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## Two Problems Posed by the Suffering of Animals

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**ABSTRACT:** What is the ethical significance of the suffering of nonhuman animals? For many, the answer is simple. Such suffering has clear moral significance: nonhuman animal suffering is suffering, suffering is something bad, and the fact that it is bad gives us reason to alleviate or prevent it. The practical problem that remains is how to do this most efficiently or effectively. I argue that this does not exhaust the ethical significance of certain evils, once we consider how the existence of those evils may detract from the meaning of human life, even on fully “naturalistic” conceptions of meaning in life. I will draw a distinction between what I will call “spiritual” problems and “moral” problems and consider why moral philosophers may be well suited to addressing both problems, as long as the domain of the ethical is not taken to be exhausted by the domain of the moral. Finally, I will elaborate on why marking a distinction between these problems—the moral and the spiritual—may help illuminate some disagreements between Utilitarians and their opponents about the ethical significance of the suffering of nonhuman animals.

**KEYWORDS:** despair, meaning in life, animal ethics, utilitarianism

The logical or structural questions about religious ethics, like many questions about God, are interesting only if you believe

in God. If God exists, then arguments about him are arguments about the cosmos and of cosmic importance, but if he does not, they are not about anything. In that case, the important questions must be about human beings, and why, for instance, they ever believed that God existed. The issues about religious ethics are issues about the human impulses that expressed themselves in it, and they should be faced in those terms. . . . Nietzsche's saying, God is dead, can be taken to mean that we should now treat God as a dead person: we should allocate his legacies and try to write an honest biography of him.

—BERNARD WILLIAMS, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*

What is the ethical significance of the suffering of nonhuman animals? For many philosophers, such suffering has clear moral significance: nonhuman animal suffering is suffering, suffering is something bad, and the fact that it is bad gives us reason to alleviate or prevent it. Given this standard view, consider now a scene from J. M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals*.<sup>1</sup> The president of the small college where Elizabeth Costello has been invited to speak asks her whether her refusal to eat animals comes from a moral conviction. "No, I don't think so," she replies: "*It comes out of a desire to save my soul.*"<sup>2</sup>

What might Costello mean by marking this distinction between a "moral conviction" and a desire to "save her soul"? And what will we make of her desire in light of her avowed atheism?

I will offer an interpretation of Costello's need to "save her soul" and elaborate on the philosophical significance of how she *limits* the role of moral thinking in her response to the suffering of animals. I propose that we can understand Costello only if we take seriously the claim, defended by some moral philosophers, that moral value is only one domain of value within philosophical ethics and that moral philosophy will be straitjacketed in terms of the questions it finds coherent to ask, and the philosophical problems it finds coherent for people to have, so long as it continues to fail to fully recognize the limits of the domain of the "moral."<sup>3</sup>

One way to mark those limits can be illustrated through an acknowledgment of the existence of a certain kind of evil, which Marilyn McCord Adams labels "horrendous." These evils are not identical to morally bad things that can happen to morally significant subjects: rather, the central ethical feature of "horrendous" evils is that they lead us to question the

possibility of human beings living *meaningful lives*. In some cases, a horrendous evil may not be the basis of *moral* objection, at all. But such evils nonetheless have philosophical significance once questions about the meaning of life are reinvigorated within academic philosophy. Here, I will argue that “horrendous evils” pose a problem for meaning in life, even on an attractive naturalistic conception of meaning in life, and that such problems are what I will call “spiritual” ones—in contrast to the “moral.”<sup>4</sup>

These problems will become more salient given our particular historical circumstance: it is arguable whether we are or are not more vulnerable to and responsible for horrendous evils than our predecessors were, but it is certain that it is within our power to be more *aware* of their existence. Fortunately, moral philosophers may be well suited to reflect on and respond to these problems, if only they allow them to be philosophical problems in the first place. Finally, I will elaborate on why marking a distinction between both kinds of problem—the moral and the spiritual—may help illuminate some disagreements between Utilitarians and their opponents, doing so in light of Elizabeth Anderson’s criticisms of the luck egalitarian’s conception of justice.<sup>5</sup>

## I. The Peculiarity of Elizabeth Costello

There are three episodes in particular that should make us wonder about the nature of the problem Costello finds herself in. The first episode, mentioned above, is her claim that her motivation for vegetarianism is *not* a moral one: that it is about a desire to “save her soul.” The second is immediately after, where to deflect another professor’s statement that she has great respect for Costello’s vegetarianism, Costello reports that she is wearing leather shoes and carrying a leather purse. The third is one in which she tries to articulate her problem to her son at the conclusion of her visit to the college: “I tell myself, you are making a mountain out of a molehill. Everyone else comes to terms with it, why can’t you? *Why can’t you?*” She turns on [her son] a tearful face. What does she want, he thinks? Does she want me to answer her question for her? . . . He pulls the car over, switches off the engine, takes his mother in his arms. He inhales the smell of cold cream, of old flesh. “There, there,” he whispers in her ear. “There, there. It will soon be over.”<sup>6</sup> In this interaction, we experience her son’s puzzlement regarding whether his mother’s problem is something that

could be possibly responded to—*What does she want?*—and his thought, prompted by the smell of old flesh, that the problem may not be *resolvable* but, instead, must simply come to an end.

In her lectures, Costello contrasts her position to those of “the philosophers.” And there are a number of different ways in which philosophers have interpreted her position and her objections. First, there is what seems to be the crux of her argumentative point: we are not as different from nonhuman animals as we hope. They are not simply irrational or nonrational, but more importantly, even if they were, it would not matter when it comes to the moral significance of the suffering we bring to them. Second, she is evincing the *moral* value of “less rational” attitudes such as sympathy and compassion. And finally (and here seems to be the heart of her objection to Tom Regan and Peter Singer in particular), she is emphasizing that thinking of animals as having *rights* is not the right or most basic way to think about our moral relationship to them.<sup>7</sup>

Here, I want to elaborate on a more recent point made by Rupert Reed that has received less attention: “Increasingly, Coetzee’s philosophical-ethical-political topic is, we might say, how one can remain sane, and loving (or even polite) to one’s family and friends, while they are almost-easily complicit in what one cannot help seeing as mass torture and mass murder.”<sup>8</sup> This too seems right to me as a partial diagnosis. But I want to highlight something else about Costello’s situation. In particular, I want to emphasize the significance of Costello’s feeling that she cannot free *herself* from the evils that she sees. She notes, after all, that she is guilty of this mass murder as well: her shoes are made of leather, she carries a leather purse.<sup>9</sup> The question, then, is not only how one will remain “sane and loving” to those complicit in and blind to a practice one finds abhorrent. Costello, unable to extricate herself from that practice, is similarly alienated from *herself*.

## II. A Secular Problem of Evil

In understanding Costello’s struggle to “save her soul,” it is important to keep in mind that she is not a theist. So, we should wonder what she could mean by this outside of a theological context. In order to work within a framework that is becoming more familiar to secular analytic philosophers, I will give an answer that uses the resources of theorizing about *meaning*

*in life*, which has recently gained footing as a distinct kind of value in need of closer attention.<sup>10</sup>

My arguments here will focus on one notable feature of this renewed discussion. In a secular spirit, it has been argued that philosophers can concentrate on the question of what gives meaning to *individual human lives* independently of the general, metaphysical or religious question of whether *human life* has meaning.<sup>11</sup> Recently articulated, fully “naturalistic” conceptions of meaning do not necessitate the existence of God, an after-life, or the guarantee of a progressive human history for the possibility of individual human beings living meaningful lives. Assuming that such naturalistic conceptions are coherent, it becomes possible to maintain a position that denies that human life as a whole has meaning (because, for example, God does not exist) but which affirms that individual human lives can nonetheless be meaningful, should they satisfy a different set of conditions proposed by a given naturalistic theory that do not depend on the existence of God.

I am sympathetic to this overall conclusion, and my goal is not to show that it is false. Instead, I want to show why it may be harder won than has been assumed: that though there is no conceptual confusion or tension in this position, it may be difficult for human beings to live lives full of naturalistic meaning, given a denial of the possibility of “super-naturalistic” meaning and given the prevalence of certain kinds of evil. To argue for this, I will first elaborate on a challenge that Marilyn McCord Adams raises to atheologians in her discussion of the problem of evil.<sup>12</sup>

Adams presents what she takes to be the strongest version of the problem, arguing that we should focus our attention on a certain *class* of evils that exist in our world and which all parties to the debate would agree are difficult to reconcile with the existence of a loving God. Thus, these evils should not be things like a lack of maximal pleasure (since, as Adams points out, the Christian God is not a “pleasure maximizer” anyway). She proposes that these are evils that give sufferers and perpetrators of those evils *prima facie* reason to doubt whether their lives have meaning by “defeating” the goodness that those lives might otherwise contain. As paradigmatic examples of horrendous evils, Adams proposes “the rape of a woman and axing off of her arms, psychophysical torture whose ultimate goal is the disintegration of personality, betrayal of one’s deepest loyalties, cannibalizing one’s own off-spring . . . slow death by starvation, participation in the Nazi death camps, the explosion of nuclear bombs over

populated areas, having to choose which of one's children shall live and which shall be executed by terrorists, being the accidental and/or unwitting agent of the disfigurement or death of those one loves best."<sup>13</sup>

The deepest challenge for the Christian theologian, she argues, is to show how God could guarantee that human life was not so hostile as to allow for *this* particular kind of evil to exist without a response. Moreover, a successful response cannot be one that relies on a "global" answer: it must be an individualized response that shows how the life of one who suffers from a horrendous evil could nonetheless be a good, meaningful life *to the sufferer*.<sup>14</sup> The response must be in some sense second-personal.

Adams then argues not only that these evils pose the greatest challenge to a loving God but that, in fact, they can only be adequately responded to *by that God*: it is only the possibility of transcendent, nonearthly goods that could give hope to those who suffer from these evils that their earthly lives are meaningful, after all. While those who suffer may not understand the justification, their faith in the meaning of their own lives is based just on the *possibility* of them being meaningful and not an explanation of how they could be. And if that is right, she contends, it is nontheists who are faced with their own version of the problem of evil: a problem of despair. Adams writes: "Assuming the pragmatic and/or moral . . . importance of believing that (one's own) human life is worth living, the ability of Christianity to exhibit how this could be so despite human vulnerability to horrendous evil, constitutes a pragmatic/moral/religious consideration in its favour, relative to value schemes that do not."<sup>15</sup>

But why, we should ask, is this a *universal* problem for those with value schemes that do not rely on Christian metaphysics? After all, those who are fortunate enough to live good earthly lives, untouched directly by such evils and full of the goods that a naturalistic conception of meaning picks out as necessary components of a meaningful life, might reasonably conclude that their lives *are* worth living, without the need to hope for anything beyond the earthly goods they are lucky to have. While there are people who are less fortunate than they are, the problem of *their* lives lacking meaning turns, for the lucky, into a practical moral or political project—not a *general* philosophical problem.

I am skeptical of the stability of this answer. To illustrate why, I will first adopt a particular naturalistic conception of meaning: the Fitting Fulfillment view, which has recently been defended and articulated by Susan Wolf.<sup>16</sup> I will assume this view because it is independently attractive but also

because Wolf directly engages with the question of how this naturalistic conception of meaning is related to questions about the meaning of human life as a whole, as well as to nonnaturalistic conceptions of meaning.

According to Wolf, there are three necessary conditions for living a paradigmatically meaningful human life: it is a life in which one is (1) subjectively fulfilled by (2) some activity of objective worth, and (3) one's engagement in this activity is somewhat successful. As she puts it, "Meaning in life arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness, and one is able to do something about it or with it."<sup>17</sup> This kind of position has also been referred to as a "Hybrid View," as it consists of both "subjective" and "objective" components that are taken by nonhybrid, monistic views to be able to capture meaning on their own.

Wolf arrives at these conditions through considering both cases in which one seems to be living a paradigmatically meaningless life. Paradigmatically meaningless lives are either those in which one is not actively engaged in the world in any way (Wolf has us imagine a stoner who spends his hazy existence watching television) or those in which one is actively engaged in something worthless (Wolf has us imagine the pointless frittering of the very wealthy). Lives that it would be too harsh to rule out as meaningless but which can give rise to justified feelings of meaninglessness are those in which one is engaged with an activity of objective worth but feels alienated from or suffocating constrained by it (Wolf has us imagine an alienated housewife or a conscripted soldier).

The aspect of Wolf's theory that is likely to yield, and has yielded, the most skepticism is its reliance on standards of *objective worth*.<sup>18</sup> This may be even more puzzling should one also take into consideration that she resists, for example, understanding goodness in the metaphysically robust way that Moore does or by relying on religious metaphysics. Indeed, Wolf suggests that worries stemming from these metaphysical concerns are misguided, along lines familiar from the *Euthyphro*: If there are activities that are worth doing and activities that are not worth doing, a life is more meaningful when it involves fulfilled engagement with those that are worth doing; we do not need, as she puts it, "God's approval" to guarantee that there are some activities that are more worthy than others.<sup>19</sup>

Wolf labels those who disagree with this optimistic conclusion "Pessimists" about meaning in life, including under this label Thomas Nagel, Camus, and Tolstoy. According to these Pessimists (according to Wolf), whether individual human lives can have meaning *at all* necessarily



depends on whether there is a God who can provide the possibility of meaning.<sup>20</sup> Given that God does not exist, according to the Pessimist, that possibility closes. Wolf's view is, in contrast, relatively optimistic. Given that meaning in life (of the kind she is interested in and believes that many others are interested in as well) does not depend on God's existence in the first place, the *lack* of God does not affect the possibility for human beings to have meaningful lives. Moreover, she argues that insofar as Pessimists continue to be despondent about the possibility of living a meaningful life when God cannot provide us with the security of cosmic significance, they may be making a kind of mistake that can be corrected with proper humility in the face of recognizing one's actual cosmic *insignificance*.

### III. A Different Kind of Relevance for God

I do not doubt that a misguided hope for cosmic, everlasting significance explains why at least some people are pessimistic about the meaning of life without God, whether or not they state such a hope explicitly. For those who think that something like this must be true about meaningful human lives, I think that Wolf's diagnosis (and advice) is exactly right.

However, there is a different role that God can play in being able to secure for us the possibility of naturalistic meaning. Rather than guaranteeing that our earthly projects or activities are *really* valuable, that they must be somehow at the center of the universe's attention, or that we will make a permanent, everlasting mark on the universe, the existence of God may underwrite the possibility of our *subjective fulfillment* with activities, projects, or objects of worth.

This may be surprising: subjective engagement has been assumed to be the aspect of the Fitting Fulfillment view less susceptible to skepticism, as it seems to raise no metaphysical concerns. Indeed, metaphysical concerns about objective goodness seem to be one reason why one might be attracted to views of the meaning of life that depend *solely* on a subjective condition, even if such views leave us with the bad result that a Sisyphean life fulfilled, or a life within Nozick's "experience machine," would be a meaningful one.

Nonetheless, once we take into consideration the moral psychological assumptions underlying what "fulfillment" consists in, we begin to see the threat that the existence of horrendous evils can pose to its satisfaction.

What horrendous evils have in common, Adams contends, is that their existence in a person's life "defeats" the goodness that such a life might otherwise contain: if a woman accidentally kills her own child by forgetting him in a car on a hot summer day, then it is true that her child can no longer be a source of goodness and meaning within her life. But worse than this, the *other* goods in her life may be "defeated," given what has happened. That she has a successful and fulfilling career may not be something that she can now *feel* fulfilled by. But again, although the existence of God leads to a theological problem of evil, Adams's proposal is that he may be the only way out of it: only he could offer the "personalized response" that this woman may need to believe that her life is nonetheless meaningful.

There are two objections we might have to Adams's conclusion. First, we could object to the claim that this gives the non-Christian a pragmatic/moral/religious reason to favor the Christian value scheme—perhaps there are other resources available to the secular. And second, one might be skeptical about this as an adequate *defense* of God's allowing such evils to exist in the first place. But before remarking on the significance of the success of Adams's theodicy, I want to first explore this category of evil and spell out her observations about them in other terms. Consider just the claims that

1. it would not be unreasonable for a person to conclude that having suffered from such an evil (such as accidentally killing her own child), she no longer considers her life worth living (we can imagine her now suffering from a kind of despair) *even if* it does contain other goods; and
2. there could be no general, rational demand on her to accept some earthly compensation, or consolation, that would successfully reconcile her to her life.

While we might *hope* that she finds something in her life worth living for, we should not (as impartial observers<sup>21</sup>) demand such a thing of her or judge that she would be making a mistake if she concluded otherwise. Though there may be things in the world that she still believes to be good, there may be nothing left that engages or fulfills her: this is one way to understand the "defeat" of such things as sources of meaning. She may live a life characterized by a kind of *global* alienation.

What is important for my purposes is just that she will fail to satisfy the condition of *subjective fulfillment* on the Fitting Fulfillment view. On this view, fulfillment is not just a pleasurable experience; it takes a kind

of *emotional* engagement with the world that is richer than some other “positive” responses that one might have in mind. It is difficult to spell out exactly what this sort of “positive fulfillment” looks like. But it at least seems exemplified by people who can approach the world with a kind of *openness* or *appreciation of life* that is not psychologically consistent with persistent emotional alienation from it.

But how does this affect the meaning of our lives, as mere spectators to what has happened? Returning now to Marilyn Adams’s discussion, another role for God emerges. We need not rely on God as necessary for granting our lives cosmic significance or for providing a metaphysical guarantee that earthly goods are truly good. Instead, it is to rely on God as the being who is able to provide those who suffer from horrendous evils something *more than this world can offer* as consolation for the horror of their lives. Whether or not this really can be an adequate answer for the theist is beside the point: for my purposes what is important is that this *cannot* be the answer for the nontheist. We must simply observe the evils while knowing that there will be no possibility for *this kind* of response.

Let us now return to Elizabeth Costello to illustrate how the suffering of animals becomes a problem of meaning for *her*.<sup>22</sup> In contemplating the suffering of animals, and in her recognition that she, the people she loves, and all of the activities that she engages in cannot be extricated from the evil that is done to them, Costello becomes, as Cora Diamond has put it, “haunted” or “wounded.”<sup>23</sup> Consider the kind of state Costello now finds herself in:

It’s that I no longer know where I am. I seem to move around perfectly easily among people, to have perfectly normal relations with them. Is it possible, I ask myself, that all of them are participants in a crime of stupefying proportions? Am I fantasizing it all? I must be mad! Yet every day 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.

It is as if I were to visit friends, and to make some polite remark about the lamp in their living-room, and they were to say, “Yes, it’s nice, isn’t it? Polish-Jewish skin it’s made of, we find that’s best, the skins of young Polish-Jewish virgins.” And then I go to the bathroom and the soap-wrapper says, “Treblinka—100% human stearate.” Am I dreaming, I say to myself? What kind of house is this?

Yet I'm not dreaming. I look into your eyes, into Norma's, into the children's, and I see only kindness, human-kindness.<sup>24</sup>

Costello loves her family, and yet she is deeply alienated from them. Perhaps at one time in her life she loved her work, as well. Given the way in which the evil she sees seeps into her own life, her despair makes it difficult for her to continue to *be in the world*, let alone be engaged with or fulfilled by the good aspects of it. So, though Costello does not suffer directly *from* the evils she witnesses, her witnessing such evils and taking part in them, given her extensive abilities of empathetic imagination, have made her "positive subjective engagement" with the world nearly impossible.

#### IV. Two Problems for Philosophical Ethics

Of course, as mentioned, there may be a secular response to Elizabeth Costello's problem of alienation and lack of emotional connection to the goodness in her life that does not rely on God. Perhaps there is room here for philosophical reflection on the conditions under which fulfillment may be possible and despair may be overcome. However, if we are to begin conceiving of this as a philosophical project for philosophers to consider, it is important to recognize that the problem that Costello faces is not a *moral* one. Rather, I propose that the kind of problem she faces is best understood as a "spiritual" difficulty, even along thoroughly secular assumptions: her experience with evil poses an obstacle for the meaning of her life, even naturalistically construed. I call these problems "spiritual" even though I myself am not attracted by Adams's proposal that the problem of despair may yield a pragmatic reason in favor of the theist's value scheme. I insist that they are *philosophical* problems, because some may be inclined to pathologize or medicalize them and see them as arising from contingent aspects of particular and peculiar psychologies. And finally, the reason we need to recognize a distinction between *spiritual* and *moral problems* is that, although moral philosophers *could* address both of them, they must be responded to in different ways.

To illustrate let me now, in conclusion, elaborate on this last point by comparing the problem of despair with the problems of envy and malice discussed by Elizabeth Anderson in a critique of Cohen's luck egalitarianism. In her critique, Anderson considers the luck egalitarian's proposal

that the bare fact that some have more than others is able to ground claims of injustice. But a claim of injustice is one that concerns what each person is *due*—what one is owed by right, entailing that someone else has a duty to respond to the injustice done to one. Thus, the intuition that Cohen relies upon in his defense of luck egalitarians—that accidental inequalities are unjust—has been misclassified. While brute inequalities may be *undesirable*, they have no direct bearing on a claim of justice that is a claim made *against* someone and which demands that he or she respond.

Notably, Anderson acknowledges that the undesirability of brute inequality *could* be interpreted as a complaint made against someone: “[Such complaints] either [express] a theological grievance irrelevant to justice in human affairs, or a form of malice toward others, whether or envy or spite. Tellingly, Cohen concedes that on his conception ‘justice can be mean and spiteful.’” It is stunning that Cohen is so vexed by the thought that contractualists conflate justice with other virtues but happily endorses an account that conflates it with vices.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, these complaints *can* be made intelligible as claims of injustice—but at the cost of being irrelevant to our theorizing about “justice in human affairs.” I do not here mean to endorse this criticism of luck egalitarians; rather, I want to consider the form of argument that Anderson has wielded against them, how it allows us to rethink what exactly the disagreement between luck egalitarians and relational egalitarians amounts to, and how moral and political philosophy, construed as a “human affair,” might proceed.

Returning to the question I began this essay with: What is the ethical status of the suffering of nonhuman animals? Again, many philosophers take as a brute intuition that suffering is bad. Does this fact on its own yield reasons for all of us to do something about it? Does it give rise to obligations and rights? To answer this, let us consider: *What is the ethical significance of the perspective from which these intuitions are “felt” or “had”?* As Williams puts this point in one of his many criticisms of Utilitarian thinking, the kind of omniscient, empathetic standpoint some of its proponents believe corrects for deficiencies in our moral thinking is not a standpoint that we can or should aspire to occupy, if we are also interested in the human project of *improving* the world. As he writes: “What would it conceivably be like [for us to take on this standpoint], even for a few seconds? What would it be like to take on every piece of suffering that at a given moment any creature is undergoing? It would be an ultimate horror, an unendurable nightmare.

And what would the connection of that nightmare to our actions be? . . . [I]f for a moment we got anything like an adequate idea of what that [standpoint is like], and we really guided our actions by it, then surely we would annihilate the planet if we could."<sup>26</sup>

Of course, some may happily concede this point.<sup>27</sup> But for those who would hope that we could *improve* the world through human cooperation, let me offer a different analysis of what is going on that will find a philosophical place for the "intuitions" yielded while contemplating the suffering of the world, if they should not be directly connected to questions about what we ought to *do*.

Again, let us turn back to Anderson's critique. Anderson acknowledges that brute inequalities may be "undesirable," and those who have intuitions that others are morally obligated to alleviate them may arise out of either nascent theological complaints or certain vices. For those who do not think that they are targeting their complaints at God, another philosophical answer is available other than the moral-political project of formulating principles of action: *philosophical reflection about the emotion of envy and the virtues*. Unhappiness with one's own brute unluckiness is a very basic, intelligible human response. But when exactly does this turn into *envy*, in a secular context? And what are the virtues that correct for envy?

Similarly, when one contemplates other forms of suffering, one may experience as a "brute intuition" that this is *bad* and that something *must be done to alleviate it*. For those who have ever seriously wondered about the existence of other minds and the existence of animal minds, there is no serious *question* that these beings suffer. And if one empathizes with that suffering, and comes to feel that one cannot help but be in some sense responsible for it, one may come to feel, like Costello, wounded too. These emotional reactions are part of a full imaginative human life and emerge from a compassionate sensibility. But as with our feelings of envy, it is not obvious that the judgments—"intuitions"—these emotions can yield should feed *directly into* questions about how we ought to act or what we owe to animals (as Costello herself acknowledges).

But this does not mean that moral philosophy has *nothing* to say about the emotions that it may be natural to feel when contemplating suffering, and the emotionally held thoughts that can come along with doing so, should our concerns extend to questions of meaning, just as moral philosophy, no longer limited to the domain of action, is not silent about the vices of envy and spite. Once Utilitarians have made clear to us just how much suffering

exists in the world, we need some critical distance from these emotional reactions—not to downplay their importance or ignore them but to reconsider what role they might play in our lives, if not to simply lead to action. As I have argued, we may recognize that they may lead to a new set of philosophical questions—about the meaning of human life and about how to respond to the difficult realization that much suffering, even meaningless suffering, may not be something that we should do anything about. We must mark a distinction between needless, uncompensated suffering that can justifiably lead one to despair, but which human beings cannot and perhaps should not realistically do anything about, and the wrongs and horrors that—through human cooperation and deliberation—we may justifiably strive to alleviate.

#### NOTES

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1. J. M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, ed. Amy Gutmann, University Center for Human Values Series (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

2. *Ibid.*, 43; my emphasis.

3. As argued for by, among others, Bernard Williams. For a more recent discussion that expands on Williams's point, and which argues that much of moral philosophy remains debilitatingly moralized, see Raymond Gaita, *A Common Humanity: Thinking About Love and Truth and Justice* (London: Routledge, 2002).

4. When drawing a similar contrast to the one I will describe here, Iris Murdoch refers to the "spiritual" as being problems of "personal morality." Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Penguin Books, 1992).

5. Elizabeth Anderson, "The Fundamental Disagreement Between Luck Egalitarians and Relational Egalitarians," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* (Suppl.) 36 (2010): 1–23.

6. Coetzee, *Lives of Animals*, 69.

7. For discussion of this point, see especially Cora Diamond, "Eating Meat and Eating People," *Philosophy* 53, no. 206 (October 1978): 465–79. See also Simone

Weil's discussion of the contextual irrelevancy of "rights claims" in "Human Personality," in *Utopian Pessimist: The Life and Thought of Simone Weil*, by David McLellan (London: Macmillan, 1989), 273–88.

8. Rupert Reed, review of *The Wounded Animal: J. M. Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy*, by Stephen Mulhall, *Mind* 120, no. 478 (April 2011): 556.

9. "'Consistency,' murmurs Garrard. 'Consistency is the hob-goblin of small minds. Surely one can draw a distinction between eating meat and wearing leather.' 'Degrees of obscenity,' [Costello] replies" (Coetzee, *Lives of Animals*, 43).

10. Thaddeus Metz writes that "contemporary philosophers have worked to elucidate the sense of claims about the meaning of life and to show that it is a fundamental normative category that is distinct from welfare and morality" ("Recent Work on the Meaning of Life," *Ethics* 112 [July 2002]: 782).

11. Metz argues for this in his survey of work on the meaning of life, as well as within his own work on the topic. See his *Meaning in Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

12. Marilyn McCord Adams, "Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (Suppl.) 63 (1989): 297–323.

13. *Ibid.*, 300.

14. In a similar vein, Bernard Williams writes about Leibniz's theodicy: "It might be thought a reproach to God that the Law of Sufficient Reason should take the form it does: it suggests a heartless modernist preference on his part for intellectual elegance over a detailed concern for his creatures' interests. If it is then replied that it is fatuous to reproach God for his choice of a creative plan, this seems to be abandoning theodicy rather than contributing to it: that reply could have been given before Leibniz started, as indeed God had already given it to Job" ("The Women of Trachis: Fictions, Pessimism, Ethics," in *The Sense of the Past* [Princeton: Oxford, 2006], 50).

15. Adams, "Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God," 310.

16. Most recently in her own Tanner Lectures, published as Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, University Center for Human Values Series (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

17. *Ibid.*, 26.

18. In the set of replies to Wolf, both Jonathan Haidt and Nomy Arpaly raise concerns with relying on objective worth in characterizing meaning, suggesting instead that we can use nonnormative standards of human psychological normalcy. Robert Adams (a theist) has no problem with objective worth as a condition of value—and challenges, instead, the necessity of subjective fulfillment and success in one's projects.

19. Wolf writes: "If one activity is worthwhile and another is a waste, then one has reason to prefer the former, even if there is no God to look down on us and approve. More generally, we seem to have reason to engage ourselves with projects of value whether God exists and gives life a purpose or not", 105, "The Meanings



of Lives”, in *The Variety of Values: Essays on Morality, Meaning, and Love*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

20. Wolf notes that Nagel is actually more pessimistic than this, because on his view, even God would not be able to ground meaning.

21. Those who stand in close relationships to her may have reasonably different expectations; indeed, they might remind her that *they* constitute reasons for her to keep living. I will leave off these questions, here.

22. For another example of a character who, upon witnessing meaningless suffering, becomes withdrawn to the point where he eventually starves to death, consider Melville’s *Bartleby, the Scrivener*.

23. Cora Diamond, “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,” in *Philosophy and Animal Life*, by Stanley Cavell, Cora Diamond, John McDowell, Ian Hacking, and Cary Wolfe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 43–90.

24. Coetzee, *Lives of Animals*, 69.

25. Anderson, “Fundamental Disagreement Between Luck Egalitarians and Relational Egalitarians,” in A. Kaufman (Ed.), *Distributive Justice and Access to Advantage: G. A. Cohen’s Egalitarianism* (21–39). (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2014), 318.

26. Bernard Williams, “Human Prejudice,” in *The Sense of the Past* (Princeton: Oxford, 2006), 146.

27. It is from a perspective like this that Coetzee sometimes writes. As Rupert Reed puts it: “He thinks the world is dying, and that this would be both a very good and terrible thing” (review of *Wounded Animal*, 554). And indeed, in conversation, some philosophers seem eager to accept this conclusion should it follow from their commitments and facts about just how much suffering there is in the world.