

# THE PRECARIOUS LIVES OF ANIMALS

## BUTLER, COETZEE, AND ANIMAL ETHICS

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There never was a human, there never was a life, and no murder has, therefore, ever taken place.

Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, 147

In *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler explores a Levinasian ethics, or what she calls a Jewish ethics of non-violence.<sup>1</sup> Arguing against Israeli violence to Palestinians, for instance, and against American military action in the Middle East—violence often justified by evocations of the sufferings of the Jews, on the one hand, and 9/11 on the other—Butler writes of an ethic which:

is wrought precisely from that experience of suffering, so that suffering itself might stop, so that something we might reasonably call *the sanctity of life* might be honored equitably and truly. The fact of enormous suffering does not warrant revenge or legitimate violence, but must be mobilized in the service of a politics that seeks to diminish suffering universally, that seeks to recognize the sanctity of life, of all lives. (103–04)

Following Levinas, Butler argues that moral authority derives from the other's face, which, Butler stresses, "is not exclusively a human face." Rather, the face is whatever says "thou shalt not kill." As Butler emphasizes, this "thou shalt not kill" need not be spoken in a human language: "So the face, strictly speaking, does not speak, but what the face means is nevertheless conveyed by the commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill.' It conveys this commandment without precisely speaking it." (132) Instead of speaking, the face may be a "cry," a "sob," a "scream." It is "an utterance, that is not strictly speaking linguistic," "a scene of agonized vocalization" (133), "the wordless vocalization of suffering" (134). "The face," Butler continues, "if we are to put words to its meaning, will be that for which no words really work; the face seems to be a kind of sound, the sound of language evacuating its sense, the so-

norous substratum of vocalization that precedes and limits the delivery of any semantic sense." (134) As Butler also goes on to argue, this cry may also be silent, evoked simply by the site of a suffering body, by a back or shoulder blades, or by a bent neck, as in an example of Levinas's. Of this ethical address, Butler writes:

Indeed, this conception of what is morally binding is not one that I give myself; it does not proceed from my autonomy or my reflexivity. It comes to me from elsewhere, unbidden, unexpected, and unplanned. In fact, it tends to ruin my plans, and if my plans are ruined, that may well be the sign that something is morally binding upon me. (130)

Although the question of animals in the ethical philosophy of Levinas is a matter of ongoing debate, Butler seems to present Levinasian ethical theory in the light which is most amenable for including non-human animals within the sphere of our ethical responsibility.<sup>2</sup> Why else would Butler stress the sanctity of "all lives," or insist that the face need not be a human face, that the cry need not be made in a human language, and that the sheer site of a suffering body or a cry of pain is enough to address us? These qualifications are not necessary to argue against violence to Palestinians, Afghans, and Iraqis, given that these subjects have human faces and speak human languages. By arguing against an exclusively human interpretation of the "face" and the "ethical address," Butler seems to be setting the stage to be able to claim—or to allow others to claim—that the cries of animals in slaughterhouses, the sight of their struggling bodies as they are dragged to their deaths, of their silent, corporeally-expressed grief as they live out their brief lives in factory farms, fur farms, and laboratory cages, address us with the ethical command: "thou shalt not kill," and that we must respond to this command, even if it "ruins all our plans"—our plans for dinner, for profit, for

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research, for fashion, for entertainment, for sport.

In fact, however, such a claim is *not* among Butler's aims in *Precarious Life*. Butler, quite legitimately, has interests elsewhere, and yet, beyond this, she repeatedly excludes animals from the sphere of ethical consideration. It will be seen that Butler does not merely neglect but implicitly denies the possibility of including non-human animals within her ethical thought, continually emphasizing that it is an ethics of the *human* that she describes. For Butler, the frame of the human must be interrupted, dislocated beyond the dominant (First World, heterosexist) model, in order to include human beings who are currently dehumanized, and yet Butler does not consider dislocating this frame—which determines which lives are considered grievable—beyond the sphere of the human.

Nevertheless, in this essay I will argue that Butler's account of an ethics of interdependence, embodiment, vulnerability, and mourning is a compelling incentive for thinking about the lives not only of humans, but of animals more generally, and that there is nothing about Butler's ethics that would justify an exclusion of non-human animals. In the final part of this essay, I will read J. M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* as an illustration of an expanded Butlerian ethics, one that considers the corporeal vulnerability of both human and non-human animals. Through the readings of Butler and Coetzee which follow, I hope to show that Butler's situating of the problems of violence and detainment in terms of dehumanization disavows and obscures the manners in which the lives of non-human animals are also precarious, indefinitely detained, violated, derealized, grievable but ungrieved, and that these are concerns which Coetzee takes up.

### Vulnerability and Mourning

In *Precarious Life*, Butler poses the question of "what form political reflection and deliberation ought to take if we take injurability and aggression as two points of departure for political life" (xii). In the wake of 9/11, Butler considers how Americans in particular might respond to the realization that they are vulnerable to injury and attack, to feelings of grief for those who died, and for the precariousness of life in general. In fact, after 9/11 the United

States responded to the exposure of its vulnerability by forbidding mourning, by suspending justice and rights, and by doing violence to even more vulnerable others. Exploiting the vulnerability of others aimed to re-establish the United States' sense of its own invulnerability, obscuring the precariousness of American lives in a show of force against the even greater precariousness of lives elsewhere.

For Butler, despite shows of force such as these, vulnerability cannot be evaded. On the contrary, vulnerability is an essential part of being human, even if not all humans are equally vulnerable. A better reaction to 9/11, according to Butler, would have been to reflect on our common vulnerability, on how this vulnerability creates a community with other human beings across the globe, rather than allowing it to divide us from them further. It would have been preferable to allow Americans to mourn, and to think about life as grievable. Such a reflection on our shared vulnerability, the common grievability of our lives, Butler argues, should inspire us to protect rather than to violate principles of justice and human rights. Experiences of violation, exposure to violence, however negative, can thus be used as resources for ethical and political reflection.<sup>3</sup>

What makes us vulnerable, for Butler, is the sheer fact of being embodied. She describes relationality and interdependence as following "from bodily life, from its vulnerability and its exposure" (25), so that all of us, simply because embodied, are dependent on one another for our survival. Because I have a body, I have to depend on you not to kill my body if I am to live, and in many ways I depend on others not only to not kill me, but to sustain my embodied life. Again, although this embodied state exposes us to violence and risk, to mortality, it is also to be seen in a positive light, as an opportunity for empathy with vulnerable others, and thus for community.<sup>4</sup>

Although our vulnerability is something we have in common, Butler also recognizes that some bodies are more vulnerable than others, and any politics and ethics of corporeal vulnerability must account for this unequal distribution of vulnerability across the globe.<sup>5</sup> When we draw on our own experiences of vulnerability in order to awaken and respond to the suffering of others, we should also reflect on how others are not only vulnerable *as* we are, but

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are *even more so*, and that this is unjust, that this injustice addresses us, that we are responsible for it.

When writing of an unequal distribution of vulnerability across the globe, Butler is concerned with human beings who are more vulnerable than other human beings, but it is important to note that there are other embodied lives on this globe that we have made dependent on us through domestication, and on which we depend in many ways for our way of life (since we eat them, experiment our products on them, wear their skins and pelts), and that these lives are in general far more vulnerable than our own. Here, I am thinking of non-human animals, and, in the most exacerbated cases, those in factory food farms, fur farms, and laboratory cages. Butler's ethics and politics seem highly amenable to thinking about these vulnerable bodies, and thus about animal ethics. It therefore comes as a surprise when she writes: "Perhaps, then, it should come as no surprise that I propose to start, and to end, with the question of the human (as if there were any other way for us to start or end!)" (20).

That we must start and end with the human when considering an ethics of corporeal vulnerability is by no means obvious, since corporeal vulnerability does not start and end with the human, but with all those beings with bodies, which are consequently exposed to harm from other bodies. Given the vulnerable and embodied state of non-human and human animals alike, it would in fact seem more obvious to start and end with animals in general, and not with one specific species of animal, the human. However, mysteriously, Butler frequently qualifies the word "vulnerability" and "life" with the adjective "human" (30), showing that her concern is with human vulnerability and human lives exclusively. What would justify this?

One potential explanation for the exclusion of animals from Butler's thought is that she emphasizes mourning as an ethical resource, and it might be thought that animals do not mourn and are not mournable, and almost certainly they do not use their experiences of mourning as a moral resource as we may. That animals do not reciprocate in this ethics and politics is, however, no reason not to grant them ethical consideration under it, since the

Levinasian ethics upon which Butler draws requires no reciprocity, and even non-Levinasian ethical theories tend to grant some kind of moral consideration to beings who cannot reciprocate, such as human infants and the senile. So the remaining questions are: Are animal lives grievable? And do animals grieve?

Of course, we know that animals grieve each other and also grieve humans. We know of the elaborate mourning rituals of elephants, involving burial and annual visits to these graves.<sup>6</sup> We hear of dogs that die of starvation waiting by their "masters'" graves. We know that chimpanzees are also reluctant to abandon their dead, will look at the faces of the dead, hold their hands, and mothers will stay with and carry their dead offspring.<sup>7</sup> We know of the mourning of mother and baby animals in factory farms when they are prematurely separated, as soon as one day after birth.<sup>8</sup> Animals in factory farms and laboratory cages also grieve for their own sad lives, and have been diagnosed with depression. Indeed, scientists invoke depression in lab animals in order to learn about the causes and possible treatments of depression in humans, and thus know that animals can suffer from despair in ways similar to humans.<sup>9</sup> Animals may also be grieved by humans. Alice A. Kuzniar has devoted an entire book, *Melancholia's Dog: Reflections on Our Animal Kinship*, to what she considers to be the melancholic relationship of humans to one species of non-human animals, dogs, and pays particular attention to the grief humans feel when their canine companions die.<sup>10</sup> Animals thus grieve, and their lives are grievable both by other animals and by humans with whom they have had a face-to-face relationship.

However, Butler seems to assume that animal lives are not grievable lives and that animals do not grieve, or are not vulnerable. Immediately after making her curious claim that the only place to start and end is with the human, she continues:

We start here not because there is a human condition that is universally shared—this is surely not yet the case. The question that preoccupies me in the light of recent global violence is, Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives?

And, finally, *What makes for a grievable life?*  
(20)

In this series of questions, Butler seems to assume an equivalence between being human and counting as a life and having a grievable life. If this is so, the lives of animals simply are not lives, or are not lives that count, or are not grievable lives. If animal lives do not count as lives, their deaths cannot count as deaths, and thus would not be deaths that we could mourn, nor deaths at all. The assumption involved in this series of questions is not an isolated incident in Butler's text. Again and again she equates being a "real life" or a "grievable life" with being a "human life." To take a few examples, she writes:

Some lives are grievable, and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and a grievable death? (xv)

Normative schemes of intelligibility establish what will and will not be human, what will be a livable life, what will be a grievable death. (146) there never was a human, there never was a life, and no murder has, therefore, ever taken place. (147)

We have been turned away from the face, sometimes through the very image of the face, one that is meant to convey the inhuman, the already dead, that which is not precarious and cannot, therefore, be killed. (150)

In these and similar passages, Butler's concern is that certain humans are excluded from the normative category of the human, or are dehumanized, and that this makes it possible to derealize their deaths and to not mourn them, and thus to perpetuate violence against them. To strive to think through and oppose the derealized violence against human beings is a worthy task, and yet, as Butler approaches the problem, an even vaster and more systematic violence is itself derealized and thus perpetuated, for if we accept Butler's logic—that to be real is to be human, and that to derealize a being's death one must first dehumanize it—

then it is all too easy to think that animals never had lives to begin with. If to be a real life is to be a human life, whereas to be inhuman—to be another species of animal, for instance—is to be "already dead" and something which "cannot, therefore, be killed," then animal lives never were real, and their deaths are not real either. Thus we can kill them with impunity—as we do—and make them suffer continually during their short lives—as we do—since those lives are not lives at all, "and no murder has, therefore, ever taken place." Animals are perhaps, for Butler, as for Descartes, mere automata, the apparent vulnerability of their bodies to pain, and of their psyches to despair, being but simulations on the part of creatures that in fact do not feel, and are thus not vulnerable. In the next section, I want to explore Butler's discussion of this crucial process of derealization further, and the manner in which this discussion itself derealizes the lives and deaths of non-human animals.

### Derealized Lives, Derealized Deaths

"What is real?" Butler asks:

Whose lives are real? How might reality be remade? Those who are unreal have, in a sense, already suffered the violence of derealization. What, then, is the relation between violence and those lives considered "unreal"? Does violence effect that unreality? Does violence take place on the condition of that unreality? (33)

Butler argues that if we derealize lives, or never allow them to be real to us to begin with, then we can do violence to those lives with greater ease. One way that we derealize lives, or do not allow certain lives to become real in our imaginations to begin with, is by refusing to individuate them with faces, names, and biographies. While, in Butler's example, happy, heterosexual, monogamous, American (human) lives are individuated in the media when they die—as in the case of Daniel Pearl—other lives, such as those of countless Palestinians, Iraqis, and Afghans, remain mere numbers in the media. Of lives such as those ended by American and Israeli military incursions, Butler writes: "certain images do not appear in the media, certain names of the dead are not utterable, certain losses are not avowed as losses, and violence is derealized and diffused" (38). As a result:

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Violence against those who are already not quite living, that is, living in a state of suspension between life and death, leaves a mark that is no mark. There will be no public act of grieving. . . . If there is a "discourse," it is a silent and melancholic one in which there have been no lives, and no losses; there has been no common bodily condition, no vulnerability that serves as the basis for apprehension of our commonality; and there has been no sundering of that commonality. None of this takes place on the order of the event. None of this takes place. (36)

This is an excellent description of the lives and deaths of animals. Billions of animals live short and miserable lives and then die horrible deaths every year in North America alone for food, while millions more suffer and die each year in laboratory and fur farm cages.<sup>11</sup> Yet we do not see these animals. Slaughterhouses are kept outside of the cities, and fur farms and laboratories, like the slaughterhouses, are carefully guarded against visitors and cameras.<sup>12</sup> When we buy a cosmetic product, we do not see the rabbits in head clamps having this product injected into their eyes. When we eat chicken, we do not see the birds that were thrown, alive and conscious, into boiling defeathering liquid. When we eat an omelet, we do not see the chicks having their beaks burned off on an assembly line. Cosmetic companies do not write "Tested on Animals" on their products. Meat and dairy suppliers put images of happy cartoon cows and pigs and chickens on their packages and on butchers' signs, and one Québec farm sells sheep meat under the label "Le Mouton Heureux," as if dead sheep are happy. All this makes the violence to animals that go into these products unreal. Customers are in no way incited to think of animals at all when they buy these products, or, if animals are invoked at all—as in the cartoon pigs—customers are encouraged to believe that they lived happy lives in idyllic pastoral settings, masking the reality of the very unhappy lives in "production facilities" which are behind the products that we buy.<sup>13</sup> When, rarely, someone captures footage of what occurs in such production facilities—as in the recent documentary *Fast Food Nation*—efforts are made to keep these images from public view. *Fast Food Nation* did not receive the studio support necessary to reach a mass audi-

ence, and critics claimed that scenes from the slaughterhouse were gratuitous and disturbing. As director Richard Linklater notes, it is strange that our society shows the murders of human beings continually in family entertainment films and on TV, but wishes to hide the sight of an animal being killed in a slaughterhouse, which is a component of almost all the meals that are eaten in our society.<sup>14</sup> Why are we so unable to look at this?

I would suggest that we censor the sight and sounds of animal deaths because we need to keep animal lives and deaths derealized in order to continue with our plans. In Levinasian terms, we wish to avoid having a face-to-face relationship with animals because we want to avoid our ethical responsibility. We censor the truth about the lives and deaths of animals because we want to keep animals outside of the frame of what we consider "real lives," lives worthy of moral consideration, grievable lives. There is a silence about animals because we want to continue defining real lives, grievable lives, as "human," as does Butler, so that we can use animals without being concerned for them, without even mentioning them—as Butler does not mention them, even as she implicitly excludes them from her ethical concern through the use of the category "human."

Of the process of derealizing lives and deaths, of censoring media coverage which might individuate and invoke compassion for the lives and deaths in question, Butler writes that "There is less a dehumanizing discourse at work here than a refusal of discourse that produces dehumanization as a result" (36). In one example, Butler discusses the manner in which prisoners in Guantanamo Bay are dehumanized, called "detainees" instead of prisoners, which re-labeling somehow helps to deprive them of their "human rights," which allows their "indefinite detention." As such, what is wrong, for Butler, is that, certain (human) lives are dehumanized, and thus if one is not already human, cannot be re-humanized, then nothing is wrong with one's indefinite detention, such as that of animals in factory and fur farms, and in laboratory cages. Once more, by invoking the normative category of the human, Butler limits her theory to thinking about the lives of humans, and excludes animals from the sphere of the real. For shoppers as they buy their euphemized "beef" and "pork," the deaths of

animals do not occur "on the order of the event," to use Butler's words, and it is as if "None of this takes place." Our lives, as we have made them, are dependent on non-human animals in almost every way, and yet we do not give these animals faces. If we were to give them names, and recognized their faces, they would become real to us, the way our pets are, and then we could not do violence to them as we do. For instance, we are appalled when we hear about abused pets, and yet the same self-righteous people who are shocked by the abuse of a domesticated dog, will eat their steak without a thought.

According to Butler, the unmourned deaths around us gives rise to a "generalized melancholia" (37) which we disavow. She writes:

If I understand myself on the model of the human, and if the kinds of public grieving that are available to me make clear the norms by which the 'human' is constituted for me, then it would seem that I am as much constituted by those I do grieve for as by those whose deaths I disavow, whose nameless and faceless deaths form the melancholic background for my social world. (46)

As is clear, for Butler it is only the unmourned deaths of humans which can make us melancholy. The deaths of animals, it seems, are not real enough to be disavowed or derealized to begin with. And yet, should not the billions of unmourned deaths of animals brought about annually also give rise to a "generalized melancholia"? Something like this is claimed by Alice A. Kuzniar in her book, *Melancholia's Dog*. For Kuzniar, because we derealize the lives of animals, we cannot mourn their deaths. Those who do mourn animal deaths—such as pet owners—are ridiculed if this grief is too extravagant, or lasts too long, and thus our relationship to animals is one of melancholia, an inability to grieve because such grief is not socially permitted. If we were to permit the grieving of animals, we might have to acknowledge that their lives are real, and thus question the practices on which so much of our consumption depends.

While Kuzniar may be correct that melancholia characterizes our response to the death of pets, I am afraid that we neither mourn nor are we melancholy for the lives and deaths of

most animals, for derealization has been so successful that we simply do not perceive these deaths at all. I am also afraid that Butler is too optimistic when she claims that the deaths we do not mourn make us melancholy. As J. M. Coetzee writes of Germans and Poles in the Nazi era:

We like to think they were inwardly marked by the after-effects of that special form of ignorance. We like to think that in their nightmares the ones whose suffering they had refused to enter came back to haunt them. We like to think they woke up haggard in the mornings and died of gnawing cancers. But probably it was not so. The evidence points in the opposite direction: that we can do anything and get away with it; that there is no punishment. (*The Lives of Animals*, 50)

Butler would like to think that we are melancholy for the deaths in the Middle East which we derealize and fail to mourn, and I would like to agree with Kuzniar that we are melancholy over the deaths of animals. And yet I think that Coetzee is in fact correct, and people everywhere consume the deaths of non-human animals and sleep soundly. "Every day a fresh holocaust," Coetzee writes, and yet "our moral being is untouched. We do not feel tainted. We can do anything, it seems, and come away clean" (LA, 49–50).

Some people—animal activists everywhere—attempt to draw our attention to the reality of the lives and deaths of animals, to interrupt this sense of cleanliness, this absence of either mourning or melancholy. There are strategies, however, to not hear these voices, just as Butler describes the strategies used to not hear leftist critiques of American and Israeli violence in the Middle East. For instance, animal activists are frequently charged with not being concerned with human suffering in their (ridiculous) focus on animals. "How can you worry about animals when humans are suffering everywhere?" activists are asked. Those who speak up for animals are considered irresponsible toward humans, as if one were forced to choose between caring for humans or animals. In fact, however, if we ground our ethics and politics in a response to the corporeal vulnerability of bodies, as Butler suggests, we will care for all animals, includ-

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ing human animals, and this will be part of a single ethical responsiveness, rather than a choice between two irreconcilable causes. This point has been noted by classical arguments in defense of animals such as Peter Singer's, who claims that the struggle for animal rights is part of, and not opposed to, the struggle for the rights of women and blacks,<sup>15</sup> while even Immanuel Kant realized that sensitivity to animals is instrumental in, rather than opposed to, concern for human beings.<sup>16</sup> Despite these arguments, concern for animals is frequently dismissed as an unethical position, betraying a lack of sensitivity to human beings and to human suffering, which (so the speciesist assumption goes) must take priority. But, to take up Butler's words,

if we continue to discount the words that deliver that message to us, and if the media will not run those pictures, and if those lives remain unnameable and ungrievable, if they do not appear in their precariousness and their destruction, we will not be moved. We will not return to a sense of ethical outrage that is, distinctively, for an Other, in the name of an Other. We cannot, under contemporary conditions of representation, hear the agonized cry or be compelled or commanded by the face. (150)

In the following section, I will consider J. M. Coetzee's novel, *Disgrace*, as an attempt to name and to grieve the deaths of animals which are normally considered unnameable and ungrievable, and to allow the frailty, the cries, and the faces of non-human animals to address us.

#### *Disgrace*

In *Disgrace*, moments of human vulnerability are frequently described through analogies to animals. When the main character in the novel, David Lurie, a communications professor, has coercive sex with one of his students, she is described:

Slip[ping] under the quilted counterpane like a mole burrowing, and turns her back on him. Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nonetheless, undesired to the core. As though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck. (25)

Despite himself, his heart goes out to her. Poor little bird, he thinks, whom I have held against my breast! (32)

The vulnerable human body exposed to violation is described as a mole trying to hide, as a rabbit preparing to die, as a fragile bird. It seems that for Coetzee vulnerability makes humans feel like, and appear to other humans as, non-human animals, rather than bringing out their shared humanity. When exposed to the fragility of human bodies, to our own mortality, we say that we are sick like dogs, that we die like dogs, that, in the worst cases, we are slaughtered like sheep. Contra Butler, it would seem that vulnerability makes us animal, rather than specifically human. It is insofar as we are animal, embodied, that we are vulnerable. If this is so, following a Butlerian argument, the experience of vulnerability as animality should make us aware of our commonality with other animals, of this vulnerability which makes a "tenuous we" of animal-kind.<sup>17</sup>

While at this point in the novel, David Lurie only looks on more vulnerable human beings as animals, he is soon obliged to realize his own animal-like vulnerability as well. First, when his affair with the student is exposed, he is submitted to a humiliating investigation, which is highly publicized in the media, causing him to lose his job and to be shunned by former students, colleagues, and neighbors. He escapes to his daughter's farm, only to be attacked, set on fire, and locked in a bathroom by three men while his daughter is gang-raped and impregnated. Unable to save his daughter from the three rapists, he is also powerless to protect her as she is gradually dispossessed of her land and livelihood. Throughout the novel, David is also dealing with his aging body, with no longer being desirable to women, and later with being exposed to the gaze of curious others when disfigured by his burn injuries. Because of the burn wounds, he is left looking "odd, worse than odd, repulsive—one of those sorry creatures whom children gawk at in the street." (120) Shamed, aged, and mutilated, David is painfully aware that he is no longer wanted, that he is an undesired presence in women's beds, in the university, and, eventually, in his daughter's home.

As a result of this accumulation of humiliations and injuries, of unwantedness, David increasingly experiences himself as akin to non-human animals. After the harassment hearing he is surrounded by student reporters, who are described circling "around him like hunters who have cornered a strange beast and do not know how to finish it off" (56). Trying to explain to his daughter how he feels about having been punished and publicly disgraced over his affair with a student, he compares himself to a dog being beaten for acting upon his instinctual desires:

He tries again, more slowly. "When you were small, when we were still living in Kenilworth, the people next door had a dog, a golden retriever. I don't know whether you remember."

"Dimly."

"It was a male. Whenever there was a bitch in the vicinity it would get excited and unmanageable, and with Pavlovian regularity the owners would beat it. This went on until the poor dog didn't know what to do. At the smell of a bitch it would chase around the garden with its ears flat and its tail between its legs, whining, trying to hide." (89-90)

After the attack at his daughter's farm, David and his daughter make their identification with non-human animals explicit:

"How humiliating," [David] says, finally. "Such high hopes, and to end like this."

"Yes, I agree, it is humiliating [Lucy responds]. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity."

"Like a dog."

"Yes, like a dog." (205)

What is interesting about *Disgrace* is not just that human beings who are exposed to dispossession, humiliation, and loss feel like non-human animals. Something like this can be found in many works of literature, and, as noted, even in common language. What is interesting about *Disgrace* is that David responds to these experiences of vulnerability, violation, humiliation, loss, and mourning—of being reduced, and seeing his daughter reduced, to the kinds of existence to which we

routinely submit non-human animals—by becoming more empathetic to other animals. As literary theorist Alice A. Kuzniar writes, David "come[s] to recognize that even in its degradation and vulnerability, in fact precisely because of them, man [*sic*] shares a kinship with the animal" (MD, 167).

Interestingly, at the beginning of the novel, David's attitude towards animals and animal activists is dismissive. He tells his daughter:

"I just find it hard to whip up an interest in the subject. It's admirable, what you do, what she does, but to me animal-welfare people are a bit like Christians of a certain kind. Everyone is so cheerful and well-intentioned that after a while you itch to go off and do some raping and pillaging. Or to kick a cat." (73)

A bit later he says:

"As for animals, by all means let us be kind to them. But let us not lose perspective. We are of a different order of creation from the animals. Not higher, necessarily, just different. So if we are going to be kind, let it be out of simple generosity, not because we feel guilty or fear retribution." (74)

As his own experiences of violation, dispossession, and unwantedness accumulate throughout the novel, however, David finds his attitude changing, and he is increasingly empathetic towards animals who are also suffering. For instance, in an episode soon after the attack on the farm, David suddenly feels compassionate toward two sheep that a neighbor has bought and is keeping in his yard in order to slaughter on the weekend. The sheep are kept tied to a post on a bare patch of earth where they cannot graze or drink, and they bleat continually from thirst and hunger. Despite the neighbor's unwillingness, David moves them to a patch of grass by the water where they can drink and graze.

Initially, it seems that David only moves the sheep because the sound of their bleating irritated him, and yet he also begins to contemplate their fate. He thinks that they have been born to be slaughtered young. At first his response is: "Well, nothing remarkable in that. When did a sheep last die of old age? Sheep do not own themselves, do not own their lives. They exist to be used, every last ounce of them,



their flesh to be eaten, their bones to be crushed and fed to poultry" (123). Of course, David and his daughter have just experienced, however briefly, what it is like to not own themselves, to be used, to be violated by indifferent others. Perhaps consequently, David now finds himself unsettled by the plight of the two sheep, complaining to his daughter that one should not bring animals home to become acquainted with the people who will eat them. He admits that he would prefer his meat to be anonymous, to not have to think about it. He has grown uncomfortable with animal slaughter, suffering, exploitation, with the use of animals as mere means to human ends. He finds himself thinking about the fact that the sheep—now tied again to a post on the barren strip of earth—only have two days to live, and that this is a miserable way to spend the last two days of their lives. Increasingly, David puts himself in the sheeps' place. He deems the treatment of these sheep to be "indifference, hardheartedness" (125), and considers buying the animals from the neighbor in order to save their lives, but realizes that they will just be replaced by other sheep. David thinks that a bond has grown between himself and the sheep, however he notes that it is not a bond of affection. Although Coetzee does not specify what this non-affectionate bond might be, I would venture that it is one of empathy. In any case, Coetzee narrates, "suddenly and without reason, their lot has become important to him" (126). Because of this, David decides that he cannot go to the party for which the sheep will be slaughtered. He tells his daughter he has not changed his views on animals and yet he is "disturbed."

Significantly, David himself cannot explain his feelings for the sheep, noting that he "never imagined [he] would end up talking this way" (127). Butler writes that when we respond to others ethically, this

means to be awake to what is precarious in another life or, rather, the precariousness of life itself. This cannot be an awakening . . . to my own life, and then an extrapolation from an understanding of my own precariousness to an understanding of another's precarious life. It has to be an understanding of the precariousness of the Other. (PL, 134)

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Such an awakening seems to be what happens in *Disgrace*. It is not that David, rudely awoken to the fact of his own vulnerability, then deduces what it must be like for the sheep to be similarly restrained and harmed. Rather, as a result of what he has undergone, he finds himself pre-reflectively awakened to a direct sensitivity to the suffering of the sheep, despite himself. He claims that his intellectual position on animals has not changed, and so it seems that his new sensitivity to the sheep is not the result of a deductive thought process, but is rather a new ability to hear their address. David responds directly to the plight of the sheep, and later to that of unwanted dogs, without self-consciously comparing their sufferings to his own until the very end of the novel. Suffering, and dwelling with his loss, has simply made David more perceptive to the agonies of animals, to the injustice of human comportment towards other species.

This transformation in David continues when he starts helping at an animal shelter. Part of his work is to help euthanize the dogs, and then to dispose of their corpses. This role causes David to think of himself as "the dogman" and even as the "dog-undertaker," which he takes as a sign of his reduced position in life. As for the work of euthanizing dogs:

He had thought he would get used to it. But that is not what happens. The more killings he assists in, the more jittery he gets. One Sunday evening, driving home in Lucy's kombi, he actually has to stop at the roadside to recover himself. Tears flow down his face that he cannot stop; his hands shake.

He does not understand what is happening to him. Until now he had been more or less indifferent to animals. (142–43)

Now, however:

His whole being is gripped by what happens in the theatre [where the dogs are euthanized]. He is convinced the dogs know their time has come. Despite the silence and painlessness of the procedure, despite the good thoughts that Bev Shaw thinks and that he tries to think, despite the airtight bags in which they tie the newmade corpses, the dogs in the yard smell what is going on inside. They flatten their ears, they droop their tails, as if they too feel the disgrace of dy-

ing; locking their legs, they have to be pulled or pushed or carried over the threshold. On the table some snap wildly left and right, some whine plaintively; none will look straight at the needle in Bev's hand, which they somehow know is going to hurt them terribly.

Worst are those that sniff him and try to lick his hand. He has never liked being licked, and his first impulse is to pull away. Why pretend to be a chum when in fact one is a murderer? But then he relents. Why should a creature with the shadow of death upon it feel him flinch away as if its touch were abhorrent? So he lets them lick him, if they want to. (143)

David has used the term "disgrace" to describe his own humiliating departure from the university, the process of becoming old and unwanted, and the attack on the farm. Repeatedly disgraced himself, he now feels that the dogs also feel disgrace, the disgrace of dying, the disgrace of being so unwanted that one has to be killed, the disgrace of having one's life and body so out of one's own control that another can kill one. We also see that David empathizes with the dogs whose licks are revolting to him. David's own attempts at physical contact with other humans have been greeted with disgust, causing him to resort to the services of prostitutes and the rape of a student. He imagines these women disgusted by his body and by the sight of his passion. Perhaps as a result of feeling his own body unwanted, he experiences compassion for the dogs who wish to lick his hands, despite his revulsion, and so he lets them lick him before they die.

We also find in *Disgrace* a description and refutation of the assumption—which, it has been suggested, Butler holds—that animals do not mourn and thus are not mournable. David also holds this view in the beginning of the novel. When the two sheep to which he has become attached are slaughtered, he smells the stench of boiling offal, and wonders: "Should he mourn? Is it proper to mourn the death of beings who do not practice mourning among themselves? Looking into his heart, he can find only a vague sadness." David initially assumes that animals do not mourn among themselves, and, following a strange logic of reciprocation, he thinks that their lives may be consequently ungrievable. And yet this is immediately proven to be untrue, for he feels sad. He finds

that he mourns the sheep, and thus that their lives are mournable.

Other animals are also described as both mournable and mournful. For instance, of an abandoned dog, Lucy says: "Poor old Katy, she's in mourning. No one wants her, and she knows it" (78). After the attack on David and Lucy at the farm, this same dog—the sole to survive the massacre of the dogs carried out by the attackers—will again be described as mournful, "subdued and timorous" (113), "slow and sulky." David's response to this description of the mourning dog—he who is himself in mourning—is described as "A shadow of grief fall[ing] over him: for Katy, alone in her cage, for himself, for everyone" (79). He crawls into Katy's cage and falls asleep with her. In this passage, a dog, himself, "everyone" come to be equal objects of mourning. Both the dog and David mourn because they are no longer wanted, no longer desired now that they are old and unlovely. David's response shows that humans can mourn for animals, just as animals can mourn for themselves and for humans.

Euthanizing the dogs at the shelter, similarly, David realizes that these are grievable lives, lives that indeed must be grieved, given as proper an end as he can give them. While previously the corpses of euthanized dogs were simply dumped in bags at the hospital to be preyed on by carrion overnight and incinerated the next day by the incinerator crew, David quickly decides to keep the bodies overnight in order to protect them from carrion and to oversee their incineration himself. He does this upon witnessing the manner in which the incinerator crew disposes of the dogs, first smashing their bones in the bags with shovels for easier processing. David "is not prepared to inflict such dishonour upon them" (144), and so he waits until morning and disposes of the bodies himself, one by one, as the crew stands by. He does this "For his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing."

According to Kuzniar, David performs this task although he knows it is pointless: dogs do not care about honor, and dead dogs in particular do not care about honor. He disposes of the dogs' bodies himself "in a humility that is not born of self-chastisement or penance but out of

humble affiliation with the unwanted" (MD, 177). It is "an expression of sharing in the dogs' own abjection" (MD, 179). The experience of suffering and violation has made David empathetic with the dogs, and the sheep, which he nevertheless cannot save from a human society that requires that they die for our use or when we no longer have use for them. Impotent to save them just as he was impotent to save himself or his daughter, David nevertheless does the little he can, refraining from eating the mutton, accompanying the dogs to their deaths with compassion, and disposing of their bodies with the bit of dignity that he can grant them—the dignity of being mourned. Once David goes back to the city he thinks of the dogs who will now be euthanized and incinerated without being grieved, and incinerated without dignity. He knows that now the dogs will be "tossed into the fire, unmarked, unmourned. For that betrayal, will he ever be forgiven?" (178). Not so long ago he thought one could not mourn an animal since animals do not mourn their own lives, but by the end of the novel David thinks that to let dogs die without being mourned may well be unforgivable.

While David experiences his sudden empathy with animals with bewilderment, his daughter, Lucy, is more self-conscious of the manners in which experiences of loss—of being forced to live "like a dog"—can serve as moral "resources," to use Butler's term. Deprived of the privileges that humans usually ascribe to themselves but not to other animals, Coetzee's novel suggests that we can learn compassion for others who are even more dispossessed and vulnerable than we, and for non-human animals in particular.

However, while David and Lucy dwell with and learn from their experiences of suffering and loss, this cannot be said of all the characters in *Disgrace*. Other characters in the novel respond to having been treated like non-human animals by treating these other species of animals callously, as if attempting to re-establish a sense of invulnerability by exploiting the vulnerability of other creatures. Many humans in *Disgrace* make themselves feel powerful by harming powerless animals. For instance, while David becomes "the dog-man," it is in part because his daughter's black South African neighbor, Petrus, is rising in post-apar-

theid social status, and will no longer work for her at menial tasks such as being a white woman's "dog-man." During the novel, Petrus buys land, builds a house, has recently acquired a second wife, and is rapidly taking over Lucy's property as her life crumbles. Petrus is affiliated with the individuals who rape Lucy and set her father on fire, and shoot her dogs, and soon after this event he announces that he is no longer "the dog-man." This announcement has the double meaning that Petrus is now a landowner, with no need to work for the white woman, and that there is no longer a need for a dog-man since the dogs are dead. The former "dog-man" is triumphant following the pathetic deaths of the dogs. These canine deaths are just one more sign of his rising status. Petrus distances himself from non-human animals as he rises socially, feeling no compassion for the sheep he keeps tied to a post on ungrazable land and with no water, or for the dogs that are shot in their cages "like fish in a barrel." The deaths of these animals are ways in which Petrus celebrates his own post-apartheid power.

Petrus's acquaintances who carry out the actual shooting of the dogs, as well as the attack on David and his daughter, are also suggested to take pleasure in the gratuitous killing of the caged dogs because dogs in South Africa had long been trained to growl at the sight of black men. Having been exposed to vulnerability, violation, dispossession, and loss, these particular characters have not learned a greater empathy for other vulnerable creatures such as the dogs that they shoot, but shoot them as testimony of their social ascendancy, of their new invulnerability, much as they rape the white woman and attack the now powerless white man. On the other hand, the white man, who is plummeting socially throughout the novel, identifies more and more with animals, has more and more compassion for them, and becomes the dog-man, which the black man is no longer.<sup>18</sup> As Kuzniar writes, "degradation can often be projected onto the dog so as to disavow it in oneself. . . . As an antidote to such disavowal Coetzee suggests that the embodiment of shame in the other can serve as a point of identification and empathy, perhaps even for the expression of compassionate love" (MD, 179). Thus, we have in *Disgrace* both of the potential responses to aggression that But-

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ler describes: retaliatory violence, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, increased sensitivity to the suffering of others. Unlike in Butler's work, however, Coetzee powerfully invokes the ways in which both retaliatory violence and increased compassion for others, as potential responses to our own experiences of vulnerability, may go beyond the frame of the human and inform our comportment toward non-human animals.

### Conclusion

Following Coetzee's vision of vulnerable bodies—human and non-human animal bodies alike—I have argued that we should expand upon Butler's ethics and politics of corporeal vulnerability in order to respond to the suffering of other animals. Dwelling with our own vulnerability can and should make us empathetic towards the vulnerability of all bodies, and not only to human vulnerability, as it is seen to do in the case of Coetzee's character, David Lurie. Butler states that although vulnerability characterizes all bodily life, some bodies are more exposed to this violence than others. This is true of non-human animals,

whose vulnerability, to take up Butler's own words, is "highly exacerbated" because "violence [to them] is a way of life [for humans who eat animals and animal products, use products which were tested on animals, and wear animals skins and furs] and the means to secure self-defense are limited" (29). In the case of animals in factory farms and laboratory cages, the means to secure self-defense are in fact non-existent, so it falls to human beings to protect these animals. In other words, it is human beings who are ethically called upon by the cries of other animals, by the sight of their suffering bodies, even though these sights and sounds are kept from our ears and eyes by those who would derealize their lives and deaths. While this consideration of animals would seem like an obvious extension of Butler's ethics, Butler in fact limits her ethics to the human, as if "the sanctity of all lives" meant "human lives," or as if animals did not have real lives at all. I have argued that Coetzee's writings, on the other hand, bring the lives of animals back to life, re-realizing their lives, which, I would argue by way of conclusion, is an ethical task for us all.

### ENDNOTES

1. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004).
2. For some instances of this debate, see, for instance, John Llewelyn, "Am I obsessed with Bobby? (Humanism of the Other Animal)," in Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, eds., *Re-reading Levinas*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 234–46; Jacques Derrida, *L'animal que donc je suis* (Paris: Galilée, 2006).
3. Butler writes: "We cannot . . . will away this vulnerability. We must attend to it, even abide by it, as we begin to think about what politics might be implied by staying with the thought of corporeal vulnerability itself, a situation in which we can be vanquished or lose others. Is there something to be learned about the geopolitical distribution of corporeal vulnerability from our own brief and devastating exposure to this condition?" (*Precarious Life*, 29). And: "One insight that injury affords is that there are others out there on whom my life depends, people I do not know and may never know. This fundamental dependency on anonymous others is not a condition that I can will away. . . . To be injured means that one has the chance to reflect upon injury, to find out the mechanisms of its distribution, to find out who else suffers from permeable borders, unexpected violence, dispossession, and fear, and in what ways" (*ibid.*, xii).
4. Butler asks: "But is there another normative aspiration that we must also seek to articulate end to defend? Is there a way in which the place of the body, and the way in which it disposes us outside ourselves or sets us beside ourselves, opens up another kind of normative aspiration within the field of politics? The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well" (*ibid.*, 26). And a bit later, she adds: "Is there a way that we might struggle for autonomy in many spheres, yet also consider the demands that are imposed upon us by living in a world of beings who are, by definition, physically dependent on one another, physically vulnerable to one another? Is this not another way of imagining community, one in which we are alike only in having this condition separately and so having in common a condition that cannot be thought without difference? This way of imagining community affirms relationality not only

as a descriptive or historical fact of our formation, but also as an ongoing normative dimension of our social and political lives, one in which we are compelled to take stock of our interdependence. According to this latter view, it would become incumbent on us to consider the place of violence in any such relation, for violence is, always, an exploitation of that primary tie, that primary way in which we are, as bodies, outside ourselves and for on another" (ibid., 27).

5. Butler writes: "In a way, we all live with this particular vulnerability, a vulnerability to the other that is part of bodily life, a vulnerability to a sudden address from elsewhere that we cannot preempt. This vulnerability, however, becomes highly exacerbated under certain social and political conditions, especially those in which violence is a way of life and the means to secure self-defense are limited" (ibid., 29).
6. See for instance "Elephant Breakdown," *Nature* 433 (2005): 807, and "Elephants Never Forget Their Dead," *Telegraph* (26/10/2005): <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2005/10/26/ixhome.html>
7. "How Animals Pay Their Respects," *Telegraph* (26/10/2005): <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2005/10/26/neleph126.xml>
8. Jim Mason and Mary Finelli, "Brave New Farm?" in *In Defense of Animals: The Second Wave*, ed. Peter Singer (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 104–22.
9. See Martha Nussbaum, "Animal Grieving," in Chapter Two, "Humans and Other Animals: The Neo-Stoic View Revised," in *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 89–138. See also, J. L. Moreau, "Simulating Depression in Animals: Stress-induced Anhedonia as a Case Study," <http://www.pasteur.fr/applications/euroconf/depression/moreau.pdf>, and G. Koob, *Animal Models of Depression* (Birkhauser, 1989).
10. Alice A. Kuzniar, *Melancholia's Dog: Reflections on Our Animal Kinship* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006).
11. Gaverick Matheny, "Utilitarianism and Animals," in *In Defense of Animals: The Second Wave*, 13–25.
12. For a Levinasian discussion of the reasons for this removal of slaughterhouses from our sight, the avoidance of a face to face relation with the animals we eat, see Mick Smith's "The 'Ethical' Space of the Abattoir: On the (In)human(e) slaughter of Animals," *Human Ecology Forum* 9 (2002): 89–138.
13. In J. M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* (London: Profile Books, 2000), Elizabeth Costello prefers to call factory farms "production facilities," so distant are these modern versions of food production from our notion of a "farm."
14. PETA e-newsletter.
15. Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for our Treatment of Animals* (New York: New York Review/Random House, 1975).
16. Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. L. Infield (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 240.
17. As such, when we say that certain humans "went like sheep to the slaughter," this should not make us merely outraged for the sake of the humans who died in such a way, but for the sheep who are slaughtered this way all of the time and everywhere. In fact, however, this phrase tends to simply reinscribe a human-animal hierarchy, according to which it is inappropriate to treat humans in the ways that we (appropriately) treat other animals. In *The Lives of Animals*, Elizabeth Costello, also discusses the way expressions such as "went like sheep to the slaughter" and "died like animals" are used to describe the death of Jews during the Holocaust. In these cases, the evocation of the way we kill animals every day is meant to induce outrage that human beings should ever have been killed in a similar manner—but, what Costello, or Coetzee (and I) want to argue, is that we should at the same time take this moment of reflection on these horrors to consider with similar outrage the fact that non-human animals die this way every day in every country. These phrases should remind us that non-human animals die this way, and that if we think it is terrible for humans to die this way, it is also terrible for other animals. Instead, however, these phrases reinscribe the human-animal distinction with its implicit hierarchy, in such a way that violence to non-human animals is in fact reinforced and facilitated. Evoking violence to humans through an analogy to animals plays on an implicit disanalogy, an assumption that humans should not be treated like non-human animals, that their suffering, unlike our own, is permissible.
18. It is worth noting that in Coetzee's novel, the white characters use their experiences of vulnerability and suffering as ethical resources, as Butler would advise, while the black characters assuage their sense of vulnerability, their memories of exploitation and suffering, by doing violence to even more vulnerable others—the white woman and her unarmed father, the dogs and sheep. What we are to make of this racial division in ethical responses to violation in Coetzee's novel is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of the current essay.

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