

Introduction

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In J.M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals*, his protagonist, Elizabeth Costello, addressing an audience of disinterested but opinionated academics on the subject of animals and the horrors to which they are submitted in today's factory farming industry, takes strong issue with the discourse of reason, of human rational capacity, that has prevailed in Western thought since the seventeenth century—and that, in contemporary utilitarian and rights-based animal ethics, remains the standard by which to determine “who counts” as having moral worth. Dismissive of the narrowness and anthropocentrism of the rational capacity standard, Costello appeals instead to sympathy, the kind of “sympathetic imagination” that disposes us to “think ourselves into the being of another” (35). In one of the “Reflections” included in *The Lives of Animals*, Hindu scholar Wendy Doniger suggests that with this appeal to a sympathetic imagination, Costello (Coetzee) shifts the ground to “feelings” (103). Barbara Smuts in her “Reflection” links the faculty of sympathy to “speaking from the heart,” suggesting that, “for the heart to truly share another's being, it must be an embodied heart, prepared to encounter directly the embodied heart of another” (108).

The fine essay that opens this *Mosaic* issue, Philip Dickinson's “Feeling, Affect, Exposure: Ethical (In)capacity, the Sympathetic Imagination, and J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*,” grapples with “the ethical primacy of feeling” to which “the language of the

sympathetic imagination attests,” asking whether “feeling” serves as an adequate ground for ethics, or whether an ethics that gives primacy to feeling “might equally appear as an ethics of the incapacitated, an ethics of debilitating affective passivity—of the bleeding heart.” This question—how might ethics fare if grounded in feeling?—may seem to presuppose some prior definition or understanding of “ethics,” even one close to that offered by the *OED*’s “science of right conduct,” a definition that ties ethics to conduct/activity, rather than to “debilitating affective passivity.” What emerges from Dickinson’s essay, however, particularly from his reading of Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, is quite different. “I focus on stupidity,” he writes. Following Avital Ronell, Dickinson considers stupidity, neither as the other of thought nor as an impediment to knowledge that must be overcome but, in Ronell’s terms, as “the ‘absence of a relation to knowing.’” Thus, for Dickinson, in Coetzee’s novel, the ethical “is to be located elsewhere, in those moments at which Lurie’s incessant rearticulation of the nature of his own being breaks down.”

What is the relation, if any, between this “breakdown” of being in the ethical moment, this shattering of what Martha Nussbaum calls “operative subjectivity,” and the “passivity” that Jacques Derrida theorizes, for example in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*? In turn, is Derrida’s passivity akin to the passivity that Dickinson considers in his essay? If so, both stupefaction and passivity participate in what Coetzee charts as “the undoing of humanist languages and the destabilization of ‘humanity’ as a category of ethical and ontological significance.”

WORKS CITED

Coetzee, J.M. *The Lives of Animals*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999. Print.

Derrida, Jacques. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Trans. David Wills. New York: Fordham UP, 2008. Print.