What is it Like to Be a Corpse?

draft

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‘Do you really believe, Mother, that poetry classes are going to close down the slaughter houses?’
‘No.’

1 Introduction
In his introduction to Philosophy and Animal Life – a small book containing Cora Diamond’s startling paper “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy” and part of the bow-waves of commentating papers that it occasioned – Cary Wolfe claims that “there is the suggestion in Diamond, I think, that imaginative and literary projection can somehow achieve this instance what propositional, syllogistic philosophy cannot achieve (the nonconceptual, nonlogical force of ‘I know what it’s like to be a corpse’).” This paper is a reflection on the sense of that sentence of Wolfe’s.

In making this claim, Wolfe points to a recurring thought in contemporary discussions concerning the relationship between philosophy and literature: There is something that philosophy cannot do – at least not in the form of linear argumentation, of ordinary propositional or syllogistic reasoning – that literature somehow manages to do. The question is, of course, what it is that literature manages to say and/or do that resists philosophical expression, and what it is with philosophical and literary language use respectively that endows these traditions of thought with

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1 An exchange between Elisabeth Costello’s son, John, and Elisabeth in J. M. Coetzee, Elisabeth Costello, p. 103.
their respective (but not converging) powers? Can literature really teach us what it is like to be a corpse? And if it can, then how? And how come philosophy cannot? Is literature really a “nonconceptual place” where reason can grow – if indeed, we can achieve a clear conception of the concept of a nonconceptual place? And can it grow to such a point that we can come to know what it is like to be a corpse – if indeed, there something that counts as knowing what it is like to be a corpse?

Let me say, straight off, that I do think that there is something that is entirely right some of the underlying inklings here: much contemporary academic philosophy, especially philosophy of a so-called analytic bent, has restricted itself too narrowly concerning what qualifies as argumentation. And I might, albeit somewhat hesitantly, also countersign the claim that not all thoughts can be fully and clearly transmitted by means of ordinary argumentative discourse. But that hangs, obviously, on how broad a conception we have of “ordinary argumentative discourse” and on how we spell out this alleged impossibility.

Furthermore, as we will see, the philosophical thrust of literature cannot be reduced to a set of mere examples. For if, indeed, literature is reduced to a catalogue of illustrative examples then literature has no philosophical weight of its own. It would be as fictional as philosophy’s “thought-experiments” – its swamp-mans, twin earths, builders with no tools and nothing to build, and other forms of imaginative wordings designating, say, assemblages of rabbit parts. And it would do nothing more for philosophy than such imaginary examples do – that is, literature would only serve to illustrate an already achieved philosophical idea, since an example is always an example of something (else). Of course, this is not to say that such illustrations are bad for philosophy. Exemplifications and thought-experiments often do illustrate and add a dimension of clarity (or they might make a philosophical position’s obscurity clear), but if exemplification and/or illustration is all literature can bring to philosophy, then there is not much that literature can do to challenge philosophy, to bring to philosophy a certain form of clarity or lucidity that philosophy is unable to bring about on its own. Literature is often, so I will argue, philosophically significant

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3 Noteworthy, this line of thinking is often the backdrop to many theories of the nature of literature, of the difference between literary language, ordinary language, and philosophical language. If this (kind of) question takes hold on one, one is more or less forced to start theorizing about the nature of literary language, to explain why that form of language use can do something which no other language use can. In short, one will end up presenting a theory of literature, building on a particular conception of the nature of language.

4 This is a fairly well argued claim, and it has been defended by e.g. xxxxx
precisely because it is not philosophy (as we know it). Perhaps philosophy could become bold enough to acknowledge its’ other (as other)?

Nevertheless, there is something in the claim that “imaginative and literary projection can somehow achieve this instance what propositional, syllogistic philosophy cannot achieve” that troubles me. Wolfe’s line of thinking runs the risk of turning literature’s philosophical importance into a stand-in for, or back-up to, philosophical discourse, thus blocking the task of trying to become clear on what’s wrong with (much of) contemporary philosophy and its guiding principle that everything of philosophical significance can easily be framed in a proposition and properly attended to by linear reasoning. It also runs the risk of mystifying literature, instead of displaying its true philosophical thrust. For if indeed literature can teach us what it is like to be a corpse, it’s beyond extraordinary – managing to speak, literally, from the other side.

2. On Not Being Costello

The phrase “I know what it is like to be a corpse” is Elisabeth Costello’s. She is not real. And that matters. When I say that she is not real, I merely mean that she is a fictional character – not that what she says is not true, and not that her life cannot fruitfully be seen as picturing, representing even, our reality in a striking and highly informative way. I aim not to make any strange claims about the metaphysics of the world (real and imagined), proclaiming my own ontology (as if I had one). But the fact that Costello is a fictional character signals that there is an apparent gap in Wolfe’s saying that needs to be, first, made clear, and secondly, bridged (if possible).

The fact that Elisabeth Costello knows – or claims to know – what it is like to be a corpse, gives us no reason to assume that anyone who reads Coetzee’s novel Elisabeth Costello learns and comes to know that. Furthermore, it would also be rushed to say that it is through reading literature that Elisabeth Costello attained this understanding. This thought strikes her occasionally, she claims, constituting a confrontation with a very much real and pressing reality. Costello’s “knowing” is indeed very uncertain. If we employ any standard (philosophical or vernacular) notion

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5 Elisabeth Costello is, of course, the main character of J. M. Coetzee’s novel Elisabeth Costello (London: Vintage Books, 2004), pp. 76f. I will return to the context of this phrase below.
of ‘knowledge’ Costello is full of contradiction, rather than solidly convincing: “For an instant, before my whole structure of knowledge collapses in panic, I am alive in that contradiction, dead and alive at the same time.”

It is true that Costello seems to think that poetry often is more capable of enlarging our imagination so that we can picture the embodied being of the other in a way that abstract arguments about the mind of the other cannot do. But that does not necessarily mean that poetry is able to teach us to, as it were, cognize beyond demise. The force of poetry that Costello cherishes is its power to *embody*, rather than describe, the animal. She calls attention to a kind of poetry “that does not try to find an idea in the animal, that is not about the animal, but is instead a record of an engagement with him.” But even this form of embodying is not easy to comprehend. In the poetry she favors – exemplified primarily by Ted Hughes’ – she claims that even the poet finds himself “entranced and horrified and overwhelmed, his powers of understanding pushed beyond their limit.”

So, to the extent that Costello claims to know what it is like to be a corpse, it is in brief moments when she is alive in a contradiction. And to the extent poetry can portray the embodied life of the other, the animal (what about the carcass?) it is beyond the limits of understanding, even the poets own understanding. What kind of knowledge is here to be gained? Must we not suspect that the concept of knowing is here stretched? Is there here a knowing that can be transmitted from the one to the other (in whatever form)? ‘Knowledge’ is and must be, as all other concepts are, elastic. But elasticity must come to an end somewhere. Even rubber bands break at some point. (Otherwise, there would be no sense at all to be attained from the feeling of being alive in a *contradiction*.) To see just how stretched Costello’s knowledge claim is, try to transplant the grammar of her claim into other contexts of knowing:

“For instants at a time, (…) I know what it is like to be a corpse.”

“For instants at a time, I know what 3 times 3 is.”

“For instants at a time, I know the height of Mount Kilimanjaro.”

“For instants at a time, I know how to drive a car.”

“For instants at a time, I know I love my wife.”

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6 Ibid., p. 77.
7 Ibid., p. 96.
8 Ibid., p. 95.
9 Ibid., p. 76.
I am not saying that these knowledge claims are nonsensical in and of themselves, but we need to be rather imaginative to find suitable surrounding for these sayings – it is not obvious, straight off, what it would mean to say either of these sentences. (For example, it seems strange to say that someone who knows what 3 times 3 is can know it on some occasions but not on others. But we can imagine a child beginning to learn how to multiply who says something similar, say, “I knew it yesterday, when practicing at home!” But wouldn’t we also say that this child has yet to gain mastery of multiplication?)

It is also worth repeating that Costello does not here say that it is by reading literature that she is able to imagine what it is like to be a corpse. This kind of imagining is possible to all. “That is the kind of thought we are capable of, we human beings, that and even more, if we press ourselves or are pressed.” 10 Elisabeth Costello’s claim is about human imagination, not about the powers of literary language use. As I see it, the question that a reading of Coetzee’s novel Elisabeth Costello should pose to philosophy is not “Can literature make us think the unthinkable?” but, rather, “If this is an adequate description of human imagination, can we see it in philosophy, or is it there denied, rejected; and if so, then why?”

Notice also that when Costello talks about turning to literature rather than philosophical theories for guidance, she emphasizes poetry more heavily than the narrative novel. Costello’s conception of the novel takes us even further away from the claim that literature is endowed with the power to make us think the unthinkable. Whereas poetry can make us transgress the limits of understanding, the novel is, in her view, “an exercise in making the past coherent”. 11

The question is how this view of literature presented by the fictional character Elisabeth Costello, relates to us reading a novel describing her reality? Might it still be said that literature is endowed with the abovementioned powers?

In other words, Wolfe is might still be onto something. Literature can still be said to have the power to sway the minds of those of us who does not know what it is like to be a corpse, for example, by means of adequately representing someone who already has it. This need not entail that we re-inscribe “I know what it is like to be a corpse” in the institutionalized pitches of pro et contra that constitutes the bulk of

10 Ibid., p. 77.
11 Ibid., p. 39.
academic philosophy today. For it would clearly be a mistake to think that the issue is a competition between two propositions (one true, the other one not):

a) Philosophy can teach us what it is like to be a corpse.

b) Literature (but not philosophy) can teach us what it is like to be a corpse.

Both these claims harbors the idea that there is a specific something which constitutes knowing what it is like to be a corpse. The fact of the matter is, as it were, already settled; and all that remains to debate are questions of pedagogy. One form of textual strategy can represent and communicate the fact of the matter adequately, while the other one can’t. But is the question at hand, really a question of a fact of the matter? And is the question of the fact of the matter really a question independent of, preceding, the question of the form?

In the formulation of Wolfe’s with which I opened this paper, Wolfe talks about a “nonconceptual, nonlogical force of ‘I know what it’s like to be a corpse’”. And an emphasis on the word ‘force’ points to what’s right in Wolfe’s thought here. Notably, the acknowledgment of such a force does not necessarily come to a “knowing what it is like”. To say that we can see the force of a claim is, for example, to say that we can come to see how such a claim can, or might, fit into a certain form of life, or how it can affect us in different ways. We might, for example, be stunned by bewilderment, struck by a newly achieved clarity, knocked out of our seats, finding ourselves angry with the bluntness of the contradiction, etc. The reality of the other can make our own certainties less certain. But the recognition of that life of the other does not entail that I know what such a life, as it were, feels like. “I know what it is like to be a corpse” is not a pair of shoes that we can try on to see if they fit. In fact, it is precisely this line of thinking that Costello herself challenges when it comes to Nagel’s famous claim that he cannot know what it is like to be a bat. (I will return to this.)

This means that there is something confused in Wolfe’s discussion since he, first, claims that “Diamond affirms Costello’s assertion ‘I know what it is like to be a corpse’”, and, second, applies Derrida’s philosophy as constituting a countering

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position holding that no one, but the other, knows what it is like to be a corpse. Should we not now suspect that by applying Derrida’s thought as something close to a counter-argument, Wolfe has removed whatever nonlogical force there was in a woman claiming to know something very peculiar, and re-inscribed her saying in a debate about two competing sentences with two alternative propositions with supposedly clear meanings, thus performing the very maneuver he sought to reject?

I am less certain about the sense of these claims than Wolfe seems to be. I feel inclined to say that whatever force there is in such a claim comes from a sense of loss of sense – that what drives a person to say such a thing as “I know what it is like to be a corpse” comes from a reality that rushes upon her, uncontrolled, hits her, as it were, and forces her to make claims about the world for which she has no reason. Yet, these sayings might matter immensely.

I think Wolfe would agree with me here, at least up to a point, since he notes that the difficulties under discussion in Diamond’s paper concerns issues which cannot “be dissolved or overcome by ever-more ingenious or accomplished propositional arguments, ever-more refined philosophical concepts.” I, however, will argue that the thought that Wolfe here expresses, is yet to be appropriated by him. (Words can, after all, as Kierkegaard has shown us, be sincerely uttered, yet not fully owned.) This is no simple mistake on Wolfe’s behalf, but it is an illuminating one. For it shows that it is hard – very hard – to speak about a thrust of literature that resists ordinary forms of propositional reasoning without relapsing into the very mode of thought that one wishes to call into question.

Wolf wants to say, and is right in wanting to say, that what Diamond highlights are cases where reality confronts us by either making our claims about it impossible or blunt or bland or platitudinous, or by making us entirely speechless – and that these confrontations often run far deeper than any ordinary philosophical argument can ever do. But as soon as he starts to talk about what it is that the world confronts us with, he re-inscribes that experience into institutionalized philosophical argumentation. I see this “mistake” of Wolfe’s as highlighting a more general problem that can be encountered in a lot of contemporary writings (mainly so-called “analytical” ones) on philosophy and literature. There is a strong tendency to use fine

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13 Ibid. ( Italics added.) This description of Derrida’s position is, I know, very unclear. I will return to the sense of this claim of Derrida’s in section 7 below.
words and big gestures concerning the thrust, importance and weight of literature for philosophy. We hear, for example, philosophers talk about ‘sensitivity’, ‘openness’, ‘attunement’, ‘attentiveness’, ‘love’, ‘awareness’, ‘sensibility’, etc. etc. But these words, so it seems to me, are often hard to make visible in the philosophical practice, and at times they might even be said to be contradicted by it. Call this, if you wish, a contradiction between form and content – style and thought do not go hand in hand. If an author claims to be open minded, attentive and lovingly attuned, that claim is more often than not grounded in a concern that his or her position is not evidently so – otherwise there would be no need to argue for it being so. (If you can show the other your money, there is no need for you to claim that you have it. A Richard Rorty or a W. V. O. Quine might feel the need to claim “I’m not a relativist” whereas a Bertrand Russell or an Ayn Rand need not feel so inclined.) This is not to say that philosophers who emphasizes the philosophical importance of words such as ‘love’, ‘openness’ and ‘sensitivity’ are barking up the wrong tree, or that they are – in doing the emphasizing gesture – evidently not attuned, lovingly or open. It is to say that these forms of emphases often are better seen as philosophical aspirations, good ones too, and not necessarily already achieved philosophical “positions”. Openness, sensitivity, attunement, and the struggle to avoid dogmatism are, like love, a quest rather than the philosophers’ (natural) bequest.

My own attempt to come to terms with this issue is difficult and, in a sense, non-conclusive. I suggest that this is a difficulty that a philosopher turning to literature can never fully overcome. The problem is that if we wish to say – as I too want – that the philosophical thrust of literature, more often than not, hangs on the philosopher letting literature be literature, letting it, as it were, speak for itself, then the philosophical incorporation of literature in philosophical discourse will always be problematic, since a philosopher speaking or writing about literature is in one sense not speaking on literature’s behalf. There is always a philosophical setting loitering somewhere in the background, which cannot, and should not, be circumvented. I don’t wish to say that philosophers should not turn to literature for guidance – far from it. But I do think that a philosopher turning to literature for guidance should be aware of the fact that she is in a business that will always be unstable, unsettling and difficult. If not, it will be bad.

In order to gain clarity here, let us follow Diamond’s reasoning more closely for a while.
3. Diamond’s Speechlessness and Costello’s Concerns

Diamond’s first example is that of a poem of Ted Hughes’, which describes a photograph of six very vital, young, smiling men, killed shortly after the picture was taken.15 This picture can be seen as representing both vitality and death in one single snapshot. Diamond starts off with a discussion of this example since it highlights her main concern: “the experience of the mind’s not being able to encompass something which it encounters. It is capable of making one go mad to try, to bring together in thought what cannot be thought: the impossibility of anyone’s being more alive than these smiling men, nothing being more dead.”16

The pressing fact that we do encounter a reality which we cannot think (clearly about); the fact that reality, at times, does confront us with facts which render us speechless, is what Diamond calls ‘the difficulty of reality’. However, the fact that we do recognize segments of reality as resisting expression, that we come to claim that “this cannot be thought”, still doesn’t prevent us from trying to express that which we – we ourselves – deem inexpressible; it still doesn’t prevent us from trying to think that which we – we ourselves – claim to be unthinkable.17 This is the difficulty of philosophy. The first difficulty concerns the human inability to fully take in the facts of the world. The second difficulty concerns, I take it, a central element of a particularly philosophical bent (that some but not all humans have). The philosophical mind cannot resist such temptations, and philosophy often begins in such temptations.

This line of thinking is not ubiquitous in philosophy, but it is an important one, at least in all philosophy after Kant that dwells on the idea that knowledge depend on our reason, and that our reasoning is, indeed, limited.18 The difficulty of philosophy that Diamond describes sounds very much like the pressing observation which opens Kant’s first critique: “Human reason has this peculiar fate that in one species of its

15 Diamond, “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy”, p. 44.
16 It is here useful to think of what Wittgenstein said in the Preface to his Tractatus: “in order to draw a limit to thinking we should have to be able to think both sides of this limit (we should therefore have to be able to think that which cannot be thought).” Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, transl. C.K. Ogden (xxxxx), p. 3. As I take it, one of the central claims of this passage is that something has gone seriously wrong when we think that we have discovered, or uncovered, the limits of thought. Such a claim will always be something of an illusion, and the illusion has its root in the common philosophical attempt to think that we can survey language from an external point of view.
17 I am here employing the concepts ‘reasoning’, ‘reason’ and ‘limit’ rather loosely, so as to include many versions of this line of thinking, well aware of the fact that the sense of these concepts are heavily debated. My point here is the rather modest claim that it is the sense of these terms (and some of their linguistic cousins) that have retained a central place in the discussions within this tradition of thought.
knowledge it is burdened by questions which, as prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, it is not able to ignore, but which, as transcending all its powers, it is also not able to answer.”

That ‘the difficulty of philosophy’ is not everyone’s difficulty is important to note. Diamond points more to the origin of a certain form of philosophical problems, than to their dissolution. That Diamond is interested in the philosophers’ inklings here is further strengthened by that fact that it is possible to read the poem, look at the picture it speaks about, and not feel that there is a contradiction of philosophical depth present. Not all persons have this philosophical bent. We do differ, on a personal level, in what we count as a real philosophical problem. There is thus a specific language game that one must want to play if one is to see Hughes’ poem and the picture it represents as a philosophical problem. If you do not feel inclined to enter that room in language, you cannot take the philosophical problem seriously.

Now it’s plainly possible to describe the photo so it doesn’t seem boggling at all. It’s a photo of men who died young, not long after the picture was taken. Where is the contradiction?—Taking the picture that way, there’s no problem about our concepts being adequate to describe it. Again, one might think of how one would teach a child who had been shown a photo and told it was a photo of her grandfather, whom she knows to be dead. If she asks, “Why is he smiling if he’s dead?”, she might be told that he was smiling when the picture was taken, because he wasn’t dead then, and that he died later. The child is being taught the language-game, being shown how her problem disappears as she comes to see how things are spoken of in the game. The point of view from which she sees a problem is not yet in the game; while that from which the horrible contradiction impresses itself on the poet-speaker is that of someone who can no longer speak within the game. Language is shouldered out from the game, as the body from its instant and heat.

The difference between the child and the philosopher is that the child is “not yet in the game” whereas the philosopher is “someone who can no longer speak within the game”. That is, philosophy (of this form) begins with a loss of language (earlier achieved and appropriated). That this loss, more often than not, goes unnoticed is not

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19 Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason. This passage is the first sentence of the preface to the first edition.
20 This is a difficult and somewhat problematic use of ‘want’, I know. I will return to it in section 6, below.
surprising, given that the philosopher (thinks he/she) knows how to speak in the game, knows that his or her words usually makes sense, and that there is no evident reason why they should no longer do so. This is a reason why it is hard, very hard, to notice that one’s language is idling. It is the feeling of “I know all the words, and their place in the sentence is OK, and I am in a familiar surrounding, and the words do not seem to be misplaced here, yet something is not right, the words no longer carry their weight. Is it just me?” It is no surprise that we find it hard to acknowledge that we do not mean what we mean, that we fail to mean what our words mean since we (think we) know our language.22

There is then a peculiar moment at which we can “come to know” that we cannot wrap our heads around something. What drives the human mind to these “facts” of reality is precisely that we do not know how to encompass them. Diamond, Ted Hughes and Coetzee’s Elisabeth Costello are drawn to parts of language that they not only do not understand but know that they, in a sense, can’t understand. This is a very problematical form of recognition, for in saying “I can’t know this” one is first admitting some kind of understanding, since the ‘this’ cannot be utterly unknown. For if it were you could not know that you cannot know it. Secondly, the ‘can’t’ of the saying must be taken in with a pinch of salt since it is not a “don’t” – that is, the ‘can’t’ signals a claim that I do not now, nor will I ever (in a sense that the “don’t” doesn’t) – and so one is claiming to know that I cannot know “this”… This is thus a fairly paradoxical recognition.

To call a segment of reality “paradoxical” is simultaneously to deny its comprehensibility, and, thus also, to admit one’s own reasoning to be, as it were, limited, or at least, drawn to precisely those things that cannot be comprehended. Describing something as “unthinkable”, “paradoxical”, “unspeakable”, “impossible”, “inexpressible” etc., is hardly a compliment paid… Words such as these often describe a sort of failure. One might say that they constitute moments when we discover the “bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language.”23 These are thus moments of discovery, but a form of discovery

22 I take this point of mine to be in line with Cavell’s view that: “‘Not saying anything’ is one way philosophers do not know what they mean. In this case it is not that they mean something other than they say, but that they do not see that they mean nothing (that they mean nothing, not that their statements mean nothing, are nonsense). The extent to which this is, or seems to be, true, is astonishing.” Stanley Cavell, The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 210.

hard to come to terms with, since what is discovered is a form of nonsense that we are very reluctant to recognize as nonsense. This kind of recognition does not, I believe, point to where philosophy ends, but where it begins. We still have to, as it were, “pay attention to [our] nonsense”.24

I think it is pivotal to recognize that this intolerable breakdown of reasoning – the sense of a language lost – is Diamond’s primary concern. I’m even inclined to say that the way we relate to animals is for her a secondary concern. This is displayed by the fact animal life functions as an example in the text, as an example of something (and it is not her first example either). The human/animal relation is approached by means of a long reflection on a very striking and convincing picture of a woman who is indeed haunted by this very “Kantian” breakdown. This picture is Coetzee’s novel.

In that novel, Elisabeth Costello is facing a horrible reality that confronts her with questions or concerns that she indubitably is, to speak with Kant, “unable to ignore” but that she feels that she “is not able to answer”. However, it is important to recognize that her inability is not due to a deficient intellectual capacity or a lack of information. In fact, she claims that we all know the horrors of the meat industry, but we do nothing about it. Nor does she lack a philosophical language to speak about the intellectual difficulty. (“Such a language is available to me …”25)

When I say that she does not “lack” such a language, this is only true with some reservations. Costello claims to be searching for “a way of speaking which is cool rather than heated, philosophical rather than polemical”.26 This is the language that she claims to have at her disposal, the language of “Aristotle and Porphyro, of Augustine and Aquinas, of Descartes and Bentham, of, in our day, Mary Midgley and Tom Reagan”.27 Clearly, Costello knows how to speak “philosophy”. So she wants a cool and philosophical language, but she already knows such a language – so what is she searching for? Well, to begin with, this passage occurs at a place in the story at which Costello has most clearly failed to be cool rather than heated. She has just compared meat factories with the death camps of the Holocaust, and she obviously feels that she has crossed the line. (“Pardon me. I repeat. This is the last cheap point I

24 “Don’t for heaven’s sake, be afraid of talking nonsense! But you must pay attention to your nonsense.” Ludwig Wittgenstein, Culture and Value (XXXXXX) § 56.
25 Coetzee, Elisabeth Costello, p. 66.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
will be scoring.”\textsuperscript{28} So it is clear that even though she knows a cool language, she fails to speak it, or, alternatively, she thinks that \textit{this} cool language is not the right language here. Secondly, she is invited as the famous novelist that she is to give a public lecture and a seminar for literature students. She feels that this is not the place to repeat philosophical theories. Furthermore, it is not at all clear that she thinks much is to be gained by repeating philosophical arguments. Indeed, her view is that the very idea of treating matters such as these in a purely abstract way distorts the reality and neglects the gravity of the subject. Arguments about the pro’s and con’s of various philosophical theories are, in Costello’s view, closer to the “cheap point-scoring” that she wants to find a way to move away from, than the right kind of coolness. Finally, Costello is also very hesitant, to say the least, about the powers of philosophy’s precious “reason”. Though not in line with Kant’s view, but still within a Kantian idiom, she claims that: “reason looks to me suspiciously like the being of human thought; worse than that, like the being of one tendency in human thought.”\textsuperscript{29}

I have said that Costello feels that the question that she is not able to ignore demands that she transcends all her intellectual powers. But in what sense? Since she claims to be well acquainted with the relevant philosophical theories, and since she knows how to speak philosophically, her inability is not a matter of poor education. Rather, she feels excluded from communality, not because she knows something others do not know, but because of the fact that the others does not seem to be hurt by the same facts that hurt her. Perhaps one might say that what haunts her is the fact that she feels alone, “shouldered out” as Diamond said. The fact of Costello’s sense of being out of touch is, I believe, fundamental to understanding the philosophical significance of that novel.

Diamond concentrates on Elisabeth Costello’s description of herself as a “wounded animal”. Costello is a person who feels that the way we treat animals is utterly and truly horrific. True. But for some reason, she feels alone in thinking so. (“The wounds marks and isolates her.”\textsuperscript{30} “…in the face of the fact that for nearly everyone, it is as nothing, as the mere accepted background of life.”\textsuperscript{31}) She is surrounded by “scholars” who approaches the subject, her horrors, in a detached manner, as if nothing was at stake at all, as if all other hearts in the world around her

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., p. 67.
\textsuperscript{30} Diamond, “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy”, p. 46.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., p. 47.
had grown cold. So she feels alone, and we (the readers of Coetzee’s depiction of that kind of life), Diamond argues, “may remain unaware, as her audience does, of the life of the speaking animal at its center.” There is no point in arguing with Costello – her sense of horror is beyond reach, and she knows it. We should also keep in mind that this is something that is part of her sense of loneliness.

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

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

There are a number of things to notice here. First, notice that Costello is portrayed as far from confident. She is well aware that she is the odd figure here. Indeed, her own sanity seems to be a constant concern of hers. This means, I take it, that we should also hesitate to say that hers is a stable position in the question of animal rights for us, her readers, to embrace or reject. Second, there’s the theme of belonging, of communion. Since Costello is the one who can no longer partake in the form of life that surrounds her – is hers, was, at least, hers – she is the one whose words seem to be hard to fill with sense. Where the rest of the world says “Yummy!”, she cries “corpses!” It is the sense of her own words that are in question. When she thinks her words “they seem so outrageous that they are best spoken into a pillow or into a whole in the ground, like King Midas”. But when she looks around her, she sees “only kindness, human kindness”. If there is a language lost here, it is Costello’s. And, finally, we should also note that Costello’s self-understanding seems to be a bit off too. She thinks she has “perfectly normal relations” with her fellow beings. But is this so? Her son is both proud and embarrassed of her. Her daughter in law, Norma, is clearly offended by her. Her grand children are forced to dine in another room. She

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32 Ibid., p. 47.
33 Coetzee, Elisabeth Costello, pp. 114f.
34 Ibid., p. 114.
has a daughter who she has no contact with at all, briefly mentioned, but never discussed explicitly, and she seems to have no contact with her at all. Clearly, Elisabeth Costello has a hard time squaring the sense of her words with their (the word’s) surrounding. Elisabeth Costello is not at home in her language or in her form of life.

So, in a sense, Elisabeth Costello is not in a position to argue with her fellow beings, because she is not at home in their world, and their words don’t seem to mean the same things. In that sense, any reader who merely takes the novel to be a set of philosophical arguments presented in a literary setting, utterly misrepresents the book – what it says – and partakes in the very activity that the book as a whole rebukes: the idea that our moral lives with animal is a question that could be settled by means of philosophical argumentation (which is not to say that philosophical argumentation is of no use at all).

On this point, Diamond’s reading departs from earlier attempts to appropriate the philosophical significance of Elisabeth Costello’s lectures. Elisabeth Costello’s birth came in 1996. Coetzee gave the Ben Belitt Lecture at Bennington College. As his Lecture, he presented a short fiction about Elisabeth Costello who gave an honorary lecture about “Realism”. Coetzee employed Costello again in a similar context in 1997 when he was invited to Princeton University to give the Tanner Lectures. Again, instead of giving an ordinary lecture, Coetzee gave two lectures about a writer invited to give an honorary lecture (very much like the Tanner Lectures) who, instead of giving the expected lectures on her work as an author decided to talk “not about herself and her fiction, but about a hobbyhorse of hers, animals.” The setting is thus fairly intricate: Coetzee comes to Princeton and decides to give a talk not about himself and his fiction, but about a hobbyhorse of his, the philosophy of animal life. To make things even more intricate, Coetzee’s fictional lecturer Elisabeth Costello, seems to be engaging in a dialogue of sorts with many leading philosophers of mind and animal life – one of them Nagel. But her lectures clearly make the point that participation in the philosophy of mind and of animal life problematic. Costello thinks that the philosophers she is talking about are “sending us down a false trail”.

35 Perhaps she is the woman who looks vaguely familiar to Elisabeth in the closing chapter of the novel?
36 Ibid., p. 60.
37 Ibid., p. 77.
Coetzee’s Tanner Lectures – Costello’s two lectures “The Lives of Animals: The Philosophers and the Animals” and “The Lives of Animals: The Philosophers and the Poets” – were then published in 1999 in the volume *The Lives of Animals*, with an introduction by Amy Gutman (most known as a “political philosopher”) and with comments from Marjorie Garber (literature), Peter Singer (philosophy), Wendy Doninger (theology) and Barbara Smuts (primatology). Though all of them find the form of the material they are discussing problematic, even enigmatic, they all focus most clearly on Costello’s “arguments” about how we treat animals as the central thing to discuss. That is, they all read the novel Costello’s lectures as presenting a philosophical position concerning the question of animal rights.

About this, Diamond rightly notes:

> For this kind of reading, the wounded woman, the woman with the haunted mind and the raw nerves, has no significance except as a device for putting forward (in an imaginatively stirring way) ideas about the resolution of a range of ethical issues, ideas which can then be abstracted and examined. (---) So we have then two quite different ways of seeing the lectures: as centrally concerned with the presenting of a wounded woman, and as centrally concerned with the presenting of a position on the issue how we should treat animals.38

I think that Diamond has made it remarkably clear that it is deeply problematic to think of Elisabeth Costello’s lectures as a presentation of a philosophical position in literary clothing. The mere fact that such a reading completely ignores the fact that Coetzee tells us, already on the cover of the book, in its title, that the book is about Elisabeth Costello (and not animal rights), is a very strong reminder, making poor readers blush. I was one of them. I had read *Elisabeth Costello* before I read Diamond’s paper, and I was not especially impressed by the novel. And one of the reasons why I did not think it was a remarkable book, was precisely the fact that it looked too much like a book where a philosophical position had been dressed up as literature. Coetzee looked more like a puppeteer than a writer. And having admired many of Coetzee’s other books, this one disappointed me. But after reading Diamond’s paper I had to conclude that in a decisive sense I had yet to read Coetzee’s *Elisabeth Costello*.

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38 Ibid., p. 49.
Diamond notes that “The difference between the two contrasting types of readings concerns also the question whether Coetzee’s lectures can simply be taken to be concerned with a moral or ethical issue. Or, rather, this isn’t a question at all for one of the two kinds of reading (…)”39 On the face of it, this merely means that one strand of interpretations ignores the question of whether or not Coetzee’s novel can be seen as a contribution to an ongoing philosophical debate, or doesn’t consider it important, or already settled. But perhaps there is a deeper significance to this observation as well?

Moments when philosophy call upon literature are always problematic, especially if the literature in question has some obvious links to philosophical discourse, or if it, at least seemingly, partakes in an ongoing debate. In such cases it is, I believe, easy to avoid thinking about the fact that it is literature and not philosophy that we are confronted with. I think that it is useful, perhaps even necessary, to remain within that problematic field; to not refrain from asking questions like: “Why is this thought presented in this way (rather than any other, more straightforward manner)”; “In what sense does it matter that the author has detached him- or herself from the thoughts here expressed, by placing them in the mouth of a fictional character”; “Why is this particular thought voiced by this particular figure in this particular form of life, and how does this thought fit into the context of that life?” I believe that such questions are of immense importance for any philosopher trying to grapple with philosophical issues that he or she feels to be hard to come to terms with in contemporary academic philosophy.40

Diamond:

39 Ibid., p. 51.
40 I talk here of “contemporary academic philosophy” in order to signal that, first, philosophy has not always been the professionalized discourse it is now and that philosophers in earlier times, thereby have had a greater variety of forms of expression to “choose from” (dialogues, essays, letters, novels, prayers, confessions, etc.). Of course, philosophers can choose whatever form they like today too, but there can be no doubt that the “academic journal paper” is the fostered form, and that scholars thereby try to write as many papers as they can in that form, thus letting that form guide how they write and what they write – for not all philosophical issues can be dealt with in 20 pages or less, and not all serious philosophizing belong to an ongoing “debate” and not all philosophical thoughts are deemed “kosher” by the peer review boards of the most highly esteemed journals. There is also a reason to place emphasis on the correlation between forms of expression and temporal location: One central concern for many philosophers’ turning to literature is a conviction that forms of expression – and hence linguistic sense – come together with a broader understanding of a particular time and culture. This thought can hardly be squared with the common attempt to, as it were, distill philosophical positions and propositions from a literary piece. Such a distillation inevitably betrays the insight by means of which we turned to literature in the first place.
Of course, Coetzee’s lectures might indeed be intended to grapple with that ethical issue; but since he has a character in the story he tells, for whom it is as problematic to treat this supposed ‘issue’ as an ‘ethical issue’ for serious discussion as it is problematic to treat Holocaust denial as an issue for serious discussion, one can hardly, I think, take for granted that the lectures can be read as concerned with that ‘issue’, and as providing arguments bearing on it. If we see in the lectures a wounded woman, one thing that wounds her is precisely the common and taken-for-granted mode of thought that ‘how we treat animals’ is an ‘ethical issue’, and the knowledge that she will be taken to be contributing, or intending to contribute, to discussion of it.\textsuperscript{41}

It matters that Costello is unwilling – or, rather, unable – to discuss these issues. In a sense, the question of how to treat animals (are they, for example, food?) is not a question at all for her. If the novel is more a picture of a woman who can’t come to grips with her surrounding world than it is about J. M. Coetzee presenting arguments in disguise; then, what we get is a picture of how a particular form of life looks, and of how that form of life is at odds with contemporary culture at large. Instead of being a contribution to an ongoing philosophical debate, the book is a criticism of the intellectual climate of which the philosophical debate is an expression. For one important aspect of our cultural climate is that we tend to treat our moral lives as something that can be properly and fully attended to with mere rational reasoning – with argumentative philosophy. This, however, is precisely the orientation of thought that Costello can be seen as challenging.

She does not engage with others in argument, in the sense in which philosophers do. Her responses to arguments from others move out from the kind of engagement in argument that might have been expected. She comments on the arguments put to her, but goes on from them in directions which suggest her own very difficult mode of approach. She does not take seriously the conventions of argumentation of a philosophy text, as comes out in her image of the dead hen speaking in the writings of Camus in the guillotine.\textsuperscript{42}

4. The Exemplary Bat

Even though the question under discussion here barely touches upon the position in the philosophy of mind that Nagel took, and the classical paper of his that my title

\textsuperscript{41} Diamond, “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy”, p. 51.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., p. 52.
alludes to, there is one point of reference that must be taken into account. And that concerns how Costello engages with Nagel’s classical paper:

Merely to imagine what it is like to live as a bat does, says Mr Nagel – to imagine spending our nights flying around catching insects in our mouths, navigating by sound instead of sight, and our days hanging upside down – is not good enough, because all that tells us is what it would be like to behave like a bat. Whereas what we really aspire to know is what it is like to be a bat; and that can never be accomplished because our minds are inadequate to the task – our minds are not bats’ minds.43

Diamond claimed, and I think she is right in claiming so, that Costello does not want to partake in the philosophical argumentation. But what is this reference to Nagel then doing here? In a sense, it seems evident that Costello is arguing with Nagel. But argumentation might take many forms, and there are at least two ways in which Costello refrains from a true conversation with Nagel. First, she denies that knowledge must take the form it does in Nagel’s argumentation (if it is to qualify as knowledge), and secondly, she transforms Nagel’s thought-experiment by twisting it, employing it for other purposes than Nagel intended.

Costello’s questioning of Nagel’s conception of knowledge does not come out in a straightforward rejection, or by means of a presentation of her own alternative epistemological position, but by an invitation to other uses of the word ‘know’ that are hard to square with Nagel’s employments of it. Nagel places certain restrictions on the phrase “knowing what it is like” that Costello rejects. This rejection comes out clearly if we attend to the fact that even Nagel claims that it is possible (though very difficult) to imagine what it would be like to be a bat in the sense that he can imagine himself orienting himself with radar, eating insects and hanging upside down in a cave during day time. But this is not enough for Nagel. “In so far as I can imagine this (which is not very far), it tells me only what it would be like for me to behave as bats behaves. But that is not the question. I want to know what it is like for a bat to be a bat. Yet, if I try to imagine this, I am restricted to the resources of my own mind, and those resources are inadequate for the task.”44

43 Coetzee, Elisabeth Costello, p. 76.
“Knowing what it is like” is thus a phrase that, in Nagel’s view, requires something immediately sensed by the ‘I’. Here, he relies on a traditional philosophical conception of the mind and the relation between different persons. I know what “it feels like” only to the extent that I cognize it, as it were, in myself. “Knowing what it is like” requires Cartesian immediacy. The fact that he can imagine what it would be like for him to hang up side down in a cave, the fact that Nagel does have a rather vivid imagination, is of no major significance to him.

Elisabeth Costello rejects this conception of the human and her capacity to “know what it is like”, not in the sense that she enters into a dialogue with the rationales behind Nagel’s position, but by focusing on the imagination there is in Nagel’s thinking, and by denying the philosophical conception of “knowing what it is like” that this imagination is supposed to be squared with. This is where Costello transforms Nagel’s thought experiment – removing it from the requirements that the context of contemporary analytical philosophy of mind places on it, focusing solely on the imaginative powers that Nagel actually had (but that he felt obliged to deny that he had, since it did not fit well with his own philosophical convictions).

For like in the case of Descartes, there is in Nagel a knowledge denied that enables the philosophical temptation to become stark and pressing. Nagel is concerned with refuting materialism, so it is no wonder that he is trying to downplay the importance of embodiment. Notice that Nagel did succeed in imagine what it would be like to “behave as bats behaves”. But that doesn’t do it. The embodied bat-life, is precisely the life of the other that Nagel does not want to know. Nagel’s argumentation thus hangs on a recognition of the importance of embodiment, since he did manage to imagine what embodied bat life might be like and since he decided to go with 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.” For Nagel, “knowing what it is like” requires an embodied recognition, say similarity of sensory organs, so bats where chosen because they are bodily different from us, but not different enough to disable our imagination of what that kind of embodied life is like. Thus, embodiment is introduced, as indispensible, only to be

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45 The “Cartesianism” of Nagel’s position is a difficult question, as we will see shortly. Here, let us merely note that it is Cartesian only in the sense that he desires “immediacy”.

46 This also means that Costello’s “quarrel” with Nagel has basically no bearing on the internal relevance of his thought experiment within the compounds of analytical philosophy of mind.

denied. It is this movement of denial which I take to be one of the decisive movements here.

One of the most important formulations here is when Costello says: “I know that Nagel is only using bats and Martians as aids in order to pose questions of his own about the nature of consciousness. But like most writers, I have a literal cast of mind, so I would like to stop with the bat.” In saying so, Costello removes Nagel’s bat from the context of philosophy of mind, sidesteps its designed function as a counterargument to hardcore materialism, and rebukes the philosophical function of the thought-experiment. She, as a writer, has “a literal cast of mind”, and so the fictionality of the philosophical thought-experiment is denied. She wants to focus on the real imaginative powers of the human that the idea of a thought-experiment only incorporates as a minor detail – the idea that the fictive story serves philosophy well, only if it illustrates an already existing philosophical idea is thus destabilized by Costello’s approach to it. That is, here is a moment when we can see, in a fictive setting, how the philosophical function of narrative literature cannot be reduced to fiction being, as Stephen Mulhall aptly describes it, “a container for philosophical arguments”. Thought-experiments “are explicitly designed so as to strip away the complexity and detail of real-life situations, in order to isolate a specific theoretical issue in as stark and plain manner as possible”.

Elisabeth Costello does not enter into a dialogue with Nagel precisely because she does not want to “strip away the complexity and detail of real-life situations”. Her “literal cast of mind” thus transforms the fictionality of the thought-experiment, its character of construction and invention, and focuses instead of the real imagination that enabled that philosophical fantasy. She wants to highlight the imagination that Nagel’s mind actually was able to create (if only to deny), in order to show that the philosophical separateness between persons, the human and her other (be it another human or an animal), depends upon a deflection from a more original communality. The gap between me and the other that contemporary philosophy of mind attempts to bridge is, in a sense, its own creation. “I would like to stop with the bat” says Costello, signaling that she rejects Nagel’s next step from the imagination to the thought-experiment. As Mulhall puts it:

48 Coetzee, Elisabeth Costello, p. 76.
50 Ibid., p. 24.
Thought-experiments are devised rather than created, modified rather than rewritten, analysed rather than entered into; when successful, they invite praise in terms of their novelty or ingenuity, as opposed to their wisdom or insight. A thought-experiment is not a very short story; consequently (so one might think) the actual reality of bat-life is of precisely no relevance to Nagel’s bat.\footnote{Ibid.}

At this point, I think that it is possible to see how this particular piece of literature – Coetzee’s *Elisabeth Costello* – has philosophical significance precisely because it is not a piece of philosophy, precisely because he does not engage in the ongoing discussions of the human/animal relation or the debates about which theory of consciousness is the better that remain so central for analytical philosophy of mind. By picturing a woman who denies a crucial step that the philosophical debate requires – the step from the reality of the imagination, to the deflection from its reality displayed in the demands of the epistemological language that informs and guides philosophy of mind – Coetzee can be employed as showing us that this step has been taken, and that it is problematical. Something happens when life, something of blood and heart, is removed from its natural surrounding and turned into a representation of a “position” in an abstract philosophical debate. Nagel is exemplary in the context of Coetzee’s lectures describing Costello’s lecturing, precisely because he seems to be denying his own imagination, more or less deliberately, for the “benefit” of philosophical clarity. This is a kind of deflection, that so much philosophy depends upon, which is also the main concern of Diamond’s.

5. Broadening “Understanding”

It should be noted that the fact that Costello refrains from partaking in a tradition of argumentation does not necessarily make her praiseworthy. That is, she might be taken to avoid conversation, as if she did not want to partake, as if she didn’t want her position to be scrutinized, as if she simply did not take the other’s words and thoughts seriously. I want to suggest that Costello doesn’t join the tradition of argumentation for a much more difficult and serious reason. For her, there is nothing to debate here, not because she does not take other persons’ thoughts seriously, but because she does
not know what it means to argue here, or that the form argumentation usually takes is distorting the subject rather than bringing clarity.

I think she literally thinks that the idea that ‘we treat animals poorly’ is not one idea that we can approve or disapprove of. For her, there is no neutral way to relate to this sentence. It does not consist of a neutral propositional sense that we then can go on to attribute value to. As I have argued, the way we treat animals is something that is incomprehensible to Costello. It is not that she has a set of arguments that runs “We shouldn’t be cruel to animals, because…” (Or, “It’s OK to make food out of animals because….”)

There is then a claim that Costello implicitly makes, which is that many questions concerning our moral lives and our relation to others are utterly misrepresented if we focus too much on this ‘because’. Such thinking invites abstraction and it invites us to make lists of properties or capacities which are then put to use in order to warrant that ‘because’. In a sense, Costello’s own vegetarianism and her sense of horror concerning the meat industry, is not a moral conviction of hers. It is not a “stance” that she has taken for a number of “reasons”. In a sense, she does not have the “belief” that vegetarianism is right.

‘But your own vegetarianism, Mrs Costello,’ says President Garrard, pouring oil on troubled waters: ‘it comes out of moral conviction, does it not?’

‘No, I don’t think so,’ says his mother. ‘It comes out of a desire to save my soul.’

Now there truly is a silence, broken only by the clink of plates as the waitresses set baked Alaskas before them.

‘Well, I have great respect for it,’ says Garrard. ‘As a way of life.’

‘I am wearing leather shoes,’ says his mother. ‘I am carrying a leather purse. I wouldn’t have overmuch respect if I were you.’

‘Consistency,’ murmurs Garrard. ‘Consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds. Surely one can draw a distinction between eating meat and wearing leather.’

‘Degrees of obscenity,’ she replies.52

What we can learn from this dialogue about Elisabeth Costello is not that she is hostile to reasoning in general, but neither that she thinks that she has a well argued position of her own. She is (almost) as obscene as her opponents. What she is protesting against, is the idea that there is a cold, rational, and objective set of reasons

52 Coetzee, Elisabeth Costello, pp. 88f.
behind any kind of moral life that is open to public scrutiny. “No consciousness that we would recognize as consciousness. No awareness, as far as we can make out, of a self with a history. What I have in mind is what tends to come next. They have no consciousness therefore. Therefore what? Therefore we are free to use them for our own ends? Therefore we are free to kill them? Why?”53

Here, we can see Costello protesting, not about the correctness of the arguments, but against the idea that understanding is, and must be like, the understanding of ‘understanding’ presupposed in the contemporary intellectual and cultural climate of today, and by today’s philosophy departments in particular. “Understanding a thing often looks to me like playing with one of those Rubik cubes. Once you have made all the little bricks snap into place, hey presto, you understand. It makes sense if you live inside a Rubik cube, but if you don’t…”54

As far as I can see, this view of Costello’s, guides her thinking more profoundly than any other singular (and perhaps more concrete) arguments do. And I think that it is in line with this more general vision of hers, which we should understand her more specific points too. This brings us back to her imagined corpse-life and to her comparison between the Holocaust and the meat industry. These two “arguments”, I think, should not be seen as singular arguments that enable a reader to say “It is true that x, therefore…”

This also means that we should at least hesitate to describe Costello’s “I know what it is like to be a corpse” as a simple counterargument to Nagel’s claim that he cannot know what it is like to be a bat, even though Costello at one point says “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.”55

According to Costello, “The question should not be: Do I have something in common – reason, self-consciousness, a soul – with other animals?”56 How we treat the other, she claims, should rather be a question of sympathy than of likeness, and “Sympathy has everything to do with the subject and little to do with the object, the ‘another’”.57 The moral question of our relation to others, is thus not so much a

53 Ibid., p. 90.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid., p. 80.
56 Ibid., p. 79.
57 Ibid.
question about the facts of that other, as it is a question about my attitude towards “it”.58 And at this point, she returns to her problematic comparison with the Holocaust.

The particular horrors of the camps, the horror that convinces us that what went on there was a crime against humanity, is not that despite a humanity shared with the victims, the killers treated them like lice. That is too abstract. The horror is that the killers refused to think themselves into the place of their victims, as did everyone else. They said, “It is they on those cattle cars rattling past.” They did not say, “How would it be if it were I in that cattle car?” They did not say, “It is I who am in that cattle car.” They said, “It must be the dead who are being burned today, making the air stink and falling in ash on my cabbages.” They did not say, “How would it be if I were burning?” They did not say, “I am burning, I am falling in ash.”59

Sympathy requires a willingness to “embody” the other. Imagination let us do that. We are capable of it. This is what Costello seems to be saying. And she is denying that we can learn how to treat the other by (merely) studying philosophical arguments. But is she thereby saying that she knows what it is like to be a corpse? Is she thereby saying that she understands the Holocaust? I don’t think so. That would be a return to the argumentative form that she rebukes: “I know that x, therefore…”

So what should we make of her claim “I know what it is like to be a corpse”? Well, it is clear that Costello claims to have a sense of what it means for a human to be aware of her own demise. But that does not entail that she thereby claims to possess a Nagel-type of “knowing what it is like” when it comes to corpses. Stephen Mulhall claims that Costello’s call for embodiment requires that we “embody a contradiction or impossibility.”60 To me, something is not entirely right in that thought. To embody a contradiction is in a sense also to embody – and so live approvingly in – one’s own failure. Is this something we do? Can we honestly and wholeheartedly do so? And, is the impossible of the Holocaust something we can understand, and then go on to employ in comparison with other “difficulties”? Costello is not, as far as I can see, claiming to understand the Holocaust. She is merely saying that we are blocking our possibility of understanding, misrepresenting

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58 Cf. Wittgenstein’s remark “My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the opinion that he has a soul.” Philosophical Investigations, Part II, section iv, p. 178.
59 Coetzee, Elisabeth Costello, p. 79.
60 Mulhall, The Wounded Animal, p. 47.
the world, if we reject imagination as a path to understanding. That would be, again, a deflection.

Mulhall claims that

Costello is exactly not denying that we can understand these killers—as if simply reformulating the perhaps too-familiar thought that we cannot grasp the evil of the Holocaust. On the contrary, this passage [Mulhall refers to the passage from Elisabeth Costello quoted above] precisely records her attempt to understand its agents by attempting to do what she claims they refused to do with respect to their victims—namely, to think herself into their place.61

This, so it seems to me, misrepresents the force of Costello’s words in, at least two ways. First, it invites a reading according to which Costello actually holds that there is a method of imagination ready at hand, with which it is possible to learn how to be sensitive and understanding. It runs the risk of repeating the gesture of inflating the “I know what it is like” with too much sense, as it were; with a sense of “if I could only feel what you feel”. And so, we would be thrown back into a Nagelian view, according to which my understanding depends on my ability to feel what you feel. (It runs the risk of returning us to the “Do I have enough in common?”) Secondly, it invites an inference from Costello’s “understanding” of the Holocaust, via the analogy with the meat factories, to the conclusion that eating meat is wrong because…

Furthermore, it leaves the question of the impossibility, the inexpressible, that which is beyond understanding – Costello’s speechlessness – hanging. If Mulhall is right, Costello almost seems to understand too much of these horrors. Something is suspicious in all claims to understand the impossible, to express the inexpressible, to be alive in a contradiction. It sounds too much like an argument, and leaves Costello’s sense of failure, of not being able to reach her audience, without much sense. And Mulhall’s rendition here, also seem to imply that there is nothing wrong with Elisabeth Costello, that she is not really shouldered out, but the avant garde.

I would also like to raise the question if the claim that “we cannot grasp the evil of the Holocaust” really is “too-familiar”? Or, to approach it from the other end: What would it mean to claim to understand it? Spontaneously, I mistrust anyone who claims to understand the Holocaust. What we need here, I think, is a broadened sense

61 Ibid.
of “understanding” which shows why the deflected philosophical argumentation distorts reality, but which does not end up in someone claiming to have reached understanding beyond the limits of understanding.

I want to stress, again, that there is a sense in which the question of how we treat animals is not a question at all for Costello. And so, I also want to ask if her “cheap point scoring” coming out of the comparison between the meat industry and the Holocaust, falls back upon nothing more than the fact that there is something completely absurd in thinking about either of these things in “merely rational” terms? The Holocaust comparison, would thus serve basically one function: it’s a provocative way of saying “Do I really need reasons for saying that killing is bad?”

This also means that my worry that Mulhall misrepresents the difficulties here when he suggests that there is such a thing as understanding the Holocaust can be qualified; for I do not mean to suggest that there is no sense at all in talking about understanding in such complex and horrific cases as the Holocaust. Remaining, for the moment, with merely the fact of the horror, I want to suggest that it is better framed in terms of a part of reality in which the contrast between ‘understanding’ and ‘misunderstanding’ is extremely hard to make. To the extent that it does make sense to talk about understanding the Holocaust, it is in more or less direct conflict with many other forms of uses of ‘understanding’, where understanding is more intimately intertwined with ‘knowing’ and knowledge in general. For when someone says that the horrors of the Holocaust is beyond understanding, this does express, I think, a certain type of understanding.

In other words, I think it is important to note that to call something “inexpressible” – to say that a difficulty of reality renders us speechless – is not to say nothing, it is to say it. How it is. To call something inexpressible is, as it were, to give it a description. And sometimes it is also the best description; perhaps even an adequate one. After all, the expression “I’m speechless” (and all its related formulations) is part of our common language too. Ted Hughes’ poem might be said to be such a description. Coetzeee’s novel pictures many such moments of speechlessness.

What is important to note about these moments of speechlessness, is that although there might be a certain kind of failure involved in many such moments, they should not to be seen as failures to understand in the same sense that we often fail to
understand because an issue is easy to misunderstand. Lars Hertzberg makes this point clearly in “The Limits of Understanding”.

[H]earing about the snipers who would shoot at children playing in the streets of Sarajevo during the civil war in Bosnia, we might respond by saying that we ‘do not understand’ how they could do it. We might also say that what they did was ‘incomprehensible’.

(…) My not understanding the snipers is not like having failed at a task. I do not consider this to be a failure on my part, the failure, rather, is on the part of the snipers. Again, it is clearly not a matter of skills, knowledge or intelligence. (…) Obviously, too, there is no kind of activity that could bring us closer to an understanding. Nor, furthermore, does our inability to understand entail that there is some judgment we are unable to make or some action we are unable to perform, which we could have made or performed if we only had understood the matter in question. What we are saying, as it were, is that we do not see what understanding this could be. If someone tells us that he can understand the snipers, I do not expect him to tell me anything that would make me change my mind. (…) This is connected with the fact that the whole issue of misunderstanding does not enter here. Someone who says he cannot understand the snipers is not saying that it is very easy to misunderstand them.62

Not all types of understanding come in the form that can be adequately represented in terms of standard pictures of knowledge. That is, there are cases where the contrast between ‘understanding’ and ‘misunderstanding’ cannot be drawn. Perhaps one might say that where there is room for argumentation, there is room for misunderstanding? Many cases of arguments depend upon the fact that we are in disagreement about some fact about the world – and that we take both alternative positions to be sensible.

This relates to the fact that Costello is not basing her “position” on either ‘knowledge’ or on facts. As she is presented, there is no type of information that could sway her mind. Her case is similar to the Sarajevo sniper case in the sense that Costello is portrayed as being part of a world where everyone around her treats cruelty of the same caliber as snipers shooting kids, as if it were up for debate whether or not their actions are good or bad. As if someone who claimed (and the very idea that someone could claim to claim this is strange in itself) that someone holding the

view that shooting children with sniper rifles is bad might have misunderstood something crucial concerning the sniping activity…

Costello is disgusted by how we treat animals. True. But she seems to be even more scared by the fact that no one seems to share her disgust, not even her own children and grandchildren. And so we should also suspect that, first, it is not necessarily so that Costello is pleased with not having any arguments or with the fact that most so-called arguments that are discussed in contemporary analytical philosophy of animals – even the ones supposedly speaking in favor of her cause – doesn’t do justice to the subject. Secondly, given that she has suggested that the comparison between meat industry and the Holocaust is cheap, unfair perhaps, similar notes of caution are in place concerning my remarks on how understanding might look in cases where we say that the facts about parts of our world are incomprehensible. Needless to say, if there is a gap between the Holocaust and the meat industry, there is a gap between snipers shooting kids and coq au vin too. The real difficulty is that Costello seems to think that these gaps are much smaller than most other humans do, and she has no reasons for thinking so. She knows these comparisons are off target, yet she returns to them repeatedly.

There is a sense in which Costello thus appeals to emotions. She is provocative hoping that someone could take her disgust at face value, treating her with respect, and say “yes, you are right, it is not dignified to be ‘arguing’ with you now”. There is a sense in which we can take the story of Elisabeth Costello as representing that fact that feelings at times is as ground for knowledge, is knowledge.63 This need not result in a subjectivistic form of “emotivism”. There is, I believe, a strong inclination of many philosophers, to shy away from everything that has even the vaguest sent of “mere feelings” – they cannot play any significant role, in any real philosophical (rational, objective, scientific) elaboration of any phenomena. But I think that Cavell put his finger on something important when saying: “The idea that passion and reason are antithetical to one another seems to me a libel on human nature and conduct. As if passion were a form of superstition.”64

For feelings connect with understanding in, at least, this way: In some situations, to not feel anything particular is to have failed to understand the situation.

63 Notably, Peter Singer’s response to Costello’s two lectures in The Lives of Animals touches upon this issue, and Singer is evidently afraid that Costello comes close to saying that emotions is all that counts. XXXXXXXX (Cf. Muhall, p. XXXXXXXX)
64 Stanely Cavell, Interview, in Film as Philosophy, p. 177
For example, if you don’t feel hurt if your loved one leaves you, you have probably not understood (but probably denied) that she actually has left you. If you don’t feel disgust in the face of an ongoing, bloody, pointless and torturous murder, you do not understand that you are facing such a murder (or you're mad, your understanding blocked by insanity or the mere incomprehensibility of the fact in front of you. Or you’re watching a movie…). If you don’t feel, say, warm, calm and happy if the one you love tells you that you mean the world to him/her, you have probably a hard time facing the fact that such a wonderful creature can love a lowlife like yourself (and, hence, you have a bundle of issues to come to terms with). This is not to say that what makes an action right or wrong is the feeling that it induces in most sane humans (backing that up statistically), or that morality consists of nothing more than feelings. Emotivism is in that respect similar to the line of moral thought that I am here criticizing. It builds on the same mistake of pretending not to know what our words mean. “Feeling it” need not be spelled out in terms of stimulus/response. Neither does, of course, “understanding it” or “sensing it” need to be so understood. (This thought now needs to be developed.)

At the heart of the difficulty that Costello is facing in trying to communicate with her audience, trying to make philosophers listen to her even though she does not want to argue with them lies, thus, not a lack of information, but a sense that there is something confused in the way philosophers tend to talk about these matters. It is not that their arguments are unsound, but that they seem to be neglecting, downplaying, many crucial regions of our lives in language, in order to turn something of great personal and moral importance into something that can be “debated”. This is deflection.

6. Understanding Deflection

7. The ‘Versus’ of Wolfe’s ‘Diamond vs. Derrida’

8. Concluding Remarks