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Philosophy & Animal Life
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It was while I was thinking about preparing a text in which I would attempt to take further some earlier thoughts of mine concerning Wittgenstein's reflections on the concept of "seeing something as something", what he calls seeing aspects, which dominate Part II of Philosophical Investigations, that I reread the paper (1

first encountered it as a lecture) that Cora Diamond—a philosopher whose work I have for years been particularly and continuously grateful for—entitles “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy”, a piece in which at a certain point she deploys an idea of mine in a way I found heartening and distinctly instructive. Eventually, I found that the rereading of her paper had made so strong an impression upon me that I came to feel compelled to articulate a response to it, however unsure I felt my philosophical ground might prove to be. Diamond’s paper takes up certain extremities of conflict associated with phenomena of what she calls the difficulty of reality (call this a difficulty of change, a difficulty that philosophy must incorporate), cases in which our human capacities to respond—she in effect says the bases or limits of our human nature—are, for some, put to the test, threatening to freeze or to overwhelm understanding and imagination, while at the same time, for others, the phenomenon, or fact, fails to raise, or perhaps it succeeds only in raising, an eyebrow. Examples range from instances of being struck dumb by sublime beauty, to speechlessness before horror.) The principal matter Diamond treats in her paper is the fact, and the understanding of the fact, of our entwinement with the non-human world of animals, specifically and most extensively our relation or relations to the mass preparation of animals as food for humans. It is a matter to whose implications I have hitherto not devoted consecutive thought—a matter I now feel I have avoided.

I say at once that while relations to animals have come up variously, if intermittently, in my writing over the years, I am neither practiced in the theory of animal rights nor committed in my daily life to vegetarianism. But an idea which is said to test or threaten the limits of human nature reminds me that in my early reflections on Wittgenstein’s study of seeing something as something I raised the issue whether it makes sense to speak of seeing others or ourselves as human (as opposed to what?). If it does then it makes sense to suppose that we may fail to see ourselves and others so—a purported condition I went on to call “soul-blindness”. A subtext of my reflections to follow here is the question whether there is a comparable blindness we may suffer with respect to non-human animals.

The obvious bearing of Wittgenstein’s study of seeing something as something on Diamond’s wish to have us ponder the human and the intellectual challenges of the mass production of animals for food, lies in its suggestion that the extreme variation in human responses to this fact of civilized existence is not a function of any difference in our access to information; no one knows, or can literally see, essentially anything here that the others fail to know or can see. But then if one concludes that the variation is a function of a response to or of an attitude toward information
that is shared, one may suppose the issue is of some familiar form of moral disagreement. Diamond’s discussion specifically questions this supposition. One peculiarity of the case of breeding animals for the manufacturing of food, beyond the extremity of responses ranging from horror to indifference, unlike difficulties over the death penalty, or the legitimacy of a war, or the torture of prisoners, or euthanasia, or abortion, is that the issue is one that touches the immediate and perhaps invisible choices of most of the members of a society every day. Further, those who are indifferent to or tolerant of the mass killing of animals for food may well regard the purpose of the institution as producing an enhancement of modes of human life’s greatest pleasures, from the common pleasures of sharing nourishment to the rare pleasures of consuming exquisite delicacies. It seems safe to say that no one of balanced mind thinks it an enhancement of human pleasures to perform executions or abortions or to torture. (Nietzsche may have exceptionally divined pleasure taken in such activities, and Himmler may have shared his view in warning the minions under his command that their deeds of extermination must be carried out soberly and dutifully.) The variation of attitudes that Diamond’s discussion stresses between the horror of individuals and the indifference of most of society considers moments in which the variation of response seems one between visions of the world, between how its practices are regarded, or seen, or taken to heart, or not.

Wittgenstein’s reflections on seeing aspects (most memorably using the Gestalt figure of a duck-rabbit to demonstrate incompatible ways of reading or seeing a situation) was brought into more general intellectual circulation when Thomas Kuhn used the idea of a “Gestalt switch” specifically in understanding certain crises in intellectual history, particularly in the history of science. But in Wittgenstein’s elaboration of his reflections on the phenomenon he emphasizes that “hugely many interrelated phenomena and possible concepts” (p. 199) are brought into play, among them the concept of merely knowing (p. 202), and of reading a poem or narrative with feeling and merely skimming the lines for information (p. 214), and of being struck by, or blind to, a likeness, and of a picture as helping one to read with the correct expression (ibid.). I might characterize Diamond as raising the question of what I will call inordinate knowledge, knowledge whose importance can seem excessive in its expression, in contrast to mere or unobtrusive or intellectualized or indifferent or stored knowledge, as though for some the concept of eating animals has no particular interest (arguably another direction of questionable—here defective—expression). I think of a remark of Freud’s in rehearsing the progress of coming into one’s own through the talking cure: “There is knowing, and there is knowing.”
And I suppose, in another register, this variability of condition is what Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, cites in the phrase "now I know in part".

I think too of my efforts to understand the appeal to the ordinary in the philosophical practices of the later Wittgenstein and of J. L. Austin, hence of the tendency they counter in Western philosophy, since at least Plato’s Cave, of seeking systematically to transcend or to impugn the ordinary in human existence. The vivid extremes in responding to the world-wide existence of food factories is a cautionary, even lurid, example warning against supposing that the ordinary in human life is a given, as it were a place. I would say rather that it is a task, as the self is. I sometimes speak of the task as discovering the extraordinary in what we call ordinary and discovering the ordinary in what we call extraordinary; sometimes as detecting significance in the insignificant, sometimes as detecting insignificance in the significant. These are reasonable abstracts of what I recurrently find to be tasks of philosophy. And the sense of one familiar replacing a contrasting familiar is what I mark in the title of an earlier text of mine as "The Uncanniness of the Ordinary".

I will not arrive here at some conclusion about how far the concept of seeing aspects may bear on either inordinate or insipid expression. Such a suggestion comes up inconclusively a couple of times in what follows. Its point is to specify moments at which we know we stand in need of a convincing account of the extreme differences of response to the eating, and other questionable uses, of non-human animals—whether or when we count this as ordinary or as extreme—since in lacking it we betray a register of our ignorance of ourselves.

In the paper of Diamond’s that I begin from here her reflections are principally cast as a commentary on moments from the presentation depicted in a pair of stories by J. M. Coetzee with the title “The Lives of Animals”. The pair appear under this title as two of the seven chapters that make up Coetzee’s novel Elizabeth Costello. The pair also appear in a separate volume also entitled The Lives of Animals, this time accompanied by responses from five writers from various disciplines. It is this latter volume that Diamond considers. She stresses her finding herself, in one decisively consequential respect, in a different, isolated, position from each and all of these five respondents, despite the fact that she and they all express unhappiness with the state, and the understanding of the state, of the human relation to the non-human animal world. We shall come to Diamond’s isolating difference in due course. I trust that I shall not refer to subtleties in either Coetzee’s or Diamond’s texts without quoting passages from them sufficient for judging them.

The first of the pair of Coetzee’s stories features a lecture to a college audience in the United States given
by a fictional Australian writer named Elizabeth Costello as part of the two or three day celebration in which she is being honored by the college. In the opening moments of her lecture Costello reports herself unable to put aside her perception, or vision, in all its offensiveness, in what she calls our food factories we are, to “say it openly ... surrounded by an enterprise of degradation, cruelty and killing which rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of, indeed dwarfs it, in that ours is an enterprise without end . . .” (p. 65).

In the second of the stories Diamond is responding to, Coetzee includes near its beginning a letter from someone that Elizabeth Costello’s son, who teaches at the college, describes as a poet who has been around the college forever. I quote most of the words of the poet’s letter, anticipating my wanting to return to various of them:

“Dear Mrs. Costello, Excuse me for not attending last night’s dinner. I have read your books and know you are a serious person, so I do you the credit of taking what you said in your lecture seriously. At the kernel of your lecture, it seemed to me, was the question of breaking bread. If we refuse to break bread with the executioners of Auschwitz, can we continue to break bread with the slaughterers of animals? You took over for your own purposes the familiar comp-

parison between the murdered Jews of Europe and slaughtered cattle. You misunderstand the nature of likenesses ... to the point of blasphemy. Man is made in the likeness of God but God does not have the likeness of man. If Jews were treated like cattle, it does not follow that cattle are treated like Jews. The inversion insults the memory of the dead. It also trades on the horrors of the camps in a cheap way. ... Forgive me if I am forthright. You said you were old enough not to have time to waste on niceties, and I am an old man too. Yours sincerely, Abraham Stern.”

Costello’s daughter-in-law, with whom she does not get along, refers to the letter as a “protest”, and the letter does seem to collect, as if to preempt, a number of attacks a reader might want to launch against Costello’s speech. But, especially in light of the daughter-in-law’s general dismissal of Costello’s sensibility (and without speculating about what may be causing it), we can be sure that this is not enough to say about the letter’s anguish. In particular the letter avoids considering the specific understanding Stern expresses to account for his absence at last night’s dinner. Along with other omissions among the appeals Stern addresses to logic in his distress—to matters of what follows from what—while Stern opens with the coup of raising the question of breaking bread in this context of an invitation
to dinner, he omits to say why he had refused precisely to break bread last night with Mrs. Costello. Was this because her words have reached to the point of blasphemy, to dishonoring the work of God? (It is an issue for certain thinking about the Holocaust whether it should be represented at all.) Or was it because she insults the memory of the dead? Or because she invokes horror cheaply? Oddly, or ironically, these are causes Costello could well find pertinent to her own sense of horror, or as she sometimes puts it, disorientation. But this is not how Stern introduces the idea of breaking bread. He was granting (I assume) the truth of the idea that we (are right to) refuse to break bread with the executioners at Auschwitz. That black meal would, let us say, curse communion, incorporating—symbolically, it goes without saying, surely—the human ingestion of bread as the body and wine as the blood of divinity.

Stern’s refusal of communion with the executioners at Auschwitz forms a sort of major premise, as it were, of the syllogism he attributes to Costello. Her minor premise is that the slaughterers of animals are in a moral or spiritual class with the executioners at Auschwitz. From which the conclusion follows that we (are right to) refuse to break bread with these further slaughterers. But are we to take it that Stern finds Costello’s offensive fault of argumentative assimilation to warrant assimilating her to (receiving a treatment of shunning precisely marking the treatment warranted by) the executioners of Auschwitz, beyond the pale of shared bread? This reaction would seem to make his perception of Costello’s fault quite as inordinate as he takes her perception of the slaughterers of animals to be. And/or should this count as Stern’s doing what he promised at the outset of his letter to do, namely taking what Elizabeth said in her lecture seriously?

Taking expressions seriously, or a sense of difficulty with realizing this project, is a way I might characterize what Diamond names “the difficulty of philosophy”, something she understands to inhabit or to be inhabited by “the difficulty of reality”. I associate this mutual existence with what I have sometimes discussed as a chronic difficulty in expressing oneself, especially in its manifestation as finding a difficulty or disappointment with meaning, or say with language, or with human expression, as such. It is a disappointment I find fundamental to my reading of Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations.

In an essay from 1978, which she entitles “Eating Meat and Eating People”, Cora Diamond identifies herself as a vegetarian and specifies her motive in writing about the question “How might I go about showing someone that he had reason not to eat animals?” as that of attacking the arguments and not the perceptions of philosophers who express the sense of “the awful and unshakable callousness and unrelentlessness with which we most often confront the non-human world”.

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The arguments, familiarly in terms of animal rights, she finds not just too weak, but the impulse to argument at this level to be itself morally suspicious. I have I think felt this way when, in response to my expressing doubt that there are moral truths for whose certainty moral theory should undertake to provide proofs, philosophers more than once have proposed “It is wrong to torture children” as a certain truth to which moral theory has the responsibility of providing an argument, and at least one philosopher added: an argument strong enough to convince Hitler. In The Claim of Reason I reply to this train of thought by saying that morality is not meant to check the conduct of monsters.

I have not, I believe, anywhere considered in detail the dangers of allowing oneself to judge another to exhibit monstrousness. Perhaps this has been because I felt sure that I would be told that the danger of such a judgment is that others might take it into their heads to judge me to be a monster, without argument. It does not, I have to say, make me feel safer to suppose that my defense against a judgment of my monstrousness must be to discover an argument to combat it. The danger I still feel worth pursuing is that, or how, I might discover monstrousness in myself. What is Thoreau seeing when he declares, “I never knew a worse man than myself”?

I do not imagine that it has been a sense of poor argumentation on behalf of vegetarianism that has thwarted my becoming vegetarian. A clear inking of the pertinence of the choice of that form of life for me was likely. I have thought, to present itself in consequence of my discovery of my love of Thoreau’s multiple intelligence. I recall the strong effect upon me of his saying that he has no objection to young boys learning to hunt and to fish—taking him to mean that in the age of innocence (the period Emerson calls the “neutrality” of boys) the young should feel in themselves that they are part of, equal to, the wildness of nature, that they sense and relish, not fear, or distrust, their own, let’s say, animal aliveness—and his going on to cite the day on which, as Thoreau reports it, he discovered that in fishing he felt a certain lowering of respect for himself. It is from about then, backed by further of his observations, that I have sometimes half expected an analogous feeling to come my way. (Despite the fact that there was no one in my early life from whom to learn how to hunt and to fish.)

In Diamond’s earlier essay, she isolates a line from a poem of Walter de la Mare’s—“If you would happy company win” (namely the companionship of “a nimble titmouse”)—and says of it (in contrast to the idea shared by the five commentators accompanying Coetzee’s stories) that it presents “a different notion of a non-human animal, namely, that of a living creature, or fellow creature which is not a biological concept”, p. 328). What she explains she means by her different
notion is one that is not the concept of an animal possessing this or that interest or capacity in common or at variance with our human interests or capacities, but one that “means a being... which may be sought as company [Diamond’s emphasis].” It is the experience of company, say of proving to us that we are not alone in the world, and not an argument about the animal’s biological powers, that on Diamond’s view places consuming the animal out of reasonable bounds.

I recall passages in various texts of mine in which I have over the years been prompted to record, coming it could seem from nowhere, encounters with animals, real and imaginary. Thinking of Emerson at the moment (perhaps it was Thoreau) observing a squirrel arching across a field and his being prompted to say that squirrels were not made to live unseen, I am moved to record, from a time within the childhood of my two sons, my watching almost every day during the early weeks of winter the following scene play itself out beyond the kitchen window looking into the back garden of our house. We had strung a thin rope diagonally across a corner angle of the garden fence in order to suspend from the middle of the rope a bird feeder. This was designed to keep the two or three most familiar neighborhood squirrels away from the seeds before the birds had a chance at them. When initially the squirrels tried to maneuver themselves along the rope, something about it (its thinness, or its slack) foiled them.

Then the next day one of the squirrels negotiated the rope all the way to the feeder and tipped it so that some of its seeds fell to the ground, thus providing a repast for his (or her) companions and, eventually, himself or herself. I was surprised at how quickly it became obvious to me that on successive mornings it was invariably the same genius performing this mission on behalf of this little group. Before our family devised a further way to protect the birds’ interests, I inwardly looked forward each day to encountering and saluting this gesture of virtuosity and careless sociability. Since it was in part my seeds that this benefactor distributed and ate, it expresses my sense of the situation to say that, as I observed him while having my morning coffee and roll, I was breaking bread with him, in common if not reciprocally.

What would follow? This sense is, I agree, perfectly incompatible with the idea of eating the fellow. But I have in any case never had such an idea with respect to squirrels. The idea has in the past been proposed to me with respect to rabbit and to horse and to snails. In each case I, as it were for the sake of philosophy, tried each just once. But my inward cringe at the idea of repetition in these cases did not transfer to my other carnivorous habits.

Nor am I tempted here to a hard conclusion about my inconsistency, although I am impressed, as Diamond is, by Costello’s rueful admission, along with her
inordinate knowledge of the use of animals for food, on her relative complaisance, anyway willingness, in wearing leather shoes and carrying a leather purse. (I suppose the admission is to ward off the attribution to herself of an unknowable purity of spirit.) Diamond speaks in this connection of inescapable but "bitter compromise". This greatly interests me and I mean to return to it.

Diamond's emphasis on "company"—earning the companionship of the titmouse—is a fairly exact precursor, etymologically, of Coetzee's Abraham Stern's sense in his letter of "breaking bread", an idea that Stern charges Costello with pressing into cheap service but which Diamond takes from Costello with utmost seriousness. This means that she takes seriously the inordinateness in Costello's response, I mean brings into question just what is disproportionate about it. (One could say she respects Costello's brush with madness.) And perhaps she therewith brings into question whether proportionateness is the question. Here is a place we might ask whether it would be helpful to think of Costello to be seeing animals as company. But rather than intensifying insipid knowledge, this appeal to seeing something as something seems here to etiolate inordinate knowledge, or rather to make the company of animals something less than a fact, namely the fact that they are (not serve as) company (for some, sometimes). Diamond emphasizes Costello's state of raw nerves or, as Costello sometimes describes it, her insecurity with her own humanity.

Diamond gets quickly in her Coetzee essay to that moment she takes most signally to differentiate her perception of his tale, hence to isolate herself, from the position of those who had been invited to respond to it. She focuses on the moment—one she discovers essentially to be passed by in their responses—in which Costello declares herself to be, analogously with Kafka's great ape in Kafka's tale "Address to an Academy", [quoting Costello] "not a philosopher of mind but an animal exhibiting, yet not exhibiting, to a gathering of scholars, a wound, which I cover up under my clothes but touch on in every word I speak" (p. 71). In thus taking her own existence to be one among the lives of animals in the story, it becomes the chief subject, or object, of the story, the singular life depicted in it that counts as multiple, the human as the animal of multiple lives, say drawn between wild and tame, or this way with one person those ways with others, open and hidden, old without being sure how to be old, capable of indecorousness in her work, suffering in, and suffering from, what she says, from her own indictment by it. Since Diamond rejects, congenially to my way of seeing things, the idea of a way, or a set of ways, for all to see, in which non-human animals differ from human animals, a way that explains why we might not wish, or allow ourselves, to eat them, I take the suggestion to be
that the realms differ, and hence are akin, endlessly, as in the case of the separation, or differences, between the human and the divine. (The appearance of the religious in Coetzee's tale repeatedly becomes pressing. This must be mostly for another time.) For example, an animal's way of eating—and so the diet integral to an animal species' life form—differs from human eating as significantly as an animal's mating or parenting or building or foraging or bonding or mortality or attention or expectation or locomotion differs from, and is analogous to, one might sometimes say is an allegory of, their forms in human life.

Coetzee's book opens this way: "There is first of all the problem of the opening, namely, how to get us from where we are, which is, as yet, nowhere, to the far bank. It is a simple bridging problem, a problem of knocking together a bridge. People solve such problems every day. They solve them, and having solved them push on."

(In my piece on the aesthetics, or writing, of the Investigations, I am surprised to recall that I speak of a near and a far shore and of "the river of philosophy that runs between". The near shore is the perspective of philosophical "problems", listed by Wittgenstein in his Preface as "the concepts of meaning, of understanding, of a proposition, of logic,... and other things." The far shore is the further perspective I describe, or standpoint, "from which to see the methods of the In-

vestigations, their leading words home, undoing the charms of metaphysics, a perspective apart from which there is no pressing issue of spiritual fervor, whether felt as religious, moral, or aesthetic". And I go on to say: "One [shore] without the other loses the pivot of the ordinary, the pressure of everyday life; one without the other thus loses, to my way of thinking, the signature of the Investigations. There remains a question of priority. From each shore the other is almost ignorable, and each imagines itself to own the seriousness of the Investigations' work." (The Cavell Reader, pp. 382–383.) I should confess that I like to understand Cora Diamond's title for her already classic collection The Realistic Spirit as encoding these banks or shores, indicating that philosophy is perpetually a matter of tracing the loss and recovery (revised, reviewed) of the ordinary, of placing to criticism what we would like in philosophy to insist upon as necessarily real—specifically to criticism out of the spirit of realism, of how the human animal actually, let us say, forms its life and its understanding of its life.)

I take Coetzee's repetition, in his book's opening that I just now quoted, of "solve" or "solving", three times in two adjacent sentences, ironically but tenderly to picture "people", in attempting to make human life a series of problems, as attempting to construe their existence as itself a problem, an intellectual puzzle to solve and from which to push on. Nietzsche enters a
similar complaint of intellectualization against our species, in its regarding life “as a riddle, a problem of knowledge”, in The Genealogy of Morals. (I cannot but think that Cora Diamond was as intrigued as I to see Coetzee’s opening chapter given the title “Realism”.) Philosophical Investigations is in effect a portrait of the unsatisfiability of the human species with its solutions, a portrait—hardly the first—detailing human life as one of restlessness, exposure, insecurity; and more specifically, of what in an essay of mine on its aesthetics I identify as its articulation of the modern subject, namely its expected reader, as someone characterized by, among other traits, perversity, sickness, self-destructiveness, suffocation, lostness, strangeness, etc.

This may helpfully return us to the question of taking seriously Elizabeth Costello’s notion of herself as an animal wounded, but with a wound (unlike other suffering animals) that she exhibits and does not exhibit. That she specifies her concealing it under her clothes immediately alerts us to the most obvious, or banal, unlikeliness between her condition and that of other animals, namely just that her species wears clothes. And since what is concealed, and not concealed, under her clothes, we are allowed to assume—are we not?—is an aging but otherwise unharmed woman’s body, the torment she expresses is somehow to be identified with the very possession of a human body, which is to say, with being human. (I say “otherwise unharmed”. I am assuming that there is no visible remnant of harm from the event she describes in a later chapter when, half a century ago, she allowed herself to be picked up by a tough who beat her up when she found she wanted to repel his advances. She suffered a broken jaw and she describes its treatment and its healing. What counts as a wound persisting from that incident is her perception that the tough took evident pleasure in beating her; this produced in her what she describes as her first knowledge of evil, something not hidden by clothes. I do not know Coetzee’s attitude toward the work of Freud, let alone Lacan, but I cannot put aside a suggestion I take that there is something specifically wounded in the normal female body.)

I emphasize two peculiarities about this revelation of the woundedness that marks being human. First, since the stigmata of the suffering are coincident with the possession of a human body, the right to enter such a claim universally to other such possessors, has roughly the logic of a voice in the wilderness, crying out news that may be known (inordinately) to virtually none, but to all virtually. It is a voice invoking a religious, not alone a philosophical, register: it is uninvited, it goes beyond an appeal to experiences we can assume all humans share, or recognize, and it is meant to instill belief and a commentary and community based on belief, yielding a very particular form of passionate utterance, call it prophecy. We could say that the object of the
revelation is not simply to touch but to announce the wound that has elicited its expression and that gives it authority. Costello had said, in matching our behavior with that in the Third Reich: “Ours [our mass manufacturing of corpses] is an enterprise without end.” It is an inherently indecorous comparison, not to say offensive, and perhaps deliberately a little mad; fervent news from nowhere. The right to voice it is not alone an arrogation of a claim every human is in a position to make, the sort of claim philosophy requires of itself, in speaking for all; it is also a judgment that distances itself from the human as it stands, that finds human company itself touched with noxiousness. (As if the mass slaughter of animals in effect negates or disenchants the concept, the possibility, of sacrifice.)

Here is a place at least to mention the apparent congruence between Costello’s comparison of food factories and concentration camps with a pair of sentences attributed to Heidegger in an interview (by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, quoted by Maurice Blanchot), translated and printed in an issue of *Critical Inquiry* a few years ago devoted to Heidegger and Nazism. Heidegger is reported to have said: “Agriculture is now a mechanized food industry. [This much appears essentially word for word in Heidegger’s well-studied text “The Question Concerning Technology” from 1955. The attributed pair of Heidegger’s sentences continues:] As for its essence [that is, technology’s essence] it is the same thing as the manufacture of corpses in the gas chambers and the death camps, the same thing as the blockades and the reduction of countries to famine [a reference, I assume, to Stalin’s starvation of four million Ukrainian kulaks in the early 1930’s], the same thing as the manufacture of hydrogen bombs.” I rather imagine (but this is not essential to my reflections) that Coetzee knew this citation linking the food industry with, among other things, the death camps and that he meant to be putting Heidegger’s words to the test in his novel, in effect to ask whether such a view is credible coming anywhere but from an old artist, tired of and sickened almost to death by the responses she receives late in her life of words, crazed by their reality to her together with their loss of interest to others and jarred or compelled by her imagination into welcoming the offense she may cause. One of the moments in Heidegger’s *What Is Called Thinking* that I have been most impressed by is his description of Nietzsche, in trying to reach his contemporaries with his perception of the event of our murder of God. Heidegger writes: “most quiet and shiest of men, . . . [Nietzsche] endured the agony of having to scream.” I find it illuminating to think of Elizabeth Costello, in her exhausted way, as screaming.

A further detail suggesting the presence of Heidegger’s *What Is Called Thinking* in Coetzee’s text lies in that opening picture of a reader’s journey, or a life’s journey, as from a near to a far bank, posing a problem
from which “people” are able to “push on”; Coetzee calls it, speaking for these problem-solvers, a “bridging problem”. Heidegger says early in this book of his, with respect to the passage from our scientific or intellectualized mentality to authentic philosophical thinking, that “There is no bridge here... only the leap.” It follows that the opening paragraph of Coetzee’s novel describes us, human beings pushing on, getting on, going along, solving problems (in terms, I take it, dictated by others) as not in a position, or a place, for thinking, or for what is to be called thinking.

One in whose imagination Heidegger survives as a serious thinker is apt to have had to find a way beyond the sense that his thought comes to direct itself as an apology for the practices of Nazism (despite certain of his “reservations” concerning its theories). And, since it is Elizabeth Costello’s comparison of food factories with death camps that invoked Heidegger’s linking of the camps with the agricultural industry, I mark her difference from Heidegger at the point at which Cora Diamond (in contrast to the initial silence on the point by the five commentators published together with Coetzee’s pair of stories), unveils (as it were) her now inescapable knowledge of her hidden yet unconcealed wound. Heidegger acknowledges no such wound for him to confess (for him), nor any pain out of which to scream, and it is perhaps in this continence, or absence, that he is cursed.

I said that there are two peculiarities in Elizabeth Costello’s invocation of human existence as wounded. The first is what I described as her identification of woundedness—judging from her own—with the condition of human embodiment, the very possession of the human body, as stigma. The second peculiarity is her claim that the evidence for her invisible/visible wound, or expression of it, is present, or, as she puts the matter, is “touched on”, in every word she speaks. In my experience, a precedent for such a thought, or vision, is Emerson’s way of speaking, epitomized in his declaration in “Self-Reliance”, that “Every word they say chagrins us” (adding that “we know not where to set them right”). But what differentiates “them” from “us”? Every word Emerson hears chagrins him, and all the words he speaks are in essence, to begin with, the words of others, common bread. What other words are there? This means that every word he speaks is touched with, is fated to express, chagrin. To speak—the obvious signature expression of the human life form—is to be victimized by what there is to say, or to fail to say.

A topic that brings Emerson’s chagrin to fever pitch is slavery. From “Fate”: “Language must be raked, the secrets of the slaughter-houses and infamous holes that cannot front the day, must be ransacked, to tell what negro-slavery has been.” Earlier in that essay Emerson had said: “You have just dined, and however
scrupulously the slaughter-house is concealed in the graceful distance of miles, there is complicity, expensive races." This somewhat extends his earlier in the essay having spoken of "expensive races,—race living at the expense of race." I will not reargue here my sense that the repeated presence of the slaughter-house, together with the ambiguity of "race living at the expense of race"—meaning the human race living at the expense of animals but in this context unmishtubably meaning at the same time the white race living at the expense of the black—yields the perception, or vision, that slavery is a form of cannibalism. Essential to his "argument" is that the idea of language as having to be raked compresses a suggestion that in moments high and low the house of language is overrun, overcome, words must be searched for through wreckage and then with force and craft aligned into parallel, justified ranks on a page to work decorously together. Such matters—recalling what Diamond speaks of as the difficulty of reality and of philosophy—will have to be taken seriously if we consider whether it expresses the perception at issue to say that Emerson here sees slavery as cannibalism. This would make the concept of seeing as a kind of explication of allegory, as when at the opening of Walden, Thoreau reports his vision of his townspeople of Concord, Massachusetts as observing practices meant to torment themselves, as though they are choosing, and not choosing, to make life a set of strange forms of penance, a vision that flares and fades; whereas I wanted to speak of the impression of cannibalism as perhaps irreversible.

I report also in this connection, as I have before, Thoreau's treating human feeding as such as a matter for anxious satire. In the account of his expenses, the literal listing of dollars and cents expended, for surviving his first year at Walden, Thoreau separately itemizes the cost of food, and he comments: "I thus unblushingly publish my guilt." Thoreau here perceives his very existence, the assertion of the will to live in the world by feeding himself, as without certain justification—there are debts in living, conditions of existence, uses to which he puts, or fails to put, the peaceable space cleared for him before he cleared it, that are uncountable. What makes them unsupportable is the degree to which they are unnecessary. Then the quest in which an adventurous life may well be spent in search, or experiment, is to replace false by true necessities, or means, to what one truly finds good (a philosophical quest as ancient as Plato's Republic), perhaps promising to allow the cloaking of the wound of existing to become superfluous.

Of course one may wish to ask whether Thoreau would not have more relevance to the way the world is if he were a little more realistic, say more open to compromise. (Albert Schweitzer in Africa, once a
more formidable guide to existence than I suppose he is now, instead of (or in addition to) protecting his hoard from the ants, left little piles of sugar for them by his bed in his tent when he retired for the night. Is such a practice, from our contemporary perspective, anything more than precious or quaint? But perhaps it was not meant as more than one man's solace.) Yet Thoreau's key term "Economy", the title of the opening, longest chapter of *Walden*, precisely projects an unfolding register of terms in which compromise at its best—keeping accounts in a fallen world of one's interests and means and losses and wastes and returns and borrowings and dreams and terms (accounts of all of one's terms)—can best be articulated systematically and lived. Its moral could even be taken to be that of realism.

I predicted that I would want to return to the idea of compromise. Here more fully is Cora Diamond's response (in her Coetzee essay) when she takes up, in connection with my discussion in Part Four of *The Claim of Reason* of what I call our exposure to the other, Costello's reply to someone's suggestion that her vegetarianism comes out of moral conviction. Costello hesitantly deflects the suggestion, saying instead, "It comes out of a desire to save my soul." Diamond glosses this response as follows: "[We are not] given the presence or absence of moral community . . . with animals. But we are exposed—that is, we are thrown into finding some-

thing we can live with, and it may at best be a kind of bitter-tasting compromise. There is here only what we make of our exposure."

Can we specify more closely the cause and strength of the bitter taste of compromise, in a region in which taste may be thought to be everything? Taste—or some discrimination beyond what we readily think of as taste—seems at play in Costello's cautioning, or rebuking, her questioner (who had assured her that he has a great respect for vegetarianism as a way of life, thus in effect discounting her declaration of the threatened state of her soul beyond the matter of moral conviction) by saying: "I'm wearing leather shoes and carrying a leather purse. I wouldn't have overmuch respect if I were you." That is, there is still disproportion between what I know and how I feel and ways I behave, if less than there might be. Costello's questioner (he is identified as the president of the college honoring her) "murmurs": "Consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds. Surely one can draw a distinction between eating meat and wearing leather." "'Degrees of obscenity,' she replies. "Replies to him. (I merely take notice of this placement of Emerson's famous, and famously mocked, crack about the hobgoblin of consistency, slightly misquoted in the mouth of a decorous college president and used casuistically to take the sting from a declaration of one's soul threatened. Here is a welcome occasion to show Emerson's uncompromising words
compromised; yesterday's radical words picked up by today's stuffed shirt.) But then what are we to make of Costello's use of "degrees"? She is implying her state as participating in obscenity, but the fact is that wearing leather, or the vision of preparation of it for human comfort and vanity, does not seem to cause her body dangerously to signal itself of its woundedness. Is it then in her case not the necessity of compromise that causes bitterness, but rather the discovery that she is, that her body is, capable of compromise? (This may suggest not a fastidiousness but a vanity of spirit.) But how does this reach to the sense of having to conceal, without concealing, a wounded body?

Is it a function of some perception of disproportion between saving one's soul and finding alternatives to wearing leather? This is in fact no easy matter to determine, especially if it begins to lead to questioning more globally the conditions under which our comforts generally are sustained and we undertake to examine work houses as closely as slaughter houses. As Emerson phrased the matter: however graceful the distance kept, "there is conspiracy, expensive races". I cannot doubt that Emerson is here (not for the only time) invoking Rousseau's perception of our stake in the social contract as that of conspirators, even recognizing that the perpetual failure of justice invites the threat of madness, of taking my participation in the difficult reality of my society's injustice or indifference or brutality as it were personally, a sense that seems to measure Elizabeth Costello's sense of isolation in her woundedness. The sense 'happens', happens even beyond sensibilities such as Hamlet's or Antigone's or Phèdre's or Melisande's, unrelieved bearers of inordinate knowledge, of human exposure.

The direction out of Costello's condition (as it were against Kafka's report of a passage, or say bridge, to a higher species), barring withdrawal from the human race—that is, deciding to stay alive—is to sink within the race, or disguise herself as a voting member of it, at one with Hamlet in the perception that "Man delights not me; no, nor woman neither." Not prepared to resign from humanity, nor to display rage against others for failing to do so, which would uselessly increase the human being's suffering from itself ("horror of itself", Montaigne says, commending a more amiable wisdom), she insists upon her adorning and comforting herself with things of leather. I do not propose a competition between our degree of compromise with the subjection of animals to human demand and that of our compromise with the degree of injustice in our society. I remain too impressed with Freud's vision of the human animal's compromise with existence—the defense or the deflection of our ego in our knowledge of ourselves from what there is to know about ourselves—to suppose that a human life can get itself without residue into the clear. It is
true that I have sometimes felt vegetarianism to be a
way of declaring a questionable distance from the hu-
man animal, but that can hardly be the full reason for
my not taking that path when it has beckoned.

I am in any case in accord with Cora Diamond's
cautions about what should count as a "reason" for or
against eating meat. And I think I may have in the
course of working through the present material to
this point, learned something about the wish to de-
clare distance from the identification with one's fel-
low human animals. I have in the past found that in
moral confrontation I can never say in my defense
(here disagreeing with a moment in the work of John
Rawls), "I am above reproach", or found rather that
to say so is to suggest that the other is morally less
competent than I am. Now I find that, in response to
reminders of the company we may keep with non-hu-
man animals, I cannot so much as say, "I am not above
reproach". If the former defense falsifies my position
by claiming an insupportable difference from others,
the latter etiolates my position by claiming nothing
in particular (declaring a generalized guilt in a guilty
world), absolving myself from the task of respond-
ing to a reason for abstinence either by denying that
I share the vision from which the reason derives its
force (I do not see or treat all animals as companions),
with or without urging a different vision (eating ani-
mals affirms my evolutionary stage as a carnivorous,
or rather omnivorous, animal), or by marking a differ-
ence in my taste that shields it from the vision (I do
not eat species that I perceive as companions). What
I would like to say is simply, "I am human"—but to
whom can this plea be directed?

Some concluding questions, as of notes to myself.
Speaking of saving one's soul, how does one under-
stand the characteristic of religions to impose dietary
restrictions? Here are vast regions in which universal
commands, unlike moral considerations, serve effec-
tively and consistently to define a separate commu-
nity, and do not depend upon changing one's indivi-
dual sensibility with respect to other of God's creatures. It
puzzled me, in some way offended me, when, during
my preparation for my Bar Mitzvah, the rabbi cau-
tioned a small group of us, in discussing the prohibi-
tion against eating pork, that we were not to claim that
eating pork was in itself a bad practice, merely that
it was not our practice, and followed this announce-
ment with a little shudder of disgust and an enigmatic
smile, which got a laugh from the small group. Both
the smile and the laugh had a bad effect on me. Is
absolute obedience to a mark of difference, merely
as difference, a serious business or is it not? Embar-
rassed by, and not yet ready to repair, my ignorance of
the general state of philosophical argument concern-
 ing vegetarianism, for example concerning whether
religious dietary restrictions are expected to come into
consideration, I took an occasion to ask a young friend studying theology whether the matter is current there. Without answering that, she pointed me back to the astonishing opening book of Daniel, in which Daniel, who "purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king’s meat", contrives to refuse Nebuchadnezzar’s lavish hospitality, or say dictation, and instead to have substituted for himself and his little group of young captives a meatless regime, and after ten days "their countenances appeared fairer and fatter in flesh than all the children which did eat the portion of the king’s meat." However, this story of God’s favor, or this part of it, feeds my suspicion of vegetarianism as asserting a moral superiority to the rest of humanity, and now based not on an entire way of life but on the sheer fact of abstinence from meat. (I assume it is internal to the motivation for constructing a moral theory of animal rights to neutralize this danger.) But surely it is justified to declare a difference from such as Nebuchadnezzar? No doubt, but in our world this may require assigning to others the role of Nebuchadnezzar.

Is the threat of inconsistency in relation to other animals a cause of comparable anxiety, or "bitterness", with our inconsistency in our moral relations with other humans—thinking, as examples, of the long and terrible list of treacheries for which one asks forgiveness, or forbearance, every year on the Day of Atonement? asking pardon for sins, for wrong-doings, specifying transgressions committed under duress or by choice, consciously or unconsciously, openly or secretly, in our thoughts or with our words or by the abuse of power, or by hardening our hearts or by speaking slander or by dishonesty in our work, and so on. Take, as I like to, Emerson’s remark about the foolish consistency of minds (little or large) as meant to have us consider what we are made of that we may be, and need not be, foolish (an affliction non-humans are free from). What is human flesh that its appetites, even needs, express, and threaten, the human soul? If there is a threat of madness (persistent and silent outrage or despair are perhaps enough) in reaction to horrors that others seem indifferent to, is there not an equal threat in finding that one is oneself inconsistent in responding to these horrors? What is a proper response to learning, and maintaining the knowledge, of the existence of concentration camps, or of mass starvation, or of the hydrogen bomb? I confess my persistent feeling that a sense of shame at being human (at being stigmatized for having a human body) is more maddeningly directed to the human treatment of human animals than to its treatment of its non-human neighbors. I think I do not overlook the point that in relation to non-humans we can take meaningful personal measures whereas in the human case, if we are conscious of it, we readily sense
COMpanionable THinking

Early in "Companionable Thinking," Cavell asks himself whether Cora Diamond's purpose in considering J.M. Coetzee's character Elizabeth Costello might be helpfully framed in terms of Wittgenstein's discussion of seeing aspects. What makes the suggestion plausible, he says, is that "the extreme variation in human responses to this fact of civilized existence is not a function of any difference in our access to information; no one knows, or can literally see, essentially anything here that the others fail to know." Later he answers the question in the negative; he concludes that the idea of seeing something as something is not helpful here because if we frame Diamond's thinking in terms of aspect seeing, we do not give proper weight to the fact...