflexive engagement between subject and world is rooted in "habits," which become a sort of extension of the body: not only, Merleau-Ponty writes, "habit in general enables us to understand the general synthesis of one's own body," but also "habit expresses the power we have of dilating our being in the world, or of altering our existence through incorporating new instruments" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 175, 166). Habits and styles presuppose, express, and perform the form of "understanding" that the body develops with regards to the world, its "body knowledge," which, using Husserl's terminology, Merleau-Ponty calls "operative intentionality" (*fungierende Intentionalität*) (1962, 486; Moya 2014). The "habitual" body is not however constrained within rigid structures but is rather ontologically open to the world, the understanding of which is a "creative operation which itself participates in the facticity of [... unreflective] experience" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 71). *Imagination* is the practice and the function of this creative operation (Morris 2008, 118–19). The phenomenological world, therefore, "is not pure being, but the sense which is revealed where the paths of my various experiences intersect, and also where my own and other people's intersect and engage each other like gears. It is thus inseparable from subjectivity and intersubjectivity" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, xxii). Intersubjectivity and the communality of the world are, after the emphasis on the "lived body," the second axis around which the phenomenological investigation revolves, and it is here that the "ethics of embodiment" is to be sought.

Intersubjectivity basically means that the subject is essentially co-constituted by and through its interactions with the world and with other subjects. In these constitutive interactions, the body is the point where the subject touches and intervenes into the world but also where the world touches and intervenes upon the subject. This means that the subject cannot avoid violating the other's integrity and is always constitutively

²In his later writings, Merleau-Ponty will refer to this constitutive exchange between and interlacing of subject and world as aspect of a single reality as "flesh of the world" (*la chair du monde*) (Merleau-Ponty 1968; cf. Evans and Lawlor 2000).

vulnerable to the ingress of the other. From this basic principle, John Russon (1994) develops an “ethics of embodiment”: since “embodiment is transgression”—“transgressing and being-transgressed, violence and vulnerability”³—the body is the field where the subject is always already involved with the other. Hence “to exist is thus to already be engaged in acting on behalf of the other, that is, acting in a way which always impacts on the other, without a prior stage of seeking permission for crossing the other’s boundary” (Russon 1994, 295–96). Russon develops a “phenomenology of responsibility” (founded in Merleau-Ponty’s ontology but imbued with Levinasian language) in which embodiment correspond to the “experience of a call”: “The very nature of embodiment is to find oneself compelled, and the form the compulsion takes is to find oneself called upon to respond to the situation in a specific way: the form in which the other exists for the body is as *a call to action*” (1994, 299). The other is that which calls upon us, and to be embodied necessarily means to respond to the call, to be responsible for answering the call. This is not the commitment an autonomous subject decides to make (or not) in a vacuum, as it were; rather, embodied intersubjectivity means that we find ourselves always already committed, and these commitments are the very substance of our existence (Russon 1994, 302). In responding to the call of the other we find out who we are and how the other, through its call and our response, constitutes and shapes our selfhood (and vice versa).

Even from this brief and cursory sketch it appears evident why the Merleau-Pontian ontology of embodiment can be so appealing for alternative trends in interspecies ethics. Even though Merleau-Ponty was firmly rooted in the anthropocentric milieu (and in the anthropocentric phenomenological trends) of his time—nonhuman animals, he wrote, for example, echoing Heidegger, have only an *Umwelt*, an animal setting; only human behavior opens up a *Welt*, a world (1962, 381)—there is nothing intrinsically necessary that excludes nonhuman forms of embodiment from the category of the “other as a call.”⁴ Moreover, the recourse

³ Russon explicitly uses the term “violence” to describe the interactions of the subject with the world and the other, deriving it from Merleau-Ponty’s description of perception and action as intrinsically violent: the “violent act which is perception itself”; “action is, by definition, the violent transition from what I have to what I aim to have, from what I am to what I intend to be” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 421, 444–45; Russon 1994, 306n12).

⁴ On Merleau-Ponty’s interest in the work of the early ethologists such as Jakob von Uexküll and Wolfgang Köhler, and on his interest in (and lecture courses on) nature, see Churchill (2008).

to the body instead of the mind allows to bypass the hurdle of the intellectual capacities that have traditionally worked to exclude nonhuman animals from the moral club: independently of *logos*, language, reason, etc., we are all, humans and nonhumans alike, embodied animals sharing the same world and interlocked in an intersubjective and interspecies community. Hence Elizabeth Behnke (1999), for examples, draws from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology to argue against hierarchical anthropocentrism and for an interspecies sociality; and likewise, Ralph Acampora (2006) uses phenomenological intercorporeality and interconnectivity (among other things) to propose a new interspecies ethics based on "corporeal compassion." The "ethics of embodiment" confirms and supports Costello's argument for an interspecies understanding based on a bodily, corporeal understanding of otherness.

DIFFERENT EMBODIMENTS: DISABILITY AND ANIMALITY

An emphasis on embodiment also necessarily leads, however, to a thematization of difference, variation, and deviation, and of the ways in which these features impact on the approach to and understanding of otherness. And this is not a secondary issue but rather the very crux of the ethics of embodiment, since the "call" of the other is precisely a demand to bridge difference and deviation. This is obvious in animal ethics and in the way Elizabeth Costello frames her dispute with Nagel about the sympathetic imagination, but it is also the main point of her critique of traditional animal ethics, which, by taking the "rational man" as measure for inclusion into the moral community, remains utterly anthropocentric. That is, traditional animal ethics posits and reaffirms a concept of "normalcy" that conditions the granting of rights and protection (animals end up being worthy of ethical consideration if and when they are diminished versions of the "normal" human) and that inevitably reinstates and reinforces the logic of exclusion at work in Western anthropocentrism. This very logic, in turn, also works in the exclusion of certain categories of human beings. Contemporary animal ethics established from the very beginning a parallel with the exclusion and submission of women and the racialized other—the term speciesism, as it is well known, was coined in analogy with sexism and racism—but in recent years a new analogy has emerged: that with the disabled other.

Animality and disability, the argument goes, are discriminated according to the same logic that grounds the inclusion, respectively, into the

moral community and into humanity “proper,” upon the possession of a certain number of “abilities”: rationality, language, autonomy, agency, etc. This logic blends and confounds difference and deprivation, and it is therefore, Joseph Stramondo argues (2021, 212), an epistemic problem. The difference in the possession of these “abilities” is equated to a negative and inferior form of embodiment, against which the *norm*, the “rational man,” is in turn defined. A convergence of disability studies and animal studies appears therefore to many as not only very fruitful but also necessary and obvious: both call into question the traditional, Western model of subjectivity predicated upon the possession of certain abilities and that naturally excludes different forms of embodiment.

A milestone in this strategy has been the publication of Sunaura Taylor’s *Beasts of Burden* (2017). In this powerful book, Taylor forcefully shows not only that nonhuman animals and disabled people must contend in the same way with the social and cultural stereotypes of normalcy, naturalness, dependency, and dignity, but also that disability and animality are both analogously conceived as “lack” of the defining features of normalcy and humanity, and that this lack is precisely what is used to justify their discrimination and domination. Moreover, Taylor also points out that disability is ubiquitous in animals “used” by humans (2017, 46, 54): not only because in the cramped, filthy, and unnatural conditions in which they live disabilities become common, but also because through artificial selection, biotechnology, and genetic engineering, animals have been intentionally manufactured to be disabled by the food industries to meet their needs (e.g., quicker growth rates in livestock, bigger breast in poultry, bigger udders in milk cows, larger number of eggs laid by laying hens, etc.). These new “abilities” literally cripple the animal body (and mind) producing deformities, incapacities, and suffering, which are not simply byproducts of the food industries but rather essential features of the work they do and the profits they create. Disability is an essential feature of animal oppression. Conversely, dehumanization and animalization are the common strategy of discriminating disabled people who do not meet the standard requirement of humanity “proper.”

Hence Taylor’s most interesting and provocative claim: ableism and speciesism are intimately entangled and are interlinked forms of the same oppression, since they define difference as lack and discriminate according to the capacities of “normate” humans (Taylor 2017, 60, 71; Taylor and

Orning 2020, 667–68).⁵ The (alleged) lack of the defining traits of humanity such a cognitive capacities and language is what justifies and supports animal exploitation and oppression. This is an ableist logic: animals deficient in human markers of intelligence are considered “stupid” and inferior, and, in turn, ableism allows us to view human abilities as unquestionably superior to animal abilities. In fact, Taylor argues, “certain abilities and capacities are central to definitions of the human; they are thought to mark the boundaries between humanity and the rest of the animal world. In this way ableism gives shape to what and who we think of as human versus animal” (Taylor 2017, 73). Ableism structures the systems that render the lives of both nonhuman animals and disabled humans as less valuable and disposable.

But Taylor also argues, just like Costello (who does not use this term), that ableism also structures all those positions in animal ethics that remain attached to notions of normalcy and traditional moral standards (which are the majority). The case in point—or rather, the extreme and therefore paradigmatic case—here is obviously Peter Singer, who with *Animal Liberation* “fathered” in a sense modern animal ethics but also (in) famously argued for the legitimacy of euthanizing severely mentally disabled infants (see, e.g., Singer 1993, 135–74).⁶ Singer upholds a notion of personhood (and the protections that this entails) based on a number of capabilities related to rationality and sentience which allow for the inclusion of more “complex” animal species into the circle of morality but also for the exclusion of those humans who do not meet these standards (the infamous Argument from Marginal Cases). In this sense, Singer is both ableist and speciesist: his arguments reinforce not only a hierarchy of abilities but also a hierarchy of species, whereby those species whose

⁵The neologism “normate” was popularized by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson: “This neologism names the veiled subject position of cultural self, the figure outlined by the array of deviant others whose marked bodies shore up the normate’s boundaries. The term normate usefully designates the social figure with which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings. Normate, then, is the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them. If one attempts to define the normate position by peeling away all the marked traits within the social order at this historical moment, what emerges is a very narrowly defined profile that describes only a minority of actual people” (Garland-Thomson 2017, 8).

⁶Taylor devotes a whole chapter to her disagreement with Singer (2017, 136–62).

capabilities resemble (neurotypical) human capabilities are granted protection, whereas the others are abandoned to the no man's land of exploitation and oppression (Taylor 2017, 161).

Singer's arguments are probably one of the main reasons for the persistent mistrust that most disability rights advocates feel toward animal advocacy and toward any attempt to link disability liberation and animal liberation. His position has been (and continues to be) harshly attacked and criticized, within and without academia.⁷ Early on, for example, Cora Diamond (1995, originally published in 1978) argued that the juxtaposition of nonhuman animals and persons with cognitive disabilities is both unnecessary and problematic; and Eva Feder Kittay insists, in her repeated critique of Singer but also of the similar stance of Jeff McMahan (2003), that the comparison is not only misguided but also offensive of human dignity (see, e.g., Kittay 2008, 2009). The most famous episode in this regard is probably the debate between Singer and Harriet McBryde Johnson, a disabled attorney and disability rights activist, who reported it in the media and in her autobiography *Too Late to Die Young*. Johnson's (and many others') position can be summed up by her statement: "I am still seeking acceptance of my humanity; Singer's call to get past species seems a luxury way beyond my reach" (Johnson 2005, 228; see also Grue and Lundblad 2019). The point is in fact that the comparison and conflation of disabled people and nonhuman animals carries the weight of a history of abuse, violence, and suffering that cannot be easily brushed aside and still hovers over the disabled as a permanent threat (cf. Crary 2019, and the responses by Kittay 2019; Singer 2019; cf. also Carlson 2007; Drake 2010).

Ableism of course does not affect nonhuman animals and disabled people in the same way and the forms of oppression to which it leads manifest differently. To *be* an animal is not the same as to *be treated like* an animal. But, Taylor argues commenting on Johnson's troubling statement, "[d]enying someone else's justice because you do not yet have your own is never a good idea" (2017, 160). The quandary of linking disability liberation and animal liberation is how to deconstruct the "human" without reclaiming humanity as a value; how to reclaim "animality" as a generative, empowering space, the way "crip" or "queer" have been reclaimed

⁷ Singer himself relates some episodes of this opposition in the appendix to *Practical Ethics* titled "On Being Silenced in Germany" (1993, 337–59).

and turned from derogatory slurs into rallying cries, from a tradition that has always seen it as a “lacking” form of embodiment.⁸ Taylor insists on this point:

I feel animal in my embodiment, and this feeling is one of connection, not shame. Recognizing my animality has in fact been a way of claiming the dignity in the way my body and other nonnormative and vulnerable bodies move, look, and experience the world around them. It is a claiming of my animalized parts and movements, an assertion that my animality is integral to my humanity. It’s an assertion that animality is integral to *humanity*. (2017, 131)

Animality and disability are not inferior forms of embodiment but rather conditions of life, parts of the reality of living in a body.⁹ And what the linking of disability liberation and animal liberation argues for and promotes are new ways of valuing life that are not limited by specific physical or mental capabilities (Taylor 2017, 71).¹⁰

THE LIMITS OF EMBODIMENT

The “ethics of embodiment” based on a Merleau-Pontian ontology supports thus those trends in interspecies ethics that seek understanding and inclusion through an emphasis on corporeality and vindicate in a sense Costello confused and confusing argument against traditional philosophy and ethics. But an emphasis on embodiment also cannot avoid highlighting very specific limits, which are the limits of the body itself. In a famous image in “Eye and Mind,” Merleau-Ponty states:

if, like certain animals, we had lateral eyes with no intersection of visual fields, this body, which would not reflect itself, would not sense itself, this

⁸Michael Lundblad notes that the insistence that humans are also animals has a problematic history as well, particularly when it has been deployed to justify various behaviors as “natural,” including violence, exploitation, and oppression, as well as sexism, racism, and homophobia (cf. Lundblad 2015).

⁹It is important to recognize not only that humans are also animals, but also that disability affects, at different and various stages of life, everybody, humans and nonhumans alike, from infancy to old age, illness, accidents, etc.

¹⁰Example of this growing trend are the eco-ability movement (cf. Nocella et al. 2017, 2019) and the notion of “disanimality” promoted by Michael Lundblad (2020).

nearly adamantine body, which would not be entirely flesh, would not be a human body, and there would be no humanity. (2007, 355)

Creatures with eyes on either side of the head, like in many animal species, apprehend the world in very different ways, which inevitably leads to different ontologies. In a word, *they have different worlds*. That our access to the world is grounded in our corporeal nature means that the specific formation of our sense organs reveals the world for us in a very specific way (Moran 2000, 419, 430)—and this ultimately also vindicates Nagel’s (still defeatist) skepticism. This is what Jessica Cadwallader (2010, 515) has called the fundamental “ambiguity of embodiment”: the body is that which enables me to have a world and, in being constructed in and through the intersubjective relationships with the other, to embrace the other in its difference; but the body is also that which delimits actions and understanding on the basis of its organs of perception and of its previous experience.

This point has important repercussions not only for our capacity to sympathetically imagine the world of nonhuman animals, but also, and relatedly, that of humans with different sensory experiences. And it therefore points to an important limit in classical phenomenology, which has traditionally dismissed animality as a “poor” access to the world, as, for example, in Heidegger (1995), and has used disability merely as an abstract thought-experiment (Hall 2021, 17). In fact, disability plays an important, even *structural*, role in Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, but merely as a means to better define the normate body to which it is counterposed. Examining breakdowns in the bodily circuit, the argument goes, allows to bring to light routines and procedures that are normally hidden and assumed in our normal conscious state; it is the failures of the system that reveal most clearly how the system works (e.g., Merleau-Ponty 1962, 104, 121). Hence “[w]e need to study people with malfunctioning systems in order to make manifest the nature of the system, which, when working properly, is invisible” (Moran 2000, 419; cf. Morris 2008, 113).¹¹ The recurring example in *Phenomenology of Perception* is that of Schneider, a brain-damaged World War I veteran studied by Adhémar Gelb and Kurt Goldstein, whose breakdown of bodily integrity and intentionality is used

¹¹ Jesse Workman (2016, 67) notes the irony of this all-too-common use of disabled phenomenological experiences as a model through which to enhance the able-bodied understanding of “normal functioning” individuals with fully functioning phenomenological fields.

to define, by contrast, the “normality” of perception. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder (2000) have called this mechanism a “narrative prosthesis” that props up the normate body (and mind), whose experiences are assumed as universal. But the mechanism holds for all forms of difference, and Merleau-Ponty has thus come also under the fire of feminist criticisms, for example, for assuming the (able-bodied) European male as paradigm of embodiment (see, e.g., Young 1990; Grosz 1994). This universalization neglects the possibility of, and dismisses as merely defective, different forms of embodiment with different sensory and motor processes and thus different accesses to the world.

One often-quoted example in *Phenomenology of Perception* highlights this problem: the “blind man’s cane” (*le bâton de l’aveugle*) that becomes incorporated into the body schema of the blind person.¹² Merleau-Ponty uses this example to show that, through the dynamics of use and habituation, objects are incorporated into our routines and ultimately into our own bodies (proprioceptive incorporation). For the blind person, in fact, the cane ceases to be merely an object (as opposed to and separated from the subject) and becomes an “extension of the bodily synthesis” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 176), literally a part of their body, of their tactile organ:

The blind man’s stick has ceased to be an object for him, and is no longer perceived for itself; its point has become an area of sensitivity, extending the scope and active radius of touch, and providing a parallel to sight. In the exploration of things, the length of the stick does not enter expressly as a middle term: the blind man is rather aware of it through the position of objects than of the position of objects through it. The position of things is immediately given through the extent of the reach that carries him to it, and which comprises, besides the arm’s own reach, the stick’s range of action. (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 165–66)

In this sense, the cane becomes “transparent” and fully part of what Jesse Workman calls the person’s “capability of reckoning with the possible” (Workman 2016, 75–77; see, e.g., Iwakuma 2002, 78–79). Martin Jay (1993, 74) notes that the analogy between sight and the blind person’s cane was an old one, used as early as Simplicius’ commentary on Aristotle’s

¹² As it is still quite common, especially but not only in the Romance languages, Merleau-Ponty—and here his translators, since in French *aveugle* is not gendered—uses the masculine “man” as neutral universal form for “human being,” which is again part of the mechanism that erases the possibility of, and dismisses as defective, different forms of embodiment.

De Anima. The point of the comparison is that both reveal an instantaneous transmission of the stimulus to the sensory organ, and from Simplicius to Descartes and up to Merleau-Ponty, this analogy has been considered direct and straightforward (cf. Workman 2016, 38–39).

Joel Reynolds notes however that this analogy, which he names “bodily habit analogy,” misconstrues the experience of blindness insofar as it is based in an able-bodied *simulation* of blindness that does not recognize the difference introduced by disability (2017, 424). Merleau-Ponty’s uses of blindness and disability are grounded in an able-bodied perspective, in able-bodied assumptions that equate blindness with the mere absence of sight. His deployment of non-normate forms of embodiment is therefore not only instrumental and uncritical, but simply wrong. Moreover, despite remaining somewhat ambiguous in his assessment of disability (Workman 2016, 5; Avramides 2018), he ultimately falls into the Western pattern of treating disability as deficient and as a lack; he is in the end also guilty of what Reynolds calls “ableist conflation” (2017, 421–22), that is, the conflation of disability with pain, suffering, and disadvantage. “We conclude,” he indeed writes, “that the tactile field has never the fullness of the visual, that the tactile object is never wholly present in each of its parts as is the case with the visual object, and in short that touching is not seeing” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 260). In the ableist conflation, blindness was also metaphorically turned into a figure of lack of knowledge, as well as epistemic ignorance or even moral negligence: for the Western tradition, light and sight equate to rationality, understanding, insight (as in the metaphor of the Enlightenment), whereas darkness and blindness to their opposite, and, according to John Protevi (1998), also for Merleau-Ponty the lack of sight ultimately leads to a lack of insight.¹³

This means not only that the blind have been customarily animalized as lesser form of embodiment, but also that those nonhuman species which do not rely on sight as their primary sense—such as bats, of course (who

¹³Protevi (1998, 2019–20) points to this passage of *Phenomenology of Perception*: “In attacking the ‘visual sphere,’ illness is not limited to destroying certain contents of consciousness, ‘visual representations’ or sight literally speaking [*au sens propre*]; it affects sight in the figurative sense [*au sens figuré*], of which the former is no more than the model or symbol—the power of ‘looking down upon’ (*überschauen*) simultaneous multiplicities, a certain way of positing the object or being aware” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 157–58). Through an assault on bodily vision, then, insight is also damaged.

are however not blind¹⁴), but also moles, deep-sea fish and other darkness dwellers—have been considered as degenerate and even morbid evolutionary deviations (hence the aversion and even disgust they provoke in our culture; see, e.g., Flack 2022a, 2022b). If it is a biological fact that humans are a predominantly visual species, the elevation of vision to the position of principal and privileged human sense is a cultural occurrence, albeit one that has marked the Western tradition and its ocularcentrism (and consequently its aversion to darkness, night and blindness) throughout its history, from Plato’s myth of the Cave to Freud’s theory of the “organic repression” and up to José Saramago’s opposition of *Blindness* and *Seeing* in his two famous novels, just to give some examples.¹⁵

What Merleau-Ponty and the Western tradition fail to acknowledge and even *imagine* is that blindness—and disability in general—is what Reynolds (2017) calls a “world-creating” condition, that is, a radical reconfiguration of experience and existence. It is not only or not much that, with disability, Merleau-Ponty’s “I can” becomes “I cannot”; rather, blindness¹⁶ brings about a change in the body and therefore in the world itself that determines and conditions the very being-in-the-world. One of the most insightful and much-quoted analyses of blindness is the memoir by

¹⁴ As I have already remarked, talking about “bats” in general makes no sense, since the order of Chiroptera is the second largest in the animal kingdom, and the use of echolocation and sight (and a combination of the two) greatly varies from species to species, depending, among other things, on their diet—whether they need to catch insects, frogs, or fishes, or whether they feed on fruits and nectar. Merlin Tuttle (2015, 67) writes, for example, that the common vampire bat “has excellent night vision for finding prey during dark, moonless times when it is safest to hunt,” but also that “[i]ts highly specialized ears enable it to hear the breathing sounds of sleeping animals.”

¹⁵ Plato’s myth of the Cave established in a sense the paradigm of visual metaphors for signifying truth (see, e.g., Workman 2016, 34); in two lengthy footnotes in chapter IV of *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1962, 46n1, 53n3), Freud proposed that the origins of human civilization lay in the “organic repression” of olfactory stimuli in favor of visual ones following the adoption of the upright posture; and in two famous novels, *Blindness* (1997) and *Seeing* (2006), José Saramago reasserts the opposition between blindness/barbarism/animality and vision/civilization/insight. For critiques of these metaphors, see, for example, Vidali (2010), Schalk (2013), and many accounts by blind persons such as Kleege (1999).

¹⁶ I will use here blindness as example and paradigm of disability but also of non-primarily visual sensory experience in some nonhuman species such as bats. It must be kept in mind, however, that not only it is not possible to speak of “disability” as a uniform experience, but that even blindness itself is not a unitary disability and presents many different forms, nuances, and manifestations (cf. e.g., Sacks 2010, 257–302). The same holds of course for sensory experiences in nonhuman animals.

John Hull, who, after experiencing various eyes problems throughout his life, finally went completely blind at age 45. Thus Hull begins his memoir, *On Sight and Insight*, which relates the various stages of adjustment to his new condition:

Gradually I came to see that blindness is a whole-body condition. It is not simply that your eyes have ceased to function; your whole body undergoes a profound transformation in its relationship to the world. Finally, I came to believe that blindness is a world-creating condition. Blind people really do live in a different world. This world is part of a larger world, the world of sighted people. (1997, xii–xiii)

This thesis is restated throughout the book: the new body produces a new world, “a new coherent world for a body at home in that world” (1997, 176). Time and space, for example, radically change: “space is contracted and time is expanded” (1997, 71). But also the other senses and perceptions, tastes and desires, change and adapt and a whole new form of consciousness arises (1997, xiii), so that “[o]ne begins to live by other interests, other values. One begins to take up residence in another world” (1997, 168). At some point, in order to better understand this change, Hull, who was a professor of Religious Education at the University of Birmingham, turns to Merleau-Ponty’s theory of embodiment and perception (1997, 175–77, 180–83). And indeed, *Phenomenology of Perception* offers the theoretical tools for a correct approach to different forms of embodiment. Merleau-Ponty in fact writes:

The blind man’s world differs from the normal person’s not only through the quantity of material at his disposal, but also through the structure of the whole. [...] The whole significance of our life – from which theoretical significance is merely extracted – would be different if we were sightless. [...] The senses are distinct from each other and distinct from intellection in so far as each one of them brings with it a structure of being which can never be exactly transposed. (1962, 260–61)¹⁷

But Merleau-Ponty’s limit was his inability to overcome the ableist bias about what blindness and disability are; in a word, his limit was his *lack of*

¹⁷A number of scholars develop Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of embodiment precisely to highlight this point. See, for example, Toombs (1995), Iwakuma (2002), and Hill (2012).

imagination. This limitation and corruption of the imaginative ability are precisely a consequence and a product of the pervasive ableist assumptions about disability, and Merleau-Ponty falsely imagines, like many others, that blindness is a mere absence of sight. Simulations of disability, like the one Merleau-Ponty recurs to in his example of the blind person's cane, cannot be but projections of our perspective and, even when well intentioned (e.g., when they aim at raising awareness of and empathy toward disability), inevitably end up reinforcing ableist prejudices and discrimination (Reynolds 2017; Avramides 2018). Therefore, grounding their argument precisely in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment, Catriona Mackenzie and Jackie Scully (2007) argue, specifically with reference to the disabled other, that being/having a specific form of embodiment places real constraints on our capacities both to imagine ourselves otherwise and to imaginatively put ourselves in the place of others. If one is sighted, it seems, it is impossible to really know what it is like to be blind (as/and a bat).

CRIPPING PHENOMENOLOGY AND ANIMAL ETHICS

Mackenzie and Scully (2007, 338) conclude therefore that the role of imagination in moral engagement with others is to expand the scope of our sympathies rather than to enable us to put ourselves in the other's place. As for Coetzee (see Chap. 1), the ethical obligation to cultivate imagination in order to support and enrich our approach to the other must acknowledge the limits of imagination and ultimately respect the otherness of the other. In "sympathetic moral imagination," Mackenzie and Scully write (2007, 347)—echoing not only Coetzee's language but also his ethical posture—we do not try to imagine being the other "from the inside" but rather recognize, with "epistemic humility," the other's difference and imaginatively engage with her perceptions and experiences, responding emotionally to her perspective and her situation.

Mackenzie and Scully propose thus as a model of moral engagement the concept of "asymmetrical reciprocity" put forward by Iris Marion Young (1997): an ethical relationship requires indeed reciprocity, the recognition of the other's ethical relevance, but the relation is necessarily asymmetrical, since, as much as we can understand and empathize with the other's position and perspective, "there is also always a remainder," there is much that we do not and will not understand (Young 1997, 53). Recognition is indeed essential, but it must include the recognition of the

other's irreducible perspective. "Understanding across difference is both possible and necessary," Young writes; "Recognizing the asymmetry of subjects, however, does imply giving a different account of what understanding is and what makes it possible" (1997, 52). A symmetrical relation denies the other's difference, and Young gives as example of this denying precisely the misunderstanding of disability on the part of able-bodied people (1997, 42). She does not address cross-species relationships, but her position resonates with some contemporary stances in animal ethics, such as, for example, that of Anat Pick, for whom the ethical relation "takes place in the absence of the mutuality of looking" (2011, 172), or that of Cary Wolfe, who writes: "the *truly* ethical act is one that is directed toward the moral patient from whom there is no expectation, and perhaps no hope, ever, of reciprocity. Such an act is freely given, outside any model of reciprocity and exchange" (2013, 20).

All these authors tap into a specific tradition, French deconstruction, which frames the ethical relation as a "gift": gift-giving establishes recognition and reciprocity, but one that is asymmetrical since, unlike a contract, it does not involve reversal and compensation; all it entails is offering and acceptance (cf. e.g., Derrida 1992). To Derrida's ethics of gift-giving, Young adds a further suggestion that she derives from Luce Irigaray: the sense of "wonder" that arises from, and simultaneously describes, the state of being open to something new, to the newness and mystery of the other (Young 1997, 52, 56). Unlike the projection involved in symmetrically trying to adopt another's standpoint, being open to the wonder of the other means getting out of oneself and accepting the otherness of the other.

What all this implies, both for the phenomenological project and for cross-species ethics, is the need to overcome and dismantle the hierarchies of embodiments and abilities that still constrain and limit them, and to reclaim the value and beauty of life beyond the limits of specific physical or mental capabilities; which must lead, at the same time, to a more respectful approach to otherness. Taylor, Reynolds and many others name this overcoming and reclaiming as "cripping": the use of the terms "crip" and "cripping" is a way of reclaiming language and agency from traditions and systems that have used them historically to demean and discriminate the "crips," both human and nonhuman. "Crippling" means to think against the *lack of imagination* of normalized assumptions and to attend to the transformative possibilities intrinsic to other—to all—forms of embodiment; to articulate new forms of experience grounded in non-normate experience. Crippling phenomenology means to imaginatively open it to

the experiences and worlds of non-normate bodies, human and nonhuman alike; crippling animal ethics means to get rid of the ableism that still heavily informs it and to open it to the “wonder” of all forms of embodiment and to a true “ethics of embodiment.” But all crippling must start from the acknowledgment of the limits of imagination.

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PART II

The Limits of Empathy



Sympathy, Empathy, & Co.: Moral Sentimentalism and Its Discontents

The cornerstone of Elizabeth Costello’s critique of Thomas Nagel, the “sympathetic imagination,” is a concept with a long and solid pedigree: the marriage of imagination and sympathy “officially” dates to the Scottish Enlightenment and constitutes the foundation of what is known as “moral sentimentalism,” the ethical position maintaining that the roots of moral agency are to be found in emotions rather than in the use of reason. By using this term, Costello not only claims lineage from a robust—although minoritarian—ethical tradition but also joins a lively debate that traverses the past three centuries and even got a boost at the end of the twentieth century thanks to the discovery of the “mirror neurons” (I will get back to this in due course). Moral sentimentalism was embraced by part of the animal advocacy movement precisely because traditional rationalism in ethics (including animal ethics) remains extremely anthropocentric, centering on the very faculty, reason (*logos*), that was used for centuries to exclude animals from moral consideration. It is to this development in animal ethics that Costello implicitly refers to, thus exemplifying its terms:

The heart is the seat of a faculty, *sympathy*, that allows us to share at times the being of another. Sympathy has everything to do with the subject and little to do with the object, the “another,” as we see at once when we think of the object not as a bat (“Can I share the being of a bat?”) but as another human being. There are people who have the capacity to imagine themselves as someone else, there are people who have no such capacity (when

the lack is extreme, we call them psychopaths), and there are people who have the capacity but choose not to exercise it. Despite Thomas Nagel, who is probably a good man, despite Thomas Aquinas and René Descartes, with whom I have more difficulty in sympathizing, there are no limits to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination. (Coetzee 1999, 34–35)

The debate on the “sympathetic imagination” is, however, quite messy and confused, especially in its terminology, and this confusion is in turn detrimental to the ethical import of these concepts. The meaning of sympathy, and of its cognates such as compassion, concern, and pity, not only has varied throughout history but also changes according to the context and the discipline in which they are used. Moreover, the “invention” of a new term, *empathy*, at the beginning of the twentieth century, and its quickly becoming a catchword in psychology and moral philosophy, made things even more complicated, whereby the semantic ground previously covered by one term has been later “taken over”—but not consistently or even logically—by another term. The flourishing of this debate at the turn of the twenty-first century did nothing to clear up the confusion. Indicative of this confusion is the fact, for example, that in the Italian translation of *The Lives of Animals* the term “sympathy” in the passage quoted above was rendered as “empatia” and the expression “sympathetic imagination” as “l’immaginazione e l’empatia” (cf. Coetzee 2000, 43).

This chapter will briefly analyze this debate both from a historical and a terminological perspective in the attempt to shed some light on its terms in general and on the limits of Costello’s position more in particular.

SYMPATHY AND EMPATHY FROM PLATO TO THE MIRROR NEURONS

Much of the conceptual diversity (or confusion) of these terms can be gleaned already from their historical roots. The etymology and the history of a concept, if perhaps do not (or should not) have substantial import for its current meaning and use—“semantics is not a slave to etymology” (Roughley and Schramme 2018, 11) –, nevertheless can be of much help in understanding its hidden structure and force, and in the case of sympathy and empathy etymology and history tell a very interesting story.

Sympathy is the much older term, already in use since ancient Greek philosophy. Composed by the prefix *sym-* (συν-, “with”) added to *pathos*

(πάθος, “feeling”), it literally means “feeling with” and was used, for example, by Plato and Aristotle to speak of being affected by like feelings, by Galen and Hippocrates for an affection or sensitivity of the body, and most of all by the Stoics to express the soul’s pervading all matter and thus a state of mutual and universal interconnectedness and interaction. Through Neoplatonism it was adopted in the Renaissance, in particular in the context of natural philosophy, where it came to connote a universal correspondence of all creatures with each other. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the term was used in the medical field to denote how an illness is transmitted but also the link between an illness and the medication used to cure it. Sympathy became then especially prominent in the eighteenth century (a true “age of sympathy”; Hanley 2015, 171) both in fiction—in the so-called sentimental novel or novel of sensibility—and in the writings of the Scottish moralists (e.g., Shaftesbury, Hutcheson), finally becoming the cornerstone of David Hume’s and Adam Smith’s moral philosophy. It is with Hume and Smith that sympathy takes a central place in the analysis of human understanding and morals, but it is important to remark that they did not invent the concept but rather inserted themselves into (but also transformed) a long and established tradition.¹

In his 1739 *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume wrote that “No quality of human nature is more remarkable, both in itself and in its consequences, than that propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to our own” (1978, 316). And, importantly, he saw “the force of sympathy” flowing “thro’ the whole animal creation” (1978, 353).² Sympathy begins with what contemporary psychologists would call “emotional contagion,” whereby one’s mind affectively resonates (Hume writes “reverberates”) with another’s experiences and emotions: “the minds of men are mirrors to one another, not only because

¹For a detailed analysis of the concept throughout history see the chapters collected in *Sympathy: A History*, edited by Eric Schliesser (2015).

²“The best method of reconciling us to this opinion is to take a general survey of the universe, and observe the force of sympathy thro’ the whole animal creation, and the easy communication of sentiments from one thinking being to another. In all creatures, that prey not upon others, and are not agitated with violent passions, there appears a remarkable desire of company, which associates them together, without any advantages they can ever propose to reap from their union. This is still more conspicuous in man, as being the creature of the universe, who has the most ardent desire of society, and is fitted for it by the most advantages” (Hume 1978, 353).

they reflect each other's emotions, but also because those rays of passions, sentiments and opinions may be often reverberated" (Hume 1978, 365).³ "Reverberation" is however the work of "imagination," which transforms ideas into physical affections: "sympathy, as I have already observ'd, is nothing but the conversion of an idea into an impression by the force of imagination." (Hume 1978, 427). Hume acknowledges sympathy's biases toward the near and dear—"The sentiments of others have little influence, when far remov'd from us, and require the relation of contiguity, to make them communicate themselves entirely" (1978, 318)—but when people are close enough, their feelings strike upon one another's souls: "A good-natur'd man finds himself in an instant of the same humour with his company" (1978, 370).

In his 1759 *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith developed the insights of his mentor and close friend Hume toward a position that today is called "projection":⁴ "As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation" (Smith 2002, 11). Again, it is the imagination the vehicle of sympathy, since "[i]t is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are [the other's] sensations": "By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them" (2002, 11–12).⁵ Sympathy or "fellow feeling" consists thus in "changing place in fancy" with another, whereby this "fellow feeling," unlike compassion or pity, connects not only with the sorrow of the other but "with any passion whatever" (2002, 12–13). Like Hume, Smith was aware of the risks of biases, and, like Hume, who attempted to bypass them by adopting the "general point of view" (Hume 1978, 630), Smith devised the fiction of the "fair and impartial spectator"—also called the

³Hume employs a physical metaphor to explain this contagion: "As in strings equally wound up, the motion of one communicates itself to the rest; so all the affections readily pass from one person to another, and beget correspondent movements in every human creature" (Hume 1978, 576).

⁴On the differences between Hume's and Smith's theories see, for example, Sayre-McCord (2015) and Ilyes (2017).

⁵Although the expression "sympathetic imagination" is usually attributed to Smith, it never appears as such in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

“demigod within the breast” or the “ideal man within the breast,” i.e., the voice of conscience, but as such also an act of imagination (Smith 2002, 129, 151, and *passim*)—that impartially examines our conduct.

This tradition continued in the nineteenth century, when its most famous representative was perhaps Arthur Schopenhauer, who argued that compassion (*Mitgefühl* or *Mitleid*) is the foundation of morality (cf. e.g., Pinotti 2014, 51; Aaltola 2018, 81). However, already in the second half of the eighteenth century a new term appeared in the German-speaking world, *Einfühlung*, which Johann Gottfried Herder used in *On the Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul* (1778)—in the verbal forms *sich einfühlen* and *hineinfühlen*—to denote a universal resonance, and was then also picked up by Novalis in his 1798 novel *The Novices at Sais* (Pinotti 2014, 45). This term was going to revolutionize (or further con-found) the tradition of moral sentimentalism, but it was first popularized in another discipline, namely aesthetics. The noun *Einfühlung* appeared for the first time in print in Robert Vischer’s 1873 doctoral thesis *On the Optical Sense of Form: A Contribution to Aesthetics* (though his father, Friedrich Theodor Vischer, had already use the verb *einfühlen*), instantly starting a lively industry on the concept that continues to these days. But this “industry” was already born under the sign of ambiguity and confusion, since Vischer introduced *Einfühlung* alongside a whole set of closely related neologisms such as *Anfühlung* (attentive feeling), *Nachfühlung* (responsive feeling), and *Zufühlung* (immediate feeling), in addition to the traditional *Mitfühlung* or “sympathy” (Jahoda 2005, 153–54; Debes 2015, 296; Pinotti 2014, 52).

The use of the term *Einfühlung* was extended to other fields and systematically organized at the end of the nineteenth century by Theodor Lipps, who carried on the tradition of imprecision and ambiguity by using it in different ways in different contexts and often as a synonym of sympathy (*Mitfühlung* but also *Sympathie*). Lipps, who in 1895 had edited the German translation of Hume’s *Treatise* (rendering “sympathy” as *Einfühlung!*), used *Einfühlung* to cover many different semantic areas, in fields as different as aesthetics, gnoseology and ethics, but especially to answer the psychological-philosophical question of how we come to know other people’s mind. In his 1903 *Ästhetik*, he proposed the famous example of a spectator watching an acrobat on a highwire: “When I observe a circus performer on a hanging wire,” he wrote, “I feel I am inside him”

(Lipps 1903, 122; cf. Jahoda 2005, 155; Pinotti 2014, 57).⁶ Finally, the term passed into English in 1909, when the Cornell psychologist Edward B. Titchener rendered it as “empathy” (Titchener 1909, 21). Although some scholars found occurrences of the term *empathēia* (ἐμπάθεια) already in ancient Greek sources (cf. Pinotti 2014, 44), this term was not in use in modernity and Titchener coined it on the mold of “sympathy,” whereby the “feeling with” became a “feeling in” (ἐν in Greek). Like Lipps and others, Titchener often used “empathy” as a synonym of “sympathy” and with no proper accuracy (Debes 2015, 291–92; Lanzoni 2018, 25).

Empathy became soon a central concept for phenomenology, but whereas Edmund Husserl and Edith Stein used the term *Einfühlung*, Max Scheler chose to stick to *Sympathie* (since I devote the whole next chapter to phenomenology, I will bracket this history here). Although many terminological and conceptual problems were noted and emphasized early on (cf. Debes 2015, 296–97), the term quickly caught on and took a slogan-like form in many different disciplines and contexts for the whole first half of the twentieth century, the first “golden age” of empathy (Pinotti 2014, 140). “Empathy” became so prominent that the English term was translated back into the German as *Empathie* to replace the now-outdated *Einfühlung*. For a few decades in the postwar period the term went out of fashion, but for a number of historical, social and cultural reasons, it came back into fashion at the turn of the twenty-first century and it now experiences a second “golden age.” One of the causes of empathy’s renewed fortunes is the discovery in the 1990s of the so-called “mirror neurons” by the team of neurophysiologist Giacomo Rizzolatti at the University of Parma. These neurons fire both when we act and when we observe the same action performed by another, and were found in the brains of many different species, including of course humans (the first experiments were conducted on macaques), giving empathy a biological and evolutionary foundation and opening the debate to the “hard” sciences.

This debate is today livelier than ever in many different disciplines, as proved, for example, by the titles of two popular books published almost simultaneously, primatologist Frans de Waal’s *The Age of Empathy* (2009) and economist Jeremy Rifkin’s *The Empathic Civilization* (2010)—but

⁶Smith had already used this example: “The mob, when they are gazing at a dancer on the slack rope, naturally writhe and twist and balance their own bodies, as they see him do, and as they feel that they themselves must do if in his situation” (2002, 12).

also by the success of psychologist Paul Bloom's *Against Empathy* (2016) a few years later. The debate, however, is still marred by terminological and conceptual imprecision and confusion, which leave the reader always with the same doubt: what are really sympathy and empathy?

SYMPATHY, EMPATHY, & CO.: A MATTER OF STIPULATION

The problems already begun with Hume's and Smith's idiosyncratic and controversial use of the term "sympathy" (cf. e.g., Haakonssen 2002) and were multiplied by the messy creation and dissemination of the new term "empathy" a century later. Moreover, scholars of empathy usually argue that Hume and Smith used the term sympathy to refer to what today we call empathy—but *also* at times to what today we call sympathy (e.g., Slote 2007, 11; 2010, 15; Aaltola 2018). From the very beginning these terms were therefore ill-defined (Lanzoni 2018, 24) and no account of either sympathy and empathy succeeded in establishing a stable paradigm of usage, so that Remy Debes argues that they are at present "eclectic" and "malleable" concepts (2015, 287; 2017, 432), Thiemo Breyer calls them "umbrella terms" (2020, 437), and Andrea Pinotti uses for them the term "constellation" (and a very broad one; 2014, 43).

This constellation relates concepts that go from emotional contagion and projection to pity, benevolence, concern, care, and compassion, which, it must be noted, is the literal Latin translation of both the Greek *sympatheia* and the German *Mitgefühl* or *Mitleid*. All these concepts differ in some way or another, but there is no consensus on how, when, or how much. Especially in the case of sympathy and empathy, some scholars have tried, nonetheless, to establish a clear consensual definition and distinction. For some authors, a first intuitive distinction is that the "em-" ("in") of empathy implies that one feels the same feeling of the other, and thus the empathizer in a sense loses oneself "into" the empathized, whereas the "sym-" of sympathy denotes a feeling "with," and thus alongside the sympathized, whereby the observer takes a step back to view the situation accurately (e.g., Mercer 1972, 9; Keen 2007, 4). Seen in these terms, empathy is interpreted as an involuntary emotion, whereas sympathy needs some degree of intellectual contribution: we can sympathize without feeling empathy (e.g., Slote 2007, 11).

Other scholars emphasize a different aspect: empathy seeks information about another's situation and feelings, whereas sympathy denotes concern

about the other: we can empathize without feeling sympathy and the need to intervene. This is, for example, the position of Lauren Wispé (1986), who emphasizes that sympathy and empathy are different psychological processes: sympathy is a way of relating, whereas empathy is a way of knowing; “sympathy refers to the heightened awareness of another’s plight as something to be alleviated,” whereas “[e]mpathy refers to the attempt of one self-aware self to understand the subjective experiences of another self” (1986, 314). Sympathy, therefore, calls to action; empathy, on the other hand, is the attempt to comprehend “unjudgmentally” the positive and negative experiences of another self. The big issue with empathy, for Wispé, is therefore the question of its “accuracy,” whereby the self never loses its own identity, whereas sympathy is “concerned with communion rather than accuracy, and self-awareness is reduced rather than augmented”: “In empathy, we substitute ourselves for the others. In sympathy, we substitute others for ourselves” (1986, 318). Stephen Darwall (1998) converges with Wispé on many points, emphasizing that in sympathy the focus is the other and their wellbeing, whereas in empathy the focus is the situation of the other as *we* imagine it (or as we imagine the other imagining it), but in a more “neutral,” off-line manner. Sympathy is a “third-person,” proactive emotion directed at individuals, whereas empathy is a “second-person,” cognitive or protocognitive emotion requiring the (attempted) adoption of another’s point of view (cf. also Pinotti 2014, 64; Debes 2015, 299; Roughley and Schramme 2018, 25–26).

In this view, sympathy is necessarily linked to negative affects (pity and sorrow for another’s misfortunes), whereas empathy is open for different affective valences—precisely as *sympathy* was for Smith: a fellow feeling “with any passion whatever.” It is in this context that the famous example of the “empathic torturer” is usually proposed: in order to be effective, the argument goes, the torturer must be able to understand the feelings of the tortured (where it hurts most), and recurs therefore to empathy, but has no concern or care whatsoever—no sympathy—for their suffering. Hence sympathy would be the true positive, prosocial emotion, whereas empathy is merely “emotional resonance.” As Douglas Chismar put it: “Empathy, then, implies sharing something of the other’s feelings without necessarily feeling affection, positive regard or the desire to help. Sympathy, on the other hand, is a special kind of empathy, viz., empathy coupled with a benevolent attitude towards the other person” (1988, 258). To empathize

is to respond to another's perceived emotional state by experiencing similar feelings, whereas sympathizing not only includes empathizing, but also entails having a positive regard and concern for the other person. However, Chismar points out that sympathy needs an *intention* on the part of the sympathizer, and this can be blocked; empathy, on the other hand, being mostly *involuntary*, is perhaps more amenable to prosocial manipulation through a process of "empathic education" and is therefore the "more hopeful" emotion: "Development of the capacity to empathize, then, offers promise of beneficial changes in social behavior" (1988, 264).

However, some scholars state just the opposite, and here Lori Gruen is the paradigmatic example: according to Gruen, sympathy, adopting the third-person perspective, is felt "from the outside" and involves maintaining one's own attitudes and preferences and adding to them a concern for another, whereas empathy, being an attempt to feel "from the inside," constitutes a deeper, more intimate engagement with the circumstances of the other and therefore "has more grip than sympathy, it packs a greater motivation punch" (Gruen 1996, 338, 2015, 44). For Gruen, this makes empathy more suited to situations in which there are significant differences between the empathizer and those with whom one is empathizing, as in the case of nonhuman animals (which are her explicit focus) (cf. also Lutz 2016; Meyers 2017).⁷ But Martha Nussbaum argues precisely the opposite: since, as Nagel said, we will never be able to really imagine what it is like to be a nonhuman animal, empathy is not necessary for the compassion we nonetheless owe to the other creatures (I will get back to Nussbaum in the next section).⁸

Gruen's position expresses nevertheless the more common understanding of empathy today, whereby it is not only conflated with sympathy—the distinction between the two concepts belongs by now almost exclusively to the specialized literature—but also considered a priori a—or rather *the*—prosocial emotion. Limiting the analysis to empathy alone, however, does not make things easier: as Susan Lanzoni writes (2018, 24), empathy was never one simple thing and its meanings have evolved in ways that are often contradictory, at times even referring to different phenomena (Bello 2022). As C. Daniel Batson argues (2009, 3), scholars of empathy agree

⁷I will analyze more in depth Gruen's position in Chap. 6.

⁸Nussbaum writes: "We often have compassion for creatures whose experience we know we can never share: most compassion with animals has this feature" (2001, 339).

that “empathy is important, [but] they often disagree about why it is important, about what effects it has, and where it comes from, and even about what it is,” and proceeds to identify eight different phenomena called empathy. Likewise, Gruen (2015, 43–44) names five forms of empathy (emotional contagion; storied empathy; primary or personal empathy; empathy as projection [narcissism]; cognitive empathy) and Elisa Aaltola (2018) proposes six different “varieties” (projective; simulative; cognitive; affective; embodied; reflective) (cf. also Maibom 2020, 2022).

One of the main criteria to sift through all these varieties is empathy’s cognitive component: some scholars understand empathy in highly intellectualistic terms as involving a theory of mind, and even equate it to mindreading (see next chapter). This is due, for de Waal, to our culture’s capital sin, i.e., logocentrism: “in the West we prefer the mind to be in charge” and thus “science has elevated empathy to a cognitive process” (de Waal 2019, 88). De Waal, with many others, emphasizes instead the bodily and evolutionary traits of empathy, which are shared across a vast number of species and are independent of any linguisticity or rationalization—and this is also what makes empathy “a gateway to the animal mind” (de Waal 2019, 106). Pinotti proposes a more interesting method: he suggests intersecting two different scales, one based on the “emotional temperature” and another based on the “focus” of the empathic intention. At the “cold” end of the emotional temperature scale we find empathy as the capacity to understand another’s mental and psychological states on a purely cognitive level, whereas on the “hot” end we find an emotional and affective involvement with another’s experience. As for the focus, it can be centered on oneself or on the other. The intersection of these two scales produces an infinite array of shades and possibilities (Pinotti 2014, 67). And that is why, Breyer concludes, we need a “multidimensional theory of empathy” (2020, 439).

The bottom line, as Debes remarks, is that these terms have been from the very beginning an instrument for expressing the “fancy of theorists” (Debes 2017, 433) and are always, therefore, a matter of *stipulation* (Debes 2015, 287; cf. also Roughley and Schramme 2018, 26). And the undogmatic scholars freely recognize this limit, when they preface their definitions, as, for example, Gruen does, with disclaimers such as “as I am understanding it...” (Gruen 2015, 45). This is ultimately the only way to talk about sympathy and empathy.

AGAINST EMPATHY (“AS I AM UNDERSTANDING IT”)

This caveat holds also for those who oppose sympathy and/or empathy—and even more so, since they are pressed by a greater need to clarify what they are opposed to. So Peter Goldie, for example, thus opens his “Anti-Empathy”: “The term ‘empathy’ is understood in so many different ways—not only in philosophical and psychological theorizing, but also in our everyday discourse—that making precise the kind of empathy that is my target will take a little while” (2011, 302). What Goldie is against is “empathetic perspective shifting”: “consciously and intentionally shifting your perspective in order to imagine being the other person, and thereby sharing in his or her thoughts, feelings, decisions, and other aspects of their psychology”; but this is different, Goldie tells us, from “in-his-shoes perspective-shifting,” which he defines instead as “consciously and intentionally shifting your perspective in order to imagine what thoughts, feelings, decisions, and so on you would arrive at if you were in the other’s circumstances”—which he is not opposed to (2011, 302). The problem with empathetic perspective-shifting is, for Goldie, that it is “conceptually unable to operate with the appropriately full-blooded notion of first-personal agency that is involved in deliberation” (2011, 303).

Paul Bloom as well opens his popular *Against Empathy* by quoting Frederique de Vignemont and Tania Singer’s famous quip that “there are probably nearly as many definitions of empathy as people working on this topic” (2006, 435; qtd. in Bloom 2016, 19). Bloom, however, soon dismisses the differences as “often subtle” and reduces them all to what he deems is “the most typical” definition: “Empathy is the act of coming to experience the world as you think someone else does” (2016, 19). Cognitive empathy, he argues, can be a “useful tool” but it is “morally neutral”; the problem is “emotional empathy,” which in ethics becomes even “morally corrosive” (2016, 39) because it works like a “spotlight,” with a narrow focus that illuminates only a little spot and leaves all the rest in darkness (2016, 82). This empathy leads us to care about the wrong things, the wrong people, to be too parochial, and to be subject to all sorts of biases. Thus Bloom—quite traditionally—concludes: “Much better to use reason and cost-benefit analysis, drawing on a more distanced compassion and kindness” (2016, 19). Throughout the book, however, Bloom is at pain to draw distinctions upon distinctions—to distinguish empathy

from understanding, empathy from compassion, empathy from warmth and kindness, etc.—because he is well aware that these distinctions are “critical for the argument I’ve been making throughout this book” (2016, 126). These distinctions are necessary in order to exclude all possible positive nuances and restrict the analysis to very limited, all-negative aspects.

These definitions of empathy clearly emphasize its cognitive component and are therefore intellectualistic, following in the footsteps of one of the first and fiercest critics of moral sentimentalism, namely Kant. Kant established the blueprint of moral anti-sentimentalism when he argued, in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, that an action driven by sympathy has “no true moral worth” because it “lacks moral content, namely that of doing such actions not from inclination but *from duty*” (1997, 11, emphasis in the original).⁹ Sympathy (and today empathy) is, for a Kantian (and a moral rationalist in general¹⁰), unreliable, misdirected and misdirecting, accidental and intermittent, irrational, uncontrollable, and erratic, and therefore incompatible with the claim of justice. Moreover, in the *Doctrine of Virtue* Kant accused compassion of being “an insulting kind of beneficence, since it expresses the kind of benevolence one has toward someone unworthy, called *pity*” (1991, 250). This adds to the “flaws” of empathy a condescending tone that has been emphasized in recent feminist, postcolonial, and critical race critiques: for these critics, empathy is a patronizing attitude of privileged Westerners that misunderstands and erases the subjectivity of the other. Empathy is ethnocentric (and Eurocentric), depends on generalizations about universal human traits, ignores that emotions are culturally constructed, and ultimately

⁹ About sympathy Kant wrote: “if nature had put little sympathy in the heart of this or that man; if (in other respects an honest man) he is by temperament cold and indifferent to the sufferings of others, perhaps because he himself is provided with the special gift of patience and endurance toward his own sufferings and presupposes the same in every other or even requires it; if nature had not properly fashioned such a man (who would in truth not be its worst product) for a philanthropist, would he not still find within himself a source from which to give himself a far higher worth than what a mere good-natured temperament might have? By all means! It is just then that the worth of character comes out, which is moral and incomparably the highest, namely that he is beneficent not from inclination but from duty” (1997, 12).

¹⁰ An example of utilitarian anti-empathy argument in animal ethics is given by Richard Holton and Rae Langton, who write: “We object to the idea that empathy provides the basis for ethics. If, as Singer believes, we owe moral concern to the sentient, then we cannot restrict that concern to those whose shoe we can, in imagination, borrow. Sentience transcends imaginability” (1998, 228–29).

disempowers its “object” through a condescending form of “pity.”¹¹ These criticisms as well must however “construct” the precise form of empathy they are opposed to (basically, empathy as projection) through an unavoidable series of specifications and distinctions.

The critics of empathy in the moral sentimentalist camp follow the same pattern. Here the foremost example is Jesse Prinz, who, in his “Against Empathy,” decides to “focus the debate” by restricting his critical attention to what he calls “a broadly Humean view” (2011, 215). Prinz stipulates (“I will say that...”) that empathy is “a matter of feeling an emotion that we take another person to have. Following Hume, we can think of empathy as a kind of associative inference from observed or imagined expressions of emotion or external conditions that are known from experience to bring emotions about” (2011, 215). Prinz’s charges against empathy are the traditional ones: it is partial, easily manipulated, ineluctably local, and therefore not a suitable tool for morality. As a moral sentimentalist, Prinz proposes better emotions to guide moral judgement, such as disgust, guilt, admiration, and most of all anger (2011, 214),¹² but, again, he must proceed through a series of clarifications and distinctions, in particular distinguishing empathy from concern and concern from care. In the end, it is all a matter of stipulation.¹³

An interesting case is that of Martha Nussbaum. Though not a moral sentimentalist, Nussbaum consistently advocates in her works (including those devoted to animal ethics) for the importance of emotions in ethical deliberation, but she is opposed to empathy, arguing that compassion is the better and proper moral emotion. Nussbaum is well aware that any definition of empathy expresses the “fancy of the theorist,” and in

¹¹ For some examples of this position see Gunew (2009); Pedwell (2016); Craps (2017); Lydon (2019); Eichbaum (2023). See also Keen (2007), Chap. 6.

¹² In animal ethics, T.J. Kasperbauer (2015) has adopted Prinz’s position arguing that moral anger is a better and highly motivating emotion that can be used to respond to transgressions against animals.

¹³ Prinz freely concedes this point in the following passage on concern: “Concern is a cure for heartlessness. In its social applications, it is a feeling we have for another person in need. It is the opposite of mathematical indifference. It is good to be concerned. At this point, fans of empathy might breathe a sigh of relief. They might say that I stacked the deck against empathy with my Humean definition, and real, genuine, bona fide empathy is just this thing I am now calling concern. Well, that is fine. *I do not want to get into debates about definitions.* But fans of empathy should not get too excited because even if concern is more dependable than vicarious emotions, it will not save the Humean thesis that fellow-feeling is a precondition for (dis)approbation” (2011, 230–31, emphasis added).

Upheavals of Thought, where we find her more sustained argument against it, she is careful to preface her own definition and argument with disclaimers such as “if so used,” “as I will later use it,” “so construed,” “as I have defined it” (2001, 310–11, 337). She acknowledges that sometimes psychologists and other theorists use empathy in a sense very close to compassion, but she chooses the opposite route: “I shall use ‘empathy,’” she writes, “in a way that clearly distinguishes it from ‘compassion’ [and from sympathy]: empathy is simply an imaginative reconstruction of another person’s experience, whether that experience is happy or sad, pleasant or painful or neutral, and whether the imaginer thinks the other person’s situation good, bad, or indifferent” (2001, 311). Unlike empathy, compassion entails important *cognitive* and *evaluative* elements that effectively help moral deliberation (2001, 330).

However, even if, “so construed,” empathy is “not sufficient for compassion” (“as I have defined it”)—or not even necessary (2001, 337, 339)—, Nussbaum concedes at the end that it is psychologically important *as a guide*: “Usually, without it, we are likely to remain obtuse and unresponsive, not even knowing how to make sense of the predicament we see. It is a very important tool in the service of getting a sense of what is going on with the other person, and also of establishing concern and connection” (2001, 339–40). Sometimes, that is, empathy contributes to compassion by drawing attention to another’s predicament and produces concern by inviting the judgment of similar possibilities. Hence, although fallible and morally neutral, “[i]f empathy is not clearly necessary for compassion, it is a prominent route to it” (2001, 340). This appears particularly important in the case of nonhuman animals: if compassion is here the appropriate emotion—since the imagination is too limited for a true understanding of nonhuman experience— “[i]t seems clear that we are much more likely to have appropriate compassion for the pain of animals if we are able at least to try hard to reconstruct their experience of the bad things we do to them” (2001, 342). Hence empathy plays here a very important role.

Compassion is evoked as the main and proper moral sentiment whenever Nussbaum addresses the plight of nonhuman animals, as in *Frontiers of Justice* (2006, 337–38) and *Justice for Animals* (2023), where it is complemented by “wonder” and “outrage” (called “anger” in *Frontiers of Justice*). In these works, however, empathy is no longer opposed to

compassion and becomes instead a general (and positive) term for the attempt to understand nonhuman experience. In *Justice for Animals*, empathy becomes even the condition of possibility of interspecies friendship:

For friendship to begin to be possible, however, more [than respect] is required: *empathy*, or at least a serious attempt at empathy; trying to see the world from that animal's perspective, to understand how an animal of that sort characteristically communicates and chooses, and to become attuned to the animal's way of seeing. We never attain fully accurate perspectival vision even with other humans, however close they are, and we should not expect that we would ever fully attain a view of the world from the point of view of a non-human animal. But it is crucial to try, and at times we can partially succeed. (2023, 259)

Nussbaum's trajectory shows that, underneath the many inconsistencies and contradictions of the sympathy/empathy "constellation," the basic recognition of another world of experience, in particular when the "other" is nonhuman, is the precondition for any moral and meaningful relationship. Whatever name we decide to give to this act of recognition, and however we decide to address it, we can never do without it.

SUBJECTIVITY AND UNDERSTANDING OTHER MINDS

This brief historical-semantic overview of the "constellation" of sympathy, empathy, compassion, and co. is thus not meant to delegitimize its import in ethics but rather to problematize and enrich it—and also to probe into Costello's paradigmatic provocations. And it is interesting to note that Coetzee's fictional character also later went back to and reconsidered her own positions. In 2018, 20 years after his Tanner Lectures at Princeton University, Coetzee published, only in Spanish translation,¹⁴ seven short stories under the title *Siete cuentos morales* (*Seven Moral Tales*), five of which are explicitly about Elizabeth Costello. Only four of these stories

¹⁴The reason why Coetzee decided to publish his latest works (including the 2022 novella *El polaco* [*The Pole*]) first in Spanish translation and only later in English is not entirely clear, but it is said to be his way of counteracting Anglophone cultural hegemony (see, e.g., Marshall 2022). *Siete cuentos morales* has been translated into Japanese, French, and Italian before being finally published—only partially—in English in 2023 as part of *The Pole and Other Stories*.

were later published in English as part of *The Pole and Other Stories* (2023). Many are the themes these stories touch and analyze, and of course human-animal relations are still a major question on Costello's (and Coetzee's) mind. One of the stories, "The Glass Abattoir," consists, in the Spanish version, of six sections describing a series of notes that Costello sent to her son John for safekeeping. The English translation omits section five, but it is in this section that Costello briefly comes back to the question of sympathy—here, however, under the name of empathy.¹⁵

As we know, in *The Lives of Animals* Costello argued that "[t]here are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination" and it is therefore possible to "think [one's] way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life" (1999, 35). If, as we saw in Chap. 1, this cannot be said to be the author's position when faced with "the challenge of otherness," his fictional character nonetheless never revised her thesis. In the Spanish version of "The Glass Abattoir," Costello goes back to her old position: "I thought I had access to the interiority of the wolf and the lobster and all the rest of the animal world [...] thanks to the faculty of empathy [*sic!*] which, in my very unscientific opinion, is innate in us. We are born with this faculty – which I'd classify as a faculty of the soul, not of the mind – and we can choose to cultivate it or let it go rotten" (Coetzee 2018, 80). But then, she says, she discovered the work of American historian of science Lorraine Daston, who made her doubt her convictions. Costello does not state which of Daston's works she refers to, but it is most likely the 2005 essay "Intelligences: Angelic, Animal, Human," in which Daston historicizes the notion of empathy—or, better, of "change of perspective," "to put oneself in another's place"—claiming that it is not something innate or universal but belongs to our Western modernity, obsessed as it is with "the apotheosis of subjectivity as the essence of mind" (Daston 2005, 53). Faced with this thesis, Costello avows:

What is Daston's lesson for me in particular? She teaches me that, when I unquestioningly presume that I can understand the animal mind through the power of empathy, the fellow feeling, I prove that I am a creature of this epoch, who was born when the paradigm of the change of perspective ruled, and I am too ignorant to free myself from it. A lesson in modesty, if I decide to accept it. (Coetzee 2018, 82)

¹⁵ In this analysis, I will use my own translation from Spanish of this unpublished section—which is not however Coetzee's original version.

As usual, Costello does not propose an analysis of ideas or concepts but merely throws them at the reader as provocations. Here she seems to reconsider her main thesis and says something like: “The idea of the unboundedness of the sympathetic imagination was an arrogant overstatement. As any other idea, also the belief in the power of empathy is the fruit of the times, and although, as a creature of my times, I cannot free myself from it, I should acknowledge in modesty that it is no universal feature of the human mind.”

The context of Daston’s analysis is actually anthropomorphism, which, though coined, as a term, already in Ancient Greece (see Chap. 8) and also present in Middle Ages cosmologies, took on a completely new meaning in modernity with the “invention” of subjectivity and the consequent idea, in science, that “the problem of studying nonhuman minds is the same as the problem of experiencing nonhuman subjectivities” (Daston 2005, 40). It is only in these terms, Daston argues, that the idea could arise that to know how a nonhuman animal thinks is to “imagine its consciousness, as a novelist might imagine the interior life of a character” (2005, 40). And this was precisely the core of Costello’s argument in *The Lives of Animals*: “If [as an author of fiction] I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed,” she said, “then I can think my way into the existence of [...] any being with whom I share the substrate of life” (Coetzee 1999, 35). But the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity on which these ideas are based,¹⁶ Daston argues, is central only to modern ways of thinking and was unthinkable in other times: “there is a profound difference between modes of understanding nonhuman minds before and after the emergence of the modern objectivity/subjectivity distinction” (Daston 2005, 41; cf. also Daston 1992). The “*cult of sympathy*, which expanded to embrace first children, then animals, and finally denizens of other times and places,” is also a product of this paradigm shift (Daston 2005, 53, emphasis added).

These are very intellectualized notions of sympathy and empathy as exercises in “perspective change” that mostly involve subjectivity as “mind” and the challenge of otherness as “studying nonhuman *minds*” (after all, Daston’s research area is the history of science)—and in this sense they are certainly very anthropomorphic (and anthropocentric). Other fields and other disciplines, as we have briefly seen, use different

¹⁶And this is a central feature for Costello, as she says in fact in *The Lives of Animals*: “Sympathy has everything to do with the subject and little to do with the object” (1999, 35).

concepts of empathy, much less tuned on the “mind” and rather focused, as de Waal, for example, emphasized, on much more basic and simpler bodily responses. The work of Frans de Waal, Marc Beckoff, and many other ethologists convincingly shows that empathy (*as they are understanding it*) not only is an innate and universal “faculty” but can easily be explained and justified in evolutionary and adaptive terms. Again, it is all a matter of stipulation.

At the turn of the twentieth century, a philosophical school attempted to study the structures of experience and consciousness beyond the dichotomy of objectivity and subjectivity historically described by Daston and in a way that engages instead the whole bodymind. This school, phenomenology, took empathy as a basic structure of human intersubjectivity and declined it in a very innovative fashion, which strongly marked the meaning and history of the concept. It is to this peculiar interpretation (which is also of course a matter of stipulation) that we now turn.

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Feeling One's Way in an Intersubjective World: Phenomenology of Empathy

Although embracing a general form of moral sentimentalism, Elizabeth Costello sets the terms of her opposition to Thomas Nagel around the expression “*thinking* one’s way into someone else” (Coetzee 1999, 32–34), whereby “thinking”—*logos*—, despite all her disparaging of reason, remains the vehicle of access to the other. A great part of the debate on sympathy and empathy, however, was fueled in the early twentieth century—and is again fueled today in the early twenty-first century—by the work of the phenomenologists, for whom empathy (or, for some, sympathy) is not primarily a question of *thinking* but instead of directly and immediately experiencing another as an embodied subject without and before any complex and reflective inference. This bypassing of *thinking* and rationality, as we have already seen, results very appealing to some trends in animal ethics insofar as it allows to dispense with the lingering anthropocentrism of Western logocentrism (including in animal ethics), and Costello, too, points in this direction with her emphasis on embodiment and her consequent opposing poetry to philosophy, as we have seen in Chaps. 2 and 3.

The opening to nonhuman subjectivities is only briefly and marginally (if ever) addressed in the work of the classic phenomenologists, and certainly not from an ethical perspective. But this is also an interesting and important point: the phenomenological approach to empathy/sympathy is pre-ethical, it addresses a dimension of existence and experience that is

more fundamental, more existential, and goes deeper than any ethical standing. The phenomenologists untied the discourse of empathy/sympathy from the theorizations of moral sentimentalism and took it to a deeper, ontological level, scrambling the terms of the debate. This does not mean that a phenomenological approach to empathy/sympathy has no ethical import; to the contrary, and especially for animal ethics, the phenomenology of empathy shows that the other (including—at least certain—animal others) is always already experienced as an embodied subject, and that every subject is always co-determined and co-defined by other subjectivities (including animal ones); and that is why phenomenology has become an interesting route to rethink and develop human-animal relations (e.g., Painter and Lotz 2007).

As in the rest of the debate on empathy/sympathy, however, and despite the recent attempt to propose a “unitary” phenomenological approach by scholars such as Dan Zahavi and Shaun Gallagher (to whom I will come back in due course), there is not one single and consistent phenomenological approach to empathy/sympathy but a number of different and sometimes contrasting positions (which also at times use a confusing terminology; cf. Moran 2004, 271–72). Zahavi, Gallagher, and others have been quite successful in putting forward a consistent phenomenological theory of empathy under the label of Direct Perception Theory as a synthesis of the classical approaches of Edmund Husserl, Edith Stein, and Max Scheler, to be opposed both to the Theory Theory and the Simulation Theory of the late twentieth century and also to the Imitation Theory of Theodor Lipps from the end of the nineteenth century. However, as Ingrid Vendrell-Ferran argues (2023), there existed other phenomenological positions (e.g., in the Munich Circle) working on imagination rather than perception in empathy, and thus closer to Lipps’ position and to Simulation Theory than to the contemporary Direct Perception Theory. Moreover, the classic phenomenologists were well aware that empathy and sympathy designate not a single phenomenon but a constellation of interrelated and many-layered activities beyond any possible synthesis (Moran 2004, 272).

Finally, it must also be noted, as Laura Boella points out (2018, 94–95), that the phenomenological approach(es) to empathy does not offer an “accomplished theory” but is instead a “broken path.” If, as Zahavi writes (2014, 123–25; cf. Magri and McQueen 2022, 231n2), Husserl kept meditating on empathy until his death, his reflections remain nonetheless

an incomplete and unfinished project, and in the case of the other classic phenomenologists the focus on empathy was abandoned much sooner: after her conversion to Catholicism, Stein embraced Christian philosophy and devoted her efforts to the thought of community; Scheler's untimely death cut short any possible development of his theory of sympathy; and even Heidegger did not expand his dismissive and brief comments on empathy after the late 1920s. The powerful synthesis proposed today by Zahavi, Gallagher and others indisputably contributed to revitalizing the empathy/sympathy debate and the phenomenological approach, but it must be considered a different path that, moreover, also points to its self-sublation, as I will show.

This chapter will briefly explore the "classic" phenomenological approaches to (but also critiques of) empathy/sympathy with a special focus on nonhuman otherness and on how more recent scholarship has developed these (still very anthropocentric) positions toward an inclusive, trans-specific understanding that tries to replace the "*thinking* one's way into another" with a more existential and ontological "*feeling* one's way in an intersubjective, multispecies world."

QUASI-PERCEPTION AND NORMALITY (HUSSERL)

The phenomenological reflection on empathy on the part of the "classic" phenomenologists (Husserl, Stein, Scheler) begins as a critique of the so-called Imitation Theory proposed by Theodor Lipps. Lipps' pioneering investigations and his influence on the phenomenological school must certainly be emphasized, but from a phenomenological point of view his basing empathy on one's inner experience, where the mind mirrors the mental activities or experiences of another person using one's own internal movements (e.g., Lipps 1979), ultimately closes the subject onto itself. The first step of a phenomenology of empathy is therefore the rejection of the "putting oneself in another's shoes" position (or what Costello calls "thinking one's way into someone else"). Instead, phenomenology regards empathy as the basic experience of intersubjective life.

Husserl established early on the basic terms of the phenomenological understanding of empathy: already in the first volume of his *Ideas*, originally published in 1913, he posited empathy as what "mediates" the experience of the intersubjective world (1982, 363), and in the second volume he called empathy a "quasi-perception" (*Quasi-Wahrnehmung*; 1989,

274).¹ What empathy names is in fact the experience of another subjectivity (*Fremderfahrung*) as a direct, intuitive, embodied, and pre-reflective perception of the other (*Fremdwahrnehmung*), which needs no conceptualization or mentalization (conceptualization and mentalization can and do of course constitute further and later stages in the comprehension of the other) (Moran 2022, 24, 25). Empathy shares with perception the directness and the sense of immediate presence of the object—I see you smile and I recognize you are happy—but it lacks the full contours of external perception, since the other’s state—your happiness—is not experienced in the first person. Husserl expresses this difference by saying that the other’s state as perceived in empathy is “non-originary” (1982, 6), that is, another’s experience cannot be grasped “from the inside,” as it were: “my lived experiences are given to me directly, i.e., the lived experiences in their own content. But others’ lived experiences can be experienced by me only mediately, in empathy” (1989, 210).

In this sense, empathy preserves the difference between self and other: it is not identification (*Einsfühlung*, “feeling-one with”) but the apprehension of another that simultaneously constructs one’s self-awareness. The other is thereby immediately experienced as a “subject of his surrounding world [...] a center of intentionality” (Husserl 1989, 383). And it is by grasping different perspectives on the world, different “centers of intentionality,” that the subject gains, intersubjectively, a sense of the world in itself. In turn, the intersubjective world—the life-world (*Lebenswelt*)—provides the horizon (a “horizon of intentionality”) for the subject’s experiences in a social, cultural, historical, interpersonal context. The empathic experience of the other is therefore always contextual, situated, and framed by a horizon of meaning. This is what Husserl calls the “nexus of empathy” (*Einfühlungszusammenhang*), whereby the world is intersubjectively constructed and supported by the different perspectives of its subjects and in turn it permeates and informs the individual “styles” of each subjectivity (Husserl 1989, 398; cf. Moran 2022, 32–40).

Husserl, nonetheless, adopts a transcendental perspective that, within this intersubjective nexus of empathy, upholds a notion of “normality”

¹The full title of Husserl’s book, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, is usually abbreviated to *Ideas*. The first volume, *General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, was published in 1913, but Husserl kept revising the second and third volumes, *Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution* and *Phenomenology and the Foundations of the Sciences*, for more than 20 years without ever deciding himself to submit them to publication. They were posthumously published in 1952.

and “normal empathic relation” structuring the empathic experience of the world. There exists for Husserl a transcendental norm (*Urnorm*), an originary human type (*Urtypus Mensch*; an adult, “normal” human—probably male, European, heterosexual, certainly non-disabled) that allows the (normal!) subject to understand otherness (Husserl 1973a, 126; Ciocan 2017, 184). It is this “intersubjective normality” that constitutes the common world. In the words of Cristian Ciocan: “We have a common world precisely by the fact that we perceive the same things in the same way. We also have a mutual understanding starting from our similar bodily achievements, which are concordant and confirm each other” (2017, 179). With respect to this *Urtypus*, some forms of embodiment and of empathic apprehension necessarily end up being considered as “abnormal,” notably the newborn baby and the insane person, but of course also nonhuman animals. The nonhuman other also partakes in the intersubjective life-world, but in the form of abnormality.

The empathic intersubjectivity with the nonhuman animal is therefore marked by a tension between understanding and non-understanding, between comprehension and “a fog of incomprehension [*Nebel des Nichtverstehens*]” (Husserl 1973b, 622; Ciocan 2017, 182). The somatological correspondences of the “normal” body with that of nonhuman animals allow the subject to immediately understand—or, rather, to empathically *feel*—the “abnormal” corporeality of the other: “[a]lways I operate with some transcendental modifications in order to assign specific meanings to the body parts of the animal or to its embodiment as a whole” (Ciocan 2017, 184). But these correspondences are only partial, hence these modifications can be designated as an abnormality: “by the fact that the body schema of the animal is different from my own body schema, the relation to the animal becomes a relation with an abnormality” (2017, 184). Ciocan insists that, first, every species present a species-specific perceptual normality, so that there is no absolute normality (e.g., the human) but only specific normalities (and abnormalities) (2017, 184); and, second, that abnormality must be understood strictly as a technical term, that is, in a non-moral, purely phenomenological sense, just like the notion of “poverty in world” with which Heidegger characterizes animality (more on this later) (2017, 176). However, from the observation that “the bodily typicality of my normality imposes a standard that I cannot avoid” Ciocan ends up embracing the defeatist position (*à la* Nagel) that anthropocentrism is inevitable and unsurpassable—*insofar as it is “normal”*

(2017, 189). Other, more courageous approaches have attempted to *develop* Husserlian phenomenology toward a wider interspecies understanding (e.g., Hart 1999; di Martino 2014; Painter 2007), but in order to do so they have to bypass or dispense with his focus on normality.²

NON-PRIMORDIAL EXPERIENCE AND SUI GENERIS PERCEPTION (STEIN)

Edith Stein developed and re-focused Husserl's take on empathy. As Husserl's student and then assistant in Göttingen and Freiburg, Stein not only attended the master's lectures but also transcribed and edited some of his research manuscripts, including the writings that will become the second volume of *Ideas*, and had therefore a privileged access to the early development of the phenomenology of empathy. Her doctoral thesis, *On the Problem of Empathy*, defended in 1916 and published in 1917, constitutes however an original contribution that goes beyond a mere organization and systematization of Husserl's ideas. Combining Husserl's insights with the coeval elaborations of Scheler (see next section), Stein basically reset the question of empathy around the intertwining of perceptive-emotive and cognitive activities (Boella 2018, 98; Szanto and Moran 2020).

Like Husserl, Stein begins with a critique of those approaches that articulate empathy around theories of association, analogy, and imitation, and in particular of Lipp's Imitation Theory. Refining Husserl's critique, Stein argues that the problem of these theories is that they are based on projective mechanisms and as such are unable to account for, and ultimately erase, the "otherness" of the other. Lipps had contended in fact that empathy involves a "dissolution" of the self-other distinction in virtue of a real identification or unity with the object, as exemplified by the spectator watching an acrobat on a highwire (see Chap. 4). "This assertion," Stein argues, "is not only refuted by its consequences, but is also an evidently false description. I am not one with the acrobat but only 'at' [*bei*] him. I do not actually go through his motions but *quasi*. [...] I do not outwardly go through his motions. But neither is what 'inwardly' corresponds to the movements of the body, the experience that 'I move,' primordial; it is non-primordial for me" (1989, 16). This is the main point for Stein: the empathic experience is "primordial as present experience

²On the unsurpassable problems with the concept of normality, see Chap. 3.

though non-primordial in content” (189, 10). That is, through empathy we *primordially* experience another consciousness (i.e., this experience is our own experience) but are not one with it: “while I am living in the other’s joy, I do not feel primordial joy” (1989, 11).³

Empathy as “the experience of foreign consciousness” is therefore defined as “the non-primordial experience which announces a primordial one” (1989, 14). This experience is a form of perception of another as an experiencing subject: “empathy is a kind of act of perceiving [*eine Art erfahrender Akte*] sui generis”; it is “the experience of foreign consciousness in general” (1989, 11).⁴ The central point of the empathic experience, therefore, is not much the *content* of another’s consciousness but rather the very existence of another’s consciousness: “not our awareness of *what* the other is experiencing but rather *that* she is experiencing and that she is her own, particular being” (Aaltola 2018, 115–16). Empathy is not, thus, an epistemological tool but a distinctive “intentional experience” whereby another’s consciousness is directly given to us *as other*. This way, empathy always preserves the self-other differentiation and involves a clear awareness of this distinction on the part of the empathizer. The other, moreover, is always given as a lived body (*Leib*), as the “visible field of always already *expressive* phenomena” (Szanto and Moran 2020). The non-primordially of the content of the empathic experience is, for Stein, what differentiates empathy not only from the “feeling-one with” (*Einsfühlung*) but also from sympathy, which she sees as a sort of passive emotional identification with another’s psychic states (Painter 2007, 104).

Stein basically embraces Husserl’s transcendental stance, but never overemphasizes the question of “normality.” In fact, many of her formulations lend themselves to non-anthropocentric openings, as when she writes that empathy “is the experience of foreign consciousness in general, *irrespective of the kind [or species?] of the experiencing subject or of the subject whose consciousness is experienced*” (1989, 11, emphasis added). She explicitly addresses the question of nonhuman otherness in the following passage:

³In this differentiation, Stein uses the same terms that Husserl used, *originär* and *nicht-originär*, but in her case the English translator chose to render them as “primordial” and “non-primordial.”

⁴When related to empathy, the translator chose to render *Erfahrung* (experience) mostly as “perception.” To “experience” a foreign subjectivity means in fact to “perceive” it as such.

Should I perhaps consider a dog's paw in comparison with my hand, I do not have a mere physical body, either, but a sensitive limb of a living body. And here a degree of projection is possible, too. For example, I may sense-in pain when the animal is injured. But other things, such as certain positions and movements, are given to me only as empty presentations without the possibility of fulfillment. And the further I deviate from the type "human being" the smaller does the number of possibilities of fulfillment become. (1989, 59)

While appreciating the foreignness that characterizes the empathic experience with a nonhuman body (the more foreign the more they deviate from the human "type"), Stein also acknowledges the meaningfulness of empathizing with all living bodies, whose emotional manifestations are experienced regardless of their species (Aaltola 2018, 111–12).⁵ That is why Corinne Painter (2007) could easily "appropriate" and develop Stein's (and Husserl's) theory of empathy for the project of an interspecies ethics. It is indeed the fact that empathy does not require coincidence, identification, or even fellow-feeling with a foreign consciousness that creates the space for accessing a nonhuman consciousness: we do not need to become coincident with the animal, or "feel" primordially what the animal feels (or "what is it like" to be her, *à la* Nagel), to be able to access their psychic life and acknowledge that they are led by their own separate psychic stream of consciousness. And this recognition provides the basis for an ethic that extends beyond species boundaries (Painter 2007, 109–10).

SYMPATHY AND UNIVERSAL GRAMMAR (SCHELER)

An important influence on Stein's dissertation was Scheler's *The Nature of Sympathy*, published in 1913 (the same year of the publication of Husserl's *Ideas I*, the other major influence). Stein discusses at length Scheler's theory of other minds (part III of Scheler's book; cf. Stein 1989, 27–35) and of the phenomena of life (1989, 68–75), but refuses to go into his polemic against empathy, because, she writes, "it is not directed against what we call empathy" (1989, 27).⁶ In turn, when reworking his book for a

⁵ Stein in fact goes so far as to postulate the possibility of empathizing with plants: "Empathic fulfillment is also possible here" (1989, 69).

⁶ Even though Husserl had assigned her the task of a historical reconstruction, Stein explicitly declares that she will call empathy the phenomenological experience and understanding of other consciousnesses, "regardless of all historical traditions attached to the word" (Stein 1989, 6; cf. Boella 2018, 70).

second, corrected and expanded edition in 1923, Scheler will mention Stein only in two footnotes and for her criticism of Lipps' image of the acrobat (2008, 18), but he will not discuss her take on empathy. What Scheler calls empathy, in fact, is basically Lipps' Imitation Theory, and the terms of his critique are very similar to Stein's own critique of Lipps.

Scheler is actually quite appreciative of Lipps' groundbreaking work and of his critique of analogical models for the understanding of foreign consciousness (cf. Debes 2015, 312; Magrì and McQueen 2022, 87), but forcefully opposes all theories (which he collects under the label of "empathy") that base this understanding on the self of the empathizer: imitation, inference, projection, etc., are a "self-regarding emotional reaction" (Scheler 2008, 40) that ultimately erases the otherness and the individuality of the other. "[T]he theory of empathy," he writes, "offers no grounds for assuming the existence of other selves, let alone other individuals. For it can only serve to confirm the belief that it is *my* self which is present 'all over again', and never that this self is other and different from my own" (2008, 242). Moreover, he also argues that all these theories "have an inveterate tendency to under-estimate the difficulty of self-knowledge, just as they over-estimate the difficulty of knowing other people" (2008, 251).

Scheler opts instead for the term "sympathy," but with a lack of terminological and conceptual clarity that emphasizes indeed the complexity of these phenomena but can also lead to confusion and misunderstanding. Like Vischer and Lipps, Scheler uses a number of different terms (from *Nachgefühl* to *Miteinanderfühlen*, from *cosmovitale Einfühlung* to *Gefühlsansteckung*) to denote and emphasize the nuances of the empathetic and sympathetic experiences, which compelled the English translator to preface the book with an explanatory list of terms (Scheler 2008, liii–liv). Moreover, Scheler uses both *Sympathie* and *Mitgefühl* (the former translated as "sympathy" and the latter as "fellow feeling") in order to adopt a critical perspective on traditional moral sentimentalism: he generally uses the Latinate term, *Sympathie*, to denote (and criticize) the history of moral sentimentalism and the Germanic term, *Mitgefühl*, for his own phenomenological understanding (Boella 2018, 72–73; cf. Dillard-Wright 2007, 3; Moran 2022, 28). His starting point is in fact a critique of Hume and Smith for their positing sympathy at the foundation of morality: sympathy on its own is not capable of supporting moral emotions, which need to be recognized in advance, before sympathizing with them. Scheler writes indeed at the very beginning of his book: "It is certainly not moral to sympathize with

someone's pleasure in evil, his chagrin in contemplating goodness, or with his hatred, malice or spite" (2008, 5; cf. Moran 2004, 285).

Sympathy, for Scheler (and for the phenomenological understanding in general) denotes instead the affective-cognitive grasping and understanding of another's experiences. Importantly, again, this understanding does not collapse the differences between sympathizer and sympathized (as in empathy—but not in Stein's understanding of it, which on this point is very similar to Scheler's sympathy): "in fellow-feeling proper, the 'distance' of the persons and their respective and reciprocal awareness of separateness is kept in mind throughout. [...] fellow-feeling is not infection, nor identification. [...] the phenomenon itself includes an awareness of difference among its separate sources in two, three or x individual selves" (2008, 64). Sympathy presupposes a "pure essential difference" between people (2008, 65) and even a certain level of insurmountable opacity: the other remains distinct from the self and even, to a certain extent, inaccessible. And this realization inherently marks all sympathetic experiences: "The realization that as finite beings we can never see right into one another's hearts, that we cannot even have full and adequate knowledge of our own hearts, let alone other peoples', is given as an essential feature in all experience of fellow-feeling" (2008, 66; cf. Aaltola 2018, 121–22). Even love, to the analysis of which Scheler devotes the second part of the book, is marked by this unbridgeable gulf between individual perspectives, but this is indicative of the structure of sympathy: what we love in love is ultimately *the otherness of the other*, and it is this fundamental openness to diversity that Scheler calls sympathy (Moran 2022, 33; Aaltola 2018, 122; Dillard-Wright 2007, 3, 5).

Paradoxically, it is precisely *because* of this unbridgeable distance from the other that Scheler's theory of sympathy can easily embrace the nonhuman. Much more directly and explicitly than the other classic phenomenologists, Scheler opens his phenomenology of sympathy to nonhuman animals and to nature more in general. Sympathy with animals is in fact evidence against any Imitation Theory:

Further evidence against Lipps' theory of imitation lies in the fact that we can understand the experience of animals, though even in "tendency" we cannot imitate their manner of expression; for instance when a dog expresses its joy by barking and wagging its tail, or a bird by twittering. The relationships between expression and experience have a *fundamental* basis of connection, which is independent of our specifically human gestures of expression. (2008, 11)

Scheler is well aware of (or perhaps overcautious with regards to [Dillard-Wright 2007, 4; Aaltola 2018, 127n3]) the difficulties of extending sympathy over the species barrier:

The varieties of sensory pleasure and pain in animals are also largely alien to us, and fellow-feeling is no longer operative in such cases. Nevertheless, so far as the various modes of vital feeling are concerned, *understanding and fellow-feeling are able to range throughout the entire animate universe*, even though they rapidly fall off in respect of specific qualities as we descend the organic scale. The mortal terror of a bird, its sprightly or dispirited moods, are intelligible to us and awaken our fellow-feeling, despite our total inability to penetrate those of its sensory feelings which depend on its particular sensory organization. (2008, 48, emphasis added)

For Scheler, it is not only that we (sympathetically, pre-reflexively) cannot doubt animals' mind or consciousness—"there can be no doubt that we also assume the presence of mind in creatures whose expressive movements (and 'actions') have no resemblance to our human ones (e.g. in birds, fish and so on)" (2008, 240)—but that we do not need to know "what it is like" to be another animal in order to sympathize with them: we can understand gestures that we cannot ourselves perform or affective states that do not directly resemble our own (Moran 2004, 282). Sympathy embraces the other not only *despite* differences, but also *in appreciation of* and *in respect for* them (Dillard-Wright 2007, 7).⁷

And this embrace enfolds the whole nature: Scheler rejects both the mechanistic-scientific view of nature as "an enemy to be overcome" and the "'empathic' projection of specifically human emotions into animals, plants, or inanimate objects" that he calls "sheer anthropomorphism." He calls instead the human being "*cosmomorphic* and as such the possessor of sources of *insight* into all that is comprised in the nature of the cosmos" (2008, 105).⁸ There exist in fact, for Scheler, "a *universal grammar*, valid

⁷ Scheler also cursorily comments on sympathy in other creatures: citing Wolfgang Köhler's *The Mentality of Apes*, he mentions that, if a human in the presence of apes freezes and appears to look in a certain direction with terror, then the other apes will also look apprehensively in the same direction (Scheler 2008, 238–39). I will come back on Köhler's book and Costello's reading of it in Chap. 7.

⁸ Sources of Scheler's attitude toward nature are both Francis of Assisi from his catholic phase and the German romantics from his post-1922 pantheistic phase. From a line in Goethe's *Faust* Scheler derives the motto that "we must learn once more 'to look upon Nature as into the heart of a friend'" (2008, 105).

for all languages of expression, and the ultimate basis of understanding for all forms of mime and pantomime among living creatures” (2008, 11). Unlike Husserl and his emphasis on a human-centered “normality” through which we filter our empathic approach to otherness, Scheler sees sympathy as a universal avenue of approach to the other which, if, as Josephine Donovan argues (2014, 109–10, 2022, 16), ultimately remains logocentric insofar as it is connoted as “grammar” (and hence implicitly/intuitively verbal, symbolic), it allows for an understanding that overcomes the species barrier.

And yet, this structural openness and universality does not prevent Scheler to fall back into a quite traditional anthropocentrism. In *The Nature of Sympathy*, this emerges only in very few passages, as when he comments in a footnote that animal love, as presented as evident in Wolfgang Köhler’s *The Mentality of Apes*, depends on instincts and has nothing to do with human (i.e., “true”) love (Scheler 2008, 187n1), or when he repeats the trite commonplace of reason as what divides humans from the beasts (2008, 223). It is however in *The Human Place in the Cosmos*, the extended, reworked version of a conference he held in 1927 and was published in 1928, the year of his untimely death, where Scheler constructs his philosophical anthropology upon the difference between humans and nonhumans—in a way that sounds very much like Heidegger.⁹ In a nutshell: Scheler argues that only humans, through a unique “spirit” that is able to negate the existent and say “no” to life, are “world-open” and have a “world,” whereas nonhuman animals are world-less insofar as they are inevitably immersed in their immutable environment (Scheler 2009, 28). Against anthropocentrism, sympathy, even when universal, is not enough.

EMPATHY AND THEORY OF MIND (ZAHAVI AND GALLAGHER)

The scattered, unsystematic and at times conflicting reflections on empathy/sympathy by the classic phenomenologists did not flow into a unitary theory and were progressively put aside—by their proponents

⁹ *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, the lecture course in which Heidegger forcefully presents his view of nonhuman animals as fundamentally—“essentially”—different from humans, was given just one year later, in the Winter semester of 1929–1930. Heidegger was generally very appreciative of Scheler and at the latter’s death he remarked that Scheler was the most important force in philosophy at the time.

themselves. And when the debate on empathy regained momentum at the end of the twentieth century (the second “golden age” of empathy; Pinotti 2014, 140) there was no mention of the phenomenological approach. In fact, the phenomenology of empathy was actually revived in opposition to the two main theories of empathy that held sway over the last two decades of the twentieth century and were centered on the theory of mind: the so-called Theory Theory and the Simulation Theory.

The concept of Theory Theory was coined by Adam Morton in 1980 and basically argues that we infer another’s mental life by attributing to her certain beliefs and desires on the basis of a folk-psychological “theory of mind.” The Theory Theory rests therefore on a form of analogical reasoning and on the premise of a fundamental uniformity of mental states. Simulation Theory was initially proposed instead by Robert Gordon (1986, 1995) and states that we model, and therefore simulate and predict, another’s mental life on our own: we create working models that we then project on another’s mind, that is, we imaginatively “put ourselves” in the other’s shoes. Most theorists working on these issues adopt today a hybrid model of mindreading, combining elements of the Theory Theory and Simulation Theory (de Bruin et al., 2014, 173), but all these models rely on the general assumption that other minds are not directly observable (cf. Zahavi 2008; Szanto and Moran 2020). It is against this assumption that the Direct Perception Theory was developed.

The main proponents of this revival of the phenomenological approach to empathy, Dan Zahavi and Shaun Gallagher, performed a complex operation consisting not only in unifying the different perspectives of the classic phenomenologists and smoothing out their differences, but also in putting phenomenology in dialogue with the cognitive sciences and the philosophy of mind (cf. e.g., Zahavi 2010; Gallagher 2017; Gallagher and Zahavi 2008). Moreover, they also necessarily downplayed the doubts and hesitation that lead Husserl, Stein, and Scheler to abandon in the end their reflections on empathy/sympathy (Boella 2018, 87). If all classic phenomenologists insisted on the perceptual nature of empathy/sympathy and on the immediacy of the apprehension of the other, the label “Direct Perception” comes probably from Scheler, who explicitly used these terms and insisted that “everyone can apprehend the experience of his fellowmen *just as directly* (or *indirectly*) as he can his own” (Scheler 2008, 256; cf. Boella 2018, 98). Just like Husserl, Stein, and Scheler with Lipps’ Imitation Theory, the Direct Perception Theory accuses both Theory Theory and Simulation Theory of erasing the otherness of the other and

argues instead that another's mental and bodily states are immediately and directly experienced in a pre-reflexive, empathic apprehension, which constitutes a legitimate form of knowledge. The other is experienced thereby as other, and therefore there is no projection, simulation, or attribution of emotions, thoughts, and desires: empathy confronts the subject with the embodied presence of another subject who feels, thinks, and acts and inhabits the same world.

The ambitious project of establishing a dialogue between continental philosophy and analytic philosophy and of informing the phenomenological approach with the tools and advances of the cognitive sciences and the philosophy of mind risks, however, to emphasize the *mental* and *cognitive* dimensions at the expense of the bodily and emotional ones. This is not, of course, the explicit intention of the proponents of the Direct Perception Theory but a risk that this kind of project takes insofar as, to some extent, it calibrates the experience of another on the theory of mind. A byproduct of such an approach is that the question of nonhuman otherness fades into the background.¹⁰ If nothing explicitly excludes the reflection on nonhuman others in the Direct Perception Theory, it is not explicitly addressed and contemporary scholars working in this direction, as we have seen, go rather back to the classic phenomenologists.

There are however also other issues at stake that problematize this revival of the phenomenology of empathy and that have been addressed in different ways. Critical phenomenology (Magrì and McQueen 2022), for example, is the project of radicalizing classical phenomenology by interrogating the social and cultural structures that are co-perceived in everyday experience and constitute therefore the conditions of possibility of the empathic experience. But Zahavi himself problematized early on the emphasis on empathy in the phenomenological approach to intersubjectivity. In an article tellingly titled "Beyond Empathy," he begins by stating that, in his view, the most interesting phenomenological analyses of intersubjectivity are those trying to go *beyond empathy*.

Not because they deny the existence of empathy or the validity of the criticism of the argument from analogy, but because empathy understood as a *thematic encounter with a concrete other* is either taken to be a derived rather than a fundamental form of intersubjectivity – because it is taken to disclose

¹⁰The presence of a theory of mind in nonhuman animals is still debated. Cf. e.g., Krupenye and Call (2019).

rather than establish intersubjectivity – or because there are aspects of the problem of intersubjectivity which simply cannot be addressed as long as one remains narrowly focussed on empathy. (2001, 153–54)

Zahavi turns therefore to Heidegger (among others) because the latter posits our being-in-the-world as always already determined by a being-with the other, whereby the very condition of possibility of any experience is the social world. The problem with empathy, for Zahavi, is that “it does misconstrue the nature of intersubjectivity, since it takes it to be first and foremost a thematic exchange between two individuals, where one is trying to grasp the emotions or experiences of the other,” and thus “an investigation of intersubjectivity that takes empathy as its point of departure and constant point of reference is bound to lead us astray” (2001, 155). A final look at Heidegger’s critique of empathy will allow to wrap up this brief overview of the phenomenology of empathy but also to show its dogmatic anthropocentric limits.

EMPATHY AND BEING-WITH (HEIDEGGER)

Heidegger’s position on empathy and intersubjectivity is decidedly eccentric with respect to those of the other classic phenomenologists, not only because he rejected the traditional terms of the question, but also, and most importantly, because he adopted an idiosyncratic terminology that created a separate, excluding and self-referential vocabulary: he did not speak of subject, intersubjectivity, consciousness and social dimensions but instead of *Dasein*, *In-der-Welt-Sein*, *Mitsein*, *Fürsorge*, etc. (Ferencz-Flatz 2015, 480). To the question of empathy Heidegger devoted only few dismissing remarks, always distancing himself from the very term by putting it into quotation marks, and he is therefore not one of the major references in the contemporary debate.¹¹ Since empathy was not only a fashionable term at the time but also one of the central issues discussed in the phenomenological circles in which he moved and taught, Heidegger did devote some remarks to it in his lecture courses of the early 1920s (e.g., *Basic Problems of Phenomenology* [1919/1920]; *The Phenomenology*

¹¹ Some scholars have tried to “develop” Heidegger’s insights along the lines of the contemporary debate on empathy, focusing not on his dismissing remarks but on his intersubjective ontology. Cf. e.g., Hatab (2002), and especially Agosta (2010, 2011, 2014).

of *Religious Life* [1920/1921]; and *History of the Concept of Time* [1925]) (Ferencz-Flatz 2015, 479). It is however in *Being and Time* where he proposed his clear critique.

At the end of § 26 of *Being and Time*, devoted to “The *Mitda-sein* of the Other and Everyday Being-With,” Heidegger writes that “[t]his phenomenon, which is none too happily designated as ‘empathy’, is then supposed, as it were, to provide the first ontological bridge from one’s own subject, initially given by itself, to the other subject, which is initially quite inaccessible” (Heidegger 1996, 117). The problem, for Heidegger, is that this notion of empathy presupposes isolated and solitary subjects that are then “bridged” by the empathic process. This notion of empathy resembles more Lipp’s position than that of the other phenomenologists, and it is in fact as a “projection” that empathy is defined a few lines later: “The relation of being to others then becomes a projection of one’s own being toward oneself ‘into an other’. The other is a double of the self” (1996, 117). This “dualistic” understanding of empathy is misleading, Heidegger argues, because the being-with (*Mitsein*) is ontologically constitutive of the being of the Dasein and thus there is no need for a bridge or even less for a projection between isolated subjects. The Dasein is ecstatically open, embedded in the world, and grounded in the ontological structure of *Mitsein*. The primordial phenomenon is the *Mitsein* and empathy can only emerge as secondary to and derivative from it: “‘Empathy’ does not first constitute being-with, but is first possible on its basis, and is motivated by the prevailing modes of being-with in their inevitability” (1996, 117). Being-with-one-another (*Miteinandersein*, which is the Heideggerian equivalent of intersubjectivity) is the primordial condition of Dasein’s being-in-the-world and both precedes and supports any experience of otherness (cf. Hatab 2002; Ferencz-Flatz 2015; Brencio 2022).

A couple of years later, in § 49 of the 1929/1930 lecture course on *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, Heidegger reframes the question of empathy as the “possibility of man’s transposing himself into another being that he himself is not” (1995, 202). In this self-transposition (*Sichversetzen*)

the other being is precisely supposed to remain *what* it is and *how* it is. Transposing oneself into this being means going along with what it is and with how it is. Such going-along-with [*Mitgehen*] means directly learning how it is with this being, discovering what it is like to be this being *with* which we are going along *in this way*. (1995, 202)

This self-transposition does not mean putting oneself in the place of the other being and displacing it in the process but merely acting “as if” we were the other being. This conception is wrong, Heidegger argues, because it is only by remaining ourselves that we can be able to “go along with the other being while remaining other with respect to it” (1995, 203). And then he adds:

The same is true of the term “empathy” which suggests that we must first “feel our way into” the other being in order to reach it. And this implies that we are “outside” in the first place. The term “empathy” has provided a guiding thread for a whole range of fundamentally mistaken theories concerning man’s relationship to other human beings and to other beings in general, theories that we are only gradually beginning to overcome today. (1995, 203)

Although rejecting this terminology and the very terms in which the question is posed, Heidegger allows that “it is possible, accordingly, to go along [*Mitgang*] with others in their access [*Zugang*] to things and in their dealings [*Umgang*] with those things. This is a *fundamental feature* of man’s own immediate experience of existence” (1995, 205). This is another way of expressing the foundational dimension of the *Mitsein*: “Insofar as human beings exist at all, they already find themselves transposed in their existence into other human beings, even if there are factually no other human beings in the vicinity. Consequently the Da-sein of man, the Da-sein in man means, not exclusively but amongst other things, being transposed into other human beings” (1995, 205). The question of the self-transposition (and the whole debate on empathy) is therefore redundant.¹²

This whole discussion, however, occurs in the context of the question about the “essence” of animality and of animals’ “poverty in world,” and thus the main focus here is whether empathy (or self-transposition) is possible with nonhuman animals. In the following section, § 50, Heidegger (in)famously states that, although *in principle* this is possible since animals, unlike stones (= inanimate objects), are living beings, in fact we do not “live” with nonhuman animals in the modality of Dasein’s *Mitsein*:

¹² Here, too, Heidegger recurs to the image of empathy as a “bridge” between two isolated subjects: “For this theory emerges from the view that in his relationship to other human beings, man is first of all an isolated being existing for himself. We would therefore in principle initially have to seek a bridge from one human being to another and vice-versa” (1995, 207–8).

even when we live with them, as in the case of companion animals, our *Mitgehen* is not a true “transposedness” (cf. 1995, 210), not a true *Miteinandersein*.¹³ There exists a gap—the infamous “abyss”—separating humans and nonhumans that prevents any authentic *Mitsein*. As Kelly Oliver remarks, in a way Heidegger displaces the dogmatic illusion of a gap separating isolated individuals onto the dogmatism that there exists an unbridgeable gap between humans and nonhumans: indeed, “[t]he absence of any gap between humans is dependent on the abyss between us and animals” (2009, 206). So, for Heidegger, empathy (or self-transposition) is redundant among humans and impossible between humans and nonhumans.¹⁴

The dogmatism of this position rests also perhaps, in part, on Heidegger’s neglect of corporeality in his analysis of being-in-the-world: as Jan Patočka remarked (2016, 151–157), corporeality is dangerously forgotten in Heidegger’s analyses of the possibilities that constitute Dasein’s thrownness in and ecstatic openness to the world (where *logos* is rather the fundamental, constitutive dimension), and this leads him perhaps to dismiss, in his “Letter on ‘Humanism,’” “our scarcely conceivable, abysmal bodily kinship with the beast”: “The human body,” he dogmatically (and indeed absurdly) states, “is something essentially other than an animal organism” (Heidegger 1998, 247, 248). But Patočka also makes a second, poignant criticism of the notion of *Mitsein*, which remains, in his view, a mere *petitio principii*: although positing the *Mitsein* as the fundamental condition of the being-in-the-world, Heidegger in fact ultimately

¹³This (in)famous passage deserves to be quoted in full: “Let us consider the case of domestic animals as a striking example. We do not describe them as such simply because they turn up in the house but because they belong to the house, i.e., they serve the house in a certain sense. Yet they do not belong to the house in the way in which the roof belongs to the house as protection against storms. We keep domestic pets in the house with us, they *live’ with us*. But we do not live with them if living means: *being* in an animal kind of way. Yet we *are with* them nonetheless. But this being-with is not an *existing-with*, because a dog does not exist but merely lives. Through this being with animals we enable them to move within our world. We say that the dog is lying underneath the table or is running up the stairs and so on. Yet when we consider the dog itself – does it comport itself toward the table as table, toward the stairs as stairs? All the same, it does go up the stairs with us. It feeds with us – and yet, we do not really ‘feed’. It eats with us – and yet, it does not really ‘eat’. Nevertheless, it is with us! A going along with..., a transposedness, and yet not” (1995, 210)

¹⁴Although rejecting Heidegger’s dogmatic abyss separating humans and nonhumans, Ralph Acampora agrees with Heidegger’s critique of empathy and proposes instead a transpecific version of *Mitsein* or *Miteinandersein* that he calls “symphysis” (2006, 78).

confined the communal world to the inauthenticity of the *das Man* (the “They,” the “One”) and reserved the “authentic” dimension of existence to the solipsistic moments of anxiety (*Angst*) and being-toward-death (Patočka 2016, 151–157; cf. Terzi 2022). The intersubjective dimensions of life, including the embodied, material commonalities and co-existence with nonhuman animals, seem to remain ultimately inaccessible to the philosopher of the *Mitsein*.

GETTING LOST IN THE SENSUALITY OF A POOR WORLD (COSTELLO)

Heidegger’s peculiar (but all-too traditional, despite his highly idiosyncratic terminology) analysis of animality makes him an obvious and habitual target for those philosophical and ethical positions striving for new, more “empathic” interspecies relations, and Elizabeth Costello, too, takes a jab at the German philosopher. In the third section of “The Glass Abattoir,” Costello discusses over the phone with her son John her notes about Heidegger that are part of the manuscripts she sent him for safe-keeping, and as usual she takes a circuitous route. What puzzles her, she says, is a contradiction she finds between the philosopher’s analyses of animality and humanity and his actual praxis and life. Whereas the human is “world-forming” because they can de-activate and thus overcome the natural limits of their world, the philosopher states, nonhuman animals (or the Animal) are “captivated” (*benommen*), that is, “stunned,” blocked by and absorbed within the circle of the limited elements that constitute their world—which is therefore “poor” (Heidegger 1995, 176ff and *passim*). But, Costello notes, human beings too, and Heidegger in particular, ultimately though secretly also yearn for this animal-like moments of complete absorption in the present, for that “thrilling, single-minded intensity” (Coetzee 2023, 219) that is animal captivity (*Benommenheit*).

Costello refers to the affair Heidegger had with his student Hannah Arendt and asks herself: “What was Heidegger seeking through Hannah, or through any other of his mistresses, if it was not that moment when consciousness concentrates itself in thrilling, single-minded intensity before being extinguished?” (Coetzee 2023, 219). She imagines the two lovers in bed, after sex, on a rainy Thursday afternoon, Heidegger pontificating about the Animal and its world-poverty and how only to humans the world is disclosed “as such,” until Hannah touches him and suddenly

his blood rushes anew and he turns again to her with insatiable lust. Like any other human being, Heidegger “hungers [...] for those moments of ecstasy when his awareness of the world shrinks to nothing and he loses himself in mindless sensual transports” (2023, 222). The irony of this contradiction does not perhaps disqualify the haughty philosophical analysis of Heidegger and others, as Costello’s son John remarks; this does not constitute a philosophical argument. But it calls indeed for a different understanding of what being-in-the-world with other beings means and entails. For Heidegger, the primordial mode of being-in-the-world is “care” (*Sorge*), but it is perhaps a different, non-anthropocentric and non-masculinist form of care that we need. A caring that is empathic (or sympathetic) and that I will analyze in the next chapter.

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Listening to What the (Animal) Other Is Saying: Empathy and Care

Elizabeth Costello's choice of moral sentimentalism over rationalism clearly resonates with an ethical theory that, since the 1980s, has troubled and challenged traditional ethics in general and animal ethics in particular, namely the ethics of care. The terms of Costello's attack on traditional philosophy—sympathy and imagination vs. reason, listening to the “heart” vs. principles and proscriptions, the “complexity of life” vs. “abstract models,” etc. (cf. e.g., Coetzee 1999, 33–35, 37, 62–63)—correspond to those making up the alternative ethical (and ontological) model proposed by the ethics of care; and even the criticisms Costello receives are those customarily addressed at this theory.

In Coetzee's novella, several characters challenge Costello but the extreme and confrontational position of his daughter-in-law, Norma (a philosopher of mind), can be considered paradigmatic: Norma judges Costello's opinions on animals, animal consciousness, and ethical relations with animals as “jejune and sentimental” and accuses her of “rambling,” of being “confused” in her lecture, and of turning a “private fad into a public taboo” (1999, 17, 31, 36, 67). Moreover, in a typical and traditional gesture, she delegitimizes Costello's rejection of reason by comparing it to madness: “There is no position outside of reason where you can stand and lecture about reason and pass judgement on reason,” she proclaims; “That's just French irrationalism, the sort of thing a person would say who has never set foot inside a mental institution and seen what people

look like who have *really* withdrawn from reason” (1999, 48–49; see also 67, 68). But also Costello’s son John, even though he declares himself agnostic with regard to animal ethics (he “has no opinions one way or the other” [1999, 17]) and meekly tries to defend his mother against his wife’s attacks, finds Costello “confused” and in need of “clarity,” and at the end of her lecture thinks: “Not her *métier*, argumentation.” Before the dinner in her honor, he wishes she had not come and mumbles: “If she wants to open her heart to animals, why can’t she stay home and open it to her cats?” (1999s, 36, 44, 38).

Coetzee attributes to Costello the almost caricatural traits of the proverbial old crazy animal-lover lady: she is overly emotional, hyperbolic and excessive, confused and even teary, mixing the personal and the objective, and incapable of (or unwilling to) presenting her ideas *clare et distincte*, as philosophers should do. Her response to humans’ appalling treatment of animals is bodily rather than detached, she tries to move rather than convince, and ultimately polarizes her audience with “acrimony, hostility, bitterness” (1999, 67). At the end of the story, she breaks down and almost confirms the parodic stereotype of gendered unbalance and female madness: “It’s that I no longer know where I am,” she tells John on the way to the airport. “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!” (1999, 69). She embodies thereby the feminization and pathologization of those instances that do not comply with the requirements that discipline Western (masculine) thought and are so often used to delegitimize animal advocacy: the binary contraposition between reason and emotion is gendered and weaponized in order to invalidate and silence unorthodox voices and the critique of animal exploitation in particular (cf. Gruen and Probyn-Rapsey 2018). But it can also be disrupted and deactivated by a comprehensive critique of philosophical objectivity, a possibility that Costello also seems to embody—perhaps even despite Coetzee’s intentions (cf. Wright 2006).

As Laura Wright writes, “[t]hrough the persona of Costello, Coetzee performs femininity and enacts embodiment in ways that counteract the masculinized notion of intellectual production” (2006, 207),¹ effectively

¹ Coetzee’s performing of femininity is problematic, as Wright also acknowledges (2006, 205), but this question exceeds the scope of this chapter. On Coetzee’s female characters see (briefly) Chap. 1, and the volume *Reading Coetzee’s Women* (Kossew and Harvey 2019).

staging an intense and often heated debate that continues to these days and that this chapter will explore and analyze, focusing in particular on the role empathy and sympathy play in it.

EMOTIONS, GENDER, AND PATRIARCHAL DISAVOWAL

In his response to Coetzee's Tanner Lectures, Peter Singer clearly explains the problem Western philosophy in general, and much animal ethics in particular, have with the positions espoused by Costello: "I feel, but I also think about what I feel," he writes. "When people say we should *only* feel – and at times Costello comes close to that in her lecture – I'm reminded of Göring, who said, 'I think with my blood.' See where it led him. We can't take your feelings as moral data, immune from rational criticism" (1999, 88–89). And in fact, when pioneering the contemporary rise of animal ethics with *Animal Liberation*, from the very beginning Singer explicitly engages in what Carol Adams calls the "patriarchal disavowal of emotions" (1996, 176): he begins the 1975 preface to *Animal Liberation* with a story about a lady who invited him and his wife for tea and was surprised when they said that they "had never been inordinately fond of dogs, cats, or horses in the way that many people are" and "didn't 'love' animals" but "simply wanted them treated as the independent sentient beings that they are, and not as a means to human ends" (2015a, 19–20).² A little further he restates that "Nowhere in this book [...] do I appeal to the reader's emotions where they cannot be supported by reason" (2015a, 22). A few years later, in *Practical Ethics*, he generalizes the ethical necessity of the disavowal: "Ethics does not demand that we eliminate personal relationships and partial affections," he writes, "but it does demand that when we act we assess the moral claims of those affected by our actions independently of our feelings for them" (1993, 76–77).³

²The figure of the (old) lady haunts animal advocacy as the specter of feminine sentimentality that "serious" male philosophers must keep at distance and disavow. The animal rights activist Cleveland Amory is credited to have iconized this figure when he said: "we aren't little old ladies in tennis shoes" anymore (qtd. in Adams 2016). Both Coetzee's and Singer's texts certainly play, in different ways, with this stereotype.

³Singer will remain consistent throughout his long career in his disavowal of emotions in favor of a rationalist approach. In his 2015 book on effective altruism, *The Most Good You Can Do*, for example, he devotes a whole chapter (2015b, 75–85) to showing the limits of an empathic approach as compared to a rationalist approach, and repeats throughout the book that effective altruists are more rational than other people.

As Josephine Donovan has documented (1996), this disavowal strongly marks most of the texts of the early phase of contemporary animal advocacy, which needed to legitimize themselves as “credible,” “philosophical” and “serious” (i.e., *rational*) against the customary dismissal of “animal lovers” coded as overly emotional and thus “womanish” (in a traditional move to trivialize and belittle their concern; see Kheel 1996, 23). Like Singer, the other putative “father” of contemporary animal advocacy (patriarchy is eternally in search of fathers, as Lori Gruen and Carol Adams remark: 2022, 14), Tom Regan, is also at pains to show his philosophical credentials and opens the 1983 preface to *The Case for Animal Rights* by stressing: “Since all who work on behalf of the interests of animals are more than a little familiar with the tired charges of being ‘irrational,’ ‘sentimental,’ ‘emotional’ or worse, we can give the lie to these accusations only by making a concerted effort not to indulge our emotions or parade our sentiments. And that requires making a sustained commitment to rational inquiry” (2004, lii). In a slightly later text, he restates: “reason – not sentiment, not emotion – reason compels us to recognize the equal inherent value of these animals and, with this, their equal right to be treated with respect” (1985, 222–23).

This bias against sentimentalism and toward rationalism genders emotions as feminine and rationality as masculine and essentially perpetuates the Western hierarchical gender norms that also contribute to the oppression of animals, like women deemed irrational, weak, and thus inferior: the separation of rationality from a lower nature is precisely what has been used to define animals (and women, and the racialized other, etc.) as an inferior nature that should be transcended by true (masculine) humanity (Bailey 1996, 350). This pressure on male theorists to disavow emotions and love lest they be dismissed as “feminized” has been called by Susan Fraiman (2022) “pussy panic,” the panic before the threat of a philosophical “castration” in proximity to the (allegedly) feminine realm of emotions. Curiously, Lori Gruen recently found Coetzee guilty of the same form of panic disavowal: in a 2016 public address in the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid, Coetzee was reported to state, “I am not an animal lover [...] Animals don’t need my love... I don’t care about love. I care about justice” (Coetzee 2016, qtd. in Gruen 2018, 18).⁴ The problem

⁴ *The Daily Mail* does not report the circumstances of Coetzee’s talk, but these very sentences also appear in the section of “The Glass Abattoir” that has not been translated into English, so it is possible that Coetzee just read a part of this short story. Here Costello’s son,

here is not only that reason and emotions cannot (and should not) be separated into two discrete and autonomous unities, as (some) rationalists seem to think, and that the categories of justice and injustice are also informed by emotional relationships determined by gendered, racial, economic, ethnic, and cultural experiences (Gruen 2018, 18); but that this very dualism reaffirms and perpetuates the traditional view that human and nonhuman natures are essentially and sharply distinct.

The conviction of the unity of reason and emotion and a challenge to the gendered binaries that inform traditional hierarchies led many feminists to elaborate an alternative ethics and an alternative ontology.

WOMEN, ANIMALS, CARE

The (understandable and perhaps initially necessary) reaction of many women to their traditional association with nature and animality and consequent exclusion from rationality (and full humanity) has been to claim that women are also rational, *like* men and *unlike* animals. As Carol Adams and Josephine Donovan show, this was the strategy adopted by the “mothers” of first- and second-wave feminism like Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* and Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (Adams and Donovan 1995, 2), but certainly continues to characterize also some trends of contemporary feminism—let alone common sense: if women’s biology has historically been the source of gender inequality, it is argued, any association of women with nature or animals should be resisted.⁵ But since at least the 1970s other feminists chose to challenge not women’s association with nature and animality but rather the very hierarchical dualisms that oppose human and nonhuman as well as rationality and emotions or mind and body—and of course masculine and feminine—and

John, is reading some diary notes his mother sent him for safekeeping, and one paragraph goes: “I’m not an animal lover. They don’t need my love and I don’t need theirs. Human love is already quite obscure. How does it choose its objects? I have no idea. Why does ambivalence gnaw at it? I have no idea either. How even more impenetrable must we appear to the sentiments of animals! No, I don’t care about love, all I care about is justice” (Coetzee 2018, 79). Tellingly, this last sentence is used as paradigmatic excerpt in the publicity for the Spanish edition of the book (*Siete cuentos morales*).

⁵The main problem with this solution, as Eva Meijer notes (2019, 221–22), is that this is not just an empirical matter but is rather a normative construction: the criterion of rationality is in fact not gender neutral but masculinist and forces women to be like men in order to gain moral or political standing. This line of argumentation does not challenge the underlying structure of patriarchy.

which constitute the foundation of the patriarchal oppression and exploitation of both women and nature/animals (see Gaarder 2011).⁶

For this brand of feminism, theorizing about animals is even “inevitable” (Adams and Donovan 1995, 2) *precisely because* of this historical association and of the intersectional nature of oppression and thus also of liberation.⁷ Noting that traditionally women make up the majority of animal advocacy movements, these theorists challenge the genealogical narrative about the origins of contemporary animal ethics—traditionally credited to the publication of Singer’s *Animal Liberation* in 1975 and Regan’s *The Case for Animal Rights* in 1983—and argue that the new movements actually grew out of the ecofeminist theories of the 1970s and 1980s, which would mark the movement with a particular sense of empathy and the role of emotions and love in ethics.⁸ That this history is habitually ignored or distorted is telling of the persevering force of the patriarchal disavowal and of its “pussy panic” (Gruen and Adams 2022, 31; Fraiman 2022).⁹

It is a fact, however—a fact well acknowledged by care theorists –, that the ethics of care developed in animal ethics in reaction to the dominant position rapidly taken by Singer’s utilitarianism and Regan’s rights theory.¹⁰ Against the rationalistic biases of these theories, some feminists attempted to restore the contribution and importance of emotional responses to the ethical debate and found an appropriate label in Carol Gilligan’s groundbreaking book *In a Different Voice* (1982), which was instrumental in identifying and summarizing the stakes of the debate under a unitary banner. Developing Gilligan’s insights, care theorists articulated their ethical

⁶In the early 1980s, Elizabeth Spelman coined the term “somatophobia” to denote the equating of women, children, animals, and “the natural” with one another and with the despised body, characteristic of Western philosophy and its emphasis on reason (Spelman 1982, qtd. in Adams and Donovan 1995, 2–3).

⁷The oppressed, as Val Plumwood noted, are often both feminized and naturalized (1993, 18).

⁸The term “ecofeminism” was actually coined by Françoise d’Eaubonne in her 1974 book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (Eng. 2022), one year before the publication of *Animal Liberation*.

⁹To the traditional rationalist genealogy Fraiman (2022) also adds a new “continental” revisionist genealogy that retroactively superimposes the figure and thought of Jacques Derrida and deconstruction onto the development of critical animal studies.

¹⁰Fraiman (2022, 285), among others, actually argues that it was Singer’s and Regan’s rationalistic ethics that developed in reaction to the (alleged) sentimentality of traditional animal ethics, but in turn this generated the need for an organized and articulated response and a new label.

position around a series of alternatives to the rationalist categories: against the latter's universalizing pretenses, care ethics focuses on the particular circumstances of an ethical event; against the rigid and formalistic abstraction of the "one-size-fits-all" approach, the care approach emphasizes contextual and political contingencies; against the liberal notion of an autonomous and isolated subject, it proposes a relational ontology; against the idea of a society of rational equals, care ethics pays attention to power differentials (especially when nonhuman animals are considered); against a dispassionate idea of justice, it underlines the constitutive role empathy, sympathy and compassion play in ethical relationships.

Universalism is associated with a certain understanding of masculinity and with what Marti Kheel called the "violence of abstraction" that in fact, she argues, impoverishes ethical engagement (Kheel 1993, 255, 2008, 3). Universalism rests in turn on the fiction of a rational, autonomous, independent subject deriving, as several theorists have shown, from the contractual relationships of market economy developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth century: the "free" and "equal" agent belonged in fact to an elite of white, male property-owners focused on protecting their property from external interference (see Donovan and Adams 1996, 14–15). Individuals not belonging to this elite—from women to animals—will necessarily fare poorly in a universalist extensionism based on similarity and will thus end up in lower rungs of the hierarchical ladder.¹¹ To this "mechanistic ontology of territorial atomism" (which "ignores the network of supporting persons [usually female] who enable his autonomy – that is, who raise him, who feed him, who clothe him, and so forth" [Donovan and Adams 1996, 14–15]), care ethicists counterpose a relational ontology: we are always in relationships with a multifarious network of "others," they note, and these relationships shape who we are (Gruen and Adams 2022, 41–42; Slote 2007, 67). These relationships, moreover, are always unequal and the relational network is thus one of dependency (or rather interdependency) and responsibility (Collins 2015, 2, 12; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 4; The Care Collective 2020; Taylor 2022).¹² The

¹¹ As Costello states in her lecture: "The question to ask should not be: Do we have something in common – reason, self-consciousness, a soul – with other animals? (With the corollary that, if we do not, then we are entitled to treat them as we like, imprisoning them, killing them, dishonoring their corpses.)" In the comparison game, a nonhuman animal fares at best as a "mentally defective human being, a simpleton" (Coetzee 1999, 34, 26).

¹² Sunaura Taylor (2022) adds to these reflections on relational ontology the perspective of disability studies, which illuminates but also complicates the understanding of "care," "dependency" and "responsibility."

paradigm of the moral relation is here no longer the autonomous and rational free agent negotiating with his equal, but rather the basic relationship of care, the mother-child relation; although this is a controversial and discussed position, it allows nonetheless to sidestep the whole debate about the need to possess certain capacities to qualify for moral consideration (Engster 2006, 521; Wrage 2022).

Important in this reconceptualization is the clarification that care ethics is not a “woman’s ethics” or a “feminine theory” (Gruen 2015, 32; Gruen and Adams 2022, 39).¹³ As Michael Slote remarks (2007, 3–4), care ethics is historically rooted in the moral sentimentalism of the Scottish Enlightenment and important male thinkers have written in terms similar or congenial to it; and vice versa, not all women and, more importantly, not all feminists endorse care ethics and empathy (Plumwood 1993, 9–10; Collins 2015, 7). The challenge to the traditional dualisms and dichotomies also involves a denaturalization of the tie that binds caring to women and rationality to men, so that what comes undone is the very opposition between naturally caring women and rational and autonomous men. As Adams put it, she advocates for care “because it is good, not because it constitutes women’s ‘difference’” (1996, 173; see Fraiman 2022, 297–98). Like this opposition, also the boundary between justice and care is shown to be porous and ultimately untenable, just like those between reason and emotion, mind and body, culture and nature, etc.: all these categories are co-constituted and mutually inform each other. The dualistic thinking is precisely what undergirds hierarchies, oppression, and exploitation.¹⁴

Coetzee seems to address this point as well, again somewhat in caricatural fashion: in *The Lives of Animals*, Costello’s main critic is in fact another woman, Norma, who does not react in a composed and rational manner (i.e.,

¹³Initially the criticism that, by valorizing practices of caring for dependents care ethics entrenches women’s subordinated caregiver role, was also voiced by a number of feminist theorists (cf. e.g., Bartky 1990; Card 1990; Hoagland 1991).

¹⁴A clear example of the dualisms in which traditional ethics—and especially animal ethics—gets stuck are the various and (in)famous lifeboat hypotheticals and trolley problems: as Josephine Donovan has repeatedly argued, while they are designed to clarify moral thinking and values, they abstract so egregiously from the particulars of any given situation that they hopelessly distort it. Nearly always, Donovan points out, the conflicts described can in reality be negotiated in accordance with the particular circumstances of the case and settled as “both/ands” rather than “either/ors” (2022a, 53).

as a *man* would) but as emotionally and bodily as Costello herself: Norma is exasperated by her mother-in-law and her theories, she sighs, snorts, and rants during Costello's lecture, and more often than not loses her temper (Coetzee 1999, 31, 32, 36, 48–49, 67: cf. Wright 2006, 205–6). This could be read as a masculinist critique of women's insurmountable emotivity, even when they are philosophers of mind (Costello's son John and the other male characters remain in fact calm and collected), or, conversely, as a critique of the traditional dualisms. Be as it may, Norma embodies and voices a common and widespread position that is necessary to address.

“FINE, SO LONG AS YOU THINK FIRST”

Norma's criticisms summarize in a sense the main arguments adduced against the ethics of care, which center, again, precisely on the need for rationality in ethics. If Singer replies to Costello that “We can't take our feelings as moral data, immune from rational criticism” (1999, 89), Regan replies to Josephine Donovan's and other care ethicists' critique of rationalism by asking: “How could it be otherwise? How, that is, could one conceivably offer a theory of animal rights based on appeals to emotion? What could such a ‘theory’ possibly maintain?” (2001, 63; cf. also the preface to the 2004 edition of *The Case for Animal Rights*, xli–xliii). Julian Franklin thus summarizes this criticism: “The lack of a rule of reason to regulate compassion is [...] a serious objection to the ecofeminist ‘ethic of care’” (2004, 80–81). And Martha Nussbaum adds: love and caring are “[f]ine, so long as you think first” (Nussbaum 1999, 79).

The rationale for “thinking first,” as also Norma states, is that “rationality is not just [...] a game. Reason provides us with real knowledge of the real world. It has been tested, and it works” (Coetzee 1999, 48). Reason, that is, has a *universal reach*, it “works” and can be organized into principles and laws. And that is the problem with care ethics: its focus on individual experiences and particular cases, its critics argue, *is not universalizable*, and the emphasis on concrete and personal relations ends up in “kin altruism” at the detriment of those who are not “near and dear” (cf. e.g., DeGrazia 1999, 126; Garner 2003, 241). The problem with universalizability has always been, of course, “who has traditionally done the universalizing and who has been left out”: feminist theorists but also decolonial scholars and disability rights advocates, among others, have contested universalism as a form of essentialism that colonizes alterity and imposes the values of the dominant and hegemonic culture (Western,

white, male, ableist, etc.) onto the “others.”¹⁵ But “if generalizing is done from a feminist point of view,” care ethicists reply, if, that is, “we take seriously the perspective or standpoint of a marginalized individual as opposed to contending that such a perspective is invalid because not universalizable,” then the injunction to care can be generalized beyond the restricted circle of personal relations: “through the use of the moral imagination one can easily extend one’s care for immediate creatures to others who are not present” (Donovan 2022a, 50–51), in the same way that Christian *agape*, for example, transcends particular circumstances and relationships to embrace the whole world as an ethical and political commitment.¹⁶

This issue is paired by critics with the vagueness and ambiguity of care. In *The Thee Generation*, Regan famously wrote:

What are the resources within the ethic of care that can move people to consider the ethics of their dealings with individuals who stand outside the existing circle of their valued interpersonal relationships? [...] most people do not care very much about what happens to [nonhuman animals] [...] their care seems to be [...] limited to “pet” animals, or to cuddly or rare specimens of wildlife. What, then, becomes of the animals toward whom people are indifferent, given the ethic of care? (1991, 95–96)

This vagueness makes care ethics, according to Gary Francione, “simplistic and superficial,” “confused and confusing” (2008, 190), and moreover not incompatible with exploitation: “*plenty of people experience empathy and sympathy toward animals and still exploit them,*” David Sztybel remarks (2011, 222, emphasis in the original). The point, Peter Allmark argues, is that care “lacks both normative and descriptive content” (1995, 19): it is in fact morally neutral and needs a correct object (care about the “right things”) and a correct principle (care in the “right way”) in order to qualify as ethical: “What we care about is morally important, the fact that we care per se is not” (1995, 23). And not even all care ethicists agree on the “right things” to care about. In fact, the question of animals and of transspecies care still divides feminists in general and care theorists in particular. Nel Noddings, for example, argues that “our obligation to summon the caring attitude is limited by the possibility of reciprocity” (2013, 149) and goes

¹⁵This “cultural imperialism of the emotions” is an accusation also customarily brought against the emphasis on empathy and sympathy. Ecofeminism and vegetarianism in particular have also been accused of being ethnocentric, elitist, and essentialist, just a “white women’s thing.” For an overview of these issues, see Gaard (2011) and Gaarder (2011).

¹⁶I owe this insight to Zipporah Weisberg.

on to exclude therefore nonhuman animal from proper “ethical caring.” Virginia Held, in turn, argues that human caring overcomes its “naturalness” by conscious reflection, which, again, sets humans apart from animals (Held 1993; for comments on these two positions, see Wrage 2022).

Finally, the focus of much care ethics on empathy and sympathy has also been called into question: other emotions have been considered more appropriate to moral engagement, such as anger (Prinz 2011; Kasperbauer 2015), disgust, guilt, admiration (Prinz 2011), or wonder, compassion, and outrage (Nussbaum 2023, introduction). Lori Gruen has engaged with empathy in a way that responds to most of these criticisms, and a more detailed examination of her proposal is therefore now in order.

ENTANGLED EMPATHY

Gruen explicitly considers her 2015 book *Entangled Empathy* as part of the care tradition (2015, 30) and proceeds to develop and systematize most of the characteristics of this tradition listed above, organizing them around the ethical centrality of empathy. At the same time, she also aims to “demystify” empathy (Cherry 2017, 439) and to propose a workable concept that ferry the ethical debate—and the debate on empathy—beyond the shallows of the present stale contrapositions. The catalyst of this operation is the first part of the title compound, *entanglement*, a concept that Gruen borrows from Karen Barad and the vocabulary of quantum physics (cf. Gruen 2017, 458, 2018, 42). The “quantum entanglement” in physics is the fact that the quantum state of each particle cannot be described independently from the state of the others, and Barad extends this fact as a general ontological rule of existence: “To be entangled,” she writes at the very beginning of *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, “is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not preexist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intrarelateing” (2007, ix).

This concept provides a solid ontological foundation to the feminist rejection of the myth of the autonomous, isolated, disembodied subject and their shifting emphasis onto relationality. The reality of entanglement simply gives the lie to the idea(1) of detachment that characterizes traditional ethics and reveals individual agency as co-constituted by a complex network of social and material entanglements: “we are who we are at any

particular time as an expression of entanglements in multiple relations across space, species, and substance” (Gruen 2018, 42). This does not mean, of course, that we should accept this network of relations as immutable, given that many of these relationships are negative and indefensible (e.g., instrumentalization and exploitation): “inevitability does not mean immutability” (Gruen 2015, 64). Being necessarily in relationships does not mean that we are completely determined by these relationships or that they cannot be changed; rather, acknowledging this fact can make us more aware and responsive to the entangled relationships we are in with the aim of understanding and improving them: “that these relationships are part of us means that we can, indeed must, work with them and try to change them for the better” (Gruen 2017, 461). (I will come back to this point in the next section).¹⁷

But entanglement also helps in giving the lie to another myth of the Western tradition, that of the opposition between reason and emotion. Entangled empathy does not only mean that the empathizing subject is always already co-constituted by the networks of entangled relationships in which she exists, but also that empathy itself cannot be disentangled from rationality and cognition, just like the mind cannot be disentangled from the body, or justice from care and love, etc., since all these opposites inform and co-constitute each other. Entanglement indeed debunks all dualisms as untenable and ultimately meaningless. In its blending emotion and cognition, therefore, entangled empathy is a form of “cognitive empathy,” always already engaged in a reflective act (Gruen 2015, 48): unlike unreflective empathy, “[e]ntangled empathy [...] directs our attention to the things that need moral response, can help provide context and understanding about what the right response would be, and [...] can provide us with a more accurate picture of who we are and what our responsibilities to others might be” (2015, 56).¹⁸

¹⁷ In relation to Nagel’s question, Myisha Cherry thus writes: “Entangled empathy calls us not just to imagine what it is like to be a bat, but to recognize that we are already in relationships with bats and are called upon to be responsive by attending to their needs, vulnerabilities, and hopes” (2017, 440).

¹⁸ Though Gruen does not refer to it, here the “somatic marker hypothesis” developed by Antonio Damasio (2005) could provide a “scientific” and ontological foundation to the entanglement of reason and emotion, just like the quantum entanglement provides a firm foundation to relationality. Reason and emotion, Damasio famously proved, cannot be neurologically separated into different processes but rather constitutively define and nurture each other. The illusion of their disentanglement was “Descartes’ error” and that of all dualisms.

As the term suggests, “cognitive empathy” rests on and requires extensive background knowledge to allow a proper assessment of another’s needs and demands. When this other is nonhuman, this involves a commitment to learn and understand as much as possible the other’s form of life and species-specific behaviors, differences and needs in order to avoid the ever-present risk of projection and the other biases usually associated with empathy.¹⁹ And since there is only so much a single person can observe and learn over time, this means acquiring familiarity with the experience and work of experts such as biologists, ethologists, ecologists, and other “knowers” and caregivers.²⁰ All this knowledge and expertise notwithstanding, understanding across species is obviously a complex and difficult matter and, as Nagel *docet* and Gruen admits, usually what we “get” is just a glimpse. However, Gruen states, “[t]hat we never really ‘know’ cannot be an excuse to opt out of working at it” (2018, 43). Entangled empathy involves therefore a continuous moving back and forth between the empathizer’s and the other’s point of view, between the first- and the third-person perspective: through a sustained attention to both similarities and differences and a reflection on proximity and distance, this movement allows to assess one’s place in reference to the other and to preserve the sense that we are in relationship and not merged into the same perspective (i.e., that of the empathizer) (Gruen 2015, 66).

The movement of entangled empathy often changes one’s perception in fundamental ways, and in turn also how one perceives going forward (Gruen 2015, 75). That is why entangled empathy is not itself an emotion, Gruen argues, but rather a “process,” a “method of moral perception” (Gruen 2018, 41), which requires two cardinal qualities: attention and imagination. Gruen declares that, besides the care tradition in animal ethics, a major influence on her view on empathy was the philosophy of Iris Murdoch and in particular, as with Cora Diamond (cf. Chap. 2), Murdoch’s concept of attention (Gruen 2017, 455, 2018, 38). Empathy, Gruen writes, “is a particular type of attention” but a type of attention

¹⁹Empathy is not therefore for Gruen putting oneself in another’s shoes, not only since this image rests on the myth of the autonomous and disentangled subject, but also because not everybody wears shoes—nonhuman animals certainly don’t! (Gruen 2015, 65–66).

²⁰A warning is however necessary here: as Marco Reggio remarks (2022, 161), we always need to be aware of and remember the Foucauldian insight that all this knowledge is also disciplinary, i.e., it disciplines its subject in the way that, in the past, anthropology disciplined the colonized other and psychology the “misfit.” Ethological and ecological knowledge is neither neutral nor innocent.

that is also equated with “care” (Gruen 2015, 39, 28): it is an attention that not only focuses on the particular traits and peculiarities of the other in their context, but constructs its relationship to alterity through a “just and loving gaze” (Murdoch 2014, 33) and aims therefore at another’s wellbeing and flourishing (Gruen 2017, 456, 2018, 39). In turn, moral attention must work with and be complemented by moral imagination, by an imaginative effort that takes the empathizer beyond the boundaries of one’s own experience and situation (Gruen 2015, 34; cf. also Hamington 2008, 181–83). Attention and imagination must complement but also restrain each other in order to provide a picture as complete as possible of the ethical relationship.

Empathic mistakes of course can and do often occur and are perhaps inevitable, and Gruen devotes a whole section to the analysis of possible epistemic and ethical inaccuracies (2015, 81–94). The process of entangled empathy is never complete and never fully successful; it remains open and fragile. But if the focus remains another’s flourishing and wellbeing, Gruen believes, entangled empathy offers the best approach to an ethical situation.

PARTICIPATORY EPISTEMOLOGIES

The notion of entanglement presents obvious advantages and has therefore gained traction in a number of fields, in particular with feminist theorists, but it has become a fashionable catchword and also shows a problematic underside. Josephine Donovan accuses in fact what she calls (derogatorily) the “American postmodernists” to use entanglement in order to obscure and justify a number of ethically questionable practices, and singles out Karen Barad and Donna Haraway as negative examples of the idea that, since everything is entangled, then everything is permitted (Donovan 2022b, 73). Barad, for example, uses the notion of “reconfiguring entanglements” (2007, 384) to justify and support biomimesis and transgenic engineering, which allegedly positively contribute to the “world’s becoming”; and Haraway proposes the notion of “entangled labor” (2007, 80) to describe the situation of laboratory animals, who certainly gain thereby the status of “active workers” but in the very same gesture that erases their suffering and death.²¹ Though well aware of the

²¹ As Zipporah Weisberg writes (2009, 28), through the notion of entanglement “Haraway in fact reinforces the anthropocentric logic of mastery over nonhuman human others by naturalizing unequal instrumental relations between species – that is, relations in which humans are the users and nonhumans are the used.”

ethical demands that the concept of entanglement generates in all entangled parties, Barad, Haraway and other “postmodernists” never question (and therefore ultimately justify) institutions such as animal experimentation, slaughterhouses and domestication, in which power differentials inevitably result in domination and oppression.²²

Donovan’s critique is not aimed at Gruen, who certainly cannot be accused of this “postmodernist” bad faith, since her entangled empathy explicitly opposes the “bad entanglements” of exploitation and instrumentalization (e.g., 2015, 64) and clearly always aims at another’s wellbeing and flourishing. Donovan discards nonetheless the emphasis on entanglement and opts for a slightly different notion: participation, or rather “participatory epistemology.” Like entanglement, this concept is also borrowed from quantum physics: since the nature and behavior of quantum particle cannot be known independently from the observer, Donovan argues, “it appears that the only knowledge now available to us – that is now possible – is not objective but *participatory*” (Donovan 2014, 77). Quantum theory implies a “participatory epistemology” because an observer’s consciousness necessarily participates in the realization of a given entity (2014, 77, 78). For Donovan, this notion provides the ontological basis not only to the feminist emphasis on relationality but also for developing care theory along a *dialogical* structure. In her interventions in the care debate in animal ethics over the years, Donovan has in fact consistently proposed to expand and strengthen the dialogical nature of care theory, which, she points out, is perhaps an implicit trait but has not been sufficiently theorized as such (2022a, 48–49).

This development importantly entails abandoning (or at least downplaying) the mother-infant relationship as paradigm of care (as initially theorized, e.g., by Gilligan and Noddings) and refocusing instead care on *listening* to what the (animal) other is saying: “Caring must therefore be extended to mean not just ‘caring about their welfare’ but ‘caring about what they are telling us’” (Donovan 2022a, 52). Donovan’s proposal consists thus in shifting the epistemological source of theorizing about animals to the animals themselves, in “caring about” what they want and

²²Donovan questions the very term “entanglement,” which is the translation of the German *Verschänkung* first used by Erwin Schrödinger in the 1930s. The English entanglement, she argues, presents the connotations of ensnarement, entrapment, and disorderliness, which are absent in the German, and thus proposes to translate *Verschänkung* simply as “connection” (2022b, 73).

have to say instead of monologically imposing onto them human projections. A communicative encounter does not mean of course to entirely yield to the other's desires, but it rather involves a dialogical negotiation (2022a, 52) and, most of all, the recognition and valuing of the other's standpoint. What Donovan in fact proposes (developing an intuition by Carol Adams²³) is to adapt feminist standpoint theory to human-animal relations. Developed in the 1970s and 1980s from a Marxist insight—that the oppressed evince a particular and privileged epistemology precisely because of their reification in the capitalist production process²⁴—feminist standpoint theory argues that knowledge is always socially situated and purports to empower oppressed groups by valuing their experiences and developing an “oppositional consciousness” (see, e.g., Harding 2004). When applied to nonhuman animals, this theory needs obviously to be updated and adapted, probably to include human advocates to articulate the standpoint of animals (Donovan 2022a, 61), but in ways not very different, for example, from the case of cognitive disabled people.²⁵

To recalibrate care around *listening* to the other's voice importantly also means to move animal advocacy away from being “the voice of the voiceless.” If, from a pragmatic point of view, it might sometimes be justified to speak *for* the animal other (when articulating their standpoint, for example) (Meijer 2019, 224), considering them as “voiceless” is always a way not only of patronizing them, but indeed of *silencing* them. “There's really no such thing as the ‘voiceless,’” Arundhati Roy points out; “There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard” (qtd. in Taylor 2017, 76).²⁶ Nonhuman animals do have voices and do speak, but not in the language of power, and therefore the real problem is that we

²³Donovan (2022a, 66n8) acknowledges that it was Adams who first had the idea to apply standpoint theory to nonhuman animals in “‘Mad Cow’ Disease and the Animal Industrial Complex” (1997).

²⁴Donovan (2022b, 2) attributes the paternity of standpoint theory to Lukács, who first theorized it in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923). See also Fredric Jameson's chapter in Harding (2004, 143–53).

²⁵On this point I greatly profited from various discussions with Ruadhán J. Flynn, who is precisely developing such an updated model of standpoint theory to recognize cognitively disabled people as epistemic agents. See also, importantly, Sunaura Taylor's intertwining of care ethics and disability studies (2022).

²⁶Taylor (2017, 75–77) traces the origin of the popular slogan “the voice of the voiceless” to a 1910 poem by American poet Ella Wheeler Wilcox (“I am the Voice of the Voiceless / Through me the dumb shall speak / Till the world's deaf ear be made to hear / The wrongs of the wordless weak”) and shows how it effectively works, despite all initial good intentions, to maintain the silenced and unheard in a subordinate position.

don't listen to them (Meijer 2019, 256; Nussbaum 2023, 109). They speak "in a different voice," but so do also many human agents, and if we care to listen, we can readily understand what they say, mean and want (cf. also Taylor 2022, 142–43). The question whether humans can understand animals is for Donovan a moot one; that we do, as Mary Midgley argued long ago, has been abundantly proved throughout history in successful human-animal interactions (Donovan 2022a, 62; Midgley 1983, 113–15). Another way to saying this, as Catharine MacKinnon put it (2004, 270), is that "[t]hey vote with their feet by running away. They bite back, scream in pain, withhold affection, approach warily, fly and swim away," and it is not difficult to read these signs (Donovan 2022b, 3). Of course, *as with humans*, signs can be misread and messages misinterpreted; all communication requires interpretation and is ultimately partial and imperfect. But what we can effectively read and understand is "*sufficient for the formulation of an ethical response*" (Donovan 2022a, 66–67n11; 2022b, 11; emphasis added).²⁷

Like Gruen, Donovan refers to the notion of attention theorized by Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch as the essential tool to enable interspecies understanding and communication (Donovan 2007, 190–91, 2016, 7–8, 2022b, 13).²⁸ Love and justice inform the attentive gaze with respect for the other's voice, for the other's standpoint; but this respect also entails the recognition of another's inviolable alterity, which includes, as Nussbaum remarked (2014, 152; cf. Chap. 2), also a part of incomprehension and, most of all, the willingness to renounce looking, grasping, and understanding. A dialogue is always a negotiation that also entails the possibility of withdrawing from it, of leaving the other alone.

This is the caveat that a standpoint theory adapted to interspecies communication should never forget, lest it reverts to traditional monologic projection. Standpoint theory is not immune to criticisms of epistemic privilege (cf. e.g., Naidu 2010) and the ever-present and inevitable risk of

²⁷ Donovan makes this point precisely in response to Nagel's skeptic question about "bat phenomenology."

²⁸ More are in fact the affinities than the differences between Gruen and Donovan—and that this is the case is proved perhaps by the fact that in her afterword to *Entangled Empathy* patrice jones argues that Gruen's message is to "attend to animal voices, be they verbal or behavioral" (Gruen 2015, 98–99), and Sunaura Taylor interprets Gruen's entangled empathy as a form of standpoint theory (2022, 155). Donovan, however, despite an initial preference for sympathy (176–77), in the end does not differentiate much between empathy and sympathy and uses the two terms as almost interchangeable, whereas Gruen argues that "empathy has more 'grip' than sympathy" and strongly opts for the former (2015, 45).

assuming a particular perspective is indeed that of sidestepping and undervaluing another's perspective and another's alterity. This is particularly the case in asymmetrical power contexts such as human-animal relationships. Care theorists readily acknowledge these problems and the permanent risk of anthropomorphizing the animal other, which is the eternal shadow hovering over all these theories and the eternal challenge of animal otherness. It is to the analysis of this challenge that we now turn.

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PART III

The Limits of Anthropomorphism



If a Chimp Could Talk: On the Advantages and Limits of Primatomorphism

In *Pleasurable Kingdom*, Jonathan Balcombe writes: “Your own feelings and motivations are a reference point for another person’s feelings, and we call it empathy. Use your characteristics to interpret the behavior of an animal, and we call it anthropomorphism” (2007, 40). Anthropomorphism constitutes in fact the litmus test to probe and assess the limits of the sympathetic imagination when crossing the species barrier, not least because it still today retains the negative aura of a scientific taboo. Its partial reappraisal over the past few decades and the wane of the strict behaviorist orthodoxy in the wake of the cognitive revolution in the behavioral and natural sciences fueled a lively debate, which, however, seems to mirror the empathy debate in the inconsistency and instability of the meaning and scope attributed to this term.

In *The Lives of Animals*, Elizabeth Costello mentions anthropomorphism as an aside, when commenting on the cognitive experiments Wolfgang Köhler (1887–1967) performed on chimpanzees in the 1910s. But implicitly her talks are in themselves a comment on and an experiment in anthropomorphism, since in the mirror game of a performer talking to an academic audience on which Coetzee structured his Tanner Lectures, Costello (and Coetzee) take on the persona of Red Peter, the character of Franz Kafka’s 1917 story “A Report to an Academy,” in which a chimpanzee who learned to talk addresses (or performs for) a scientific audience—just like Costello and Coetzee. The anthropomorphism of literature allows

Kafka, Costello, and Coetzee not only to problematize Wittgenstein's famous dictum, "If a lion could talk, we wouldn't be able to understand it" (2009, 235),¹ but also to question scientific orthodoxy and behaviorist dogmas and to push the debate to its limits.

That the speaking animal in Kafka's story is a chimpanzee is not a secondary factor. Primates in general and chimpanzees in particular, as humans' closest relatives, create in the observer what primatologist Jan van Hooff calls "an empathic unrest" (2000, 126; qtd. in Corbey 2005, 7), the unsettling impossibility of denying their individuality as experiencing subjects that troubles scientific orthodoxy and the *idées reçues* of the Western tradition. The interplay of otherness and similarity they embody and the constitutive ambiguity of their status and place within the animal kingdom make them uncanny and (philosophically) frightening. Figures of transition, they dwell on the threshold between humanity and animality and challenge human isolationism from a scientific, philosophical, and moral point of view (Corbey 2005, 200–1). That is why they are the perfect starting point for a discussion of anthropomorphism. This chapter will begin this discussion through an analysis of Costello's reading of Köhler and Kafka against the background of the twentieth-century developments and turns in the study of animal behavior.

WOLFGANG KÖHLER AND ANTHROPOMORPHISM

At the end of her discussion of Köhler's experiments with chimpanzees (to which I will return later) Costello takes Köhler—as representative of the scientific ethos—to task for his inability to understand and "make something" of a peculiar behavior of the group of chimpanzees under his care: "the moment when the captive chimpanzees lope around the compound in a circle, for all the world like a military band, some of them as naked as the day they were born, some draped in cords or old strips of cloth that they have picked up, some carrying pieces of rubbish" (Coetzee 1999, 29). In a parenthesis she adds: "In the copy of Köhler's book I read, borrowed from a library, an indignant reader has written in the margin, at this point: 'Anthropomorphism!' Animals cannot march, he means to say, they cannot dress up, because they don't know the meaning of *march*, don't

¹The English translation of the dictum already raises some issues pertaining to the anthropomorphism debate, since it renders the final masculine pronoun "ihn" (lion is masculine in German) with the pronoun used for inanimate objects, "it."

know the meaning of *dress up*” (Coetzee 1999, 30). Köhler noticed the pleasure of the animals in draping things around themselves and thus describes this scene:

The adult female, Tschego, was often thus festooned when she trotted round in a circle with several of the smaller animals, quite at ease, tossing her head up and down, her mouth wide open, and, unlike the occasions when she was preparing to attack, all its muscles relaxed. That the whole company was playing could not be doubted by anyone seeing them, marching in a circle, one behind the other, the big animal stamping its foot violently at every step, or every other step, and the others exaggeratedly accentuating the marching movements. (Köhler 1925, 96)

In a note he adds: “That Tschego begins to elaborate the march rhythmically when playing in a circle is certain, as also the fact that in other cases she cares more for the form of the movements of the body, while rhythm occupies a secondary place” (1925, 96n1). He explains this behavior writing that “it is very likely that primitive adornment like this takes no account of external effect – I do not give the chimpanzees credit for that – but is based entirely on the extraordinary *heightened bodily consciousness of the animal*” (1925, 97, emphasis in the original), comparing it with very similar feelings in humans. Criticizing the narrow scope of this explanation, which reduces the whole experience to its “kinetic effect,” Costello concludes: “This is as far as Köhler, for all his sympathy and insight, is able to go; this is where a poet might have commenced, with a feel for the ape’s experience” (1999, 30; cf. Chap. 2). In fact, Köhler did go very far, both in terms of the importance and influence of his discoveries and also if compared to the scientific “closed-mindedness” of his contemporaries. A look at his experiments against the background of the scientific developments of the time will allow us to contextualize Costello’s analysis.

Köhler studied psychology in Berlin under Carl Stumpf and in 1914 was named director of the primate research facility maintained on the island of Tenerife, off the northwest coast of Africa, by the Royal Prussian Academy of Sciences. The facility was founded in 1912 by the neurophysiologist Max Rothmann and was the first primate station in Europe (although geographically part of Africa, Tenerife and the Canary islands have been a Spanish colony and then province since the fifteenth century).² Its first

²The first primate facility in the world was founded by Rosalía Abreu in 1909 in Havana.

director, Eugen Teuber,³ in 1913 received the animals coming from the German colony of Cameroon (the animals arrived already in 1912: seven chimpanzees named Consul, Tschego, Grande, Sultan, Tercera, Rana, and Chica, and an orangutan named Catalina) and rented a property in La Orotava, on the western part of the island, with a building (still known as *casa amarilla*, yellow house) and a large outdoor pen. In December 1913 Köhler moved to Tenerife with his family for a one-year-stay, like his predecessor, but the outbreak of World War I in July 2014 forced him to prolong his stay until 1920. From his experiments Köhler published four articles in the journal *Abhandlungen der Königlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften* on chimpanzee perception (1915), intelligence (1917), relational learning (1918), and other aspects of their psychology (1921). The second paper, the most important, along with some of his other observations on chimpanzee psychology and relational learning, was reprinted in book form in 1921, and a second, revised edition was translated into English in 1925 with the title *The Mentality of Apes*.⁴

Besides being known for his pioneering experiments on chimpanzees' intelligence, Köhler is also famous for establishing, with Max Wertheimer and Kurt Koffka, the school of Gestalt psychology. And it is from a Gestaltist perspective—that is, from a holistic approach that looks at mind and behavior as a whole—that he approached his experiments with chimpanzees. The question from which he started was “whether the animals do not behave with intelligence and insight under conditions which require such behaviour” (1925, 1) or whether their behavior can be explained merely in terms of “instinct” and “chance.” And to answer this question he devised his by-now famous experiments (mostly carried out in 1914) in which some obstacle had to be overcome to attain an object, usually a piece of fruit, that was in the subject's view but beyond their reach: he would put a banana out of reach and offer the chimp sticks that were too

³Teuber was not Stumpf's first choice for the job. Stumpf first proposed it to Oskar Pfungst, who at the time was the most well-reputed comparative psychologist in Germany for his research on the horse Clever Hans and had already studied primates in the Berlin zoo, but Pfungst declined. Köhler was initially considered but thought to be too inexperienced in comparative psychology.

⁴The literature on Köhler in Tenerife is extensive—including a spy novel, Ronald Ley's *A Whisper of Espionage: Wolfgang Kohler and the Apes of Tenerife* (1990), since Köhler was also accused by the British residents of the island to be a German spy. For some examples—from which I have taken the information here listed—see Teuber (1994); Martinelli (2015); Ruiz and Sánchez (2014); Villanueva-Romero (2021).

short to reach the fruit; or he would hang a banana high up in the air and spread large wooden crates around, none of which was tall enough for the purpose; or he would fill the crates with stones to make them heavier and more difficult to move for the animals. He could therefore record that the chimps were able to combine two bamboo sticks together to make a longer one; to pile the wooden crates one on top of the other in order to reach the hanging banana; and to empty the crates from the stones in order to move them and put one on top of the other.

Instead of heavily controlling the setting and the animals in order to produce desired outcomes, Köhler presented simple challenges and waited for the animals' reaction (Menzel 1989; de Waal 2016a, 67–68). He observed that the chimpanzees, after a few failed attempts, would pause and apparently give up, until in a flash they reached a breakthrough, found the solution, and proceeded to execute it. This has come to be known as the “Aha! moment,” what Köhler called “insight”:⁵ the situation is perceived as a whole—as a *Gestalt*—and the solution is reached in a sudden grasping of the relationships between the various factors that restructures the field of perception. Preexisting knowledge and a certain amount of trial-and-error learning do play of course a part in this process, but what the “insight” shows is the ability to weave prior information into new patterns (de Waal 2016a, 73). Köhler's conclusion was that the chimpanzees (and other animals: he experimented also with chicken, dogs, and human children, namely his own son) do not proceed by blind fumbling and automatic responses to stimuli but show purposeful and intelligent behavior requiring specific mental abilities (cf., among many others, de Waal 2016a; Tartabini 2020, 30–41).

More than four decades before Jane Goodall, Köhler gave a name to each chimpanzee (a common and self-evident practice before the rise of behaviorism), acknowledged their distinctive personalities, and observed their capacity in the making and using of tools.⁶ He used moreover a

⁵The English translator reports that the German term *Einsicht*, mostly used by Köhler in the adjectival form *einsichtig*, was rendered both as “insight” and “intelligence,” since in English there is no adjectival form for “insight” (Köhler 1925, 228n1). Gabriel Ruiz and Natividad Sánchez (2014, 8) note that this translation misinterprets the author's intentions by changing the focus from the mere description of a behaviour to the “theoretical” process causing it, as if the “genuine solutions in chimpanzees can supposedly be explained on a theoretical level,” which goes beyond Köhler's intentions.

⁶When he wrote *Man the Tool-Maker* (1st edition 1949), arguing that what distinguishes humans from the other animals is the ability of tool-making, British anthropologist Kenneth

strongly anthropomorphic language to describe the chimps' personalities, emotions, and actions: for example, acknowledging the great individual differences in intellectual capacities, he singled out the young Sultan as the most gifted and "clever" of the group and repeatedly disparaged Rana as the most "stupid." And he did not shy away from using terms such as "indignation," "astonishment," "sympathy," "trotting about," "gay," "sad," etc. He explicitly comments on anthropomorphic language in a few passages of the book, invoking what will be later called the "principle of parsimony," according to which the same function for the same action on the part of similar organs does not need to be named differently, unless one is ready to call anthropomorphic the sentence "Chimpanzees have the same tooth formula as man" (Köhler 1925, 106; cf. also 48n1, 161).⁷

These remarks were responding to the anthropomorphism debate of the time, which, as we will see in the next section, was already very heated. And in this debate Köhler chose the losing side, which accounts for the fact that the importance of his legacy had to wait until the cognitive revolution of the second half of the twentieth century to be properly recognized. His book was widely discussed in philosophical circles in Europe at the time, most notably by phenomenologists such as Max Scheler, Aron Gurwitsch, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Scheler 2009; Merleau-Ponty 1963; cf. Embree 2008), but it was also criticized and dismissed (for being anthropocentric, of course) by fellow scholars in comparative psychology and animal behavior. After returning to Berlin in 1920 Köhler did not continue his research in comparative psychology with primates but pursued other interests, namely the development of Gestalt psychology theory. Perhaps, Gabriel Ruiz and Natividad Sánchez speculate (2014, 12), in consequence of the frustrating experience of remaining isolated in Tenerife for so long, and of the accusations of espionage brought against him from the English colony, but also because of his disillusionment with the chimpanzees, who with age became more independent and aggressive (adult chimps are difficult to control) and made him feel that working with them

Oakley knew of and acknowledged Köhler's experiments but dismissed chimpanzees' tool-making as fortuitous and not related to conceptual thought (Oakley 1961, 2–3). Jane Goodall, on the other hand, in *In the Shadow of Man* (1st edition 1971) named Köhler's observations as forerunners of her own observation of tool-making by chimpanzees in the wild (Goodall 2010, 323–24).

⁷He adds, however, as in self-justification: "I should like to add, that nothing is said therein as to the 'consciousness' of the animal, but only as to its 'behaviour'" (1925, 106).

he had become himself “chimpanzoid” (qtd. in Ruiz and Sánchez 2014, 12).⁸

Germany’s dire financial situation after the defeat in World War I made it impossible to maintain the Station in Tenerife, which was therefore closed, the remaining animals (the chimpanzee Nueva had died in 1914 and the orangutan Catalina short before the trip) being sent to the Berlin Zoo, where they did not survive long (the last to die was Sultan in 1923) (Ruiz and Sánchez 2014; Teuber 1994). In 2023, behavioral psychologist Javier Virués-Ortega discovered the remains of five of the chimpanzees, left forgotten in a storage of the Berlin Museum für Naturkunde (University of Auckland 2023).

THE EARLY ANTHROPOMORPHISM DEBATE AND THE BIRTH OF BEHAVIORISM

In the first chapter of his book, Köhler sets his method in opposition to the one developed by the American psychologist Edward Thorndike (1874–1949) in his influential 1898 doctoral thesis, *Animal Intelligence: An Experimental Study of the Associative Processes in Animals*. Thorndike experimented mostly with cats (but also with dogs and chicks) and devised what has become known as the “puzzle box”—a practice that he pioneered and became a staple of behaviorist experimentation (Rollin 1999, 93): he put the animals in a box from which they could escape only by acting on a device (pressing a panel, opening a catch, or pulling on a loop of string), and measured the speed with which they gained their release on successive trials. Initially, he observed, the animals behaved aimlessly and frantically, stumbling on the correct response merely by chance, but after a number of repetitions they would learn how to properly execute the task. He thereby advanced what he called the Law of Effect (also known as trial-and-error learning), according to which a behavior followed by a rewarding outcome will be repeated. What Thorndike wanted to demonstrate is that there is no “reasoning” in animal behavior, which is determined instead by mere impulses. “[M]y observations of all the conduct of all these animals during the months spent with them,” he bluntly stated, “failed to find any act that even seemed due to reasoning” (1898, 46; qtd in Köhler 1925, 3). Köhler objected that the tests “were made so difficult

⁸This is curiously also what happens, as we will see in a later section, to the first trainer of Kafka’s Red Peter.

[the animals could not see the mechanism, so how could they understand its working?] that the result was bound to fall out badly” and therefore that “Thorndike then drew generalizations about [the animals’] capacities, which do not follow from those difficult experiments” (1925, 22–23).

Thorndike set off with a very clear objective in mind: “to give *the coup de grace* to the despised theory that animals reason”—which he even considered superfluous to demonstrate—(1898, 39), and chose cats and dogs precisely in order to debunk the myths about their intelligence that were so (wrongly, he argued) widespread among the general public. But also among some scientists: he singled out George Romanes (1848–1894), reproducing long quotations from Romanes’ book *Animal Intelligence* (1st edition 1882, full of anecdotes about clever cats and dogs),⁹ to illustrate “an attitude of investigation which this research will, I hope, render impossible for any scientist in the future” (Thorndike 1898, 40). Romanes had been Darwin’s research assistant and unofficial intellectual “heir” and, like Darwin himself in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), had assumed that the evolutionary principle of the physiological and psychological continuity between humans and the other animals warranted the use of an anthropomorphic language. Romanes did indulge, much more than Darwin, in imaginative and even creative conjectures and based his arguments on excessive anecdotalism, which led his colleague, the comparative psychologist C. Lloyd Morgan, to call for moderation and the necessity of experimental evidence. In 1894 (the year of Romanes’ death), in his book *Introduction to Comparative Psychology* Morgan formulated what has become his (in)famous “canon”: “In no case may we interpret an action as the outcome of the exercise of a higher psychical faculty, if it can be interpreted as the outcome of the exercise of one which stands lower in the psychological scale” (1894, 53). This earned him from Thorndike the praise of “sanest writer on comparative psychology” (1898, 50). Although Morgan did not mean his canon to deny any “higher” faculties to nonhuman animals (Lockwood 1985, 189; Rollin 1999, 78; Svendsen 2019, 34–35), his words were taken out of context and radicalized to become the dogmatic (and parodic) refusal of animal intelligence tout court.

⁹By adopting the same title for his own book, Thorndike certainly intended to use Romanes as negative paradigm and to show the truth about what “animal intelligence” really is.

The intellectual milieu in which Köhler's book appeared was made unfavorable also by other factors. In 1907, Oskar Pfungst (who in 1912 will not accept the position of director of the primate station in Tenerife) demonstrated that a horse called Hans, who was claimed to perform arithmetic and other intellectual tasks, was in fact only responding to involuntary cues in the body language of his trainer. Pfungst published a popular book, *Clever Hans* (Eng. 1911; cf. Despret 2004), giving a name to the danger of unintentional cueing (the "Clever Hans Effect") but also igniting a wave of skepticism with regard to animals' intelligence and intellectual abilities. In 1913 (the year the primate station in Tenerife was opened), then, the psychologist John B. Watson gave a famous address at Columbia University, published the same year as "Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It" (also called "The Behaviorist Manifesto"; Watson 1913), effectively launching Behaviorism as a psychological school. Systematizing Thorndike's objectivism and methodological rigor, Behaviorism rejects introspective methods and explanations and focuses exclusively on measuring observable behaviors and events. Watson systematized his ideas in his 1924 book *Behaviorism*, and the "school" was then promoted from the 1930s by B.F. Skinner, overshadowing comparative psychology and becoming the dominant approach to the study of animal (and human) behavior for most of the twentieth century.

Finally, Ivan Pavlov (1849–1936), always critical of what he called the "mysticism" of Gestalt psychology (qtd. in Todes 2022, 137) and of Köhler's approach in particular, during the 1920s became interested in the question of problem-solving and between 1933 and 1936 replicated Köhler's experiments with two chimpanzees called Roza and Raphael. In contrast to Köhler's theory of "insight," and in a refinement of Thorndike's trial-and-error approach, Pavlov argued that the chimpanzees arrived at the solution not by suddenly grasping the relation between the various factors of a situation but progressively and through conditional reflex associationism (Windholz 1984; Todes 2022, 134–140). Köhler was certainly not alone in his endeavors and some of his contemporaries did indeed pursue similar research: for example, in 1916, one year before Köhler's main publication, the American comparative psychologist Robert Yerkes published *The Mental Life of Monkeys and Apes: A Study of Ideational Behavior*, in which he analyzed problem solving through the notion of "ideation," similar to Köhler's "insight." And in Russia in the 1920s zoo-psychologist and comparative psychologist Nadezhda Ladygina-Kohts began her studies of ape behavior, emotion and cognition free from the

dogmas of Behaviorism (cf. de Waal 2016a, 98–100). But the tide of the dominant behaviorist fashion obscured their legacy for many decades to come.¹⁰

CRITICAL ANTHROPOMORPHISM AND THE LIMITS OF PRIMATOMORPHISM

Although today Köhler's book has acquired the status of a "classic," it still disturbs the last defenders of the citadel of human exceptionalism. As Frans de Waal writes: "That animals may show mental processes closer to thinking than learning was so unsettling [...] that still today Köhler's name is hissed rather than spoken in some circles" (2016b). A member of these "circles" is, for example, John S. Kennedy, a self-styled "neobehaviorist" who, in his tirade against the "new anthropomorphism," states that "[i]t has since been recognized, however, that [the chimps' behavior observed by Köhler] was not strictly a new use of the sticks and boxes. The animals had to have had previous experience of putting these objects together if they were to do so to get food" (1992, 97–98). Another member is Stephen Budiansky, who similarly argues that "[c]himpanzees that have never had the chance to play with sticks fail to use the sticks as rakes in such experiments" and that "[i]t was only by first having had such a chance to learn, by trial and error, what a stick can do that the chimpanzees were able to use them to solve problems" (1998, xxxiv). Hence, he concludes, "Köhler's insightful apes [...] turned out to be more an instance of wishful human thinking than native simian brilliance" (1998, 47).

But the tide has changed. The cognitive revolution that begun in the 1950s and 1960s slowly brought in the 1970s to the cognitive approach replacing behaviorism as the dominant paradigm, and the birth of cognitive ethology in the late 1970s finally gave full legitimacy to the kind of questions that Köhler asked more than five decades before (cf. e.g., Griffin 1978; Bekoff 1995). This process was certainly not smooth or undisputed, and neither is it fully completed, as also evidenced by the still ongoing fierce debate on anthropomorphism. Jane Goodall's path breaking observations in the 1960s were resisted and ridiculed in "scientific" circles and academic journals because of her giving names and not numbers to the

¹⁰For a (partial) history of the passage from Romanes to Watson and Skinner and the birth of behaviorism see, for example, Rollin (1999).

chimpanzees she observed and her using “anthropomorphic” language to describe their actions and emotions (all things that Köhler—and many others—had already done) (e.g., Goodall 1998). But she broke the glass ceiling of behaviorist resistance and opened the way for a flood of new voices reclaiming a new language. One of the best known among these voices is Frans de Waal’s, who not only always named the subjects he observed, identifying different personalities and individual idiosyncrasies, but did not shy away from focusing in his research on “anthropomorphic” topics such as “reconciliation,” “pace-making,” “friendship,” “culture,” “empathy,” and even “politics” (cf. e.g., de Waal 1989, 2007, 2009).

De Waal notes that with chimpanzees and great apes anthropomorphism is in fact “logical,” since they are “anthropoids,” which means “human-like” or “with human form”: in other words, anthropomorph—which is the name of the order (“Anthropomorpha,” later changed into “Primates”) in which Linnaeus grouped all great apes, including humans. “The simplest, most parsimonious view,” de Waal argues, “is that if two related species act similarly under similar circumstances, they must be similarly motivated. We don’t hesitate to make this assumption when comparing related species like horses and zebras, or wolves and dogs, so why change the rules for humans and apes?” (2019, 53). And Goodall concurs: “If we accept that there are dramatic similarities in chimpanzee and human brain and nervous system, is it not logical to assume that there will be similarities also in at least the more basic feelings, emotions, moods of the two species?” (1990, 16). With great apes anthropomorphism is in fact dictated by the very principle of parsimony which, as in Morgan’s canon, was a cornerstone of behaviorism: the “new voices” in cognitive ethology turn the principle around and show that what is really “anti-economical” (and indeed absurd) is to search for different sources and explanations for anatomically, physiologically, and psychologically similar or analogous functions.¹¹ “[A]ssuming that the human form of a particular characteristic is the defining feature of that characteristic” is a fallacy, argues Barbara King

¹¹ Mary Midgley also writes: “Granted the similarities between nervous systems, and also between many of the ways in which animals interact and the ways in which humans do, and granted also that humans often interact with animals successfully, *how wide a difference in their basic social faculties does it make sense to posit?* It is not economical to posit a greater difference between the causes that is needed to suit the difference in the effects” (1998, 134).

(1994, 134; qtd in Corbey 2005, 167)—although it is the most common strategy to still defend human exceptionality.¹²

These arguments led to a partial reappraisal of anthropomorphism, whereby the great apes worked as a sort of bridge between humans and the other animals. In the past few decades (a certain use of) anthropomorphism has been proposed as a pragmatic strategy which can be helpful in formulating testable hypothesis and getting replicable observations. Gordon Burghardt (1985) calls this attitude “critical anthropomorphism”; Randall Lockwood (1985) “applied anthropomorphism”; de Waal (2006) opts for “heuristic anthropomorphism,” claiming that it is the opposite attitude, which he calls “anthropodenial,” that does not follow the basic principle of evolutionary parsimony; Marc Bekoff (2000) advocates then a form of “biocentric anthropomorphism” as the proper “scientific” stance in the study of animal behavior; Daniel Dennett (1987)—certainly not a strong supporter of animal consciousness—defends the heuristic value of what he calls the “intentional stance,” which allows to explain and predict a behavior “as if” the subject possessed certain states of consciousness; even Kennedy admits the pragmatic usefulness of what he calls “mock anthropomorphism” (explicitly a cognate of Dennett’s “intentional stance”) to predict animal behavior by “merely pretending for argument’s sake that an animal can think or feel as we do” (Kennedy 1992, 9).¹³

That this tide change was mostly driven by primatologists is quite logical, since phylogenetic closeness among primates makes it easier to blur the species barriers and recognize shared and homologous traits. In this sense, to speak of anthropomorphism in the case of primates is perhaps a “category error” and we should rather speak of “primatomorphism” (Keeley 2004; cf. also Povinelli 1996). Primatomorphism, however, presents in turn another danger, namely “primatocentrism.” Moving the dividing line between humans and “beasts”—or “expanding the circle”—to include primates still responds to an anthropocentric logic of similarity:

¹² These are of course highly contested positions, even among primatologists. For example, Daniel Povinelli (2003) rejects the strong anthropomorphism position even for chimpanzees.

¹³ With some logical acrobatics Kennedy defends as a fact “that some anthropomorphism need not generate bad science, and that is *mock* anthropomorphism, because natural selection has produced animals that act *as if* they had minds like us [sic!]. That is what enables us to make valid predictions about animals’ behaviour without making unprovable assumptions that they have feelings and intentions” (1992, 94). I confess that I fail to understand these logical somersaults.

humans are primates so primates must be protected, whereby the similarity to humans is still the standard against which nonhuman animals are judged. This is the main accusation that was moved, for example, against The Great Ape Project, which aims at conferring basic human rights to all great apes (chimpanzees, bonobos, gorillas, orangutans) (cf. Cavalieri and Singer 1994). The inclusion of great apes in the “rights club” still entails, and is predicated upon, the exclusion of the other, less similar species.¹⁴ The reply to these criticisms was, pragmatically, that one has to start somewhere and great apes can work as a convenient bridgehead toward the rest of the animal world for future “expansions” of the club (cf. Corbey 2005, 172–75).¹⁵ These are the two poles between which critical anthropomorphism is stretched.

A common strategy to try to contain the new tide and still keep nonhumans at a comfortable distance has been (and still is) that of moving the goal posts: when tool use was observed among chimpanzees, language replaced it as the defining “unicum” of humanity; when chimps were acknowledged to use symbols, then grammar and syntax were invoked as the dividing marker; as the complexity of apes’ language abilities becomes progressively known, then other factors must be found (culture, self-consciousness, etc.) to save human uniqueness (Corbey 2005, 168; Sorenson 2009, 135). With all their language abilities, however, chimpanzees do not possess the anatomical structure (the appropriate neural control over their vocal tract muscles) to produce the articulated speech characterizing humans. So articulated speech is still the last frontier of anthropomorphism and remains therefore the precinct of literature.

¹⁴ Benjamin Beck (1982) has even warned against the danger of “chimpocentrism,” that is, the tendency in cognitive ethology, but also in philosophy and ethics, to excessively focus on chimpanzees at the expense of other primates and other non-primate species.

¹⁵ The same argument has been brought against the Nonhuman Rights Project, founded in 2007 by Steven Wise: the Nonhuman Rights Project proceeds on a case-by-case basis and does not focus only on primates but also on other intelligent mammals such as orcas, dolphins and elephants. Like the Great Ape Project, however, it aims at the recognition of legal personhood for the animals in focus, which is necessarily based on the similarity with human subjects. In 2018 a group of philosophers published *Chimpanzee Rights: The Philosophers’ Brief* in support of the Nonhuman Rights Project’s case in favor of Kiko and Tommy, two chimpanzees held captive in rural New York (Andrews et al. 2018).

IF A CHIMP COULD TALK: PERFORMING ANTHROPOMORPHISM

This is where Köhler passes the baton to Kafka and literary fiction takes over from ethological observation. There exists an interesting connection between Köhler and Kafka, which is the starting point for Costello's analysis of Köhler's experiments (see next section): the most important of Köhler's articles, "Intelligenzprüfungen an Anthropoiden I," which will constitute the basis of his 1921 book,¹⁶ was published in 1917, the same year of the publication of Kafka's short story "A Report to an Academy," which features the speaking chimpanzee Red Peter addressing an academy of scholars. Although there exists no evidence that Kafka ever read Köhler's articles or books, Costello finds interesting parallels and imagines that Köhler's chimpanzees, and in particular the clever Sultan, could have been one of the models for Red Peter. A closer look at the dates disproves this hypothesis: Kafka wrote the story in early April 1917 and already on April 22 he sent it, together with 11 other texts, to Martin Buber, who selected "A Report to an Academy" and "Jackals and Arabs" for publication in issue 2 of his journal *Der Jude*, which appeared in November 1917 (Binder 1975, 225–26); the journal issue in which Köhler's text appeared, on the other hand, was published on May 19, 1917 (Köhler 1917, 1), so Kafka could not have read it before writing his story.¹⁷ But Costello's claims are not based on philological exactness.

The parallels between Sultan and Red Peter are indeed noteworthy, and what singles out "A Report to an Academy" among Kafka's production are precisely its many references to the historical reality, usually absent in his work. Red Peter says he was captured in the Gold Coast (Kafka 1983, 251), which was the name of the British Colony in the Gulf of Guinea that with its independence in 1957 became Ghana; Sultan and the other

¹⁶For the 1921 publication in book form, the title was changed into *Intelligenzprüfungen an Menschenaffen*.

¹⁷Yvonne Nilges (2015, 407) notes that the first of Köhler's articles had already appeared in 1915, but it focused on chimpanzees' perception (it was titled "Optische Untersuchungen am Schimpansen und am Haushuhn") and not on intelligent behavior. She also notes that, at the end of his book, Köhler categorically denies the possibility that chimpanzees could have a "culture": "The lack of an invaluable technical aid (speech) and a great limitation to those very important components of thought, so-called 'images', would thus constitute the causes that prevent the chimpanzee from attaining even the smallest beginnings of cultural development" (Köhler 1925, 277; cf. Nilges 2015, 414).

chimpanzees of the Tenerife Station came instead from nearby Cameroon, a German colony until the end of World War I (University of Auckland. 2023). Red Peter recounts how he was captured: he was shot and hit twice, once in the cheek, which left a red scar giving him his name, and once below the hip (Kafka 1983, 251); shooting the mother dead to acquire the babies was the most common way of capturing wild animals, and this is probably what happened also to Sultan and the other Tenerife chimps, mostly aged 2–3 when they arrived—by boat, like Red Peter—at the station (University of Auckland. 2023). The company which captured Red Peter and took him to Hamburg, Hagenbeck, was a real firm, founded by Carl Hagenbeck (1844–1913), the most famous trader in wild animals of his time, who also branched into circuses and other animal-related activities, and even founded his own zoo in Stellingen, near Hamburg. The conditions in which Red Peter was transported—the cage “was too low for me to stand up in and too narrow to sit down in” (Kafka 1983, 252)—are realistic, and even the choice between zoo and variety show with which he is faced in Hamburg corresponds to the reality of Hagenbeck’s many activities (cf. Rothfels 2002, 189–94; Harel 2020, 50–52).

The actual source of Kafka is probably an article appeared in the newspaper *Prager Tagblatt* on April 1st, 1917, reporting on a variety show which featured a chimpanzee called Peter (or Konsul Peter)—and this explains Red Peter’s otherwise obscure tirade about his name: “a horrible name, utterly inappropriate, which only some ape could have thought of, as if the only difference between me and the performing ape Peter, who died not so long ago and had some small local reputation, were the red mark on my cheek” (Kafka 1983, 251). There are other reports of performing chimps visiting Prague’s theaters in previous years: at the time, dressed-up animals cycling, smoking, reading the papers and “aping” many other human activities were a cultural phenomenon, and the very name Peter (just like Consul or Sultan) probably refers to different animals, since after they turn 5 or 6 chimpanzee cannot be easily controlled and must be replaced (hence these kinds of shows mostly use juveniles) (Gray et al. 2005, 36–37; Nilges 2015; Radick 2019; Tischel 2018, 172). Other inspirations for Kafka could have also been E.T.A. Hoffmann’s short story “News of an Educated Young Man” (1814) or Oskar Weber’s 1914 memoir, *The Sugar Baron* (Danta 2007, 730; Tischel 2018, 131–137).

The Kafkan twist to the otherwise realistic setting of the story is of course that Red Peter, in order to find “a way out” from his unbearable captivity, learns to speak human language and turns (almost) human. In the time span of five years he recapitulates human evolution, but to the “honored members of the Academy” who came to hear about his previous life as an ape he avows that he cannot remember it: “your life as apes, gentlemen,” he says, “insofar as something of that kind lies behind you, cannot be farther removed from you than mine is from me” (Kafka 1983, 250).¹⁸ His rollercoaster journey from apehood to humanity has been obviously compared to the transformation of Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis* (e.g., Radick 2019; Harel 2020, 60–61; Latini 2022, 5), although Red Peter’s Bildungsroman-like ascent to humanity (Di Noi 2019, 161) seems to invert the direction of Gregor Samsa’s descent into an insect. However, in Red Peter eyes his new human condition represents neither an ascent nor a new freedom, but merely “a way out” from a lifetime in prison. He states that he has reached “the cultural level of an average European” (1983, 258) but identifies smoking, spitting, and drinking alcohol with the human behaviors he needed to adopt in order to become human (1983, 255–56)—which requires therefore neither rational thinking nor moral virtues (Harel 2020, 64). This “descent” into humanity from a life of plenitude accessible only in a state of nature is a modernist trope (Richter 2011, 106–7)¹⁹ which challenges human superiority and in Kafka’s story leads to a veritable “disavowal of humanity” (Danta 2007, 730).²⁰

Naama Harel (2020, 64) argues that Red Peter’s humanization is completed when he describes, at the end of his “report,” his abusive relationship with a female chimpanzee, as he is now a (human-like) master to the

¹⁸Walter Benjamin famously wrote that for Kafka animals (and animality as such) are “the receptacles of the forgotten” (1999, 810).

¹⁹A few remarks reported by Gustav Janouch from his conversations with Kafka confirm this view. For example: “The civilized world depends for the most part on the effect of successful training procedures. That is what culture means. In the light of Darwinism, man’s evolution looks like a monkey’s fall from grace” (2012, 72); “Every man lives behind bars, which he carries within him. That is why people write so much about animals now. It’s an expression of longing for a free natural life. But for human beings the natural life is a human life. But men don’t realise it. Human existence is a burden for them, so they dispose of it in fantasies” (2012, 27).

²⁰Virginia Richter (2011, 113) remarks that the story was written in the midst of a worst-case scenario concerning the development of humankind, World War I, which constitutes a true break in the history of modern Western civilization.

half-tamed animal. But Dagmar Lorenz notes that, at the same time, the female chimpanzee marks the fact that Red Peter is still not fully accepted into the human club: human mates are inaccessible to him and his self-image is therefore not validated by those who are “fully human” (Lorenz 2016–2017, 124). And the scar that gives him his name keeps reminding him and the reader of the human power that captured and subjugated him: the scar is the mark of human sovereignty over animals (Tischel 2018, 171–72; Harel 2020, 53; Latini 2022, 8–9) that he comically keeps exposing to the public—he has “a predilection for taking down [his] trousers to show them where the shot went in” (Kafka 1983, 251)—which is taken as the sign that his ape nature is “not yet quite under control” (1983, 251). Exposing the scar (human violent power) troubles the public, and that is why Red Peter as much as Elizabeth Costello like to show it: to rub people’s face in the violence against animals which they do not want to see (Lorenz 2016–2017, 125; Harel 2020, 53).

In truth Red Peter (like great apes more in general) inhabits an intermediate zone, a threshold (a classic Kafkan motif) between human and animal, questioning and blurring thereby the division lines and reminding the reader of the precariousness of impermeable identities (Di Noi 2019, 162; Harel 2020, 63; Latini 2022, 18–19). And the last thing he wants is to be included in the human club as a “lesser” member. Costello makes this clear with an implicit reference to The Great Ape Project and the language experiment with primates that were popular between the 1960s and the 1980s:²¹

Generation after generation, heroically, our captives refuse to speak to us. All save Red Peter, all save the great apes. Yet because the great apes, or some of them, seem to us to be on the point of giving up their silence, we hear human voices raised arguing that the great apes should be incorporated into a greater family of the Hominoidea, as creatures who share with man the faculty of reason. And being human, or humanoid, these voices go on, the great apes should then be accorded human rights, or humanoid rights. What rights in particular? At least those rights that we accord mentally defective specimens of the species *Homo sapiens*: the right to life, the right not to be subjected to pain or harm, the right to equal protection before the law. That is not what Red Peter was striving for when he wrote, through his

²¹ For some examples of the vast literature focusing on the famous experiments with Washoe (chimpanzee), Koko (gorilla), Kanzi (bonobo), and other primates, see de Luce and Wilder (1983), Hixson (1998), Tomasello (2017), Krause and Beran (2020).

amanuensis Franz Kafka, the life history that, in November of 1917, he proposed to read to the Academy of Science. Whatever else it may have been, his report to the academy was not a plea to be treated as a mentally defective human being, a simpleton. (Coetzee 1999, 25–26)²²

Red Peter’s “report” is instead a *performance*. Since its publication, “A Report to an Academy” has been interpreted as an allegory of the assimilation of European Jews, or also of European colonialism, of the question of mimesis, or of writing itself. But Kafka himself refused to call it (and its companion story “Jackals and Arabs”) a “parable” (*Gleichniss*), as Martin Buber suggested; “If they are to have any overall title at all,” he told Buber, “the best might be: ‘Two Animal Stories’” (Kafka 1977, 132). Animality is the focus of the story and is in it *performed* at many and different levels. What the story performs is also a number of discourses: just like a “drag show” ridiculing and subverting normative identities and cultural expressions, Red Peter—a chimp in drag—“apes” the academic discourse and the bourgeois moral code, as much as Costello apes Red Peter (she repeatedly claims to feel like Kafka’s ape) and Coetzee himself apes the codes of philosophical address and argumentation. In yet another *use* of anthropomorphism, this mirror game of reflecting performances works as destabilizing device to assail impermeable identities, normative species relationships, and anthropomorphism itself as a policing apparatus to defend human exceptionality (Lorenz 2016–2017, 127; Di Noi 2019, 162; Harel 2020, 66–67).

THE ANTHROPOMORPHISM OF THE EXPERIMENT VS LITERARY ANTHROPOMORPHISM

The problem with The Great Ape Project and with the language experiments with Washoe, Koko, Kanzi, and other primates, so popular between the 1960s and the 1980s, is that they are extremely anthropomorphic (and anthropocentric): bestowing *human* rights on, or teaching *human* language to, nonhuman subjects means, as Costello emphasizes, to turn them

²²The same argument is repeated at the end of Costello’s stay at Appleton college in her discussion with the philosophy professor O’Hearne: at the latter’s provocation that “The best performance the higher apes can put up is no better than that of a speech-impaired human being with severe mental retardation,” Costello replies that it is the experiments which test animals according to *human* capacities that are “profoundly anthropocentric” and ultimately “imbecile” (1999, 61–63). I will analyze this point in the next section.

into lesser forms of human beings. This is indeed what the worst form of anthropomorphism consists of: a projection of human traits onto a non-human. And Costello takes to task Köhler and his experiments for the very same reason: despite all his “sympathy” and “insight,” which finally made him a “classic” and a precursor of the cognitive revolution, what Köhler tested in the chimpanzees under his care was ultimately their ability to conform to human patterns of thought.

The parallel between Sultan and Red Peter helps bringing this fact to light: just like Red Peter, Sultan and his chimpanzee companions in Tenerife “underwent a period of training intended to *humanize* them” (Coetzee 1999, 27, emphasis added). Kafka’s fiction satirizes this process with a fabulous metamorphosis, while Köhler’s book shows how it can, at best, bring the chimpanzees to the level of “a speech-impaired human being with severe mental retardation” (1999, 62). Through the device of *prosopopoeia*, Costello imagines what Sultan’s thoughts might have been when he was undergoing the experiments, looking at the hanging bananas and the wooden crates:

Sultan knows: Now one is supposed to think. That is what the bananas up there are about. The bananas are there to make one think, to spur one to the limits of one’s thinking. But what must one think? One thinks: Why is he starving me? One thinks: What have I done? Why has he stopped liking me? One thinks: Why does he not want these crates any more? But none of these is the right thought. Even a more complicated thought – for instance: What is wrong with him, what misconception does he have of me, that leads him to believe it is easier for me to reach a banana hanging from a wire than to pick up a banana from the floor? – is wrong. The right thought to think is: How does one use the crates to reach the bananas? (1999, 28)

When the wooden crates are filled with stones:

One is not supposed to think: Why has he filled the crates with stones? One is supposed to think: How does one use the crates to get the bananas despite the fact that they are filled with stones? One is beginning to see how the man’s mind works. [...] As long as Sultan continues to think wrong thoughts, he is starved. He is starved until the pangs of hunger are so intense, so overriding, that he is forced to think the right thought, namely, how to go about getting the bananas. Thus are the mental capabilities of the chimpanzee tested to their uttermost. (1999, 28–29)

For Costello, the whole process forces the lowest and pettiest thoughts into the chimpanzee's mind: "At every turn Sultan is driven to think the less interesting thought. From the purity of speculation (Why do men behave like this?) he is relentlessly propelled towards lower, practical, instrumental reason (How does one use this to get that?) and thus towards acceptance of himself as primarily an organism with an appetite that needs to be satisfied" (1999, 29). The experiments—ultimately "sadistic games that are played around food" crafted into "a carefully plotted psychological regimen"—lead Sultan away from "questions about the justice of the universe and the place of this penal colony in it," away from "ethics and metaphysics" and "towards the humbler reaches of practical reason" (1999, 29). And it is only on the basis of these "humbler reaches" that he and the rest of apedom are (mis)judged.

Prosopopoeia—to put oneself in another's mind—is here unequivocally anthropomorphic (Tischel 2018, 185), but it helps nonetheless both attributing to the chimps a "theory of mind" (they need to understand what the humans want from them) and questioning the meaningfulness of the experiments. Köhler was aware that the artificiality of the situations proposed influenced the animals' responses:

How often, in any case, – he wondered – could a chimpanzee, under his normal conditions of life, be in a position to need, for example, a footstool to reach a high object – presumably the fruit on a tree? [...] Under natural conditions they arrive anywhere without stools, and only Man, making experiments, brings them into situations where such roundabout methods are excluded naturally, or through Man's prohibitions. The same may be said about the use of a stick for pulling objects to them which would otherwise be unattainable. (1925, 222–23)

Not only the setting of the experiment (the "apparatus"), but the type of questions asked and the way they are asked and interpreted determine the framework in which the animal can respond: captivity, confinement, stress, isolation, starvation, and most of all the anthropo-referentiality of the whole situation *produce* very specific and "unnatural" answers, which moreover do nothing but confirm what was already implied in the questions—what Vinciane Despret calls the "tautology of the apparatus" (Despret 2002, 113–14; cf. also e.g., Delfour 2019, 35). Testing *animal* intelligence on the ability to perform *human* tasks cannot but lead to a poor performance (Menzel 1989, 218). Finally, the cultural and social norms of the time and place of the experimenter also condition the

questions, the answers, and their interpretation. Comparing Thorndike's experiments in America and Köhler's experiments in Tenerife, Bertrand Russel ironically and famously said:

It seemed that animals always behave in a manner showing the rightness of the philosophy entertained by the man who observes them. This devastating discovery holds over a wider field. [...] Animals observed by Americans rush about frantically until they hit upon the solution by chance. Animals observed by Germans sit still and scratch their heads until they evolve the solution out of their inner consciousness. I believe both sets of observations to be entirely reliable, and that what an animal will do depends upon the kind of problem that you set before it. (Russell 1959, 95–96)

Even anthropomorphism itself is culturally determined, as Pamela Asquith has demonstrated by comparing Western and Japanese understanding and uses of the concept (e.g., 1986, 1997). And also twentieth-century primatology, as Donna Haraway argued in a very controversial book (1989), is overdetermined by gender, race, class, and science codes which literally “create” (hence the big controversy) the animal subjects it studies.

Confronted with the anthropomorphism (and anthropocentrism) of the experiment (of “science”), which crushes animal agency and degrades nonhuman subjects to a pathetic shadow or humanity, the anthropomorphism of literature can allow instead to take the very perspective of the animal, it can open a path to the imaginary space of their minds, and *this* form of anthropomorphism, charged with an ethical imperative, can become a form of “knowledge” in its own right (Tischel 2018, 188, 191–92). Kafka's and Costello's strategic and ironic anthropomorphism unveils and denounces the “bad” anthropomorphism of science and of our culture more in general, which constrains and stifles our relations with nature and the other creatures, and it is instead through an exercise of the imagination, through the fictional words of Red Peter and Sultan, that we can perhaps hope to reconnect with the world of animals.

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Tentacular Logocentrism: Octopus Minds and Human Imagination

Elizabeth Costello's main tenet about the sympathetic imagination is, "If I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed, then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life" (1999, 35). In his response to Coetzee's Tanner Lectures, Peter Singer counters, "The fact that a character doesn't exist isn't something that makes it hard to imagine yourself as that character. You can imagine someone very like yourself, or like someone else you know. Then it is easy to think your way into the existence of that being. But a bat, or an oyster?" (1999, 90–91). Singer's point is that the farther we move from the human form of embodiment the more difficult it becomes to "think our way" into the nonhuman bodymind, and the paradigm of this difficulty are mollusks, represented here by the oyster.¹ Costello's singling out chimpanzees and oysters might be a hidden reference precisely to Singer's *Animal Liberation* (the bat is of course an explicit reference to Thomas Nagel), where we read, in the preface to the 1975 edition, "In the popular mind the term 'animal' lumps together beings as different as oysters and chimpanzees, while placing a

¹In the Spanish version of "The Glass Abattoir," Costello replaces the oyster with the lobster: "I thought I had access to the interiority of the wolf and the lobster and all the rest of the animal world [...] thanks to the faculty of empathy [*sic!*] which, in my very unscientific opinion, is innate in us" (Coetzee 2018, 80). The English edition of this short story (Coetzee 2023, 207–42) does not include the entire section where these sentences appear.

gulf between chimpanzees and humans, although our relationship to those apes is much closer than the oyster's" (Singer 2015, 26). In the first edition of Singer's work, it is precisely the oyster—or rather, "somewhere between a shrimp and an oyster" (2015, 258)—that is to mark the boundaries of moral consideration.

In subsequent editions of *Animal Liberation*, Singer revised his position, based in part on recent behavioral studies of cephalopods (cf. Herzog and Galvin 1997, 239), and in the 50th anniversary re-elaboration of his work, *Animal Liberation Now*, in a section tellingly titled "Drawing the Line," he feels confident to extend sentience even to (some) mollusks, dwelling in particular on octopuses. Although "more closely related to an oyster than to any vertebrate" (Singer 2023, 34), octopuses have been revealed, in the past four decades or so, to be intelligent, astute, curious, flexible, and even creative beings, and have aroused a lot of curiosity and interest, both among scientists and in society at large. Their form of intelligence, however, is so different from that of humans that Singer subscribes to the often-repeated cliché that meeting an octopus is the closest we get to meeting "an intelligent alien" (Singer 2023, 34; cf. Godfrey-Smith 2016, 12; Svendsen 2019, 9–10). In the encounter with an octopus, therefore, the imaginative effort and the role played by anthropomorphism are very different from those at play in the encounter with a chimpanzee or other great apes—or even with bats, and mammals in general.

In this chapter I will explore the limits and conditions of this "alien" encounter, delving both in the scientific literature and, following Costello's maxim, also in some artistic approaches. Unlike Costello, though, this time I will not look at poetry but instead at a movie, the 2020 documentary *My Octopus Teacher*, and a novel, Ray Nayler's 2022 *The Mountain in the Sea*. Like Costello, I follow the principle that imagination and the arts—what in the previous chapter I called "literary anthropomorphism"—can offer us a different access to nonhuman otherness and the means for what Peter Godfrey-Smith (2019) calls an "imaginative leap" toward another's perspective. This chapter is thus in line with the aims and goals of those scientific-philosophical projects seeking a different access to octopus experience by bringing together scientists and artists in the hope to manage to "get inside," insofar as possible, the octopus' world.² This approach tries to avoid reducing the octopus to their otherness by

² See, for example, *Okto-Lab*, <https://oktolab.khm.de>.

“taming” and appropriating them to human (anthropomorphic) categories (cf. Krebber et al. 2019, 2020). Appreciating them for themselves and in their difference to us is the challenge their otherness issues to human imagination.

THE MOST OTHER OF ALL

“Never mind what it’s like to be a bat, as Nagel pondered,” writes Ed Yong; “How can we possibly know what it is like to be an octopus?” (2022, 333). The foreignness of the bat’s sensory apparatus is dwarfed by that of the octopus’ and especially by the way the octopus’ senses are weaved together and relate to the world, so that the octopus could occupy the position of the Martian—the outmost alien—in Nagel’s scale of foreignness. And as such octopuses are in fact represented both in the scientific and in the popular literature, although they are earthly creatures just like bats and humans. In contrast to bats, however, there is something in octopuses that deeply fascinates us humans: their intelligence. The point on which I will insist in this chapter is that this trait pushes us to try and bridge the abyss of otherness separating us from the octopus, an effort that we are much less ready to make in the case of bats (and many other creatures). This is, for example, what pushed naturalist Sy Montgomery to want to explore octopuses as “the great mystery of the Other”: “I wanted to meet the octopus,” she writes. “I wanted to touch an alternate reality. I wanted to explore a different kind of consciousness, if such a thing exists. What is it like to be an octopus? Is it anything like being a human? Is it even possible to know?” (2015, 14). And it is also what moved philosopher Peter Godfrey-Smith to focus on octopuses to investigate the topic of “other minds”: “If we want to understand other minds,” he writes, “the minds of cephalopods are the most other of all” (2016, 12).

It is the uttermost otherness that first fascinates us. Octopus blood, to start with, is blue because it uses copper as the oxygen-carrying molecule instead of the iron which makes our blood red. This blue blood is pumped by three hearts, two—the branchial hearts—pumping the blood to the gills where it picks up oxygen and the third—the systemic heart—pumping the oxygenated blood around the body. All octopuses produce a venom which they use to stun their preys, which they crunch, when the latter are hard like crabs or clams, with a two-part beak. The beak, made of keratin (like our fingernails), is the only hard part of the octopus body and is situated, with the mouth, on its underside, where the eight arms

meet. Each arm has muscles with both radial and longitudinal fibers (more like our tongues than our biceps) and is provided with hundreds (the exact number is species-specific³) of suckers, each in turn equipped with 10,000 chemoreceptors to sense chemicals: therefore, the suckers handle simultaneously touch, taste and smell in a way that fuse these senses together in a true synesthesia. In male octopuses one of the arms, the hectocotylus, is specialized in storing and transferring the spermatophores (packets of sperm) into the female's mantle cavity.

But the most striking aspect is perhaps the octopus' bodily flexibility: with neither skeleton nor shell,⁴ the octopus has no permanent shape, they are shapeshifters who can squeeze through a hole slightly bigger than their eyeball (the only other semi-hard part of their body besides the beak) and transform their body shape almost indefinitely. As Godfrey-Smith emphasizes, the octopus' is "a body of pure possibility" (2016, 34). This characteristic complicates (for us, for our understanding) the body-mind relationship: with no fixed distances between parts, no joints, no natural angles, the octopus is almost "disembodied," Godfrey-Smith argues. Not, of course, in the sense that it has no material body, but that the body, being "protean, all possibility," "has none of the costs and gains of a constraining and action-guiding body. The octopus lives outside the usual body/brain divide" (Godfrey-Smith 2016, 51). Moreover, the division between brain and body also makes little sense: the octopus' central brain is not protected in a cranium and is curiously wrapped around the esophagus (a dangerous feature if the octopus eats something sharp), but it only comprises one-third of the nervous system; the other two-thirds are distributed in the rest of the body. With ca. 500 million neurons (the same as a dog or a cat), the octopus' nervous system is the largest among invertebrates, which makes octopuses "the most intelligent invertebrates in the world" (Schweid 2013, 47) and "evolution's only experiment in big brains outside of the vertebrates" (Godfrey-Smith 2016, 100). But it is also a *different* experiment: as Godfrey-Smith repeatedly emphasizes, it is "an independent experiment in the evolution of large brains and complex behavior": "evolution built minds twice over" (2016, 12).

³The order consists of about 300 species, ranging from the tiny, 2-cm-long *Octopus wolfi* to the Giant Pacific octopus, weighing up to 15 kg and with an arm span of more than 4 m.

⁴Among the cephalopods, the nautilus is the only species to have retained a shell; like the octopus, the squid and the cuttlefish forwent the outer shell, but, unlike the octopus, they retained a hard internal structure called cuttlebone or gladius. The octopus is the only species to have forgone both external and internal hard structure.

As Sidney Carls-Diamante (2022) points out, with its 45–50 million neurons the central brain is even the *smallest component* of the octopus’ nervous system. The two optic lobes (sometimes regarded as part of the central nervous system and sometimes of the peripheral nervous system; but does this division even make sense?) contain 120–180 million neurons and the rest is distributed throughout the eight arms. The three systems, moreover, are interconnected by only 30,000 nerve fibers. This means not only that the central brain is not able to support “somatotopic representation or point-for-point mapping of the body,” but also, and most importantly, that the arms are extensively autonomous in sensory processing and motor control, and even possess independent short-term memory (Carls-Diamante 2022). Unlike in humans (and bats), there is almost no top-down control, and the metaphor of “core and periphery” does not make much sense. Godfrey-Smith proposed thus a different metaphor, which is often cited: “In the octopus’s case there is a conductor, the central brain. But the players it conducts are jazz players, inclined to improvisation, who will accept only so much direction. Or perhaps they are players who receive only rough, general instructions from the conductor, who trusts them to play something that works” (2016, 69).

Hence the octopus is “suffused with nervousness; the body is not a separate thing that is controlled by the brain or the nervous system” (Godfrey-Smith 2016, 51). And this lack of a clear demarcation between body and brain, and the relative independence of each nervous system, raise important questions with regards to the octopus’ consciousness. The octopus is the only invertebrate mentioned in the 2012 Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness (Low et al. 2012),⁵ but how far is octopus consciousness comparable to vertebrate consciousness (vertebrate brains all have a common architecture)? If the octopus has no centralized “I,” of what consist their conscious states? How can we describe them without anthropomorphically squeezing them into our human models? Against the thesis of unity (e.g., Mather 2021), many hypotheses and hybrid

⁵The 2024 New York Declaration on Animal Consciousness also adds some decapod crustaceans and insects (cf. Andrews et al. 2024). The acknowledgment of consciousness should secure some level of legal protection, and in fact the 2010 Directive of the European Union on Animal Welfare includes cephalopods, listing them as a kind of “honorary vertebrate” (Godfrey-Smith 2016, 41). However, the US Animal Welfare Act still does not include invertebrates, and many plans exist to intensively “farm” octopuses, who are a-social animals and would therefore strongly suffer (cf. Mather 2019b; King and Marino 2019; Marshall 2023).

explanations have proposed the thesis of “multiple selves,” distributed but collaborating and cooperating (Montgomery 2015, 158), or of a “distributed sense of self” (Baer 2017). Ed Yong (2022, 332) speculates that octopuses live in two different *Umwelten*, whereby the head is dominated by vision but the arms live in a world of taste and touch, with some cross-talk between the two “worlds.” Carls-Diamante (2022; cf. also 2019) prefers to speak of “fields of consciousness” and argues that the question is not only “*what* is it like to be an octopus?” but also “*where* is it like to be an octopus”: if the arms are capable of supporting an idiosyncratic field of consciousness, then “octopus consciousness might consist of multiple conscious fields that may or may not be experienced as a single, unified field.”

Confronted with such utter and fabulous foreignness, however, what strikes and fascinates us is that we cannot doubt that “there is someone in there.” Richard Schweid begins his book on octopuses stating, “When you watch an octopus, an octopus watches you back” (2013, 7), and most people studying them indeed focus at some point on the octopus’ eye. Octopuses have “camera” eyes with a lens that focuses an image on a retina and that are dramatically similar to ours. And in their so similar, so human-like eyes we detect interest, curiosity, strong personality, a quick and vivid intelligence;⁶ we recognize something special about them, something that, despite their extreme alienness, we have in common—perhaps even a “soul.”⁷ Godfrey-Smith defines octopuses as “an island of mental complexity in the sea of invertebrate animals” (2016, 12), and it is precisely this mental complexity that attracts and moves us, as I will show in the next section on the 2020 documentary *My Octopus Teacher*.

Before moving to the film, however, I need to briefly dwell on a last point: the octopus’ intelligence does not manifest itself in their ability to solve complicated tasks that the experimenters assign them. In laboratory settings, they perform fairly well but not exceptionally, and they are slow learners: it is hard to teach them anything like how to pull a lever to get a reward (which was one of the preferred tasks of all behaviorists from Thorndyke and Skinner onward; cf. Svendsen 2019, 112). They seem not

⁶And in fact in the documentary movie that I will analyze below, *My Octopus Teacher*, many close-ups of the octopus eyes work to emphasize the similarities and the connection between the human and the octopus.

⁷Though not settling on a positive definition of “soul,” Sy Montgomery feels, “If I have a soul – and I think I do – an octopus has a soul, too,” and this conviction gives the title to her book, *The Soul of an Octopus* (2015).

to be interested in the test but express instead their intelligence in different ways: in these kinds of setting, where their intelligence emerges and shines is in the many anecdotes in which they do not do what they are told or what is expected from them but instead “turn the apparatus around them to their own octopodean purposes” (Godfrey-Smith 2016, 37). The many and most celebrated anecdotes of octopus intelligence are in fact tales of escape and thievery and stories about their special interaction with some human subjects (both of sympathy and dislike). It is not in the lab, therefore, that we can really “meet” the octopus,⁸ but in their own environment and on their own terms, and this is the great achievement of Craig Foster in *My Octopus Teacher* (Ehrlich and Reed 2020).

WHAT CAN AN OCTOPUS TEACH US?

The first line of the movie, spoken by Foster’s voice-over, goes: “People say an octopus is like an alien, but if you get closer you realize we’re very similar in a lot of ways.” The whole movie is then built around these similarities and the amazing relationship between a man and an octopus that developed and flourished. In the mid-2010s, South African documentary filmmaker and naturalist Craig Foster was going through an existential crisis and started freediving every day in a cold underwater kelp forest in False Bay, near Cape Town. After encountering a curious octopus (a “common octopus,” *Octopus vulgaris*) who let him approach, he decided to return every day and document the octopus’ activities and the uncommon relationship that was developing between them. Foster followed the octopus for nearly a year, documenting her⁹ living habits, her hunting techniques, her clever and creative defense strategies, including in two attacks by a pyjama shark (*Poroderma africanum*), her most common predator in that area, but most of all the bond that was growing between

⁸This is my main objection to the otherwise emotional and moving account of human-octopus encounters in Sy Montgomery’s book: despite all her sensitivity and compassion, most of her encounters with octopuses take place in the New England Aquarium in Boston, and she almost never questions the ethics of capturing and imprisoning these extremely intelligent beings. The only time she does, she answers herself (via the mouth of the person responsible to provide the aquarium with octopuses from the wild) that the captives are “ambassadors,” importantly tasked to teach us humans about the marvels of the natural world—the standard (and quite weak) justification of all zoos and aquaria.

⁹We find out at the end of the movie that she was a female octopus, but the feminine pronoun is used from the very beginning.

them: progressively losing fear of the human, the octopus started exploring Foster's hand and body with her arms, then even rode his hand to the surface, rested on his chest, and seemed to say (Foster muses): "I trust you, human, and now you can come into my octopus world." What prompted Foster to return every day was the question: What could I learn from such an intensive focus on a specific individual—not just a "specimen" in a lab—in her natural environment? (cf. Suther 2021).

The movie is a documentary—and in fact it won the 2020 Best Documentary Feature at the 93rd Academy Awards—but it is not just another feature of naturalist cinema, so what the viewer learns—what Foster learns—is not only a number of facts about the octopus' life and environment and her habits in feeding, mating, etc. The movie is, of course, a commercial product (and is distributed by a big player like Netflix), so it is crafted in the elegant style of naturalist cinema, with stunningly beautiful, high-definition images, an engaging narrative (the story of the interspecies friendship told by Foster in voice-over), a descriptive music guiding the viewer's emotions, and an edifying "message." However, unlike in naturalist cinema, Foster is not the disinterested narrator but instead presents himself as part of the nature he is observing and describing. He is the protagonist of the movie as much as the octopus; or better, the protagonist is their uncommon and deep relationship, in which, he remarks, "the boundaries between us seemed to dissolve." The narrative focuses on the effects this relationship provided and the changes it produced in Foster (the film has the structure of a Bildungsroman, Cary and Gruen [2022, 59] remark), whereby the human is framed as "pupil" and the octopus as "teacher." What the octopus teaches Foster (and the viewer) is not only or not much the vulnerability of life and the fragility of the human connection with the natural world—which is the intended "message" of the movie (e.g., Arnold 2020). Much more interestingly, she teaches us to recognize and acknowledge her as an *individual*, oriented by ends, with pleasurable or painful experiences, and a good or bad life (Suther 2021).

Foster avows that "I had never been overly sentimental toward animals before. I realized I was changing. She was teaching me to become sensitized to the other, especially wild creatures." And the last sentence of the movie goes: "What she taught me is that you are part of this planet and not a visitor. That's a huge difference." *My Octopus Teacher* inverts the roles of laboratory experiments, where the humans decide about what is to be learned and how; but also of traditional naturalist cinema, where

humans are external and detached observers with no real emotional connection (except for a patronizing fascination for the “beauty” of the *rest* of the world). Against the dominant, impersonal gaze of the lab experimenter and, ultimately, also of the traditional naturalist filmmaker, *My Octopus Teacher* proposes a personal and loving gaze that humbly allows to be taught by the other instead of seeking to “extract”—physically or visually—the desired knowledge from a dominated and objectified other.¹⁰ Foster’s attitude overall is a feeling of true awe before the “pure magnificence of her.” And it is in wonder that he describes the many things he learns. In one of the most emotional scenes of the movie, for example, Foster films the octopus flailing her arms through a school of fishes in a way that could not be misunderstood for hunting: he realizes she was playing, which is a behavior that was thought to be present only in vertebrates and social animals. Jennifer Mather and others (e.g., Anderson and Mather 1999; cf. also Kuba et al. 2014; Toomey 2024, ch. 1) did experimentally prove that octopuses do engage in this activity, which, moreover, does not diminish with age, as in most vertebrates, in which play is thought to have an adaptive function (but octopuses live short lives). Vinciane Despret speculates therefore that what play manifests in octopuses is “a free and creative relation to the world and to other beings” (2021, 64).

Obviously, this “personal” and emotional approach did not appeal to everyone (although it certainly contributes to a large degree to the film’s success, striking a deep emotional chord with many viewers). Elle Hunt (2020), for example, for all her general appreciation, objected to the movie’s “occasional sentimentality” and lamented that “Foster’s takeaways tend to be emotive, rather than scientific,” despite three expert advisers being credited on the film, including Jennifer Mather. And Martha Nussbaum (2023, 240) sneered at the excessive focus on the “romanticized relationship” between a *male* human and a *female* octopus—though the language of love adopted by Foster is certainly one of the striking features of the movie: “I fell in love with her,” he says toward to end, “but also with that amazing wildness that she represented and how that changed me.” But, of course, the main problem is with the movie’s “lapsing” into anthropomorphism. A central theme in the movie is the correspondence

¹⁰For Cheril Abbate (2020), naturalist cinema (and I think she would include *My Octopus Teacher* in this category) inherently cannot but disturb, misrepresent, and anthropomorphize wild animals since it involves “assumptions about ‘wild’ animals that do not accurately represent their authentic intentions, desires, behaviors, and goals” (2020, 783).

between the two lives—the human and the octopodan—in a process of self-healing and regeneration: just like Foster, through his daily diving with the octopus, progressively emerged from his life crisis, so the octopus regrew an arm that was bitten off by a pyjama shark in the first of the two attacks featured. “She was getting past her difficulties,” Foster says, “and I was getting past the difficulties I had in my life. In a strange way our lives were mirroring each other”—an assertion that sounded to many like an anthropomorphic projection (e.g., Hunt 2020).

Another instance is a claim Foster repeats twice: when tracking down the octopus at the beginning of the movie, he says: “you have to start thinking like an octopus”; and at the end, recalling his intense and even taxing emotional involvement, he repeats “in my mind I was thinking like an octopus.” This desire of identification with the pure “other” is perhaps at the heart of our fascination with such alien a creature, as also Montgomery writes: “If you took the monsters’ point of view, everything they did made perfect sense. The trick was learning to think like a monster” (2015, 19). But what does this really mean? Is it possible, or does it even make sense, to try and “think” like an octopus? Is it just a metaphor? Since our nervous systems are so different, would it not be better, as Sophie Lewis suggests (2021), to resist these kinds of metaphors? From a purely “scientific,” “objective” point of view, these objections are sensible and correct. However, anthropomorphism and sentimentality must be weighed against the ethical and political achievements of this kind of movie: the emotional and ethical investment they create in the audience can raise public awareness and facilitate conditions for political change—as the encounter with his octopus teacher led Foster to create the Sea Change Project, a nonprofit organization to protect marine life (which features in the final scenes and the credits of the movie).

In the next sections I will analyze this aspect of anthropomorphism, but I will also dwell on a characteristic of the octopus that still puzzles scientists and philosophers: their very short life in relation to their intelligence. The interspecies friendship between Foster and his octopus teacher ends in fact, after about one year, with the death of the animal. One day Foster finds her in the company of another octopus—certainly a male, since octopuses are not social animals and only meet to mate¹¹ (and that is how we finally find out that the “teacher” was a female): after mating, the female lays her eggs and sets permanently in her den, fanning and tending them

¹¹This is a contested point and I will get back to it in a later section.

as they develop. When the eggs hatch, the larvae drift off and the mother let herself die. The last images we see of the octopus are of her body drifting until the corpse is carried away by a pyjama shark. The viewers cannot but be deeply moved by this scene, because throughout the movie they learned to see the octopus as an *individual*. This is ultimately her most important teaching, which no “scientific” experiment can (or intends to) provide.

“JUST A STORY”: ANECDOTALISM AND SUBJECTIVITY

What ultimately makes *My Octopus Teacher* “unscientific” is not much its sentimentality and its romanticization of the man-octopus relationship, but the fact that it is “just a story.” It is a narrative focusing on one single “specimen” in a specific and contingent context which, moreover, overinterprets its subject and the anecdotes about her. This is not “science.” Science—as it has been defined for much of the twentieth century—needs “data,” collections of “behavioral patterns detected repeatedly and independently by experienced and well-trained observers” (Mitchell 1997, 420–21); science involves “careful experiments with a statistically significant number of animals, often with both ‘experimental’ and ‘control’ groups, followed by analysis to estimate the probability that any recorded pattern was not just a chance event” (Balcombe 2007, 44); science must be rigorous and exact. A story like *My Octopus Teacher* is just a collection of anecdotes which carries little scientific credibility.

The reliance on stories and anecdotes characterized nineteenth-century, “pre-scientific” naturalists, and the so-called anecdotal method (Thorpe 1979, 25), typical of George Romanes’ colorful and sentimental observations, was precisely what provoked Lloyd-Morgan’s reservations and Thorndyke’s anathema, as I showed in the previous chapter. Anecdotes are not “data” because they are single, casual, unverifiable, and thus unreliable observations that cannot be reproduced and confirmed in laboratory conditions. Anecdotalism is often associated with anthropomorphism, and these two “flaws” constitute the “twin demons” (Mitchell et al. 1997, 3) against which “true” science has been at war for more than a century. But this terminology is indeed telling of the emotional and almost “religious” (and therefore *unscientific*) charge of the debate. The term anthropomorphism comes in fact from a religious context (and it is still used there today in the original meaning): it was supposedly coined by the Greek philosopher and theologian Xenophanes in the fifth century BC to censure

Homer's portraying the gods in human form. Mocking this practice, Xenophanes argued that if horses had hands, they would draw their gods in their own image. Anthropomorphism, therefore, was in the first place a *sin*, and this connotation is implicitly retained in the contemporary use.

Until the mid-nineteenth century the term was used only in religious debates but was then adopted also in scientific contexts, perhaps to mock and deactivate the antivivisectionist criticisms of the cruel "scientific" practices of the time (cf. Hribal 2010, 448n33). Today the religious vocabulary is retained—anthropomorphism is a sin, a blasphemy, a heresy, a taboo¹²—and when John Kennedy calls it an "incurable disease" (1992, 160), unfortunately ingrained in the human psyche, he means something like the "original sin." The religious terminology emphasizes how the debate on anthropomorphism is biased and distorted: as John Fisher remarks (1991, 49, 51), in scientific circles anthropomorphism is a "term of ideological abuse," used to inhibit further considerations and to shut down any discussion. And anecdotalism, its "demonic" twin, is used to dismiss all unstructured observation as "just another, untrustworthy story." For a very long time, "proper" observation was equated to (literally) putting the test subject in a *box* and force them to perform one single task, as it was pioneered by Thorndyke's early experiments with cats (see previous chapter) and then systematized by B.F. Skinner. Skinner invented indeed what he called the Operant Conditioning Chamber (also called Skinner Box) where the test animal had (and still has) to push a button or a lever to receive a reward (or eventually a punishment). And this is what was deemed "proper," structured, repeatable, non-anthropomorphic—in a word, *scientific*—observation.

But, as I have already mentioned, octopuses do not perform very well in "boxes" and in highly conditioned situations. Instead, their vivid intelligence emerges—and thus must be studied—in *anecdotes* of escape, mischief, thievery, and in other situations in which they turn around the apparatus and literally "think outside the box." As they do with the other devices, octopuses also turn around and deactivate the ideological apparatus that opposes anecdotes and boxes, confirming and supporting thereby a trend that has been changing the study of animal behavior in the past few decades. As with the attitudes toward possible "critical" uses of anthropomorphism that I explored in the previous chapter, also the attitudes toward

¹²For an overview, see, for example, Masson and McCarthy 1996, 52–57; Midgley 1998, 125–33; Daston and Mitman 2006; Balcombe 2007, 40–43.

anecdotalism are changing, even within the scientific community. Anecdotes and storytelling, it is now acknowledged, are not only natural and inevitable features of human psychology (“the human tendency to want to tell a good story”; Burghardt 1997, 270); as Martin Moynihan writes, “Storytelling is a science – at least a practical technique – as well as an art” (1997, 214): complex behavioral patterns must be described in well-structured narratives; statistics, numbers and quantifications are useful only with simple and repetitive phenomena (and that is why behaviorism reduced animals to simple and repetitive machines); complex and more infrequent interactions must be described one by one.

But most importantly, a structured narrative induces a psychological interpretation, in which the characters (the nonhuman animals) are perceived as *intentional agents*. In her history of the modern anthropomorphism debates, Eileen Crist (1999) counterposes the old nineteenth-century naturalists to the twentieth-century, “scientific” ethologists to show how the two different languages these two groups adopted shaped the very subjects they purported to describe. The old naturalists used the (anthropomorphic) “language of the lifeworld”—a world humans and animals share and that is replete with action and meaning. In order to establish ethology as a “science,” twentieth-century ethologists created instead a “technical language” which, moreover, favored causal explanations: contrary to the “stories” of the naturalists, the ethologists looked for what is “typical” and proposed generic descriptions. The effect of the new language—*independently from the intentions of the authors*—was that of reducing nonhuman animals to “natural objects” and to “epistemic dupes”: beings “without knowledge, awareness, or control of the contexts or relevancies of their behaviors” (Crist 1999, 162). Mechanomorphism, Crist argues, is the effect of a technicalized language that disempowers the animals and is ultimately incompatible with the language of subjectivity (1999, 162). The stories and anecdotes of the naturalists, to the contrary, by focusing on concrete episodes involving actual animals convey a sense of authorship and meaningfulness. The animals *linguistically* emerge as subjects who are authors of meaningful actions and lead meaningful lives:

The unified character of the act as a whole is preserved in this focus on a sequence of events and actions that constitute one cohesive episode. Episodic description cultivates an image of a world of meaning and agency; it upholds the subjective dimension of action by attending to the idiosyncrasies of the unique and singular event; and it presents actions as achievements by focusing on specific individuals. (Crist 1999, 263)

The new trend in ethology is therefore a kind of return to the old naturalist practices and language, but Craig Foster takes this practice to a further level: by shedding entirely the old “scientific” skin he embraces the teaching of the octopus, the ethico-political attention that her subjectivity and individuality demand.

WHAT IS INTELLIGENCE FOR?

Short after his first encounter with his octopus teacher, Foster wonders about her intelligent behavior and says: “a mollusk shouldn’t be so intelligent.” The presence of a vivid and developed intelligence in a species of invertebrates related to snails and slugs puzzles our mammalocentric (lack of) imagination. But what puzzles us even more is that this intelligence developed in nonhuman animals who are not social and, moreover, live short lives. Most theories about the development of intelligence, as, for example, the Social Intelligence Hypothesis, imagine that intelligence and brain size developed in response to challenges issued by life in complex social groups over long periods. As Montgomery reports, “Evolutionary biologists suggest that keeping track of our many social relationships over our long lives was one of the factors driving the evolution of the human brain. In fact, intelligence itself is most often associated with similarly social and long-lived creatures” (2015, 85). But most octopus species live only one to two years (the Giant Pacific Octopus has a longer lifespan of three to five years) and do not usually interact with conspecifics (except for mating). In octopuses’ short lives there is no post-hatching parental care, no support from group members, no sheltered juvenile period, no communication and learning about threats and surviving skills (Mather 2019a, 19; Thys 2020).

So, Montgomery asks, “what is their intelligence for?” (2015, 86). And Godfrey-Smith continues: “What is the point of building a large nervous system if your life is over in a year or two? The machinery of intelligence is expensive, both to build and to run. The usefulness of learning, which large brains make possible, seems dependent on lifespan. What is the point of investing in a process of learning about the world if there is almost no time to put that information to use?” (2016, 99). Most explanations refer to the loss of the ancestral shell (among the cephalopods, only the nautilus still preserves it), which opened indeed the way to incredible flexibility and dexterity, but simultaneously deprived the octopus of all protection and made them extremely vulnerable: needing to outwit simultaneously many

different prays and many different predators, and deprived of any support from a family or a group, the octopus' chances of survival depend entirely on their own individual intelligence. And this very extreme vulnerability, Godfrey-Smith argues (2016, 109), also tunes their lifespan: live-fast-die-young.¹³

An amazing aspect of this survival strategy is the octopus' incredible ability to camouflage, changing shape and, most of all, color with unmatched speed and diversity: they can change color, pattern, and texture in a fraction of a second, matching their surroundings or simulating other beings or objects. This is another very puzzling characteristic, because octopuses are believed to be *color-blind*: their eyes have only one photopigment (humans have three), and, if they can discriminate the plane of polarization of light (useful to navigate in turbid water), technically they should not be able to see colors. In 2016, Alexander and Christopher Stubbs proposed that even animals with a single photoreceptor can achieve color discrimination thanks to the particular shape of the pupil, which allows for different wavelengths to come to focus at different distances behind the lens (Stubbs and Stubbs 2016; qtd. In Despret 2021, 109n24). But before this explanation (and actually independently from it), it was proved that octopuses “see” with their skin, which is equipped with photosensitive cells reacting to different light wavelengths: the octopus skin is extremely sensitive to the chromatic qualities of its environment. It is not known whether this information is communicated to the central brain; what is certain is that the skin immediately and considerably reacts and that this information is essential to the octopus' survival strategies.¹⁴

The color change constitutes an “ongoing chromatic chatter” (Godfrey-Smith 2016, 82), the reasons for which are myriad: becoming invisible in the presence of a predator, looking like something else (more threatening, less appetizing), etc. But it also reflects moods: when a Giant Pacific

¹³Octopuses seem therefore to confirm the Ecological Intelligence Hypothesis, which argues that intelligence and brain size evolved by overcoming survival challenges posed by the natural environment (Thys 2020).

¹⁴Research in human biology has recently found evidence of similar phenomena in the human skin, which “is able to ‘sense’ ultraviolet light in the same way as [human] eyes because skin cells contain rhodopsin, the same photosensitive receptor that the eye uses to detect light.” Because this receptor is also involved in the skin's “melanin-producing defense against DNA damage,” researchers have concluded that “as soon as you step out into the sun, your *skin* knows that it is exposed to UV radiation” (Paddock 2011, qtd. in Erev 2018). This phenomenon is believed now to be present in a wide range of species.

octopus turns red, for example, she is excited; when white, she is relaxed; “an octopus presented with a difficult puzzle for the first time often undergoes several rapid changes in color, like a person who frowns, bites his lip, and furrows his brow when trying to solve a problem” (Montgomery 2015, 70). But the meaning and function of most patterns and changes are unknown. “It is an explosion of signs,” writes Lars Svendsen, “but we are simply unable to find anything meaningful in most of them. It may be that there is something meaningful there which we are unable to grasp, but it could also be that there is no meaning there to be understood – that it is simply a fascinating display of colour” (2019, 21). In particular, the display system seems aimed at fishes rather than (or much more than) at conspecifics, so it is questionable that it is a matter of *communication*, which always needs the complementarity of a sender and a receiver. So, Godfrey-Smith muses (2016, 83), despite this extremely powerful expressive system, if nobody is “listening”/interpreting the signs, little is really being said.

Some situations have been observed, however, in which an octopus displayed a dark color and raised her mantle (the so-called mantle-up posture) before another octopus, and these have been interpreted as aggressive/agonistic displays. That is, as a proper form of intraspecies signaling. Some recent discoveries have also put into question (or at least softened) the view of octopuses as unsocial beings: for example, David Scheel et al. (2016, 2017) have identified at least two sites in Jervis Bay, Eastern Australia—which they named respectively Octopolis and Oclantis—where gloomy octopuses (*Octopus tetricus*) have been congregating for generations (which are, of course, quite short) and engaging in complex social interactions. Octopus sociality is thus today a disputed issue, and all these new discoveries could change the way we look at this “alien” intelligence. Godfrey-Smith, despite all his rigor as a philosopher of science, at some point indulges in an “unscientific” fantasizing:

We can imagine extra evolutionary steps that could be taken in a situation like this. Suppose the interactions became more complicated, the signaling more refined, the densities even higher. The life of each animal would become more caught up with the lives of others, and this would start to show in the ongoing evolution of their brains. We saw [...] that lifespan is tuned by lifestyle, especially the threat of predation. If octopuses of this species could reliably make it through more years without being eaten, there is no reason why they could not eventually evolve a longer lifespan, too. (2016, 119)

This is not the stuff of science but rather of science fiction—and in fact it is precisely what Ray Nayler imagined in his 2022 novel, *The Mountain in the Sea* (which credits Godfrey-Smith, Montgomery, and many others for their wealth of information about octopuses). Set in an unspecified near future in which overfishing has depleted the oceans and giant corporations rule above nation states, the novel imagines that a marine biologist, Dr Ha Nguyen, is sent to the remote Vietnamese archipelago of Con Dao to investigate rumors about an alleged octopus colony under the sea. The archipelago has been bought by a giant corporation, DIANIMA, best known for its groundbreaking work in artificial intelligence, which evacuated the original population and sealed it off, allegedly as natural reserve but in truth to study the (scientific as well as economic) potentialities of the “alien” intelligence at the bottom of the sea.

The plot is complex and organized into parallel storylines, which I cannot explore here. The stories are then also intertwined with philosophical musings about the nature of consciousness, with critiques of postindustrial life, human isolation, and incommunicability, and especially of the environmental disaster and ecocidal depredation wrecked by human “intelligence,” summarized by a line spoken by the Victor Frankenstein-like leader of DIANIMA, Dr Mínervudóttir-Chan: “The great and terrible thing about humankind is simply this: we will always do what we are capable of” (Nayler 2022, 264). What I want to briefly focus on here is the meaning of the core idea of the novel: that octopuses did take the further evolutionary step hypothesized by Godfrey-Smith, have become social, come together in structured colonies, and communicate among themselves and with the human characters through a symbolic language. The main question is thus expressed by Dr Nguyen: to produce consciousness as we understand it, she says, “you would need to have a creature that is long-lived, that is social, that raises its young, and can pass information from one generation to the next. An octopus that has developed a complex, symbolic system of communication” (2022, 58). The novel hypothesizes that all this has happened, perhaps in reaction to and defense against the human overexploitation of the natural world.

Nayler imagines that the octopuses developed a symbolic communication system using the incredible chromatic potentialities of their skin: they flash series of repeated patterns at each other, and besides “write” to the humans constructing symbols with debris and other objects.¹⁵ Dr Nguyen

¹⁵Vinciane Despret also devised a similar scenario in her 2021 *conte philosophique*, *Autobiographie d'un poulpe* (Autobiography of an Octopus), where however the octopuses write with their ink on pottery debris.

manages to decipher some symbols and tries to communicate with the octopuses, but the first thing they say is: “Go away!” The “aliens”—reasonably, it seems, considering the social, political, and environmental disastrous conditions of the human world, not very different from ours—do not want any contact with the humans and want to be left alone. Ironically, while trying to communicate with the “alien” species, the human characters hardly manage to communicate with each other: Dr Nguyen is alone on the island with Altantsetseg, an unsociable Mongolian woman, a veteran of war and the ruthless responsible for the security, and Evrim, the world’s only conscious android created by Dr Mínerudóttir-Chan; when the latter also comes to the island, communication and understanding hardly improve. The questions raised about octopus consciousness, sociality and communication, therefore, also (or perhaps primarily) concern the humans (and the AI character).¹⁶

The novel, like *My Octopus Teacher*, does occasionally tip into didacticism about how we should care more about the environment, respect the other species, and also care more for each other, although this is not the “message” of the book (whereas the movie is more explicit in teaching the viewer life lessons). Perhaps the “philosophy” of the novel can be found in an extract from Dr Nguyen’s fictional book *How Oceans Think*, which introduces the second-last chapter:

I think what we fear most about finding a mind equal to our own, but of another species, is that they will truly see us – and find us lacking, and turn away from us in disgust. That contact with another mind will puncture our species’ self-satisfied feeling of worth. We will have to confront, finally, what we truly are, and the damage we have done to our home. But that confrontation, perhaps, is the only thing that will save us. The only thing that will allow us to look our short-sightedness, our brutality, and our stupidity in the face, and change. (2022, 429)

¹⁶Each chapter is introduced by quotations from two fictional books, *Building Minds* by Dr. Mínerudóttir-Chan or *How Oceans Think* by Dr Nguyen, and one of the latter’s quotations reads: “In the end, the factors which will keep us from understanding a species as alien as the octopus are the same factors that keep us from truly understanding one another: imperfect predictions of what is ‘going on’ in the head of another, misunderstandings compounded by assumptions, bias, and haste. And a pervasive distrust regarding the motives of the ‘other’ as we struggle to understand and to make ourselves understood. If we fail, there will be nothing unfamiliar about that failure. Though on a different scale, it will be essentially the same as the countless times our species has failed to communicate” (Nayler 2022, 403).

As in *My Octopus Teacher*, here, too, the octopuses ultimately work as a “mirror” for the humans: they are there so that we can look at and confront our deformed and ugly image and the deformed and ugly world we have created around us, and, hopefully, also “heal” our damaged psyche and our damaged world. That is, they are there *for us*, and what we look for when we enthusiastically investigate their fascinating and “alien” intelligence is, in the end, but another trace of the human.

TENTACULAR LOGOCENTRISM AND SLIMY ANTISPECIESISM

Imagining a society of octopuses who evolve to communicate with a symbolic language—among themselves and with us—and organize to resist the human ecocidal depredation of the world is certainly a beautiful environmental fable with a powerful critical message. But it is also yet another instance of the hidden, unquenchable power of logocentrism (and thus of anthropomorphism) that tentacularly infiltrates even the most powerful anti- or post-humanistic critiques: since we find octopuses so intelligent and so fascinating, we would like them to be more social, more communicative, more organized—*more like us*. Considering their great and unused (dormant?) potentialities, we would like them to be *better*, because, in the end, we unwittingly think that their great intelligence and communicative capacity are somewhat *wasted*. Godfrey-Smith explicitly expresses this unconfessed though quite common feeling when he writes that he sees octopuses as, in a sense, “unfinished” beings. He knows very well that “one should not think of evolution as goal-directed. Evolution is not heading anywhere, not toward us or anyone else.” And yet, he “can’t resist seeing” in octopuses “an unfinished quality”: they are (unsatisfactorily) “one-sided” “in their version of the fundamental signaling duality, the interlocking roles of sender and receiver, producer and interpreter.” Despite their incredibly versatile communication system, with their simple social life they just have little to say (2016, 85). In sum, they could, and perhaps should, be better.

This is, in the end, the true anthropomorphic “sin” of our approach to the world, and of “science” in particular: in approaching other beings, we value, look, and test for qualities we possess and are good at: cognitive complexity, learning ability, large brain size, indications of pain, awareness (cf. e.g., Mather 2019b). Despite all calls for “objectivity” and all warnings against anthropomorphism, even science still looks for human-like features in the world, and especially for forms on intelligence that

resemble ours. We are fascinated by the octopus because of their “human-like” intelligence, because of something that, despite the immense differences in most other aspects, we recognize and find somehow “familiar” (and we would like them to be even more so). It is telling that, as Moynihan states, the octopus’ nervous system and intelligence have been the most studied in recent decades and their “brains may be better known than those of any other animal, with the possible exception of humans” (1997, 216). Intelligence comes in many other different forms, since it is a way of species-specific adaptation to one’s ecological role (cf. e.g., de Waal 2016a), but all-too often we just do not look that way.

That is why the octopus has recently become a *charismatic* animal, popular both with scientists and the wider public (also thanks to movies like *My Octopus Teacher* and novels like *The Mountain in the Sea*). And as with charismatic animals in general, the problem is that they end up overshadowing less-charismatic species, which are then pushed to the borders—if not outside—of the circle of moral consideration. An instructive exercise is a comparison between octopuses and fishes (although the category “fishes” is an ultimately meaningless generalization including many and extremely different species, a bit like Derrida’s *animot*). From an ethical point of view, fishes are by far the most exploited animal group on earth, and if octopuses are also hunted and eaten at all the latitudes where they live, their numbers are of a different and definitely much lesser order. And yet, ethical theories barely looked at fishes and only recently started to include them in their focus, whereas when recently plans for a commercial-scale octopus farm in the Canary Islands were made public, this immediately caused a big commotion, because octopuses “are too smart for that” (cf. e.g., Halpin 2023). Jonathan Balcombe (2016) has shown how complex, emotionally rich, and intelligent fishes can be, but since they lack detectable facial expressions and to us they appear mute, they are not allowed to climb up the empathy ladder as high as octopuses (and of course mammals). Their eyes, which are as complex as those of mammals, have no lids and do not need to blink (as they are permanently bathed in water), so they look flat and glassy and amplify the illusion that they feel nothing, whereas we stare in awe at the octopus’ eye intelligently staring back at us.

Balcombe’s (and many others’) response is to emphasize the “plurality and contextuality of intelligence”: intelligence, he writes, “is not one general property but rather a suite of abilities that may be expressed along different axes” (2016, 118). And Frans de Waal concurs: “Instead of a

ladder, we are facing an enormous plurality of cognitions with many peaks of specialization” (2016b). Our gaze cannot perhaps escape this logocentric/anthropomorphic bias, but what is important is to be aware of it and to factor it in in our assessments. I want to close this chapter with a possible tool for raising awareness of this bias, and, possibly, trying to “slink” away: what Massimo Filippi and Enrico Monacelli (2020) call “slimy anti-speciesism” (*antispecismo viscido*). Slimy antispeciesism turns away from the “sanitized” and “domesticated” image of life molded on the human figure and erected on hierarchical categorizations, and focuses instead on the viscous, sticky, slimy entanglements of life which indeed destabilize these very categorizations. Its figure is the “becoming invertebrate,” which, *à la* Deleuze (the main inspiration of this perspective), perverts, profanes, and subverts traditional theories, viewpoints, attitudes—even antispeciesism itself. In fact, slimy antispeciesism is not, the authors write, just another type of antispeciesism but rather the awareness that we need a “way out” (or many ways out) from the double cage of our innate and cultural biases which prevent us to really “see” and respect nonhuman animals for what they are. It is perhaps only through this “slimy” maneuver, always partial and limited, always to be repeated anew, that we will manage to slip away from the squeezing, crushing embrace of our tentacular self-centeredness.

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The Back of the Snake, Or, Face to Face with the Other

In the last two chapters, I have examined some aspects of anthropomorphism in relation, respectively, to chimpanzees—with whom it is even justified, since they are our closest “cousins”—and octopuses—who fascinate us so much because of their intelligence, in which we recognize something of ourselves. In both cases, we are driven towards the *other* by a search for *sameness*, even in such an “alien” creature as the octopus. In this final chapter, I want to focus instead on a creature in which we find neither phylogenetic kinship nor “elective affinities” but rather true—anatomical, sensorial, psychological, even cultural—otherness: the snake. The focus on the snake will allow me to wrap up the explorations of imagination, empathy, and anthropomorphism with an extreme case that really puts them to the test. But it will also allow me to explore one last ethico-philosophical position, that of Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas revolutionized contemporary ethics centering it on a notion of radical otherness and on the primacy of the face-to-face encounter with the other, but at the same time he closed the door of ethics in the face of nonhuman otherness, singling out precisely the snake as representative of this exclusion of animality. He epitomizes, therefore, for one last time, the paradoxes and contradictions of the Western tradition with regards to nonhuman animals.

Closing the book with Levinas and the snake also allows me to go back for a last time to the original inspiration from which I started, J.M. Coetzee’s

The Lives of Animals. Inspecting Coetzee’s notebooks stored at the Harry Ransom Center of the University of Texas at Austin, Derek Attridge found in fact a preparatory note for the 1997–1998 Tanner Lectures in which Coetzee wrote: “Reread Levinas on the face in the context of animals.” And another note taken five months later reads: “It is a matter of seeing the animal’s face, but not as a reflection of one’s own (*empathising* with it). Every contact has to be unique, as though preceded by no history. Every contact is thus unaided” (qtd. in Attridge 2019, 49, emphasis added). A Levinasian focus on the face of the (animal) other seems to reject any empathetic approach since empathy is considered here as a projection onto the other and, with nonhuman animals, a crude form of anthropomorphism (the face “as a reflection of one’s own”); but the focus on the (human) face—the *need* to find a face—also means a focus on the most distinguishing human trait, and thus on the human form as such. These are the issues this final chapter will analyze and explore.

Coetzee will go back to the question of the face two decades after *The Lives of Animals* in the short story “The Old Woman and the Cats” (2023) (which I will analyze in due course), showing not only that it constitutes a sort of subterranean *fil rouge* for his engagement with the challenge of otherness, but also that it summarizes many of the ethical dilemmas we are confronted with in our encounter with nonhuman animals: do we need a face in order to rise to the challenge of otherness? But what qualifies as a face? Should we turn our back to allegedly “faceless” beings? And what will a *back*, as opposed to the face, tell us and demand of us?

ADVERSARIAL OTHERNESS

Pace Nagel, it is not that difficult to imagine what it is like to be a bat, as we have seen, for example, if we compare bats to octopuses. Sure, (some) bats use echolocation to move around and hunt at night—and this we can hardly imagine—, but they are mammals, live in cohesive social groups, form sophisticate social relations (or “friendships”), and some species even adopt orphans and help to feed needy individuals. Among vampire bats, for example, unrelated females might regurgitate part of their meal for a “friend” who has been unable to feed, and the beneficiaries remember these acts and are likely to return the favor (Laird 2018, 141–42; Tuttle 2015, 62–63). This (relative) “kinship” is indeed part of the reason why Nagel chose bats for his thought-experiment, as he explicitly avows: beside

echolocation (and flight, and nocturnal life, and...), they're not *so* different from us and we can therefore make many assumptions and take many facts for granted.¹

A snake, however, is another matter entirely. Snakes are not “aliens” like octopuses and have inhabited the human world and human imagination from time immemorial—they are the most symbolized animals in all cultures and probably also the first symbol in history (Stutesman 2005, 9, 33). However, their cohabitation—actual and symbolic—with humans has always been under the sign of distance, mistrust, and incomprehension. They have always represented extreme otherness if not malevolence and evil, and even the fascinating discoveries of contemporary ethology did not manage to dispel or diminish the feeling of remoteness and even revulsion that they usually inspire.² Unlike octopuses, in fact, snakes do not show particular intelligence, friendliness or curiosity for the human world, and remain therefore *psychologically* (as well as anatomically and physiologically) foreign and distant: as with bats, we *don't want* to imagine what it is like to be a snake.

The imaginative effort, anyway, would have to take a great leap indeed. Snakes are limbless reptiles who crawl on the ground propelling themselves by a locomotion of rippling muscles and, like all other squamates (lizards and snakes), are ectothermic, that is, they derive their body heat from outside sources. Temperature is in fact the main factor (together with smell) determining their life, which makes it extremely difficult for vision-centered humans to imagine their perceptual world. Though present in all continents except Antarctica (and some islands such as Ireland,

¹He writes in fact: “I assume we all believe that bats have experience. After all, they are mammals, and there is no more doubt that they have experience than that mice or pigeons or whales have experience. I have chosen bats instead of wasps or flounders because if one travels too far down the phylogenetic tree, people gradually shed their faith that there is experience there at all. Bats, although more closely related to us than those other species, nevertheless present a range of activity and a sensory apparatus so different from ours that the problem I want to pose is exceptionally vivid (though it certainly could be raised with other species). Even without the benefit of philosophical reflection, anyone who has spent some time in an enclosed space with an excited bat knows what it is to encounter a fundamentally *alien* form of life” (2024, 6–7).

²Snakes have been kept by humans in many cultures throughout history and today have even become a curious kind of pets. This does not alter, however, the sense of remoteness we *culturally* feel for them.

Iceland and New Zealand), in colder climates snakes hibernate for up to eight months a year. Because they regulate body temperature through outside sources, their blood pressure differs within areas of circulation. Moreover, temperature also fixes their gender: high heat creates males and moderate heat females (Stutesman 2005, 26–27). Some species (boas, pythons, and pit vipers) are even able to sense infrared thermal radiations through the pit organ situated between the eyes and the nostrils, which allows them to “see” preys and predators in the dark (Stutesman 2005, 23).³ The eye is lidless and permanently open but covered by a transparent scale called “spectacle.” Their sight is generally good, and their retina operates as a zoom lens to move in and out (Stutesman 2005, 23).

Smell is the other main determinant of the snakes’ perceptual world, and their smell organ is not the nose but the tongue, which has no taste buds but is rather a chemical collector: when it darts out (as it does continuously), the tongue catches odor molecules and directs them towards the vomeronasal organ (or Jacobson’s organ), located above the roof of the snake’s mouth. The tongue is forked to compare chemical traces at two points in space (“in stereo,” as it were), allowing the snake to determine the direction of the smell trail. The two tips of the tongue, constantly in motion, splay out at the end of each flick, creating two rings of moving air which also direct odorants towards the mouth on both sides of the head (Stutesman 2005, 22; Yong 2022, 43–45). Snakes are mostly solitary animals and when they seek a mate, they do so by smelling the pheromones of possible partners. They have forked penis (hemipenis) and forked clitoris (hemiclitoris) and copulate after curling around each other, sometimes even in group—but some are parthenogenetic, reproducing through cloning (Stutesman 2005, 25, 27). Snakes are virtually deaf but “hear” by picking up vibrations from the ground through their jaw muscles. They have only one lung, and some desert species can breathe under sand. They can unhinge their jaws at the sides and at the front, enabling them to swallow preys much bigger than their head—and to swallow them whole. Swallowing can take up a few hours, so they breathe when they swallow. The digestion can take months, and guts, liver and heart swell (up to doubling their size) during the process, which requires a lot of energy (Stutesman 2005, 20–24; Yong 2022, 49).

³Rather than being a “sixth sense,” infrared seeing seems to be just an integral part of snake vision (Yong 2022, 151–52).

All these traits mark and emphasize the snakes' otherness. But what makes them psychologically *remote* and *utterly foreign* is that they lack facial expression and vocal communication, and, as Frans de Waal remarks, "empathy needs a face": "With impoverished facial expression," he writes, "comes impoverished empathic understanding, and a bland interaction devoid of the bodily echoing that humans constantly engage in" (2009, 83).⁴ If octopuses, as we have seen in the previous chapter, represent an otherness that fascinates and attracts us, snakes represent on the contrary an otherness that we reject and recoil from, and are often chosen precisely to epitomize the "other as adversary," from Genesis to modernity, including, (perhaps not so) curiously, modern science.⁵ A case in point (which I am going to take as representative⁶) is that of Daniel Dennett, who, in yet another criticism of Nagel's "too charitable" position (i.e., that of granting consciousness to bats), uses the snake as a paradigm to show how and why nonhuman animals have nothing comparable to human consciousness.⁷

Dennett quotes a 1996 study by Peter Gärdenfors that shows "why a snake can't think of a mouse." Snakes use three different sensory systems to catch and eat a mouse (or any pray): the visual system (or thermal sensors) to strike the pray, smell to locate it, and tactile information to find

⁴Jonathan Balcombe (2016, 133) notes however that dolphins also cannot change their facial expression but we feel very empathetic towards them. Perhaps, Balcombe muses, it is because their fixed expression looks like a smile (as in bottlenose dolphins), or perhaps because we know that they are big-brained mammals, or both. In any case, they are yet another example of mammalocentric prejudice.

⁵Snake symbolism is much more complex and diverse than I can explore here, and not always negative. For some instructive reading see, for example, Oldfield Howey (2005) and Charlesworth (2010). The point I want to underline, however, is that in contemporary culture, *including philosophy and science*, snakes are mostly used to epitomize adversarial otherness.

⁶The article I am referring to, "Animal Consciousness: What Matters and Why," was originally published in 1995 and then reprinted in 1998 in Dennett's collection of essays, *Brainchildren*. The "scientific" data are perhaps outdated, but the philosophical and ethical argument Dennett makes is (unfortunately) not, and therefore I can still take it as the paradigm of a certain "scientific" attitude.

⁷Dennett actually uses Nagel to attack the much wider claims of cognitive ethology, which he dubs as "the pathetic course upon which many are now embarked" ("For current thinking about animal consciousness is a mess. Hidden and not so hidden agendas distort discussion and impede research") (1998, 337), and all ethical positions (which Nagel is far from addressing) that derive ethical status from cognitive abilities and consciousness.

the head from which they start swallowing it. These three different systems, Dennett writes, are not connected to each other and organized into a unified processing system—a “consciousness”—; hence there is nothing “it is like to be” a snake. Consciousness as this “internal organization” is, for Dennett, “an organization that is swiftly achieved in one species, ours, and in no other. Other species no doubt achieve *somewhat similar* organizations, but the differences are so great that most of the speculative translations of imagination from our case to theirs *make no sense*” (Dennett 1998, 347, emphases in the original). This absence or “lack” has important ethical implications: “Snakes (or parts of snakes!) may feel pain – depending on how we choose to define that term – but the evidence mounts that snakes lack the sort of overarching, long-term organization that leaves room for significant suffering. That doesn’t mean that we ought to treat snakes the way we treat worn out tires, but just that concern for their suffering should be tempered by an appreciation of how modest their capacities for suffering are” (1998, 351; cf. Bradie 2012, 633). Less pain means less suffering, which in turn means less moral relevance.

In the ethical debate, this is the default assumption of both those who argue for and those who argue against the moral relevance of nonhuman animals: a scientific body of information (about pain, suffering, intelligence, cognitive and social complexity, etc.) should inform and determine the moral status of the subject in question. Knowledge precedes ethics. Levinas turned these terms around and forcefully argued for the primacy of ethics over knowledge (and ontology). And yet, he also bent to the immemorial custom of singling out the snake as adversarial otherness.

THE FACE OF THE SNAKE

Dennett is overconfident that “science” can and eventually will conquer otherness, and that is why he criticizes Nagel’s lack of confidence in what human ingenuity can achieve. “We can learn enough about animal consciousness,” he argues, “to settle the questions we have about our responsibilities” (1998, 339). Levinas starts from the completely opposite assumption, that is, that otherness is unconquerable, ineffable, radical—“If one could possess, grasp, and know the other,” he writes, “it would not be other” (Levinas 1987a, 90)—and that it is not knowledge that can “settle the questions we have about our responsibilities” but the other way round: the ethical relation is not a “superstructure” but rather the very *foundation* of all knowledge (Peperzak 1993, 65). Dennett’s and Levinas’

approaches are of course incommensurable, and, moreover, Levinas' language is idiosyncratic even within the continental philosophical landscape to which he belongs; but contrasting these two incommensurabilities helps emphasizing the Levinasian position. From the latter's perspective, Dennett is just another instance of the "imperialism of the same" (Levinas 1969, 39) characterizing the whole history of Western philosophy, which, through appropriating, assimilating, knowing, absorbs differences, annuls alterity, and reduces the other to the same. This is not how one can truly *encounter* the other. The authentic encounter is, for Levinas, not epistemic but instead *ethical* in nature.

In Levinas' philosophy, the other's radical alterity is marked by infinity, exteriority, and transcendence. Against the totalizing drive of the appropriating self, otherness remains forever unseizable, unattainable, and therefore *infinite*—hence the title of Levinas' masterpiece, *Totality and Infinity*. As infinite, otherness cannot be integrated or "sublated" in any closed identity and remains therefore pure *exteriority*—hence the subtitle, *An Essay on Exteriority* (cf. Peperzak 1993, 120). Finally, infinite exteriority exceeds any claim to immediate presence and is therefore *transcendent*: "Infinity is characteristic of a transcendent being as transcendent; the infinite is the absolutely other"; "The Other remains infinitely transcendent, infinitely foreign" (Levinas 1969, 49, 195). This pure, infinite, transcendent exteriority is however in a constitutive and originary relationship with the "I": the principle and the *arché* is not an isolated individual but the indissoluble relation between self and other, between Same and Otherness.⁸ And the modality of this relation is what Levinas calls "face": "The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name face" (1969, 50, emphasis in the original). The primordial experience is one's confrontation with a face, a "face to face," and this confrontation is first and foremost not an epistemic fact but instead a "moral summon" (1969, 196).

The face presents itself as naked and vulnerable, destitute and needy, and as such solicits a response from me; but it contains at the same time an injunction, which says: "you shall not commit murder" (e.g., 1969, 199, 262). So, the face simultaneously appeals to me in destitution and orders

⁸Levinas comes after all from the phenomenological tradition and studied with Husserl and Heidegger, translating into French Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations* and writing his doctoral thesis on Husserl's theory of intuition. Intersubjectivity—albeit in a very personalized and idiosyncratic form—is therefore for him, too, a matter of fact.

me to respond; it signifies at once utter vulnerability and authority over me—or, rather, the highest authority deriving precisely from utmost vulnerability and precariousness. That is why, Levinas insists, there is *no reciprocity* and *no promise of reciprocation* in the “face to face” (as we find, e.g., at the basis of theories of “communicative action,” etc.): on the one hand, the other’s vulnerability gives me power over them, but, on the other, their claim on me through this very vulnerability holds me hostage. And this asymmetry founds the moral relationship: “Justice consists in recognizing in the Other my master” (1969, 72). Ethics, as Levinas writes in “Ethics as First Philosophy,” consists “in the laying down by the ego of its sovereignty” (1989a, 85). To emphasize the asymmetry of the self-other ethical relationship Levinas was fond of quoting a sentence from Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*: “every one of us is guilty before all, for everyone and everything, and I more than others” (Levinas 1996, 102).

The other’s inaccessibility seems to disqualify from the outset empathy and the sympathetic imagination, which would be for Levinas just other instances of the “imperialism of the same” and of the narcissism that it expresses. No matter how we define empathy and sympathy, imagining to “be in someone else’s shoes” or trying to access another person’s subjective experience involves a denial and a suppression of the other’s otherness and a reduction of the other to the same. But Levinas never clearly speaks against empathy. Being well acquainted with Husserl’s philosophy, he was certainly also familiar with Husserl’s and his colleagues’ discussions of *Einfühlung*, and in fact, as Simon Thornton (2024) remarks, Levinas discusses empathy in his early writings on Husserl, namely in his doctoral thesis on Husserl’s intuition and other texts from the 1930s. But he never mentions empathy in his mature writings, implicitly discarding it because it must presuppose a kind of “access” to the other that his theory insists on excluding (Thornton 2024).⁹

The Levinasian primacy of ethics over knowledge in the face of the other’s unknowability appears so promising for deactivating both Nagel’s defeatism and Dennett’s overconfidence with regards to nonhuman otherness, since what one can know does not ultimately matter for an ethical response. And yet, despite the fact that nothing intrinsically identifies the Levinasian other as exclusively human, Levinas was unable and/or

⁹Although there exist other attempts to analyze empathy in Levinas (cf. e.g., Amiel-Houser and Mendelson-Maoz 2014), Thornton’s article is to date the best and most thorough analysis.

unwilling to abandon the anthropocentrism of his time and culture. His philosophy can be recapitulated with the title of his 1972 work, “the humanism of the other man,”¹⁰ and nonhuman otherness rarely appears in his writings. Two are the main and much-commented-on loci where he briefly discusses it: the 1975 short text “The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights” and the 1986 interview originally published as “The Paradox of Morality.” In both texts Levinas makes a gesture of opening to nonhuman otherness but then immediately (and inconsistently) retreats behind the barricades of a very dogmatic anthropocentrism that his philosophy should logically undermine.

These two texts have received much scholarly attention, so here I will only emphasize a few points. In “The Name of a Dog,” Levinas briefly tells the story of Bobby, a stray dog who, when Levinas was a prisoner of war in a Nazi camp during World War II, for a few short weeks, “before the sentinels chased him away,” met him and his fellow prisoners: “He would appear at morning assembly and was waiting for us as we returned, jumping up and down and barking in delight. *For him, there was no doubt that we were men*” (Levinas 1987b, 153, emphasis added). Bobby *responded to the face* of the Jewish prisoners in Nazi Germany, he offered them the recognition of their humanity that the human beings around them, both soldiers and civilians, instead denied them (for them “[w]e were subhuman, a gang of apes”). And that is why he was, for Levinas, “the last Kantian in Nazi Germany.” After recognizing that Bobby was more “human” (or “humane”) than the other humans, however, Levinas immediately adds: “without the brain needed to universalize maxims and drives” (1987b, 153). Bobby is therefore a paradox: less than human because incapable “to universalize maxims and drives,” but, from an ethical point of view, more human than the humans themselves; morally superior to those humans who, however, threatening the prisoners “like animals,” reiterate that animals have a moral status *a priori* inferior to that of humans (Atterton 2004, 56).

Bobby’s moral status, moreover, amounts to acknowledging the humanity of the humans, and that is why Levinas can exclaim: “There is a transcendence in the animal!” (1987b, 152). Transcendence, as we have

¹⁰This translates the original title, *Humanisme de l’autre homme*. The official English translation, *Humanism of the Other* (2003), erases the sexist use of the masculine as neutral universal, still so common in all Romance languages, but also the clear anthropocentric overtones of Levinas’ concept of otherness.

seen, is one of the main features of true otherness, but in *Totality and Infinity* Levinas writes that “Transcendence is the transcendence of an I. Only an I can respond to the injunction of a face” (1969, 305). In “The Name of a Dog,” he seems therefore to concede that animals, too (or at least some dogs), can be an “I,” that is, a subject, albeit in a somewhat diminished modality (“without the brain needed to universalize maxims and drives”). But this transcendence is tied and limited to bearing witness to the humanity of the human (Guenther 2007, 233). As it has been noted (Davy 2007, 48–49; Svendsen 2019, 126–27), it is also strange that such an emphasis is put on the Kantian capacity to universalize maxims: for Levinas, the source of morality’s demands lies in the vulnerability that appears in the face and not, as in traditional ethics, in the subject’s possession of some capacities (logos, intelligence, sentience, the capacity to universalize, etc.), so why this all-too Kantian remark? Perhaps precisely because the “animal” vulnerability should indeed be enough to include nonhuman animals into ethics (Calarco 2008, 64; Svendsen 2019, 127–28) and a Kantian escamotage is needed to keep excluding them.

The same ambiguities and inconsistencies return in the 1986 interview.¹¹ Here, at the direct question whether animals do not have faces, Levinas replies with a promising opening: “One cannot entirely refuse a dog the face” (Levinas 2019, 3). As in “The Name of a Dog” (and perhaps in a hidden reference to it; Calarco 2008, 68; Atterton 2004, 58), the dog is again singled out as an animal with a certain kind of access to ethics—a face. However, Levinas continues, the face is not *originary* in the dog (“the face does not begin with the dog”) but can be found in them only in an analogy with the human face. Although Levinas avows that “I cannot tell you at what moment you have the right to be called ‘face’” (this is also a promising opening), he dogmatically insists that the “human face is an altogether different thing, and we rediscover [only] afterward the face in the animal.” Therefore, “the ethical extends to [other] living

¹¹The interview was conducted in 1986 in Levinas’ house in Paris by three MA students from the University of Warrick, Tamra Wright, Peter Hughes, and Alison Ainley, and then published in 1988 in *The Provocation of Levinas*, edited by Robert Bernasconi and David Wood. The French original was never published and the English translation was heavily edited to make it more coherent and accessible. In 2019, Peter Atterton and Tamra Wright re-transcribed and retranslated the passages relative to the face of the animal to show the nuances and the literal meaning of Levinas’ answers, and published these passages (together with the French original) as “The Animal Interview” in *Face to Face with Animals: Levinas and the Animal Question*. I will here cite from the new translation.

beings” (“We do not want to make an animal suffer needlessly, etcetera”), but “the prototype of this is human ethics. [Even] if animals do not have a face in the ethical sense, we have an obligation toward them” (Levinas 2019, 4). That is, ethical consideration for animals is a mere extension of human ethics in a sort of analogical transposition or *anthropomorphism* (Derrida 2008, 108)—but this contradicts, again, the principles of Levinasian ethics of the other.

The fact is that Levinas follows the (quite traditional) anti-Darwinian principle of the human as a “rupture” of the natural order: “in relation to the animal,” he continues in the interview, “humanity is a new phenomenon.” Animality is a mere “struggle for life without ethics,” whereas “the human breaks with pure being.” Against the background of the animals’ (alleged) mere struggle for life, “with the appearance of the human – here is my entire philosophy – that is, with man, there is something more important than my life, and that is the life of the other. That is unreasonable. Man is an unreasonable animal” (2019, 4–5). Here again there is a contradiction: despite avowing not to know at what “stage” the face begins, Levinas knows very well that the only “true” face is the human face—but this is a completely unfounded statement, a mere *sovereign decision*. And despite reversing the traditional hierarchy based on logos—the struggle for life is ultimately “rational,” the human care for another’s life is what is truly unreasonable; humanity is indeed this capacity to break with reason in favor of the other (Atterton 2004, 60)—an (again unfounded, dogmatic) hierarchy with the human on top remains nonetheless operative. But, as Peter Atterton remarks (2004, 60), it is precisely this “unreason” in favor of the other that could (and should) demand an extension of ethical responsibility to nonhuman others.¹²

It is when avowing not to know “at what moment you have the right to be called ‘face’” that Levinas adds: “I do not know whether one finds it in the snake!” (2019, 4). Although he tries to forgo giving further explanations by saying “I do not know how to answer that question, since more specific analyses are needed” (what analyses?), the passage from the dog to the snake is neither neutral nor accidental. If it would be very difficult to deny the dog a face, as in fact Levinas himself admits, a snake is psychologically and culturally much more *remote* and serves therefore the aim of

¹² “What could be more unreasonable or more unintelligible from a sociobiological perspective for members of one species to sacrifice themselves for the members of another?” (Atterton 2004, 60).

pushing animality away and distancing it from the face. The question is only apparently open (“I do not know whether...”): the final recurs to the snake is a way of implying that the conclusion has always already being presupposed (cf. e.g., Derrida 2008, 109–10).¹³

DISMANTLING THE FACE

All these Levinasian questions and contradictions inform quite explicitly Coetzee’s short story “The Old Woman and the Cats” (2023)¹⁴ and are dialogically played out in the usual confrontation between Elizabeth Costello and her son John. The background story is that John is visiting his mother, who has moved to San Juan Obispo, a small Spanish village on the Castilian plateau,¹⁵ and lives with hordes of semi-feral cats. Right at the beginning, the conversation casually falls on one of the cats, whom John identifies as “that one there, with the white mark on its face,” to which, to the reader’s surprise (or at least to mine), Costello replies: “Strictly speaking, [...] cats don’t have faces” (2023, 182). From the start Costello seems to defend an orthodox Levinasian position: “Birds don’t have faces [...]. Fish don’t have faces. Why should cats? The only creatures with proper faces are human beings. Our faces are what prove us human” (2023, 182). The terms used for human and nonhuman body parts are traditionally different (e.g., feet/paws, noses/snouts, etc.), so, Costello continues, “A cat has a mien but not a face. [...] A bodily mien. Even we, you and I, are not born with faces. A face has to be coaxed out of us” (2023, 183).

The conversation continues in this traditionalist line, with John lamenting that cats (read “nonhuman animals”) never grow into proper

¹³The new transcription of the interview adds, after the doubt about the face of the snake, a sentence that the 1988 translation had excluded: “Not in the flea, for example. The flea! It’s an insect, which jumps, eh? [*laughter*]” (2019, 4). Just like—or even more than—the snake, recurring to insects to signify animality has been a very common way, from Heidegger to Agamben and further, to reduce them to elementary, insensitive machines (cf. Oliver 2009, 197–98). We can have some doubts, perhaps, about the face of the snake, but the certainty about the flea—the flea certainly not!—is quite reassuring for our threatened anthropocentrism.

¹⁴The dates of composition are given as “2008–2013” (Coetzee 2023, 206). The story was first published in Spanish in 2018 in *Siete cuentos morales* and only in 2023 in English in *The Pole and Other Stories*.

¹⁵There exist a village named San Juan *del* Obispo in Spain, but it is located in Asturias and not on the Castilian plateau.

“individuals” (read “subjects”) and remain to some extent always only representatives of their species, and Costello replying: “Animals don’t have characters in just the same way that they don’t have faces. [...] You are disappointed because you expect too much” (2023, 184). The explanation that follows is difficult to interpret, since it is not clear to what extent Costello is being ironic or simply eccentric: “Animals don’t have faces, properly speaking, because they do not have the fine musculature around the eyes and mouth we human beings are blessed with in order that our souls may manifest themselves. So their souls remain invisible” (2023, 185). As for Levinas, two eyes, a mouth, and two nostrils are not enough to make a face, even if they return the gaze (as the kitten with the white blaze at some point does; 2023, 188); but, in un-Levinasian fashion, here Costello seems to say that the simple addition of the fine musculature around the eyes and mouth would do.

After this exchange, mother and son drop the argument and the story continues, until a few pages later Costello tells John how she started taking care of the cats—and her Levinasian orthodoxy begins to flounder. One day while taking a walk, she says, she found a female cat in a culvert in the act of giving birth: the cat was half-starved and scared, but she could not flee. In that moment Costello decided that, from then on, she would take care of the feral cats of the village, shunned and rejected by everybody else. The reason behind her decision is thoroughly Levinasian: “That cat in the culvert made an appeal to me, and I responded. I responded without question, without referring to a moral calculus” (2023, 195). John, however, immediately picks up the contradiction: “You met the mother cat face to face and you could not refuse her appeal,” he counters, but only yesterday “you told me that cats do not have faces.” He continues by highlighting the same contradiction in his—very Levinasian!—upbringing:

And I remember how, when I was still a child, you used to lecture me on the gaze of the other, on the appeal that we dare not refuse when we meet the other face to face, unless we are to deny our own humanity. An appeal that is prior to and more primitive than the ethical – that was what you called it. The problem, you said, was that the very same people who talked about how we are interpellated by the other did not want to talk about being interpellated by animals. They would not accept that in the eyes of the suffering beast we may encounter an appeal that can likewise be denied only at heavy cost. (2023, 195–96)

Costello's Levinasian approach emerges therefore not as a dogmatic orthodoxy but as embracing instead the potentialities—*intrinsic in Levinas' thought*—towards a universal form of ethical consideration that has no a-priori anthropocentric constraints. Costello joins thus the ranks of those interpreters who, in the face of his dogmatic anthropocentrism, have proposed the need to “radicalizing Levinas” (e.g., Atterton and Calarco 2010).

John, however, insists—as it is his role in all Costello's stories—in voicing many of the questions that even this “radicalized” approach still leaves unanswered:

what exactly is it that [...] we deny when we refuse the appeal of the suffering beast? Do we deny our common animality? What ethical status does that curious abstraction have, *animality*? And what exactly is the appeal that comes to us from the animal's eyes, eyes that, according to you, lack the fine musculature necessary to express the soul? If the animal eye is simply an inexpressive optical instrument, then what you think you see in the animal eye may in fact be nothing but what you wish to see. Animals don't have proper eyes, animals don't have proper lips, animals don't have proper faces – I am happy to concede all of that. But if they don't have faces, how do we, we beings with faces, recognize ourselves in them? (2023, 196)

The second part of John's questions tries to deactivate the ethical demand issuing from the nonhuman other by reducing it to an anthropomorphic projection (“what you think you see in the animal eye may in fact be nothing but what you wish to see”), and in fact John misunderstands the demand of the face when he asks: “how do we [...] recognize ourselves in them?” As we have seen, the appeal of the face issues precisely from its otherness and not from our recognition of its similarity with ours. The first few questions, however, echo legitimate and true concerns. As usual, Costello does not answer her son's questions and tries to deflect the question of the face by saying that the appeal the cat in the culvert made to her was not coming from the face (“I never said that the cat in the culvert had a face,” she states; 2023, 196) but from her motherhood, which is what demanded from her a response without questions or moral calculus. The question of the face is dropped here and the story continues on other themes.

The unanswered questions voiced by John emphasize the fact that Levinas' approach to ethics, although very original and extremely influent, remains problematic, especially when we want to "radicalize" it and extend it to nonhuman otherness. I will briefly highlight here just a few points, which will lead me then to my conclusion. And I will start with the central question John Llewelyn asked already thirty years ago: "why Levinas gives so much ethical weight to the ability to speak" (1991, 63)? Llewelyn's wording is perhaps unfortunate, since Levinas' point is not the "ability" to speak as just another ability belonging to a set that will then determine the moral status of the subject in question, as in traditional ethics, but rather the face as *communication*. It is true, nonetheless, that Levinas insists on determining the face-to-face relationship as a "conversation" (e.g., 1969, 51, 71), and the "discourse" as a necessary requirement for it. The "face to face" is primarily a *linguistic* relationship: "The 'vision' of the face is inseparable from this offering language is. To see the face is to speak of the world"; "Meaning is the face of the Other, and all recourse to words takes place already within the primordial face to face of language"; "Language as the presence of the face" (1969, 174; 206; 213). The face is intrinsically intertwined with language, and in fact, as Adriaan Peperzak notes, it can effectively be replaced by "expression" or "word" or "speech" (*la parole*) as the "concrete manners by which the irreducibility of the Other comes to the fore" (1993, 142; cf. also Taylor 2006).

However, this language is not necessarily or even primarily vocal. As Judith Butler remarks, what the face *means* for Levinas is the commandment "thou shall not kill" *before* and *without* speaking it out; "the face, strictly speaking, does not speak," and instead of speaking the face may be a "cry," a "sob," a "scream," it is "an utterance, that is not strictly speaking linguistic," "a scene of agonized vocalization" (Butler 2004, 132–33; cf. Taylor 2006). The face is in fact primarily signification and an "instrument of communication," but of a communication which "extends outside and predates language, rationality and consciousness" (Black 2011, 3). If we add, with Daniel Black (2011, 1), that the face is a "shifting, multiplex, distributed and layered phenomenon," the terms of this communication become problematic. Since, as Black again states (2011, 2), "the face exists more in the mind of the viewer than on the body of the viewed: it perhaps results more from the attribution of a face than the simple presence of physical features," the attribution of the face ultimately depends on an aleatory decision. And since to have a face means to be

recognized as a subject, on this aleatory decision depends one's ethical status (cf. Parkinson 2019, 46–49).¹⁶

Deleuze and Guattari particularly (and exclusively) insisted on this point in their chapter on “faciality” in *A Thousand Plateaus*: the face is for them an apparatus of subjectivation *imposed* upon the body by an “abstract machine of faciality” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 168), where subjectivation means subjugation to larger structures of meaning and identity. Their account is, in a sense, antithetical to that of Levinas, but a comparison that would do justice to both positions exceeds the scope of this chapter.¹⁷ Suffice to say here that, although one-dimensional (Black 2011) and, unlike Levinas' account, based on vision and not on expression and speech (cf. Taylor 2006), Deleuze and Guattari's critique of faciality highlights a very important point: the face is not inclusive, it is not for everyone, even within the narrow limits of humanity. In a nutshell, the “machine of faciality” *produces* faces according to certain standards,¹⁸ in a “dichotomized relation to the same” which prevents any encounter with true alterity (Taylor 2006). What we encounter in a face is what is already understood and expected, which will never allow for surprises. “The face is not a universal,” Deleuze and Guattari write. “It is not even that of the white man; it is White Man himself, with his broad white cheeks and the black hole of

¹⁶This emphasis on aleatory attribution contradicts a fundamental tenet of Levinas' face, which should remain entirely independent and disconnected from any attributes or qualities. However, as Adriana Cavarero remarks (2016, 164–66), Levinas himself repeatedly disproves his own tenet continually invoking and focusing on underprivileged figures of otherness, such as the orphan, the widower, the stranger, the poor, the indigent, the hungry, the stateless—in terms, that is, that are often *pathetic*.

¹⁷There is actually no consensus on this point: for example, whereas Simone Ghelli argues that Deleuze's and Guattari's faciality constitutes a “critical politicization of Levinas' face” (Ghelli 2023, 204), Daniel Black considers the two positions antithetical, since for Levinas the face comes prior to any subjectivation (Black 2011, 20–21), and Chloé Taylor argues that the two positions are actually heterogeneous and to a point even compatible, since the former focuses on vision and the latter on language (Taylor 2006). For other perspectives see also Rae (2016) and Schroeder (2012).

¹⁸In a way, Costello says something similar to John, although without Deleuze and Guattari's negative emphasis: “Even we, you and I, are not born with faces. A face has to be coaxed out of us, as a fire is coaxed out of coals. I coaxed a face out of you, out of your depths. I can remember how I bent over you and blew on you, day after day, till at last you, the being I called *you my child*, began to emerge. It was like calling forth a soul” (Coetzee 2023, 183).

his eyes. The face is Christ. The face is the typical European” (1987, 177). The machine of faciality produces “normalities” *with no exteriority and no transcendence*: “If the face is in fact Christ, in other words, your average ordinary White Man, then the first deviances, the first divergence-types, are racial: yellow man, black man, men in the second or third category. [...] They must be Christianized, in other words, facialized” (1987, 178). That is why the face must be rejected, they argue, in the name of “becoming”: “Yes, the face has a great future, but only if it is destroyed, dismantled. On the road to the asignifying and asubjective” (1987, 171).

Mutatis mutandis, Derrida draws similar conclusions from the inconsistencies of the face. Levinas’ enormous influence on Derrida’s elaboration of an ethics of “hospitality” to the stranger cannot be overstated, but when it comes to opening ethics to nonhuman animals Derrida considers Levinas’ position as a mere continuation of the dogmatic anthropocentrism of Descartes, Kant, and Heidegger. Already in the 1964 essay “Violence and Metaphysics” (three years after the publication of *Totality and Infinity*) Derrida argues that, in Levinas’ philosophy, in order to recognize the other as other we must assume that she is an *ego*, that she “has the form of the ego,” and thus the Levinasian asymmetry between ego and other is ultimately based on *this symmetry*: that both self and others are egos (Derrida 1978, 125–26).¹⁹ This underlying symmetry, from an anthropocentric perspective like Levinas’, we can add, limits true otherness only to human beings.²⁰ But it is in the posthumously-published conference and seminar on the animal question, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008) and *The Beast and the Sovereign* (2009), that Derrida highlights the true scope of Levinas’ own doubts regarding the face: Levinas’

¹⁹ Adriana Cavarero (2016, 155ff.) similarly contests Levinas’ geometry, arguing that a “face to face” cannot but presuppose a certain degree of symmetry and reciprocity: there are two faces, which must both be egos, in a linear relationship that must involve a kind of geometry of correspondence.

²⁰ Another point Derrida notes is that the face is constructed on the resemblance between man and God: “man’s visage and the Face of God” (1978, 108); and in fact, Levinas writes: “The Other [...] resembles God” (1969, 293). Although different from the face of Christ that Deleuze and Guattari identify in the face—unlike the face of Christ in Christian iconography, the face of the Jewish God is invisible and unwatchable—this point also limits the face to an exclusively anthropocentric and *anthropomorphic* sphere. After all, in Genesis (1: 26–28) God *makes Man in His image and after His likeness*, and it is precisely this likeness that gives Man “dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.”

hesitation about the beginning and end of the face ultimately undermines the anthropocentric thrust of his own work (Calarco 2019, 128–29).²¹

By avowing “I don’t know if a snake has a face. I can’t answer that question,” Derrida argues, Levinas in a sense declines responsibility but simultaneously restates, in his non-response, his (exclusively human) ability to respond. However, he also ultimately admits that

he can thus no longer answer for his whole discourse on the face. For declaring that he doesn’t know where the right to be called “face” begins means confessing that one doesn’t know at bottom what a face is, what the word means, what governs its usage, and that means confessing that one didn’t say what responding means. Doesn’t that amount, as a result, to calling into question the whole legitimacy of the discourse and ethics of the “face” of the other, the legitimacy and even the sense of every proposition concerning the alterity of the other, the other as my neighbor or my brother, etc.? (Derrida 2008, 109)

The face to face with the animal ultimately deconstructs and delegitimizes the whole ethics built on the face and calls therefore for a different ethics, one that, in *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Derrida will call an ethics of “unrecognizability.” This ethics involves a “responsibility with respect to the most dissimilar [*le plus dissemblable*, the least ‘fellow’ like], the entirely other, precisely the monstrously other, the unrecognizable other. The ‘unrecognizable’ [*méconnaissable*], I shall say in a somewhat elliptical way, is the beginning of ethics, of the Law, and not of the human” (Derrida 2009, 108).²² Any other ethics based on recognition and recognizability—and the face *is* this recognition—remains “dogmatic” and “narcissistic”

²¹ *The Animal That Therefore I Am* consists of the complete transcription of Derrida’s ten-hour address to the 1997 Cérisy conference entitled “The Autobiographical Animal.” As Kai Wiegandt notes (2019, 171–72), a first text, titled “L’animal que donc je suis (à suivre),” which was to become a part of the book, was published in 1999, the same year of *The Lives of Animals*. Although the two books present evident parallels, the two authors never refer to one another and no explicit influence can be identified.

²² In his Derridean readings of Levinas’ face, Matthew Calarco similarly calls for a dismantling of the face. However, whereas in *Zoographies* (2008) he still somehow, like Derrida, clings to the face or to a “face to face” as the primal site of the ethical confrontation (albeit adopting a generous “agnosticism” concerning the “who” of the other), ten years later (2019) he gestures beyond the face—and also beyond Derrida, as I will show in the next section—because it inevitably remains too anthropocentric and too anthropomorphic.

(2009, 108)—in a word, *anthropomorphic*. The need to look for a face—the human signifier *par excellence*—, the need to find a face in the other as a condition to qualify for ethics, is and remains anthropomorphic.

THE BACK OF THE SNAKE

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas writes that, although the face is where the existent presents itself *par excellence*, “the whole body – a hand or a curve of the shoulder – can express as the face” (1969, 262). More than twenty years later, he expands on the reference to the “curve of the shoulder” in the essay “Peace and Proximity” (originally published in 1984), where he repeats that “[t]he face is thus not exclusively a human face” and uses a scene from Vasily Grossman’s novel *Life and Fate* to explain what he means by this. In this scene, the character of Yevghenia stands in line at the entrance of the Lubynaka prison in Moscow, where political prisoners were held. She can see only the back of the other people in line, and muses: “[She] had never thought that the human back could be so expressive, and could convey states of mind in such a penetrating way. Persons approaching the counter had a particular way of craning their neck and their back, their raised shoulders with shoulder blades tense like springs, which seemed to cry, sob, and scream” (qtd. in Levinas 1996, 167). In a later interview, Levinas would famously redefine this reference to Grossman’s novel, renaming “the curve of the shoulder” as “the nape of the neck”: “those napes which still express anguish, anxiety and tears to the people who see them, are *obliterated faces*, though in a very different manner” (1989b, 38, emphasis added). The “signifyigness” that the face is, Levinas argues, is not limited to eyes, mouth and nose but can emerge in the most unlikely parts of the human body. This is what he means when he says that “[t]he face is thus not exclusively a human face.” Paradoxically, even the nape of the human neck can be a face, but not the snout of an animal.

The point is, as Derrida emphasized, that there is a face only where we (decide to) recognize one—and therefore there is true ethics, for him, only when we do away with this need for recognition. However, Derrida himself, despite his call for an ethics of “unrecognizability,” struggles to disentangle himself from the primal scene of the “face to face.” In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, he even elevates this primal scene to the origin of (human) thought itself (the thought of the animal and thought

tout court): “The animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps begins there” (2008, 29). And also in *The Beast and the Sovereign*, when trying to distance himself from Levinas’ ethics of the face as “recognizability,” instead of doing away with the need for the face he still falls into the trap of trying to find a primal “face to face”—in particular with the snake. Whereas in *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, in response to Levinas’ indecision about the face of the snake, he proposes a reading of Paul Valéry’s poem *Silhouette of a Serpent* (2008, 65–68),²³ in *The Beast and The Sovereign* (2009, 236–249), following a suggestion by John Llewelyn (1991, 65), he improvises a brief reading of D.H. Lawrence’s poem *Snake*. Here a final twist seems to suggest an overcoming of the face, and although Derrida does not take this opportunity, it is with this point that I want to conclude.

Lawrence wrote *Snake*, one of his most anthologized poems, probably in July 1920, published it first in the magazine *The Dial* in 1921, and then included it in his 1923 collection *Birds, Beasts and Flowers: Poems*. When staying at Fontana Vecchia in Taormina, a town in Sicily in sight of Mount Etna, one morning he went to get water to “his” water-trough and found there a snake who was drinking. So, he writes, he had to stand and wait, for there was somebody “before me.”²⁴ Derrida dwells on this last line—and on its repetition a few lines later, in which the poet calls himself “a second comer”—to argue that the poem stages that true “face to face” between the human and the animal that Levinas was unable to conceive. The phrase “before me” means both that, as for Levinas, the other *comes first*, that in my relationship with the other I am always a “second comer”; but also that the animal stands *before me* in a face-to-face, in a true ethical relationship (Derrida 2009, 238–39). Moreover, the pronoun “he” and not “it” is used for the snake, who appears thus as a “someone,” *a person*. Therefore, as Gerasimos Kakoliris argues, Derrida construes this scene of encounter as a scene of *hospitality par excellence*: “The man waits out of respect for the other, because the other was there first, but also because the other is a guest” (Kakoliris 2016, 246). And this is a hospitality beyond recognition, an obligation not only to “those like us” but rather “with

²³The point of this reading for Derrida is that in Valéry’s poem the snake (the animal) *responds*: he speaks, or rather hisses, and expresses himself.

²⁴The poem occupies three pages (349–351) of Lawrence *Complete Poems* (1977) so I will here not specify each time the page number.

respect to anyone at all, any living being at all, and therefore with respect to the animal” (Derrida 2009, 244; cf. Calarco 2019).

Lawrence recounts, however, how his cultural conditioning urged him to disregard his obligations to this interspecies hospitality: the voice of “education” told him that the snake must be killed; that, if he were a “man,” he would take a stick and finish off the animal.²⁵ Anthropocentrism, atavistic fears, illusions of domination, and a stereotyped idea of masculinity²⁶ push against the poet’s first, hospitable opening. But the poet resists, creating a tension between fear and admiration, natural impulses and cultural conditionings, “divine” otherness and “accursed human education,” that marks this scene with the complexities and actual problems of a real encounter with nonhuman otherness (cf. Kakoliris 2016, 245; Thomas 1986). The poet is torn between his “liking” the snake and being “glad” that he had come “like a guest” to peacefully drink at the water-trough, and the “voices” accusing him of cowardice and even of “perversity” for feeling “honored” by the unexpected presence of the snake and his seeking the poet’s “hospitality.”

For some interpreters, this de-mythologization of the human encounter with the snake (a mythical setting if ever there was one), together with the personification of the animal—not only through the pronoun “he/him” but also through the description of his agency, of his body parts, and his comparison to a god—, amount to a kind of anthropomorphism, one that, however, for Derek Ryan is a “nonanthropocentric anthropomorphism”: along the lines of “critical” anthropomorphism, this is an approach to the nonhuman other which decenters the human and focuses on the

²⁵This line ends supporting the need to kill the snake with the fact that in Sicily black snakes are harmless but “gold” snakes are venomous. The venomous snake is probably an asp viper, whose subspecies found in Sicily (*Vipera aspis hugyi*) is the only venomous snake in the island and is usually a reddish color with distinctive red-orange saddles down its back. The innocent “black, black snake” is probably a western whip snake (*Coluber viridiflavus viridiflavus*) because the subspecies found in Sicily is a shiny black color.

²⁶Derrida remarks how this scene is strongly gendered: not only the voices of his “accursed human education” push the poet toward a violent virility, but the characters are exclusively masculine: a male poet encountering a male snake. Derrida concludes his seminar with the words: “And there is no woman here, no woman, just a man and a snake” (2009, 246). Kakoliris asks therefore: “What would happen if a woman were in the position of the man, who would not have to prove her ‘virility’? Equally, what would happen if the snake were a ‘she’?” (2016, 249). A possible response could be the feminist approaches explored in Chap. 6 of this book.

nonhuman, while acknowledging at the same time that some anthropomorphism may be necessary in the attempt to make sense of another's world (Ryan 2015, 294–95). Michael Bell calls it instead a “bracketed anthropomorphism” or, *à la* Derrida, an anthropomorphism *sous rature*, under erasure, and links Lawrence’s snake to Costello’s sympathetic imagination: in both Lawrence and Costello, given the unknowability of non-human radical otherness, an anthropomorphic gesture—albeit *sous rature*—is a necessary condition for the exercise of the sympathetic imagination and for a more complex recognition of the other (2006, 177–78).

The poem ends nonetheless with a twist: when the snake, after drinking, turns around to get away and turns his back to the poet, the tension between hospitality and hostility breaks and the poet is overcome by the voices of his “accursed human education”: overcome by horror and protest at the snake’s withdrawing into a “horrid black hole,” the poet picks up a “clumsy log” and throws it at the snake. He does not hit him, he believes, but keeps nonetheless staring at the hole with fascination. This is the true ethical moment of the poem. The poet immediately regrets his foolish action and despises himself and his education for his vulgar and mean act. He ultimately feels that he missed his chance to really *encounter* a “divine” Other and must expiate his anthropocentric “pettiness.” This is the last word of the poem.

Derrida (2009, 244) emphasizes that this is when the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” clearly emerges from the confrontation. However, here the back of the snake is not simply an “obliterated face,” like Levinas’ nape of the neck, and the confrontation is no longer a face-to-face (as perhaps Derrida still believes). It is instead a “face-to-back.” It is the back and not the face that cries “Thou shalt not kill”: it is not in the face-to-face but instead only when the snake turns his back to the poet that the latter is called to a true ethical response—and miserably fails.²⁷ The back and not the face is the most unknowable and unrecognizable. The back and not the face is the most vulnerable and helpless—the other does not see us, they are defenseless, we can “backstab” them; the vulnerability of the back awakens a sense of the utmost power to kill. The face-to-back and not the face-to-face is therefore the true non-symmetrical and non-reciprocal confrontation: the back truly represents the impossibility of recognition, of

²⁷ In an ironic or perverse reversal of the story of the Fall, Derrida argues (2009, 246), the victims here are not the humans but the snake. See also Thomas (1986).

similarity, of reciprocity, of response and relation. And it is therefore in our facing the back that true ethics emerges: in the response, violent or hospitable, that we are called to give.

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EPILOGUE

BATMOM'S "WORLD"-TRAVELING IN NONHUMAN UMWELTEN

As the chapters of this book have shown, negotiating the limits of imagination is an open-ended endeavor that needs to be continuously renewed and reinvented. That is why there is no “conclusion” to this book but only a call to keep pushing against what, each time, we think or believe are the limits of the imaginable. However, to give a sense of “closure” I want to briefly add one last image and one last *poetic* metaphor which I believe resonate very well with the spirit of Elizabeth Costello’s interventions, and in particular with her polemic against Thomas Nagel—ultimately the *fil rouge* of my whole analysis. The image is that of Batmom, a Polish pensioner who transformed her apartment into a bat sanctuary, and the poetic metaphor is that of “world”-traveling as developed by María Lugones.

Barbara Górecka, a 69-year-old pensioner from Szczecin in northwestern Poland, has been dubbed Batmom (and given a mock “superhero” status with the modified batman logo) because she transformed her apartment on the ninth floor of a residential building into a bat sanctuary, where, she says, in the past 16 years she has taken care of around 1600 bats, and around three dozen are now (February 2024) in residence. As she recounts, on a very cold January bats started emerging out of the ventilation ducts into her apartment. Initially scared and sharing the prejudice

and popular beliefs about bats, she was reassured by a microbiologist friend and in time built a network of experts and volunteers who help her in her work of shelter and rehabilitation. She has grown so accustomed to the physical contact with bats, who seek warmth and comfort under her jumper and clothing, that she sometimes forgets and leaves her flat with one still in her sleeve (New Straits Times 2024). Górecka's trajectory from fear to forgetful routine, I would like to argue, exemplifies the possibility of a kind of journeying into the world of nonhuman animals that I want to illustrate by developing and adapting Lugones' concept of "world"-traveling.

Lugones, an Argentinian feminist philosopher educated and working in the US who identified as non-white, developed the concept of "world"-traveling in relation to the experience of Latino women in US society. The concept has been discussed and adapted to different situations, in particular in relation to schizophrenia and mental illness (cf. e.g., Jaeger 2003; Potter 2003; Molas 2018), but I believe that, when reconfigured to include nonhuman "worlds" (cf. already Herron 2017), it strongly resonates with Elizabeth Costello's interventions and with the analyses of this book. The use of the concept in relation to mental illness already opens it to different, non-normate forms of embodiment, but it is Lugones' own flexibility with the notion of "world" that makes it malleable and plastic in the first place, so that its extension to nonhuman worlds does not appear very problematic. Lugones resisted any strict definition of a "world" because, she argued, "the term is suggestive and I do not want to close the suggestiveness of it too soon" (1987, 9). That is why she always put the term between quotation marks, highlighting it and simultaneously distancing it from any assumed connotation. "Worlds," for Lugones, contain people (who, I add, can be nonhuman beings), some of which must be flesh and blood but other can be imagined, dead, or fictional. Some worlds are precisely and rigidly structured but others can be incomplete, partial, small, or scarcely inhabited. What is important is that they are and remain permeable and ontologically open, and that most beings inhabit more than one world, sharing them with other beings—the way Batmom shares her world with the bats.

In a sense, Lugones' concept can be compared to Uexküll's notion of *Umwelt* (2010), the species-specific perceptual world of every living being, because all *Umwelten* overlap and intersect, producing different experiences of the same environment—although Uexküll's *Umwelten* are definitely less porous and permeable than Lugones' worlds. But the concept

certainly departs from Heidegger's very exclusive and excluding understanding of world, since for Heidegger to "have" a world a being needs a certain form of reflexive relation with the objects in it (the "as such" structure), and that is why nonhuman beings are "poor" in world. Moreover, for Heidegger, as we have seen (Chap. 5), no spatial overlapping can lead to any form of "sharing" (cf. Heidegger 1995, 210)—hence humans and nonhumans never share a world, which makes "traveling" between and through them impossible. What most distances Lugones' from Heidegger's position, however, is the attitude she deems appropriate when confronted with other worlds (and preparing to travel through them): what determines the capacity to "world"-travel is, in fact, the "loving perception" one needs to adopt when approaching other worlds. This attitude—akin to Iris Murdoch's "just and loving gaze" (cf. Chap. 2)—transforms the very relationship we have with the other beings inhabiting the worlds but also with ourselves, making the "travelling" possible and fruitful.

The opposite attitude is what Lugones, borrowing the concept from Marilyn Frye, calls "arrogant perception." The arrogant perception is in fact the *refusal* to travel based on the assumption of one's sufficiency and on the indifference toward the others and their worlds. Importantly, Lugones underlines and insists that this kind of perception is *taught*—it is a social and cultural feature—and becomes part of the identities we are disciplined into. She calls this "teaching" the "internalization of the propriety of abuse without identification," whereby the "failure of identification" becomes "the manifestation of the 'relation'" (Lugones 1987, 5, 7). This aspect can be easily transposed to our relations to nonhuman worlds: we are *taught* to look arrogantly at the rest of creation and this perception—this "propriety of abuse without identification"—is "internalized" and becomes the "manifestation" of our relation to the nonhuman worlds as part and parcel of our species-identity. Lugones even uses the concept of "different species" as an image for the failure/refuse of identification—"I saw myself as separate from her, a different sort of being, not quite of the same species" (1987, 6)—and Andrew Molas and Chris Kramer also recur to the species difference to illustrate the arrogant gaze: for Molas it is a way of "classifying, defining, and distancing ourselves" (2018, 728), just like the attitude of the detached "scientist" toward her object of research, and Kramer explicitly compares it to the attitude of the ethnologist or zoologist (2017, 94). But the social/cultural nature of the arrogant perception also means that this attitude can be unlearned and transformed—just as happened with Batmom, who initially shared all

traditional prejudiced about bats (as she was *taught* to) but eventually learned to see them differently, with a “loving eye,” and this new gaze provided a new access to the bats’ world.

A feature that can lead to, and is ultimately constitutive of, the arrogant perception is being “at ease” in one’s world. Being “at ease” involves being a “fluent speaker” in one’s world (knowing the Wittgensteinian “language games”), agreeing and being content with all the norms (“being normatively happy,” Lugones 1987, 12), and being (exclusively!) bonded to one’s “inner group.” If feeling somewhat at ease in one’s “home” is not necessarily bad, the “maximal way of being at ease” is, for Lugones, “dangerous because it tends to produce people who have no inclination to travel across ‘worlds’ or have no experience of ‘world’ travelling” (1987, 12). “World”-traveling means instead to leave the familiarity of “home,” to abandon the comfort of the worlds in which one is most at home, and to embrace the condition of not-being-at-ease, of being-between-worlds, as a critical and enriching attitude (Potter 2003, 212–13; Magrì and McQueen 2022, 187). Traveling is as such paradoxical, insofar as it presupposes a home to which one might return, but also a liberating sense of abandoning home and its limited horizon: “Genuine travel, then, is both the menace of loss and the possibility of gain” (Potter 2003, 212–13). That is why tourists are not good “world”-travelers, since they always remain detached outsiders and superficial spectators, always satisfied and “at ease” in their own perspective (Potter 2003, 211; Kramer 2017, 95–96; Molas 2018, 730; Yap 2021, 171). But also Uexküll’s “forays” (*Streifzüge*) into animal worlds remain distant from true traveling, since they explicitly express the aggressive, domineering, and conquering attitude of the “detached” and “objective” *scientist* toward an object to be seized, coldly analyzed, and controlled.

The traveler certainly remains “oriented,” in the sense that one’s identity—one’s “home”—is never entirely lost and relinquished (Potter 2003, 213). However, true traveling means to be open to being changed, and this is precisely Lugones’ definition of traveling: “The shift from being one person to being a different person,” she writes, “is what I call ‘travel’” (1987, 11). This shift, produced by the loving perception, involves a transformation of one’s commitments, perceptions, and values. In particular, it involves a change in one’s epistemological position from the “center,” which is always a position of *power*, to a relative “periphery” informed by epistemological modesty. Lugones not only subscribes to a notion of non-fixed and performative self (Herron 2017) but theorizes

“world”-traveling precisely as a process of self-transformation in which “one does not experience any underlying ‘I’” (Lugones 1987, 12). We all live in many worlds and are different selves in each one of them, and if Nagel wonders about “what it is like” to be another being in another world, Lugones is interested instead in what happens to the self in traveling to that world. Importantly, the understanding of another’s world opened up by the perspectival shift of traveling is not a matter of “propositional truth” (Molas 2018, 731), i.e., it is not a matter of knowing “what it is like.” Nancy Potter explicitly evokes Nagel’s defeatist paradigm in order to counter that, for “world”-travelers, the otherness of another’s world works not as a prohibition (“we will never know”) but rather as a challenge—“It is the otherness that is the challenge,” as Costello would say (Coetzee 2003, 12)—; not as a sign of the impossibility but instead of the difficulty of the work of understanding (Potter 2003, 212). Even if Batmom will never know what it is like to echolocate and flutter about in the night sky, the transformation operated in her by the loving perception gives her a partial but insightful access to the world of the bats she cares for.

Finally, Lugones says that “world”-traveling must be *playful*. She must however differentiate her notion of playfulness from the well-established concept championed, for example, by Hans-Georg Gadamer in *Truth and Method* and Johan Huizinga in *Homo Ludens*. These authors understand play in an “agonistic” sense, which involves contest, winning, losing, battling, the exercise of a certain competence and, most importantly, the affirmation of one’s “self-importance” (Lugones 1987, 15). Agonistic travelers are “conquerors” and “imperialists” and as such their traveling always fails, because what they do is to try to conquer and colonize (and thereby destroy) the other world, and thereby lose it—as in the “bad” or “wrong” connotation of empathy and anthropomorphism as *projection*. Lugones’ own definition of playfulness is instead the “loving attitude in travelling across ‘worlds’” (1987, 15). This attitude “does not expect the world to be neatly packaged, ruly,” and embraces “uncertainty” as an “openness to surprise”:

We are not self-important, we are not fixed in particular constructions of ourselves, which is part of saying that we are open to self-construction. We may not have rules, and when we do have rules, there are no rules that are to us sacred. We are not worried about competence. We are not wedded to a particular way of doing things. While playful we have not abandoned ourselves to, nor are we stuck in, any particular “world.” We are there creatively. (1987, 16)

Playfulness involves, therefore, an openness to re-shape and re-construct oneself, the world(s) one inhabits, and one's relations to other worlds. A playful attitude invites discovery and welcomes the unexpected, and so one's own experiential and ontological grounding is not held sacred. And only in this attitude are ignorance and not-knowing not paralyzing but rather thought-inducing: although we will never know what it is like to be a bat, this does not paralyze us but pushes us forward to try harder and, especially, *lovelier*.

This is, ultimately, the only “healthy” attitude toward oneself, one's world, and all the other worlds we share with other beings, since this “sharing” is our ontological condition: “I am incomplete and unreal without other women,” Lugones writes (1987, 8), and we can expand: “I am incomplete and unreal without other – human and nonhuman – beings.” We are fully dependent on each other, so “travelling to each other's ‘worlds’” is what “enable[s] us to *be* through *loving* each other” (1987, 8). Obviously “world”-traveling is not always successful and not always even possible, but it is the only alternative to indifference and to writing off the others and their worlds as inaccessible. Moreover, it is not a “truth-seeking endeavor” aimed at “classifying” the other by imprisoning them into terms and definitions *we* can understand; instead, it is about accepting the other for who they are and genuinely caring about them (Molas 2018, 739n5). This is ultimately, for me, the sense of the whole endeavor of probing and pushing against the limits of the imagination in our interactions with other beings: “to *be* through *loving* each other.”

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