

Animal rights, human claims

Are vegetarians trying to save animals or are they trying to save themselves? Is vegetarianism about changing the world or escaping from it? These are questions the acclaimed novelist and critic J. M. Coetzee raises in a wonderfully inventive and inconclusive book.

reviewed by [Stephen H. Webb](#) in the [May 19, 1999](#) issue

The Lives of Animals.

By J. M. Coetzee. Princeton University Press, 127 pp.

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Part of the fun of reading this book is that it is not easy to classify. It consists of Coetzee's Tanner Lectures, given at Princeton University in 1997-98. But these are no ordinary lectures. Coetzee tells the story of a fictitious novelist, Elizabeth Costello, who has been invited to give two talks at Appleton College, where her son teaches physics. She surprises her audience by talking about the rights of animals rather than literature. But Coetzee goes beyond this ploy of lectures within lectures, to capture the skeptical and condescending response of Costello's audience.

Is this the response that Coetzee was afraid he would receive if he had said what Costello said, or is he siding with Costello's critics? The book is made even more complicated by its conclusion: four scholars who have written extensively about animals, Wendy Doniger, Peter Singer, Marjorie Garber and Barbara Smuts, respond to Coetzee's lectures.

This is postmodern metafiction at its best, but as in most examples of the genre, it is hard to tell where the author himself is to be found. Even the four respondents seem a bit at a loss, unsure whether they are responding to Coetzee or to Costello. Does Costello represent Coetzee's views? If not, what is Coetzee trying to say? Why couldn't he just give a lecture!

The answer seems to be that the ploy of giving a lecture about a lecture allows Coetzee to investigate the motivations behind the defense of animal rights. Coetzee's attitude toward his literary creation is indeed ambiguous and forces us to think. Are Elizabeth Costello's talks academic hyperbole or prophetic provocation? Are we meant to feel sorry for her or, angered by her poor reception, to stand up and defend her and her cause?

Costello is old and dying, and her plea for the rights of animals easily can be read as a plea for herself. She has a hostile relationship with her son and daughter-in-law, and her defense of animals alienates her from much of the rest of the world as well. She repeatedly draws the insensitive analogy between the killing of animals and the death of Jews in the Holocaust. She rejects rationality as the criterion for judging animal worth, defending instead the ability of the imagination to instill sympathy. Yet Costello cannot imagine a way of healing her relationship with those who are closest to her.

Her love for animals is not part of an ordered life, where everything is loved according to its place in God's creation. Instead, her love is disordered and destructive. She is scandalized by the meat-eating world and seeks not only justice but revenge. Bat being is as full as human being, she insists, thereby denying the uniqueness of humanity. She can raise the value of animals only by lowering the value of humanity.

From a theological point of view, Costello needs salvation as much as the animals she defends. In the end, she breaks down, and her son takes her in his arms. That hug is what she needed all along. This is the one moment of human contact in the story. Perhaps Coetzee is saying that only humans can worry as much about death as Costello does, and that human solidarity is our only defense against death. Curiously, none of the characters mentions a personal encounter with an animal. Could Costello have received the same comfort from hugging a beloved pet?

The early Christians were drawn to but finally rejected vegetarianism for two reasons. First, they wanted to distinguish themselves from Judaism, and in their missionary zeal they did not want to be hindered by dietary rules. They sensed that vegetarianism could become a new legalism that would lead to schism—something the early church could not afford.

Second, gnostic groups used vegetarianism as a means of claiming moral purity and separating themselves from the cares of this world. Gnostics thought the world was beyond the grace of God, and so they restricted their diet as one way of turning their backs on the world. Many modern vegetarians also seem to use this commendable diet as a way of claiming moral superiority and expressing a deep sense of alienation from the world. Somehow Christians need to find a way of talking about diet that does not lapse into legalism or utopianism.

Christian compassion should be rooted not in dogmatic claims about the equality of humans and animals or in escapist flights from the realities of this world, but in our ability to be compassionate, to reach out and care for other beings. Until the church can articulate such an alternative to the modern animal rights movement, the gnostic version of vegetarianism will remain alive and well, as Coetzee's story illustrates.