

**READING IN THE ABORTION CLINIC:
MEANINGS OF THE BODY IN DERRIDA AND COETZEE**

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Abstract

This interdisciplinary thesis brings together a Derridean reading of J.M. Coetzee's 1999 novel *Disgrace* and my own clinical experience of working as a doctor, to examine how the fetal body and its destruction are experienced and conceptualised in the practice and discussion of abortion. In Derrida, ethics is frequently reframed as responsibility. This reframing makes ethics a matter of our ability to *respond* and of the interpretation of our *responses*. The ambiguity of these terms is exploited by Derrida to open up the field of ethics to concern any kind of response, including those made automatically by living beings. Consequently, Derrida sketches an account of ethics in which responsibility operates at the level of anatomy and physiology. Fetal life and its destruction both illuminates, and is illuminated by, this account of responsibility. Coetzee's novel further illuminates the networks of sexual response and responsibility in which abortion exists and is interpreted, and again bridges the domains of physiology and ethics.

Chapter One examines the 2010 report produced by The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, which concludes that fetuses are not capable of awareness, and specifically are not capable of pain. This conclusion informs both medical practice and political debate. However, I argue that while the report claims to restrict its remit and methodology to scientific evidence, it in fact provides no scientific answer to the question of fetal awareness, and I demonstrate how the report depends in various places on a circular reasoning that the report both acknowledges and ignores. I suggest that the RCOG report is best understood as an argument for a certain philosophical attitude towards the question of what meaningful subjectivity is and is not. This question is framed in the report by a distinction between *meaningful* and *meaningless* gestures or signs. To examine this distinction, I use Derrida's analysis of the Husserlian concept of the sign in *Speech and Phenomena* (1967), and Derrida's critique of a comparable distinction in Descartes, which Derrida analyses in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2002). I argue that rendering certain gestures meaningless derives from a deeply unsympathetic and Cartesian disposition towards the body, and to animality in general, including the kind of animality to which the RCOG report itself explicitly compares the fetus.

Chapter Two is concerned with Coetzee's *Disgrace*, and in particular the decision of Lucy Lurie to continue a pregnancy forced upon her by rape. I examine readings that frame this decision as an act of self-sacrifice, and which thereby tacitly frame the abortion Lucy does *not* have as a form of fetal or child sacrifice. I develop Andy Lamey's sacrificial reading of Lucy's decision in the volume *J.M. Coetzee and Ethics* (2010), in which Lamey draws on the work of René Girard, but I do so by using a more general account of abortion that is offered by the Girardian anti-abortion activist Bernadette Waterman Ward. I explore the implications of framing abortion as sacrificial, suggesting not that the term is inappropriate, but that sacrifice and abortion should be used to cultivate responsibility, rather than to determine the conditions of responsibility as Ward—and perhaps Coetzee and his readers—try to do.

Chapter Three is concerned with the hand as a figure for thought, which plays an important role in the reading of *Disgrace* offered by Cary Wolfe in the collection *Philosophy and Animal Life* (2008). I explore the figurative hand-of-thought that is presented by Wolfe, which derives from his reading of Heidegger, Stanley Cavell, and Derrida. I argue that if the hand is a figure for various peculiarly human responses such as thought, this thought must concern our responsibilities. While Heidegger uses the figure of the hand to bring thought into the body, Derrida uses it to bring responsibility into the body, and I give an example of my own bodily experience of responsibility to suggest that our most responsible responses breach the dualist distinctions examined in Chapter One. I conclude that we can meaningfully develop our discourse about abortion, the body, and responsibility, if instead of aspiring to normative ends we follow Derrida's example, and focus our attention on the space between the responses of the speaking 'I' and the responses of a body that exceeds what can be said.

Everything that I am about to entrust to you no doubt comes back to asking you to *respond* to me, you, to me, reply to me concerning what it is to *respond*. If you can. The said question of the said animal in its entirety comes down to knowing not whether the animal speaks but whether one can know what *respond* means. And how to distinguish a response from a reaction.

Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*

“I wouldn’t want someone doing it for me who didn’t mind. Would you?”

J.M. Coetzee, *Disgrace*

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Introduction

This thesis is, in large part, a Derridean reading of J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999).¹ Many of Coetzee's fictional works engage with their own status as literature, demonstrating a reflexivity and intertextuality that seems to be informed by and to build on the developments in literary theory that Jacques Derrida pioneered. David Attwell, in a biography of Coetzee that includes detailed reference to Coetzee's old notebooks and drafts, writes that Coetzee has often been 'in ideological sympathy' with Derrida and other post-structuralists,² and it is not surprising therefore that his works have been read alongside Derrida by various commentators.

One of the best-known Derrida-influenced readers of J.M. Coetzee is Derek Attridge. In *The Singularity of Literature* (2004), Attridge puts forward an argument for conceiving of literature as an 'event,' a form of reading which is not simply a hermeneutic exercise or the passive absorption of fictionalised authority, but a performative co-creation of meaning between author and reader, in which the reader is spurred on by the work to *respond* to it in new and *responsible*—that is, ethically sensitive—ways.³ The motivation for this thesis, preceding my familiarity with Attridge's argument and the work of Jacques Derrida by which he is influenced, can be traced back to just such a literary event: my reading of *Disgrace*, and in particular the various moments in that novel in which I experienced what Attridge terms, in his reading of the novel, 'a shudder of understanding'.⁴

Many of these moments occur in one particular strand of the plot concerning the novel's principal character and his relationship to animals. David Lurie loses his teaching position at a university after the exposure of his affair with a student, and having retreated to his daughter Lucy's farm he ends up assisting one of Lucy's friends, Bev Shaw, at the nearby 'Animal Welfare Clinic.' It is quickly made clear that the work of the clinic consists largely of putting-down unwanted animals, mostly dogs. David helps Bev as she administers one lethal injection after another, and eventually he volunteers to transport the corpses to the incinerator at the local hospital.

At first, David leaves the dead dogs for the hospital workmen to load onto the conveyer that carries the bodies into the furnace, but then he observes what happens. The stiffened corpses are not gently committed to the fire to liberate their souls from a failed and frustrated bodily existence; on the contrary, when the conveyor emerges from the incinerator, the dead dogs also emerge, their bodies merely mutilated by the flames, in a grotesque parade of failed disposal. In response to these

¹ J.M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (London: Vintage, 1999). Hereafter the page references to this volume appear in the text in brackets.

² David Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee and The Life of Writing: Face to Face with Time* (London: Penguin, 2016), 9.

³ Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), i.

⁴ Derek Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2004), 186.

uncooperative bodies, the workmen responsible for loading refuse into the incinerator use their shovels to smash the dogs into a more combustible shape, breaking the awkward legs so they can be worked upon properly by the fire. David intervenes and loads the dogs more respectfully into the incinerator.

Like Antigone, who in Sophocles's play refuses to leave her brother's corpse unburied on the battlefield, David's gesture is a refusal to permit the desecration of the dead.⁵ But David's experience of corpse desecration is also one of failed incineration, and this dimension of the scene appeared to me to stage a problem with which I was faced daily in my work as a provider of abortions: unwanted bodies cannot be disposed of in reality with the elegance of the perfect rhetorical incinerations that are possible in philosophical texts. Prior to reading *Disgrace*, I had spent some time reading contemporary philosophical arguments about abortion in the Western ethical tradition, especially in the fields of practical ethics and bioethics. I found that authors in this tradition consistently effected such a rhetorical incineration, refusing to speak meaningfully of the body and referring instead to concepts of consciousness, sentience, and autonomy, much as if such concepts were neither bodily in origin nor problematised by fetal life and its destruction. Such an emphasis, I felt, left invisible the bodies to which Coetzee by contrast directs his reader's attention.

In another scene that has been discussed by many commentators on the novel and which I will examine in this thesis, David Lurie is driving home from the clinic, and he is forced to stop his car when he is overwhelmed by tears and shaking (142-143). David endures, we might say, his own shudder of understanding. This response to the reality of his situation is then induced in the reader—or at least in Attridge and in myself—in our own response of a shuddering that is also somehow an understanding. For Attridge, as I will further explain, this scene is a powerful example of the kinds of *ethical* understanding the novel offers. This is because for Derrida, and hence for Attridge, the word *response* will always invoke responsibility, with all that word's ethical connotations. Coetzee asks us to question precisely how a response like David Lurie's relates to our understanding and experience of our responsibilities, and to our understanding of what is called ethics.

Derrida often uses Levinasian language when he speaks of responsibility, as responsibility always directed toward what or who is 'Other.' However, the precise relationship between responsibility and ethics in Derrida, and in this thesis, remains certain but unspecified. As I hope to demonstrate, this uncertainty is in fact a condition of responsibility for Derrida: responsibility is always yet-to-be-created. Consequently, the terms response and responsibility will, for the purposes of this thesis, serve

⁵ Dan Adelman has read *Disgrace* as 'an imaginative rearticulation' of Sophocles's *Antigone*, but he does not mention this particular resonance. 'No Suture: Rethinking Utopia Through J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, the Occupy Movement, and Idle No More.' in K. Beauchesne, A. Santos (eds.), *Performing Utopias in the Contemporary Americas*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

as each other's definition: the response is something concerning responsibility, and responsibility is something concerning our responses.

Such an account of ethics is very different to the accounts one finds in the most prominent forms of analytic philosophical ethics, including the subdisciplines of practical ethics and bioethics. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, Derrida's work has generally been scorned by that tradition. But Coetzee's fiction too can also be understood to be in polemical dialogue with the Western philosophical tradition of which practical ethics and bioethics are a part. Stephen Mulhall situates Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), which was written around the same time as *Disgrace* and bears many thematic resemblances to it, in 'the ancient quarrel' between literature and philosophy that was instigated by Plato, who for various reasons banished poets from the ideal republic. Mulhall writes: 'Plato fears what he sees as literature's capacity to engage and incite our emotions while bypassing our rational faculties. He distrusts its ability to construct simulacra of real persons and events, in whose purely imaginary vicissitudes we can effortlessly lose ourselves, thereby distracting ourselves from the genuinely real and the slow, hard struggle to comprehend what lies behind its often-misleading presentations of itself.'⁶

Mulhall points out the irony that to make this argument Plato often uses impressively persuasive rhetoric that looks rather poetical or literary in form, which suggests that the distinction between philosophy and literature might not be easily made. Correspondingly, the subject matter proper to each discipline cannot be easily determined. There does however seem to be something about literary writing that creates space for the body, a space that is closed by precisely the kinds of philosophical discourse in which matters of the body—abortion being one example—are typically addressed. But if ethics is taken to be a sub-discipline of philosophy, and Coetzee's *Disgrace* is taken to be an example of literary fiction, *Disgrace* cannot properly be called a work of philosophy in Plato's scheme, and there is a sense in which, however powerfully the body is presented in the novel, it loses some of its ethical force. In fact, no work of literary fiction will deserve the label of philosophy; only the argumentative form and deductive methodologies of a certain type of philosophy will be taken to be, properly speaking, philosophical, and hence ethical, in character. Coetzee is aware of this debate and the uncertain place of the body within it. In *Elizabeth Costello*, he problematises the place of reason and rationality in the ethical forces that work on our bodies. The title character rejects argument—or perhaps more precisely, rejects argument as the exclusive medium by which ethical forces can be disseminated—and instead she presents *herself*, in various states of moral confusion or crisis, to audiences of her academic colleagues and her family, bringing into question the limits of so-called rational responses to moral matters.

⁶ Stephen Mulhall, *The Wounded Animal: JM Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 2.

The moments of Coetzee's work that I am interested in here, such as David Lurie's gesture towards the dogs, can be understood as situating Coetzee's oeuvre and its bodies in a trajectory of anti-rationalism that William Barrett has identified with existentialism. In *Irrational Man* (1958), Barrett opposes to the Platonic tradition the work of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre, suggesting that the project of these and other existentialists is largely to restore to the collective Western consciousness a fullness of being which rational faculties have obscured. These rational faculties are but one part of our being; or more precisely still, not even a 'part' properly understood, for this faculty cannot be separated, except by the most abstract analysis, from any other dimension of our existence.

Part of this dialectic between the rational and the irrational is related by Barrett to a dialectic between Europe's Greek and Hebraic cultural foundations. Developing an idea elaborated by Matthew Arnold in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) (Arnold himself develops the idea from Heinrich Heine), Barrett suggests that these traditions offer fundamentally different ways of being in the world: 'The distinction, as Arnold so lucidly states it, arises from the difference between doing and knowing. The Hebrew is concerned with practice, the Greek with knowledge.'⁷ An emphasis on knowing will inevitably lose sight of what cannot be known, but only practiced or lived. As I will discuss in Chapter Two, these traditions are alluded to in various ways in *Disgrace*, and a related conversation takes place in *Elizabeth Costello*, when the title character debates with her missionary sister about the proper place of reason, and figures a certain Hellenistic tradition of living as being in tension with a Christian one.⁸

In the Greek philosophical tradition derived from Plato, the body is separated from the real world of ideal forms. For issues such as abortion, which are addressed predominantly in the field of applied ethics that derive from the conventions of that Greek philosophical tradition, this has important consequences. Alistair Campbell notes as much in *The Body in Bioethics* (2009), where he writes: 'In an influential part of the Western tradition stretching back to Plato [...] the body has been seen as the prison house or tomb of the soul or spirit—*soma sema* (the body is a tomb).'⁹ Campbell's claim is certainly true, and it is important to highlight the ways in which the body is forgotten or disparaged in contemporary ethics, as I try to do in this thesis. It is also important to note that it is not entirely clear whether the responsibility for that philosophical disposition towards the body lies primarily with Plato himself or with the tradition that follows after and interprets him.

⁷ William Barret, *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* (London, Melbourne, Toronto: Heinemann, 1958), 62.

⁸ Mulhall, *Wounded Animal*, 197-198. I will not consider the nuances of this debate here, concerning the particular Greek traditions that Coetzee and Mulhall parse.

⁹ Alistair V. Campbell, *The Body in Bioethics* (Abingdon: Routledge-Cavendish, 2009), 2-3.

A recent study by Coleen P. Zoller, entitled *Plato and the Body* (2019), details the rhetoric that many of Plato's readers have taken to indicate this disparaging attitude, but Zoller argues for a more nuanced reading. She writes: 'Many commentators have assumed that Plato is responsible for originating the view that loving wisdom is incongruous with being embodied. For instance, many feminists are critical of what they call Plato's "somatophobia" and take his dualistic worldview to be incompatible with feminism. And at the opposite end of the political spectrum, Strauss accuses Plato of ignoring the body, *eros*, and nature.'¹⁰ This received interpretation, Zoller argues, does not do justice to Plato's more subtle and embodied view.

However, Zoller acknowledges that there are good reasons why one might read Plato in this somatophobic manner, and she acknowledges too the persistent influence of such readings. 'Conceiving of the soul as what animates the material stuff of the body causes Plato to consider the soul a human being's true self. [...] Plato variously describes the relation between the soul and the body as a prisoner in a cage, a tomb, an oyster in its shell, a barnacle-covered sea-soaked creature, an orbit shaken by a commotion, a person dressed in a costume to be stripped off, and the victim of a bad influence, maimed by the association.' It is perhaps not unreasonable that a large number of influential readers of Plato, from the Neoplatonists to Nietzsche, have taken these figures to mean that Plato is ashamed of or despises the body and sees it in opposition to truth and beauty. For Zoller, however, the situation is more complex. She continues: 'Plato ranks [...] soul before flesh, but he does so *without* denigrating the human body or nature itself [...]. [Plato's] philosophical asceticism is a practice that is *not* predicated upon disdain for the body in particular'.¹¹ I will not examine further here whether Plato manages to privilege the soul without denigrating the body, but Zoller's argument concerns a matter of degree: it seems beyond dispute that in the philosophical tradition that derives from Plato, the body is always open to suspicion, its significance or meaningfulness subject to doubt.

Alistair Campbell develops his account of the body in bioethics by observing that in the modern era the body is even more powerfully divested of value by one of the Western tradition's other principal characters: this divestment, he writes, 'undoubtedly [...] stems from the revolution in thinking brought about by René Descartes.' The Cartesian sceptical method subjected everything to ontological doubt: the body was treated with the same suspicion as everything else Descartes thought was contingent or not logically necessary to his thinking soul, and he was left with only one certainty: *cogito ergo sum*. Descartes, Campbell writes, 'desacralised' the human body, and allowed scientific studies that were foundational to modern medicine.¹²

¹⁰ Coleen P. Zoller, *Plato and the Body: Reconsidering Socratic Asceticism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2019), 2.

¹¹ Zoller, *Plato*, 2-8.

¹² Campbell, *Body in Bioethics*, 2-3. Descartes is mentioned in *Disgrace*, in a remarkable line which draws together Cartesian mechanistic physiology and the details of Ancient Greek sacrificial practices that are alluded to in various places in the novel. David thinks that the gallbladder, which no-one will eat (and which is

The prodigious power of performance¹³ of the medical sciences derived from Cartesian physiology ensures that the dualist Cartesian metaphysics that underpins it continues to be woven into medical-scientific discourses. As Joanna Bourke explains, the Cartesian tradition in which the body is understood as just another piece of the physical world, like rocks, candles, and so forth, continues to be a powerful intellectual disposition in medicine.¹⁴ As I argue in Chapter One, it is so profoundly entrenched in that discipline and its texts that it can be difficult to recognise their peculiarly Cartesian disposition. Consequently, we may fail to track the effects these Cartesian interpretations have on the body as a material, anatomical, or physiological phenomenon.

Returning to Coetzee, we can see that the bodies of *Disgrace*, by contrast with the philosophical tradition I have faintly sketched, are forcefully present, in all their materiality and physiology. The materiality is painfully evident when the workmen at the incinerator ‘beat the bags with the backs of their shovels [...] to break the rigid limbs’ (145). Each of those /b/ sounds feels to me like the flat smack of the shovel on dried muscle and bone, the fourth of which (‘break’) comes after an interval in the alliteration that marks a kind of rest and summoning of strength before the final exhausted strike. This staging of a body confronting another body seemed to me to depict all the physical and psychological force and fatigue I had felt so often in my clinical work, blurring any distinction between style and ethics (and between the physical, the textual, and the psychological).

The physiological nature of our being is also ever-present in the sexual responses of the characters of *Disgrace*. The novel is very much dependent for certain of its ethical dimensions on the realist setting of post-Apartheid South Africa, and sexual elements of the plot obviously have a particular valence in that geographical and historical context. But the plot is driven forcefully along by various sexual and ethical responses, none of which are exclusive to South Africa. These problematic responses are, in David Lurie’s view at least, fundamental to our being. He wonders whether a dog that is beaten over the head whenever it becomes sexually aroused can be said to have a life worth living (90). These thoughts are echoed in the scene at the incinerator, and are as much about Lurie himself being chastised by the university committee that banishes him from the academy for his affair with his student Melanie. But the conflation between man and canine that recurs in the novel emphasises the animality and organicity in which these two beasts share: a physiological form with biological impulses that are profoundly ambivalent, both enriching and disgraceful.

Coetzee’s concern with the body here is not surprising, given his own comments on his novels. In an interview published in 1992, several years before he began working on *Disgrace*, Coetzee told

consequently the ‘burnt offering’ commended to the gods) is the last hiding place for the soul. ‘Descartes should have thought of that. The soul in the dark, bitter gall, hiding.’ 124.

¹³ ‘Prodigious power of performance’: this useful term is used frequently by Paul Feyerabend to explain the privileged position of scientific thinking in the Western world; Feyerabend himself takes it from Ernst Mach.

¹⁴ Joanna Bourke, *The Story of Pain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 12.

David Attwell: ‘If I look back over my own fiction, I see a simple (simple minded?) standard erected. That standard is the body. Whatever else, the body is not “that which is not,” and the proof that it *is* is the pain it feels. The body with its pain becomes ‘a counter to the endless trials of doubt.’¹⁵ While these comments predate *Disgrace*, they nevertheless seem to confirm that the powerful presence of the bodies in the novel is not merely the result of an over-reading on my part caused by my clinical work. ‘That which is not’ presumably refers here to the philosophical enterprise of ontology; that is, the determination of *what is* and *what is not*. *Disgrace* can be seen to stage a resistance to a philosophy in which the body is doubted, made insignificant or meaningless, in ontological or ethical terms, to the benefit of the soul, mind, cogito, or consciousness. The philosophical tradition of phenomenology, which Derrida critiques and builds on, stages its own challenge to a Neoplatonic and Cartesian tradition, by reminding us that we are embodied. But Coetzee reminds us of something simpler, or more simple minded: that we are bodies.

Such a concern with bodies is increasingly out of step with the most influential movements in the Western philosophical tradition, particularly in the field of bioethics that is deeply informed by that tradition and which holds considerably more sway over policy and practice than other branches of the humanities. It is now entirely legitimate and, in David Lurie’s terms, right-headed to speak of bodies as a biological resource, as Peter Singer argues in his well-known and widely taught undergraduate textbook *Practical Ethics* (1979).¹⁶ In branches of bioethics that seek to provide a less impoverished account that is more informed by the experiences of patients and medical practitioners, bodies are nevertheless rendered as ‘work objects,’ or in other terms taken from an ambiguous sociological vocabulary.¹⁷

Without denying the benefits that the Cartesian desacralisation of the body has afforded humans, it should be noted that some authors have tried to reverse the philosophical divestment that such a view, and the corresponding developments in medical science, have imposed on the body; or they at least bring to our attention that such advances are not without cost. Michael Rosen uses the notion of dignity, which he traces back to Kant, to articulate the value of the body per se, and to make this argument he gives the following example:

Accept please, at least for the sake of this argument if you do not do so already, that a fetus at some early stage (say, around week ten) is not yet a person and that, in some circumstances at least, abortion would be permissible. Now consider how that now-dead fetus should be

¹⁵ J.M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. David Attwell (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1992) 248.

¹⁶ Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 163-65.

¹⁷ Kathryn Ehrlich, Clare Williams, Bobbie Farsides, ‘The embryo as moral work object: PGD/IVF staff views and experiences.’ *Sociology of Health and Illness* 30, Vol. 5 (2008):772-787.

treated. May it be treated any old how? Thrown in a rubbish bin? Flushed down the toilet? My conviction is that it too must be treated with dignity. But why? It is not just that the fetus is not aware that it is being benefited by being treated with dignity; in this case (by assumption) there never was or will be a person to be benefited. And yet I still strongly believe that the dead fetus should be treated with dignity.¹⁸

Like the dead dogs of *Disgrace*, dead fetuses seem to demand a certain type of response. However, one can find examples of precisely the scenario Rosen describes. A 2013 report by the Care Quality Commission, the statutory body that inspects all medical services in the UK, found that one abortion clinic in Norwich had ‘multiple surgical termination products [...] left in a single open hazardous waste bin [...] for the whole day.’ And if this is remarkable, the terms of the subsequent condemnation are more so: ‘A container left open for several hours containing multiple products could be considered an infection risk and is not recognised as best practice.’¹⁹ The problem is not the treatment of the fetuses as such, but that established procedures for processing have not been followed.

While Rosen takes the concept of dignity seriously, he explains that other theorists do not: Schopenhauer, he notes, described it as ‘the shibboleth of all empty-headed moralists’, while more recently Stephen Pinker has called it ‘stupid [...] squishy and subjective, hardly up to the heavyweight moral demands assigned to it’. And the bioethicist Ruth Macklin argues that it is simply an inferior synonym for autonomy, which is precisely the concept that Kant believes is ‘the ground of the dignity of human nature’.²⁰ Connecting this to David Lurie’s treatment of the dead dogs, that scene in the novel can be read as asking not whether the notion of dignity stands up to scrutiny—for dogs or fetuses or anything else—but what it means to live in a world in which additional concepts like dignity must be invoked and defended to justify the response that Rosen articulates, and that David performs.

It is also interesting that for David Lurie at the incinerator the debate between two attitudes towards the dead dogs is staged not between David and the workmen—who do not stand in David’s way—but as a rather desultory internal dialogue in David himself. This indicates that the divestment I have sketched here is already internalised by those who, like David, feel there is something wrong with that divestment. But resistance to a principle one has internalised is perhaps futile. David can

¹⁸ Michael Rosen, *Dignity: Its History and Meaning* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2012), 134-135.

¹⁹ The CQC report is available at: https://www.cqc.org.uk/sites/default/files/new_reports/AAAG0115.pdf. Accessed May 2019.

²⁰ Rosen, *Dignity*, 120, 21. Dignity is also important in Ian Hacking’s reading of Coetzee’s *Disgrace* and *The Lives of Animals*. As I argue in chapter three, the application of this problematic philosophical concept to explain a gesture such as David’s does not adequately account for the novel’s ethical effects.

find no good explanation, nothing expressible in rational terms, to justify his gesture towards the dogs, at least not without reference to a religiosity that is notable by its absence. The incinerator has a numinous quality—'On the seventh day it rests'—but this profundity is made ghoulish and bathetic by the reappearance of the dogs, who are spat out by an afterlife whose nonexistence is thereby confirmed. And the reader is brought by the free indirect style into that surprising moment of psychological reversal on which the chapter ends, in which David's intervention to dispose of the bodies himself, which has seemed for several paragraphs to be a matter of enormous importance, is suddenly described as an absurdity: he is becoming, he thinks, 'stupid, daft, wrongheaded' (146). David is, in his moderated way, devastated by a world in which bodies are killed, crushed, beaten or otherwise destroyed because of vicissitudes to which those bodies are oblivious, and yet he fails to identify in that response of devastation anything of credible value. That David nevertheless refuses to let go of his seemingly futile and absurd ethical impulse is one of the novel's most powerful affirmations.

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It is against this background that I undertake here, in Chapter One, a Derridean reading of the report of a medical-scientific working party on 'Fetal Awareness,' produced by the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. This reports offers unambiguous and putatively scientific answers to the question of whether fetuses are capable of experiencing pain, but it does so in an ambiguous and non-scientific manner. Moreover, it makes powerful statements about the meaning of the fetal body, and consequently about bodies in general, which it never recognises. The flaws of such a report are important to understand because clinical guidance of this nature establishes standards of care, dictates what procedures patients undergo and in what manner, and it determines what clinicians may or may not say to patients. It will also wield influence over legislation and political debate. Because of the credibility given to reports associated with medical scientific methodology, recommendations therein have a credibility or significance that other texts do not.

I argue that while this report claims to use its analysis of scientific evidence to produce confident conclusions about the status of the fetus as incapable of pain, it is in fact better understood as the expression of the philosophical tradition I have outlined above; that is, a tradition in which the body *as a body* has been, and continues to be, removed from visibility and consideration. In making this argument, I problematise the status of impulses—non-conscious gestures—on which the report and its philosophical heritage depends, arguing that the distinction between involuntary fetal movements which the report calls *reflexes*, and which it opposes to some other more meaningful gesture, is not a scientifically determined fact; it is an interpretation, a kind of useful fiction, which is derived as much from the entrenched *methodologies* of physiological experimentation as from the results. I specifically locate these methodologies and the report itself within the Western philosophical tradition as an

example of Cartesianism, demonstrating that the report's implicit and explicit devaluation of the fetal body is really the more comprehensive devaluation of bodies-in-general championed by Descartes. In a related, Cartesian, way, the report depends critically on metaphorical invocations of animality, and on distinctions between physiology and psychology that regulate a question-begging concept of subjecthood, fetal or otherwise. To illustrate these problematic elements in the report, I use two critiques made by Derrida: that against Husserl's theory of signs in *Speech and Phenomena* (1967), and his critique of Cartesian anthropocentrism in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2006). This is supported by parts of a related analysis of animality put forward by a philosopher whose work is influenced by Derrida, Giorgio Agamben, in his book *The Open* (2002).

Embedded in the various dualisms that are fundamental to the report, I argue, is an outdated concept of the physiological reflex, and an insufficient and inconsistent account of communication as a purely semiolinguistic or representational phenomenon. The report uses the concept of communication in literal and figurative ways, and it tentatively attributes to pain an exclusively linguistic quality; but it is precisely in the distinction between literal and figurative uses of the term communication that the report both *attributes to* and *withholds from* the fetus and its parts a communicative capacity. It does so without considering that the distinction between the literal and figurative is impossible to determine in the case of communication, something Derrida points out in his essay 'Signature, Event, Context' (1972). In this way it is my intention to open up the field of what is called gesture, and what is called communication, and to thereby open up possibilities for meaning.²¹

Fundamentally, the report reiterates a philosophical disposition that is profoundly unsuited to its task. However, I try to argue that this philosophical disposition is not original to the report, but is better understood as the very nature of the political and historical context that led to the report's production. It is perhaps in the nature of a working party, I suggest—a working party being a particular kind of professional or expert 'body'—to be unable to respond adequately to such problematic stimuli as questions about the nature of fetal subjectivity and pain, and especially so in the context of abortion. The report is exemplary of the disposition towards the body that I have described, and against which I take Coetzee to be writing. So while I do not discuss *Disgrace* in the first chapter, the novel has nevertheless affected my thinking about the way the fetal body is presented in the working party report, and the way in which I respond to the abortions I provide in my clinical work. Importantly, of course, Coetzee's novel is not clinical guidance, and so the impulses it

²¹ My critique here is not unlike the suggestion made by Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello, in *The Lives of Animals* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), that the hen slaughtered by Albert Camus's grandmother can be said to 'speak.' See Mulhall's discussion of Coetzee, Costello, Camus, and the hen, in *The Wounded Animal*, 74-76. However, I try throughout to avoid positing speech as the arbiter of meaningfulness.

potentiates are, in my own psychic milieu, in a state of tension with the RCOG clinical guidance by which my practice is in fact dictated.

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Despite the seriousness of David's urge to intervene in the maltreatment of the dead dogs, David himself has nothing to say about it except to note its apparent wrongheadedness. Indeed, he tells no one about his actions: he doesn't seek the approval or the mockery of his daughter or Bev Shaw or anyone else. The only people who see him disposing of the dogs are the workmen, and we never learn their opinion of his behaviour. The viewer for whom David's gesture is performed—by Coetzee—is the reader.

Considered alongside the various references to ritual in the novel, and sacrificial ritual in particular (which I elaborate in Chapter Two), one can read David and Coetzee's gesture as demonstrative; or to use a term with more complex connotations, performative. What is it that David performs here? It is, I would suggest, a cathexis of the body. The word cathexis first appeared in English in the 1920s, when the translator James Strachey used it for the German word *Libidobesetzung* coined by Freud. It is now defined by the OED as 'the concentration of mental energy on one particular person, idea, or object (especially to an unhealthy degree).' I will set aside until later the parenthetical addendum concerning psychopathology, and argue at this point only that David's treatment of the dogs is a ritual cathexis, the ceremonial form of which is completed by the participation of the reader.

In *The Singularity of Literature*, Derek Attridge writes of literature's capacity to performatively stage moments which offer the reader an 'intense but distanced playing out of what might be the most intimate, the most strongly felt, constituents of our lives.'²² Attridge gives us a convincing account of the performative ritual of fiction as capable of producing ethical effects which are inaccessible to philosophical argumentation. In *Disgrace*, Coetzee offers us a ritual within a ritual: David's rather modest ceremonial disposal of the dogs is itself a fiction, and it therefore requires for its success not only our openness to the unnamed principles David is marking and enacting, but adherence to the conventions on which fictions depend. If David's gesture towards the dogs is, as he himself says, 'stupid, daft, wrongheaded,' then the ritual by which such a scene is written, published in a book, and read, is perhaps also brought into question as deserving of those adjectives. In this case, there is something peculiarly literary—in the broadest possible sense of that term—about David's urge to intervene, and anyone sympathetic to his behaviour must acknowledge this literary quality, but also how literature is also at stake in the ritual David performs.

Derrida is an important influence on both Coetzee and Attridge, and has in his own work developed a kind of overt performativity that invites us to attribute to any form of writing a ritual

²² Attridge, *Singularity*, 109.

dimension.²³ In an introduction to an anthology of essays on his work, Derrida gives what he calls an ‘oblique offering,’ a preface which is presented as a kind of scholarly ritual, problematising from the start the possibility that an academic essay, even one as apparently simple as an introduction to a collection of other essays, can escape what Derrida terms ‘ritual analysis.’ In this context, this term implies the possibility of analysing a scholarly essay in the way I have described for Coetzee’s fiction, as if that essay and the reading of it were themselves both a form of ritual. It is not fiction but writing and reading that are rituals, and scholarly writing is, Derrida gives us to understand, no exception.

‘Let us imagine a scholar,’ Derrida writes, ‘A specialist in ritual analysis, he seizes upon this work [the collection of essays on Derrida’s work], [...] he makes quite a thing of it, believing he can recognize in it the ritualized unfolding of a ceremony, or even a liturgy, and this becomes a theme, an object of analysis for him.’²⁴ Derrida’s framing both creates and anticipates the possibility of this ritualised ‘critical’ reading, and it invites us to speculate that all forms of writing, indeed all forms of human interaction, participate in principles that might be interpreted as ritual in nature. Participants carry out a carefully constructed performance, observers subject that performance to their own fixed procedures of analysis, and no clear distinction can be made between participant and observer, performance and critique.

Derrida here seems to be extending the concept of performative language developed by J.L. Austin, which Derrida considered in ‘Signature, Event, Context.’ For Derrida, literature is somehow especially attuned to this performativity such that it might have the capacity to take its own ceremonial nature seriously—in a way that other forms of writing do not, but perhaps should. All these possibilities for meaning go beyond, in their performance, what can be conveyed by the semiolinguistic description of the ceremonial gestures, as if one were not part of what one observes.²⁵

²³ In J.L. Austin’s original account of performative and constative language, *How To Do Things With Words* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), many of the examples of performatives are rituals or ceremonies, such as weddings and the launching of ships.

²⁴ Jacques Derrida, *On The Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit, trans. David Wood, John P. Leavey Jr, Ian Macleod (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 3. I have benefited from reading John D. Caputo’s discussion of this essay in his book *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997).

²⁵ Despite Derrida’s repeated engagement with the term ‘ritual,’ in a bibliographic survey of the theorization of rituals, published in 2007 (Jens Kreinath, Jan Snoek, Michael Stausberg. *Theorizing Rituals: Annotated Bibliography of Ritual Theory* [Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007], 195), I can find only three works listed, out of a total of 620, in which Derrida is mentioned. The third paper cited in the bibliography is an article by the anthropologist Roger M. Keesing, who anticipates Derrida’s 1991 ‘oblique offering’ by examining Derrida’s discussion of Austinian performativity in ‘Signature, Event, Context,’ first published in 1977, using Derrida’s analysis of performatives to frame a discussion of ritual as an anthropological concept. Keesing questions the distinction between ‘everyday life’ and ‘ritual’ that he finds in the anthropological tradition. Everyday life is,

In this thesis, I have tried to take methodological inspiration from David Lurie's and Coetzee's ceremonial gesture, and from Derrida's conviction that scholarly writing partakes of the ceremonial performativity that is more readily understood to be a quality of literature. This is partly because, in setting-out to write the thesis, I encountered my own difficulty in articulating—within the conventions of the philosophical tradition that informs the dominant modes of philosophical ethics—the value of preserving a certain response to bodies. My difficulty mirrors David's inability to articulate the value of his own private ritual at the hospital incinerator, where his gesture towards the dogs barely transforms the incineration into a cremation.²⁶ This inability is not just a failure on my or David's Lurie's part; it is, I think, a failure of language and reason, in which the responses of bodies to other bodies find no home in the vocabularies and forms that dominate philosophical argumentation. Lacking a rational justification that is transmissible by a transparent semiolinguistic system, responses such as David's are easily dismissed. Ironically then, the ethical force of these responses—their ethical significance or signification, one could also say—is invalidated by the very corporeal origin that makes them so powerful.

This power is displayed in *Disgrace*, a couple of pages before the scene at the incinerator, when David is driving home from the clinic, and is forced by a wave of feeling to pull his car over to the roadside. There he sits, trembling, with tears rolling down his face, 'gripped' by what happens in the surgical theatre (142-3). In an essay published in the recent volume *Beyond the Ancient Quarrel: Literature, Philosophy, and J.M. Coetzee* (2018), Attridge develops his notion of a 'shudder of understanding' and calls this moment an 'ethical conversion experience.'²⁷ This event of conversion, I would suggest, postulates that ethics is transmitted not—or not just—by philosophical argument, but by an illocutionary and metacommunicative force which partakes of physiology, psychology, and

like Austin's constatives are shown to be, 'characterized not by the absence of a frame [...] but by the implicitness and invisibility of the framing.' Everyday life is a ritual 'whose fictionality and scriptedness have become so internalized and implicit to have been effectively "forgotten"'. Keesing calls ritual a 'genre of communication' best understood as a form of 'play,' but a form of play that is 'scripted.' Like Derrida, he finds attempts to distinguish ritual from non-ritual 'unpersuasive': 'It should be possible to define ritual in formal communicational terms, I think; but at the same time, as the deconstruction serves to remind us, the message "This is ritual" needs to be placed within a more complex and developed theory of metacommunicative framing than the one I have sketched.' Roger M. Keesing (1991) 'Experiments In Thinking About Ritual,' *Canberra Anthropology* 14, No. 2 (1991): 70.

²⁶ This might be better expressed in the terms of Ancient Greek ritual, as transforming a *thysia* into a holocaust. See p.83.

²⁷ Derek Attridge. 'A Yes without a No' Philosophical Reason and the Ethics of Conversion in Coetzee's Fiction,' in *Beyond the Ancient Quarrel: Literature, Philosophy and J.M. Coetzee*, eds. Patrick Hayes and Jan Wilm (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

anatomy, but which is reducible to none of these categories. The body—not thought or reason—is the principal medium through which responsibility or ethics is experienced and disseminated.

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In Chapter Two, I discuss *Disgrace* directly, putting the materiality and physiology of bodies into the background while focusing on what I call ‘sacrificial’ readings of the novel. A crucial point of plot development in the novel is the pregnancy that results from Lucy Lurie’s rape, and Lucy’s refusal to have an abortion. I identify a collection of readings that present her refusal as self-sacrificing, and I point out that such readings inevitably frame the abortion she *does not* have as itself a form of sacrifice. This is a consequence of sacrificial readings which their authors do not acknowledge. One particular sacrificial reading of the novel, by Andy Lamey in the volume *J.M. Coetzee and Ethics* (2010), draws heavily on the French theorist of sacrifice René Girard. Girard’s work crosses the boundaries of theology, literary studies, ethics, sociology, and anthropology, and his theory of the origins and nature of sacrificial practices in human culture are exemplary of his approach. Girard’s interdisciplinarity has placed him somewhat on the margins of the fields of sociology and anthropology in which sacrifice has traditionally been studied, yet he offers a theory of sacrificial ritual that is ambitious in explanatory scope. Lamey argues convincingly with textual and biographical support for a reading of *Disgrace* as a Girardian allegory, noting various references in the novel to the concepts of sacrifice and scapegoating that are the dominant themes of Girard’s work, and also Coetzee’s engagement with Girard’s work in nonfiction essays.

Placed within this sacrificial scheme, I argue that the novel, in a manner that is subtle, ambiguous, but disturbing, alludes to a vocabulary of abortion politics which conflates its unwanted dogs and its unwanted humans—one of which is Lucy’s unwanted fetus—and I take seriously the idea, tacitly presented by sacrificial readings of the novel, that abortion might be meaningfully understood as a form of secular sacrifice. To do so I use the work of a Girardian literary scholar and antiabortion activist, Bernadette Ward, who has made precisely this argument, and has done so without any reference to Coetzee’s novel. Ward argues not only that abortion is a form of sacrifice, but that the ritual mechanisms by which it is justified are hidden by scripture-like laws and evasive philosophical arguments, designed to conceal the sinister and quasi-religious nature of the practice, exactly as Girard’s scheme describes. I examine the appearance of abortion in both Girard’s and Coetzee’s written work to determine if the views that are a consequence of sacrificial readings of abortion—both within and without *Disgrace*—can reasonably be attributed to Coetzee and Girard. I argue that Ward’s detailed Girardian reading of abortion as a social phenomenon in the United States is in fact quite unfaithful to Girard’s account of sacrifice; and I argue that Lamey’s Girardian reading of *Disgrace* reduces the novel to a bland allegory in which all the complexity of Lucy’s decision—and of many women’s decisions about pregnancy—is ignored. However, some of the responsibility for this reading

must lie with Coetzee, for there is little material in the novel with which to read Lucy Lurie differently.

Following Lucy Graham, I suggest that Derrida's account of sacrifice, principally in *The Gift of Death* (1992), is a more ethical theorisation with which to read the novel, and with which one can examine the valence of abortion-as-sacrifice without fixing the relevant network of responsibilities as Ward does. Derrida's place as a theorist of sacrifice is even more marginal than Girard's (and even more marginal than Derrida's place as a theorist of rituals in general), and his work does not appear in any anthologies on the topic of sacrifice. Yet the term 'sacrifice' appears in many of his works and is absolutely central to his discussions of responsibility, which are effectively his mediations on what ethics is or might be. Derrida's sacrificial responsibility remains ambiguous, but this ambiguity is also an openness to new interpretations of ethics and what form ethical gestures might take. Just as this openness is essential to Derrida's exploration of ethics, I argue that Coetzee's novel in fact withholds the kinds of foreclosures that some of its sacrificial readers impose on it.

In the third chapter, I attempt to bring together the anatomical and physiological analyses of Chapter One and Coetzee's *Disgrace*. I develop a detail of Cary Wolfe's reading of Coetzee's novel in the collection *Philosophy and Animal Life* (2008). Wolfe's reading is a kind of reinterpretation of what is by now a rather well-known essay on Coetzee by Cora Diamond, which is concerned with the problematic relationship of philosophy to reality. Focusing on Coetzee's character Elizabeth Costello, Diamond suggests that philosophy, by its nature, imposes on itself a kind of distance between the world and the flesh-and-blood forms that we as human beings take: there is a rupture between our thought and our reality that is somehow both frustrating and curiously constitutive of humanity and human responses. Wolfe relates this distance to a figure used by Heidegger: the human hand. The hand for Heidegger is a meaningful metaphor for human thinking, but the nature of this meaning is not obvious. If we think of thinking as grasping, or failing to grasp, ideas, we are not really thinking, Heidegger says. The grasp is only one gesture of which the human hand-of-thought is capable; it is but one way that it can be in the world. Wolfe draws on developments of this figure by Derrida, and also by Stanley Cavell in his own readings of Heidegger and Emerson, and Wolfe relates this line of thought to the events of *Disgrace* and Coetzee's contemporaneous book *The Lives of Animals* (1999). Inspired by Wolfe, I extend his reading of *Disgrace* further, as it is concerned with the Heideggerian-Derridean hand, arguing that the novel in fact stages the hand as a particularly important site of the experience of responsibility—of sacrificial responsibility—that I describe in Chapter Two. The ethical force of the novel is conveyed by hand, so to speak, in a gesture of communication that exceeds the limits of a semiolinguistic system, and which again grounds responsibility and ethics in the body. This is precisely the gesturing and physiological body which I argue in Chapter One has been lost in the prevailing modes of medical, scientific, and philosophical discourse, of which the RCOG working party report is one example.

Despite my ongoing clinical work as a provider of abortions, the reader will, I think, detect my dissatisfaction with many of the political and philosophical arguments that are put forward to defend women's access to that procedure. In a sense, the thesis is a kind of testimony to that dissatisfaction, an expression of what Bev Shaw describes, in one of the epigraphs to my thesis, as 'minding.' I mind performing abortions; but I mind to a greater degree the way many commentators write about abortion, as if it were something that one should not mind doing, or as if any such minding were not of ethical significance. And minding here could be read in many ways: objecting, remembering, and caring-for are three possibilities. What is so affecting about Bev Shaw's comment is that she seems simultaneously to object to her work, to remember it, and to care for the ill-fated dogs in her clinic, while continuing unwaveringly. I found it too difficult to articulate such a minding within the bounds of analytic philosophy. Literature, or literary criticism, maintains a space for a form of writing about the body that conventional forms of philosophical ethics (and bioethics in particular) quite deliberately close.

Within such a space, or close to it, a kind of minding appears in Cavell's essay in *Philosophy and Animal Life*, and, moreover, at a moment when he perhaps rather offhandedly mentions abortion. Cavell is discussing Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals*, and the infamous moment in that book when Coetzee's character Elizabeth Costello compares the meat industry to the Nazi holocaust. Cavell states (somewhat apologetically) that he himself eats meat. However, while he acknowledges the views of those who oppose the slaughter of animals for food, he contends that such people must acknowledge that the consumption of meat can be understood to enhance human life through the 'common pleasures of sharing nourishment, [and the] rare pleasures of consuming exquisite delicacies.' In contrast, he says, 'it seems safe to say that no one of balanced mind thinks it an enhancement of human pleasures to perform [...] abortions.'²⁸ In a strangely unreflective gesture, Cavell expresses this objection to abortion without pausing to question it, or indeed to consider that it might be precisely incorrect.

The more credible conclusion is that someone of sound mind might indeed think of abortions as facilitating and enhancing human pleasure. Setting aside for a moment the enhancements abortion might offer to women, abortions allow a great many men to have sex without committing to one of its most significant consequences. If David Lurie's sexual encounters have 'enriched' his life, as he suggests more than once in *Disgrace*, abortion has contributed to that enrichment. It is, after all, left to Bev Shaw, from whom David learns a great deal, to introduce contraception to the novel, when she passes him a condom during their first rendezvous at the clinic. David's student Melanie was not able

²⁸ Stanley Cavell, 'Companionable Thinking,' in *Philosophy and Animal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008) 94. In addition to abortion, Cavell offers the examples of executions and torture.

to make such a suggestion, and despite his preoccupation with sex, David never mentions contraception. The only form of fecundity control he mentions is abortion.

Feminist commentators on abortion, such as Andrea Dworkin, Catherine Mackinnon, and Rosalind Petchesky, have written about the idea that abortion facilitates heterosexual male irresponsibility. Bearing Cavell's comments in mind, it seems probable that if abortion were to be made illegal in a country where it is currently accessible, like the UK, such a prohibition would alter the consequences of sex, and would inevitably alter the dynamics of human pleasure. Heterosexual men might take more responsibility for the consequences of sex, or they might be judged more harshly for failing to take on the burden of this responsibility. But there is also evidence that such laws change nothing of this responsibility. There are high rates of heterosexual sex and unintended pregnancy in countries where abortion has been or is illegal, indicating that the burden of such a prohibition, and the corresponding increase in responsibility, would be borne by women. This observation is certainly not an argument for prohibition, but an invitation to question why that rethinking of responsibility cannot take place in the absence of such a prohibition, and to ask what it is about abortion discourse that undermines such a 'responsibilization,' as Derrida might call it. I want to indicate, without exploring it in this thesis, the possibility that such a rethinking is made to seem unnecessary, at least partly, because of the way fetal life is divested of meaning in the dominant philosophical tradition I have described.

Alongside the accounts one finds in this philosophical tradition, there must also be an effect of understanding male heterosexual desire a biological force, or misogynistic entitlement, that is so enriching (David Lurie) or enhancing of human pleasure (Cavell) that it deserves special status as the kind of profound affliction that David Lurie takes it to be. Is sexuality something for which men should be forgiven, or even permitted to ask forgiveness for? When David prostrates himself before Melanie's mother and sister (173), perhaps they should chase him out of the house in disgust. Such a gesture, taken in the context of public debates in which women are often framed as entirely responsible for their abortions as autonomous individuals, re-enforces a view of men as non-responsible—rather than irresponsible—victims of their sexual drives.

Consequently, while I find in Cavell's objections to abortion to be something not unlike Bev Shaw's minding, his rhetoric belies an uncharacteristic lack of sensitivity to the subject matter, a distance from it. Bev Shaw is, by contrast, in close contact with the animals found in her clinic. I should also add that Cavell is rather wrong in another and surely more important way in his casual reference to abortion as a defence of his meat-eating: safe abortions enrich or enhance the lives of countless women, giving them control over their future, helping them avoid the risks of childbirth, sparing them the disease, death and other vicissitudes that pregnancy and motherhood can represent.

In *The Claim of Reason* (1979), Cavell writes: 'Voluntary abortion is less bad than its criminalization is; but it is not therefore all right. The more terrible one takes it to be, the more terrible one should take its indictment of society to be. It is a mark of social failure, not unlike the existence of

prisons.²⁹ Cavell expresses the idea that abortion is in some sense deeply unsatisfactory, but suggests that, with a heavy heart, one should nevertheless support its availability. Given that these comments were written during a period of time in the United States in which abortion was being violently debated, I admire his honesty and decorousness. But it is troubling how the abortionist in this account is brought close to the jailer; and secondly, how much this seems like a very eloquent expression of the unsatisfactory platitude that abortion is a ‘necessary evil,’ in a way that he does not apply to the eating of meat. Such an account narrows rather than expands the possibilities of reading abortion as a moment that illuminates responsibility. For this reason, while Cavell’s notion of failure resonates with some of my thinking about abortion, Bev Shaw’s simple expression of minding, in all its ambiguity, resonates more deeply with my own experience of providing it. So too, however, does the kind of crisis that David Lurie endures, as he moves towards the kind of composure Bev demonstrates, but which he can only reach by acknowledging in full his own particular responsibility in the sacrificial landscape.

This minding is, in Coetzee, a kind of crisis. In an interview conducted in Spain in 2018, Coetzee was asked if he thought philosophical and political questions could be addressed adequately in fiction. He replied by saying that on such matters he was generally in concord with the response of his character Elizabeth Costello, which he described in this way: ‘Not rational analysis of what one might call a problem or a question, for instance the question of how one should respond to industrial farming, but sympathetic exploration of what it is like to undergo a crisis in facing such a problem.’ In the example of Elizabeth Costello, Coetzee continues, her response to the killing of animals for meat is experienced by her, on occasion, as so extreme that she wonders if she is placing herself outside the normal range of the human community in what might simply be her apparent lack of robustness. Indeed, there seems to be no promise for Costello of a resolution to her crisis, even a resolution of the moderated type that David Lurie achieves. But this uncertain outcome is, I think, part of the profundity of such a crisis: it is the realisation that one is operating close to, or beyond, the fringes of one’s community, either in one’s actions or in one’s responses to those actions; and it is the simultaneous fear that neither the community at large, nor any of its sub-groups, will ever be a reliable guide as to how one should live. Consequently, there is always the possibility that the crisis might in fact be a permanent state of being.³⁰

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²⁹ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 374-75.

³⁰ The interview is available on YouTube: ‘J. M. Coetzee: las literaturas del sur.’ The exchanges I have quoted take place 30 minutes into the video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DW1QRdJ9rDg>. Accessed May 2019.

The idea that abortion illuminates responsibility appears in another book that draws on personal experience, Derrida, and discussions of abortion: Karen Houle's *Responsibility, Complexity and Abortion: Toward a New Image of Ethical Thought* (2014). Reflecting on her own experiences of abortion, Houle draws on Derrida, but also on many other theorists and arguments from the literary, continental, and critical theory tradition, including Deleuze, Foucault, Levinas, Nietzsche, and discourse theory. The book is a kind of autoethnography,³¹ not only because Houle is herself a professor of philosophy who teaches classes on these theorists, but because Houle discusses her abortions in relation to those theorists and her teaching of them. For Houle, unwanted pregnancy should be thought of not as a matter to be settled by appeal to abstract principles, but with the recognition that abortion is a 'moment that, undertaken in a certain spirit, [...] releases an event of responsibility.'³² Because abortion 'is, or is very widely taken to be, a unique and potent moral phenomenon,' it is also a useful example of how ethics in general can be reconsidered with the emphasis shifted from normativity to articulations of responsibility. Her overarching argument is encapsulated well by the book's closing sentence: 'If we can investigate, study, examine, inhabit, listen to, read, experience, and think abortion as other than an object to be annihilated from our individual and collective lives, then we (who are chiasmatically entwined with our bodies and their dramas of fertility and mortality) might also be able to participate more and more actively in the production of worthy selves—selves deserving of this event that keeps coming at us.'³³ Rather than examine Houle's book directly here, I have instead taken inspiration from the way in which she addresses abortion by intertwining her own life with the work of Derrida and others.

Other recent work on abortion and literature that is broadly speaking relevant to my project include Karen Weingarten's *Abortion in the American Imagination: Before Life and Choice, 1880-1940* (2014), in which Weingarten reads a variety of early twentieth century texts, including literary fiction and journalism, to show how abortion became a biopolitical issue in the United States. She draws on the political dimensions of the concept of life in the work of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, who invites many interpretive possibilities regarding *fetal* life, a few of which I consider later in the thesis.

A more influential reference for this thesis is Barbara Johnson's 'Apostrophe, Animation, Abortion,' in which Johnson, who was a translator of Derrida's work, analyses the effects of the

³¹ One of the early methodological approaches I considered was autoethnography. In hindsight I can see that such an approach did not suit me because it takes from post-structuralism a kind of model—a structure—for self-reflective research, which is both contrary to the spirit of Derrida's work, and which places the literary dimensions of deconstruction in a kind of theoretical frame. The theories used may be literary in orientation (such as Derrida) but the fundamental form of autoethnography is taken from the social sciences.

³² Karen Houle, *Responsibility, Complexity, and Abortion: Toward a New Image of Ethical Thought* (Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2014), 194.

³³ Houle, *Responsibility*, 232.

figure of apostrophe in lyric poetry.³⁴ She shows how certain poetry about abortion that employs this figure proposes that the fetus can, in some sense, be addressed (although whether it is capable of receiving that address is a different matter). Judith Butler, in a helpful reading of Johnson's essay, suggests that Johnson is bringing to our attention that the question of whether a fetus should be addressed, and can or cannot receive our various forms of address, shows us that the fetus is 'animated within some discourses and de-animated within others.'³⁵ This question of whether the fetus is capable of receiving and responding is at the heart of much political debate, and so political debate, Johnson argues, should be subjected to the analyses of rhetoric. Metaphysical determinations and normative conclusions, and the politics to which they are related, can depend on figures of speech. I try to use Johnson's account to show how the questions she raises are complicated further by the ambiguity of the concepts of communication and response in more general terms. I develop this ambiguity by using the distinction between two types of gesture or sign that recur in various of the texts I discuss here. Butler's account of discursive animation or de-animation, I think, does not capture what Johnson intimates, and what I try to show here: that the fetus and the body are made significant or signifiatory in some discourses, and insignificant in others.

By putting pressure on a purely semiolinguistic account of signification and communication in the distinction between, for example, the concept of reaction versus response employed by the RCOG working party report, my thesis invests the body with different possibilities of interpretation. This is a gesture of cathexis which parallels David Lurie's gesture towards the dogs. The parenthetical addition to the definition of cathexis in the OED, which I mentioned earlier, indicates that cathexis may be thought of as a form of psychopathology; but etymologically the word is derived from the Greek *kathexis*, which means 'retention'. Retention seems to me another synonym for Bev Shaw's minding. David Lurie's cathexis might indeed indicate a form of psychopathology, perhaps one that originates with a sense of guilt or unbearable responsibility that the events of the novel bring to his consciousness; and the classification of his behaviour as dysfunctional would be convenient for the instrumental rationality which his gesture seems crafted to stand against. Such a diagnosis might be correct according to prevailing philosophical paradigms, but what I have tried to argue here is that such paradigms are neither correct nor incorrect, but particular interpretations. No single interpretation can determine for everyone the borders between the body and the subject, philosophy and literature, or physiology and ethics. Gestures of disciplinary, biographical, and biological division only widen the distance between language and the body, producing accounts of ethics that are

³⁴ Barbara Johnson, 'Apostrophe, Animation, Abortion,' in Melissa Feuerstein, Bill Johnson González, Lili Porten, Keja Valens (eds.), *The Barbara Johnson Reader* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 217-34.

³⁵ Judith Butler, 'Personhood and Other Objects: The Figural Dispute with Philosophy.' In *Barbara Johnson Reader*, xxii.

irreconcilable with the human forms that the experience of responsibility takes. Derrida tries, in various places throughout his oeuvre, to close this distance. However, if such divisions can or should be made, David Lurie's gesture towards the dogs, and my fixation on it, may represent nothing more than his and my failure to accept what is variously called Platonism, Cartesianism, or progress.

Chapter One
The RCOG Working Party Report on Fetal Awareness

We would have to say in the end that the spoken word, whatever dignity or originality we still accorded it, is but a form of gesture.

Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*³⁶

I think, and I have often thought I must underscore this, that the manner, lateral or central, in which a thinker or scientist spoke of the said “animalness” constituted a decisive symptom concerning the essential axiomatic of the given discourse.

Jacques Derrida, *Geschlecht II*³⁷

From Fetal Gestures to Fetal Awareness

In the first of a collection of essays entitled *Gestures* (2014), the Czech philosopher Vilém Flusser tries to define the word gesture, starting with the idea that it refers to ‘movements of the body,’ or of ‘tools attached to the body.’ But, he continues, ‘neither the contraction of the pupil, for example, nor intestinal peristalsis is an instance of what is meant by gesture, even though both are movements of the body.’³⁸ Flusser considers if a gesture might best be thought of as a movement of the body, but one that is the consequence of some associated consciousness, or what he refers to by the phenomenological term ‘intentionality’; but he sets this aside, because intentionality is, he says, an ‘unstable concept,’ determined by problematic notions of ‘subjectivity and of freedom.’ Consciousness and intentionality will complicate rather than clarify the meaning of the word gesture. Furthermore, he writes, an associated consciousness or intentionality is only one cause of gestures among many, and it is not causes he is seeking but a definition. He writes: ‘If I raise my arm, and someone tells me that the movement is the result of physical, physiological, psychological, social,

³⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison and Newton Garver (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 50.

³⁷ Jacques Derrida, ‘Geschlecht II: Heidegger’s Hand,’ in *Deconstruction and Philosophy: The Texts of Jacques Derrida*, ed. John Sallis (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 173.

³⁸ Vilém Flusser, *Gestures*, trans. Nancy Ann Roth (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 1.

economic, cultural, and whatever other causes, I would accept his explanation. But I would not be satisfied with it.’ With this in mind, Flusser offers the following definition instead: ‘a gesture is a movement of the body or of a tool connected to the body for which there is no satisfactory casual explanation,” and he adds that ‘I define satisfactory as that point in a discourse after which any further discussion is superfluous.’³⁹

Flusser continues by stating that ‘The discourse of gestures cannot end with causal explanations, because such explanations do not account for the specificity of gestures’. This specificity requires that a gesture must not only be explained but ‘properly interpreted’. ‘We need,’ Flusser suggests, not just a theory of gestures but ‘a theory of the interpretation of gestures.’ What this seems to mean, but which Flusser does not explicitly say, is that explanations are one possible response to gestures, or rather, one possible interpretation of gestures. Indeed, Flusser then suggests that scientific responses to gestures are often concerned primarily with a kind of causal explanation, while the responses one finds among the disciplines of the humanities are concerned primarily with interpretation.

At this point, it is important to note, Flusser also begins to relate gesture to affect, with a shift of emphasis from gesture per se to gesture as the manifestation of something like the intentionality he wanted to avoid, but which he refers to now with the more ambiguous German term (the work was originally written in German) *stimmung*, which translates roughly as ‘state of mind’. This shift departs from my interest here, for reasons that will hopefully become evident; but what Flusser has already done in the opening paragraphs of his essay is direct his reader to the interpretative dimension of our responses to gestures. Causal scientific explanations of gestures, which depend on the determination of certain empirical facts, do not necessarily bring us to a point in discourse at which any further discussion will be superfluous: to repeat my development of Flusser’s scheme, explanation is a species of interpretation, but other interpretations are available and may, I will tentatively suggest, be more meaningful.

Flusser does not comment on fetal gestures, but the gestated human is, from almost its very beginning, a gesturing one. A seven week-old embryo will move its head (or the area that might become a head) if the mouth (or the area that might become a mouth) is touched with a microscopic instrument.⁴⁰ By the eleventh week of gestation, the hands will respond to stroking, ‘practicing’ as one text has it, ‘the movements involved in the “palmar grasp reflex” (in which the fingers clasp down on the palm and alternately release).’⁴¹ From approximately 17 weeks, a fetus will make gestures of a

³⁹ Flusser, *Gestures*, 2.

⁴⁰ Stuart Derbyshire, ‘Fetal Pain: Do We Know Enough To Do The Right Thing?’ *Reproductive Health Matters* 16 (2008): 119.

⁴¹ Andrew J. Bremner and Dorothy Cowie, ‘Developmental Origins of the Hand in the Mind,’ *The Hand, An Organ of the Mind: What the Manual Tells the Mental*, ed. Zdravko Radman (Cambridge, USA and London: The MIT Press, 2013), 32.

specific nature in response to injury: it will withdraw its hand, flinch, and recoil; and it will release hormones like adrenaline and cortisol, physiological phenomena which represent or constitute the response of an organism to the loss of bodily integrity. This is, of course, precisely the kind of physiology that Flusser removes from the field of gesture at the outset of his discussion; but it is important to note that he does so without the kind of careful argument that otherwise characterises his essay, and in doing so, he imposes his own unexamined interpretation of such physiological phenomena, assuming that that any further discussion—beyond, I assume he means to imply, the biological sciences—of the contraction of the pupil, intestinal peristalsis, or indeed fetal grasping, would be, in his words, superfluous.

These fetal gestures are of course made in response to other gestures; for example, gestures made with the purpose of ending the life of the fetus, of destroying it and removing it from the pregnant woman's body; or there are gestures which are made to maintain the health of the fetus, as with some in utero surgical procedures or fetal therapies. There are other movements of the body related to those made by the fetus, which, if we attend to them, invite various interpretations. My concern in this chapter is first of all to indicate that the possibilities for the interpretation of all these gestures, fetal, destructive, or therapeutic, has been closed down by the publication of certain influential documents which offer a narrow and explanatory interpretation as the only response to the fetal response. I want not so much to refute any explanatory argument—although I will show the flaws in one particular argument—but to expose how such an interpretation is the expression of a certain disposition, which, I will go on to argue, is an unsuitable one to adopt when considering matters of pregnancy, fetal life, and the destruction of fetal life in abortion.

The existence of the fetal gestures of flinching and so on, sometimes made in response to deliberate efforts to harm the fetus, is not controversial. They are visible on conventional ultrasound, and the release of hormones by the fetus was identified in a 1994 study published in the *Lancet*,⁴² in which fetuses were found to secrete cortisol in response to sampling of their blood in utero. These findings provoked enough controversy that in 1997 Parliament asked the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG) to respond these fetal gestures. But what I want to show here is that a specific interpretation of these fetal physiological phenomena has been instituted by the RCOG response or the events leading up to it, because these phenomena are now responded to exclusively with reference to the question of whether these gestures indicate that fetuses experience pain. I want to make this interpretation, which dominates medical discourse of fetal gestures, appear more controversial.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, much of the report produced by the RCOG's working party also addresses concerns about the meaning of fetal gestures in the context of abortion, when these gestures are

⁴² X. Giannakouloupolous, V Glover, W. Sepulveda, P Kourtis, N.M. Fisk, 'Fetal Plasma Cortisol and B-Endorphin Response to Intrauterine Needling,' *Lancet* 344 (1994):77-81.

produced without any underlying purpose of benefiting the fetus. This emphasis was warranted, because the safest and most frequently performed method of terminating a pregnancy for a woman at fourteen weeks of gestation or greater is a procedure in which the fetus is destroyed in utero, broken into its constituent parts—torso, head, and limbs—each of which is then extracted from the woman’s body through the cervix and vagina. The fetus typically is alive at the commencement of this procedure and dies at some point in the course of its destruction.⁴³ This rather brutal operation allows the woman to avoid the two alternative methods of terminating the pregnancy: hysterotomy, which is essentially a preterm caesarean section and therefore a major abdominal operation with greater risks, morbidity, and long term health effects; or medical induction, which for the purposes of an abortion requires the woman to endure labour for up to 24 hours to deliver an intact fetus that is dead or dying.

This destructive surgical procedure, known as dilatation and evacuation (D&E), is preferred by the majority of women undergoing a termination after 14 weeks of gestation, because it is performed under general anaesthesia and avoids major surgery. Consequently, the gynaecologist David Grimes has argued that the principles of evidence-based and patient-centred medicine require that the procedure be available to any patient who might need it.⁴⁴ However, while Grimes is a vociferous advocate of women’s access to this procedure, he acknowledges that it shifts something of what he calls ‘the burden’ of the termination, from the woman undergoing it to the doctor performing it. Furthermore, he leaves open the precise nature of that burden, its psychological, moral, and physiological dimensions. Whichever category of human experience this burden falls within, it is constituted in part by taking responsibility for destroying a human being that is capable of physiologically expressing what I will venture to call the crisis of imminent destruction.

The gynaecologist Lisa Harris has observed that this particular operation is undeniably an act of violence against the fetus, but she notes quite rightly that the refusal to provide an abortion can also be understood as a form of violence against the woman who wishes to have one.⁴⁵ And it is also possible to argue that forcing a woman to undergo a type of abortion that is unnecessarily invasive or painful—hysterotomy or induction—to avoid performing this destructive procedure, is to subject her to a form of needless iatrogenic violence, which is not without the potential for negative effects.⁴⁶ Those

⁴³ The relevant professional guidance (also produced by the RCOG) makes no recommendation to end the life of the fetus prior to destroying it, life in this case being defined as the presence of a fetal heart beat. RCOG Evidence Based Guideline 7, 2011.

⁴⁴ David A Grimes, *The Choice of Second Trimester Abortion Method: Evolution, Evidence and Ethics*, *Reproductive Health Matters*, 16:sup31, (2008): 183-188.

⁴⁵ Lisa H. Harris, ‘Second trimester abortion provision: breaking the silence and changing the discourse.’ *Reproductive Health Matters*, 16 (2008): 74-81.

⁴⁶ Women randomised to medical termination rather than surgery have poorer subsequent scores after their procedure on what is called the Impact of Events Scale, which measures the persisting negative psychological effects of traumatic life events. T. Kelly, J. Suddes, D. Howel, J. Hewison, S. Robson. ‘Comparing medical

wishing to care for women requesting abortion at later gestations must therefore consider what Joanna Bourke calls, ‘the *meaning* of observable physiological changes and movements’ in the fetus, and I emphasise the word *meaning* here, and Flusser’s reminder that we are concerned not just with explanation but with interpretation.⁴⁷ This interpretative process has very real consequences for the patient: the doctor must weigh physiological changes and movements—and as I will argue later, the physiological changes of the fetus may be paralleled by similar changes in the doctor herself—against the responses of the pregnant woman.

Parliament’s request to the RCOG was driven primarily by a group of Members of Parliament who were opposed to abortion. Those members, we might say, responded to the fetal response by seizing on an interpretation which they thought would expose the fetal gesture as a sign that abortion ought to be prohibited. Ironically, as I hope to make clear, this kind of reflex response has in fact contributed to a divestment of value from the fetal body which those parliamentarians sought to protect.

To produce the 1997 RCOG report, a group of obstetricians, midwives, fetal medicine specialists, neuropsychologists, and laypersons was convened, and in the report this group identifies its remit—its response to the fetal gesture—in the following way: its ‘guiding principle’ is ‘concern that the fetus should be protected from any potentially harmful or painful procedure, but,’ it continues, ‘the assessment of the capacity to be harmed should be based on established scientific evidence.’ Despite the heterogeneity of the group and the breadth of its remit, the report’s response to fetal gestures focuses exclusively on whether or not such phenomena as those identified on ultrasound and in the 1994 *Lancet* study can be considered indicators of fetal pain experience. That is, the fetal gesture will be meaningful only if it is taken to be a valid sign of a corresponding pain experience.

Clearly the form of the RCOG working party response was determined by the nature of the stimulus that produced the working party in the first place: a request from Parliament to respond to concerns that fetal gestures might indicate fetal pain. But while Parliament presented its concerns in this way, the working party need not have reiterated this kind of response; and indeed the authors of the report try, in the opening sentences, to demonstrate an attention to the broader possibilities of interpretation that such gestures offer: the working party is concerned to prevent not only fetal *pain* but fetal *harm*, a distinction that seems to acknowledge the concept of non-pain related harms. But these interpretative possibilities are never in fact taken up in the report, and the report becomes the expression of the view that the fetal gesture is to be interpreted as a possible *signifier* of the *signified* that is fetal pain—a vocabulary and framing of the report that I wish to develop further in this chapter.

Evidently the interpretation I am highlighting here is not instigated by the RCOG, but this document is my focus here because, as professional medical guidance, it determines what may or may

versus surgical termination of pregnancy at 13-20 weeks of gestation: a randomised controlled trial.’ *British Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology* 117 (2010): 1512-20.

⁴⁷ Joanna Bourke, *The Story of Pain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 221.

not be said to patients undergoing abortions or other procedures, and it determines what may or may not be done in the course of their surgeries. And it warrants special attention precisely for its claim to be restricted in its methodology to the objective appraisal of ‘scientific evidence,’ and the claim of one its working party members that the report’s major strength was that it ‘stood above the political arguments about abortion’.⁴⁸ In the light of such claims, it is all the more important to demonstrate the degree to which the report is an interpretation, and is therefore in fact deeply enmeshed with political and philosophical questions which cannot be responded to adequately with scientific evidence.

The 1997 report was later revised and expanded in a 2010 iteration, which is almost identical in its argument and conclusions, and which I will therefore focus on here. The report’s argument rests on the assumption that the fetal subject indicated in the term ‘*fetal pain*’ or ‘*fetal awareness*’ is a locus of consciousness situated somewhere in the fetal cerebral cortex. The fetus is divided into a peripheral non-subject body, and a central cortical subject. Its crucial conclusion is based on an anatomical argument, that before 24 weeks gestation, ‘connections from the periphery to the cortex are not intact, and as most neuroscientists believe that the cortex is necessary for pain perception, it can be concluded that the fetus cannot experience pain *in any sense* prior to this gestation’ (my emphasis).⁴⁹ This conclusion appears several times in the report, but is stated most clearly in an appendix titled ‘Information for women and parents’, which includes ‘Questions some women ask when having a termination of pregnancy’. The first question is ‘Will the fetus/baby feel pain?’ This is the unambiguous response suggested by the report:

No, the fetus does not experience pain. Pain relates to an unpleasant sensory or emotional response to tissue damage. To be aware of something or have pain, the body has to have developed special sensory structures and a *joined-up* nerve system between the brain and the rest of the body to *communicate* such a feeling [my emphasis]. Although the framework for the nervous system in the growing fetus occurs early, it actually develops very slowly. Current research shows that the sensory structures are not developed or specialised enough to experience pain in a fetus less than 24 weeks. After 24 weeks, it is difficult to say that the fetus experiences pain because this, like all other experiences, develops postnatally along with memory and other learned behaviours. In addition, increasing evidence suggests that the fetus never enters a state of wakefulness inside the womb. The placenta produces chemicals that suppress nervous system activity and awareness.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Stuart Derbyshire, ‘Fetal Pain Again,’ July 2010: http://www.prochoiceforum.org.uk/ocr_ethical_iss_4.php
Accessed September 2019.

⁴⁹ RCOG, *Fetal Awareness*, viii.

⁵⁰ RCOG, *Fetal Awareness*, 22.

In addition to the anatomical argument, which is notably presented here in terms of communication—in which parts of the fetus communicate with other parts—additional arguments concerning physiology and psychology are made. In a physiological sense, the report says, even if the nerve system were connected and communication from peripheral non-subject to cortical subject were possible, a cortex capable of receiving or realising pain signals from the body will be sedated by placental chemicals that induce a state of coma. The psychological argument is as follows: in the unlikely case that the nerve system is in fact connected, and that the fetal brain is in fact not completely sedated, there is further reassurance that, in any case, pain requires more than anatomy and physiology, it is *learned*, it is a psychosocial phenomenon of which the fetus is surely incapable of experiencing.

The report can be criticised in two ways. Firstly, one can contest the accuracy of its anatomical, physiological, and psychological explanations. This kind of criticism would argue that the authors have made an error in determining the developmental landmarks of fetal neuroanatomy, the point in gestation at which the nervous system is ‘joined-up’ such that an injury would be successfully transmitted to the fetal brain; or it would argue that the authors are incorrect to isolate the capacity for conscious experience within the cortex when other parts of the brain, lower down the spinal cord and connected to the periphery earlier in gestation, might possess this receptive capacity. Or one could contest the hypothesis of fetal sedation, and point out that this conclusion is based solely on one experiment conducted in the 1980s on the fetuses of sheep.⁵¹ One could furthermore contest its radical assessment of the definition of pain as a psychosocial and inter-subjective phenomenon. I am not concerned here primarily to pursue a critique of this type, partly because I do not want to further endorse the general scheme in which the fetal gestures have been framed, that is, as true or false indicators of a conscious and cognitive cortical subject. Inevitably, however, I will make some specific arguments of this type, in the course of a broader rejection of the report and its interpretations.

An example of this more fundamental disagreement is that offered by Peter Saunders, who reads the report as a very political document about the legitimacy of abortion. He comments on the 1997 iteration of the report in this way: ‘The perception of pain by fetuses is a fascinating issue but far less intriguing than the perception of guilt by doctors. [...] We who once pledged to “maintain the utmost respect for human life from the time of conception” have simply rewritten our ethics and shelved our scientific integrity in the process.’ Saunders is a medical doctor and leading member of the Christian Medical Fellowship, and his religious views clearly inform his criticism. Saunders intimates here,

⁵¹ Roger Highfield, “Unborn Child Can Feel Pain at 20 Weeks, Say Researchers,” *The Daily Telegraph*, 28 August, 2001; Martin Ward Platt, ‘Fetal awareness and fetal pain: the Emperor's new clothes,’ *Archives of Disease in Childhood - Fetal and Neonatal Edition* 96 (2011): 236-37; K.J.S. Anand, ‘Fetal Pain?’ *Pain: Clinical Updates* 14, no.2 (2006): 1-4.

with his reference to scientific integrity, that he rejects the report on the grounds of the first type of criticism I have described: the authors have not been rigorous in their appraisal of the neurological evidence, their assessment has been biased by a pre-existing commitment to preserving as far as possible the non-subjecthood of the fetus and the legitimacy of abortion.

However, Saunders also makes a different kind of critique immediately after this accusation, when he makes the following reference to Shylock in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. Saunders asks: 'hath not a [fetus] hands? [...] if you prick [a fetus], does it not bleed?' And with this reference Saunders achieves two things. Firstly, a comparison is made between Jews and fetuses as victims of systematic and legitimised violence, a trope used by various commentators on abortion who describe it, in implicit or explicit terms, as a form of genocide. Secondly, Saunders makes the strikingly simple gesture of showing us the body of the fetus; or rather, he shows us the body of the fetus metonymically represented not by the cognitively functioning fetal brain but by the *hand*—as if the showing of a hand would be sufficient as a response to questions about the meaning of fetal gestures and the ethics of abortion with which Saunders is concerned.⁵²

This reference brings to mind a story, published in 1999, about the American journalist Michael Clancy. While Clancy was working for a national magazine, photographing an experimental in utero surgery on a 21-week-old fetus to repair a defect in its spine, it appeared to him at one point that the fetus reached from the incision in its mother's womb and took hold of the surgeon's finger. Clancy captured this moment in a famous picture that would come to be known as 'The Fetal Hand Grasp,' and he was so moved by it that he gave up journalism to become a fulltime antiabortion speaker and activist, referring to this hand grasp as 'the earliest human interaction ever recorded.' The pictures were featured widely in the national press and were of much greater interest than the ground-breaking operation Clancy was documenting. The fetus, who later would be given the cratylic name Samuel Armas, survived the operation and was delivered safely by caesarean section, quickly becoming a poster-child for American anti-abortion campaigners. This experimental operation to heal Samuel Armas became a kind of mass operation to save every fetus threatened by the possibility of abortion.

Much of the controversy around this story, and the counter arguments made by those who supported access to abortion, concerned whether Armas's gesture—the movement of his hand—was the product of a conscious will or the product of some other force: perhaps it was a reflex; perhaps the surgeon himself had moved the hand in the course of operating; perhaps Clancy had imagined it. Armas's mother told reporters, 'if he reached out, I don't know. If [the surgeon] reached out, I don't know. The fact of the matter is it's a child with a hand, with a life, and that's meaningful enough.'⁵³

⁵² P. J. Saunders, 'We should give them the benefit of the doubt,' *British Medical Journal* 314 (1997): 303.

⁵³ 'Ten Years Later, Boy's "Hand of Hope" Continues to Spark Debate.' *Fox News* 6 May, 2009. Available at: <http://www.foxnews.com/story/2009/05/06/ten-years-later-boy-hand-hope-continues-to-spark-debate.html>

In much the same way, Saunder's raising of the hand gives away Saunders's hand, so to speak, because for all his forgoing expressions of concern with corrupted scientific integrity and misinterpreted scientific evidence, clearly what is at stake here for Saunders is the simple fact of a fetal hand—which is also your, or my hand. Interpreting his inflammatory response as charitably as possible, I think Saunders is demanding the reinstatement of a certain visibility for the fetal body, to counter the invisibility imposed on it by an interpretation centred on repeated references to faculties presumed to be associated with or realised within components of its brain.

As I have noted already, one of the members of the 2010 expert panel, Stuart Derbyshire, has suggested that a notable strength of the report was its being aloof from political arguments about abortion. Evidently, critics of the report like Peter Saunders feel the conclusions of the report are very much bound up with political and ethical debates about abortion. I think such accusations are fair; for while the authors of the report may indeed be correct that their normative views on abortion did not affect their interpretation of the scientific evidence (and how would such an accusation be proved or disproved?), Derbyshire's comment shows an important lack of insight into how the working party members' own views on ambiguous concepts such as pain, harm, the relationship between the body and subjectivity—all of which have political dimensions—will inevitably inform the report. And indeed, issues such as subjectivity and harm are often the principles with which political arguments about abortion take place.

Contrary to Derbyshire's suggestions, I wish to show that: (1) the report in fact draws no reliable neuroscientific conclusions about fetal pain; (2) it instead expresses a very political commitment: not to the rightness of abortion, but to a certain concept of subjectivity; and (3) that this concept is derived from a particular European philosophical tradition that is ill-suited to the remit of the RCOG working party to protect the fetus from harm. This tradition is characterised by a metaphysical dualism, which operates in the report as a mind-body distinction, but also according to a corresponding signified-signifier distinction that I have already mentioned. This dualism is, moreover, not just an argument but a *disposition*, characterised by a particularly unsuitable attitude towards animals, or to be more specific, nonhuman and fetal animals.

I have mentioned that I will also address some of the inconsistent and often circular reasoning the report offers for its conclusions. Anticipating that these flaws in its argumentation will lead to a revision of the RCOG guidance in the near future, I want to suggest that what can be learned from the history of this document, and the chain of responses and reactions to the fetal gesture of which it is a part, is not the need for better neuroscience, nor for better philosophical analysis; rather, we can see here the dangers of applying politically expedient interpretations to matters that extend beyond what politics and science are capable of responding to. This lesson is all the more important when the philosophical provenance of such interpretations goes unacknowledged, because as I will make clear, the provenance of the method and conclusions in this case are self-evidently unsuited to the material. The paradox of the report is that it rather thoughtlessly reiterates and endorses an unsuitable

interpretation, and the perpetuation of this interpretation is precisely the kind of reflexive gesture which Descartes, and the report itself, seek to divest of significance or signification.

The Argument of The Report

It is first of all important to demonstrate how the report, in its attempt to draw an unambiguous conclusion about the possibility of fetal pain, presents an argument about pain which is essentially an argument about subjectivity, that is, about what a (fetal) subject is or is not. Close reading demonstrates that while the report concludes that fetuses cannot experience pain ‘in any sense,’ the argument in the report proposes a very specific definition of pain, based on a very specific understanding of what a fetal subject is; and it is only according to this very particular definition of pain and of subjectivity—and not ‘in any sense,’ as the report concludes—that the fetus can be said to be incapable of experiencing pain. This argument is, in several of its points, circular, and furthermore the definition of pain on which the conclusion depends includes so many qualifications that it practically provides no answers to the question of fetal pain. Rather, it simply confirms the impossibility of answering the report’s given question within the bounds of what it calls ‘scientific evidence.’

The argument of the report, which itself conveys the interpretation of the fetal gesture according to the principles of signification and significance that I have described, can be broken down as follows: pain is a ‘subjective’ sensation; the subject capable of subjective sensations that is indicated by the term ‘fetal’ in the title Fetal Awareness, is identified exclusively with the fetal cerebral cortex; the communicative force of the fetal gesture—its significatory significance, its status as a meaningful gesture, or meaningful instance of communication—is grounded in whether or not this gesture itself in some way communicates with the fetal cortical subject, and indeed it is in the explicitly communicative terminology of nerves ‘speaking’ to one another that the report makes this communicative argument.

The report, it is worth repeating, gives itself the following remit: ‘A guiding principle’ is ‘concern that the fetus should be protected from any potentially harmful *or* painful procedure, but the assessment of the capacity to be harmed should be based on established scientific evidence’. The report distinguishes here between harm and pain, and includes both outcomes within its scope. However, while the report provides a relatively detailed definition of pain (which I will soon examine), the report offers no definition of harm. I will not discuss in any detail here the nature of harm and whether it can be distinguished from pain: the report itself makes the distinction, so I assume it endorses it. The report does not, however, seek to provide a definition of harm to complement its definition pain. This, it seems, is not an uncommon practice in discussions of harm. In a review of the topic, Ben Bradley writes, ‘Despite the importance harm is supposed to have, almost nobody bothers to say what it is. [...] there are significant disagreements about what counts as a

harm.’ Yet the report could have easily found some non-pain definitions of harm to use in its working, as it does with its definition of pain. Elizabeth Harman argues that ‘one harms someone if one causes him pain, mental or physical discomfort, disease, deformity, disability, or death’.⁵⁴ The destruction of the fetus in abortion can easily be understood as the infliction of disease, deformity, disability, or death; just as therapeutic in utero procedures can be understood to alleviate these harms, aside from the matter of pain.

Why does the report mention, in its first lines, a desire to protect the fetus from harm? I think this moment of the report intimates an understanding that the methodology that follows those opening lines will not encompass all of the interpretative possibilities presented by the fetal gesture and the existence of procedures that inflict harm on the fetus and thus produce a debate about the possibility of fetal pain. However, the report is also committed to that methodology. The report itself appears to concede at its beginning that reference to pain does not exhaust the interpretive possibilities offered by fetal gestures, or by the act of performing an abortion that provokes those gestures. But this important concession is not discussed any further in the report.

That determining a satisfactory definition of *pain* is challenging in this context is, in a way, acknowledged in the report, for its discussion of the nature of pain is contained within a text-box, part-way through the report.⁵⁵ In the box, the report states: ‘The word ‘pain’ is used in different ways. The most frequent use, especially with respect to subjects that cannot communicate verbally, is in describing the behavioural response to noxious stimulation. However, if we accept this use, we are presented with the difficulty of distinguishing between the responses of simple versus complex organisms.’ I want to show that these subjects who cannot communicate verbally are nevertheless held, in the RCOG scheme, to a certain verbal standard (what Derrida calls in various places ‘the authority of speech’).

It is first important to say, in considering this crucial section of the report, that the careful reader is already confronted by a Derridian question regarding the form of the report’s presentation: why is this crucial element of the report, namely, the authors’ definition of pain, contained within a text box? Is the reader to understand the text within the box to be part of the text as a whole? Or is this box separate from it? How does it, in its recognition of ambiguity, relate to the text that precedes and follows after it, in which a scientific methodology is affirmed and unambiguous conclusions are drawn?

The answers to these questions are evident from reading the contents of the text box carefully, for here, where the report intends to define pain, so many caveats and uncertainties are acknowledged that if these were incorporated into the main body of the report it would be impossible for it to proceed

⁵⁴ Quoted in Ben Bradley, ‘Doing Away With Harm,’ *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 85 (2012): 390-412.

⁵⁵ The text from this text box is included at the end of the thesis as an appendix.

from its methodology to its conclusions. All the difficult questions that would founder any attempt to produce confident conclusions based purely on scientific evidence are acknowledged but set aside by placing them inside this box.⁵⁶ To avoid a lengthy quotation here, I refer the reader at this point to the appendix of the thesis, in which the text box is reprinted in its entirety.

The box contains the essential argument of the report, namely that a distinction must be drawn between what the report calls a behavioural response to noxious stimulation—nociception—and some other type of gesture, one in which there is an associated consciousness connected to that instance of physiological nociception. The report divides these gestures into those made by *simple* and *complex* organisms. Put differently, in the text box the argument is made that the arc of a gesture's production (withdrawing, flinching) must pass through some specific anatomical site within the organism at which consciousness, or the apparatus of the realisation of consciousness, is located, in order for that gesture to legitimately raise concern about pain, and hence to legitimately raise concern as a significant sign.

Interestingly, the reason given for this distinction is not that the authors have a certain definition of consciousness, subjectivity, or pain, to which they will refer; rather the reason for that distinction, the authors state, is the *necessity* of distinguishing between 'simple' and 'complex' organisms. This putative necessity is never justified and is question begging: in the report's argument the distinction between simple and complex is simply the distinction between the absence or presence of the capacity for pain. No argument is made for consigning the fetus, or the animal to which it will soon be compared, to the category of simple organism, nor is any argument made to justify the existence of such a category. This amounts to the argument that fetuses do not feel pain because they are the kind of simple animal that by definition as 'simple' does not feel pain.

The definition of pain that the report employs is that of the International Association for the Study of Pain (IASP), which is used widely in medicine. The report cites it in the following way: 'an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage, or *described* in terms of such damage...pain is always subjective.' It adds that 'Each individual learns the application of the word [pain] through experiences related to injury in early life'. While this definition is largely accepted as useful in the practice of medicine concerned with patients whose status as subjects is not in question, in the philosophical literature there is much debate about the

⁵⁶ The text box is a means of including the fetus and the philosophical problems it poses within the report while excluding those problems from the main body of the report outside the text box. Here I am drawing on Derrida's analysis of textual margins and framings in *The Truth in Painting* (1978) and Nicholas Royle's discussion of it in his book *Jacques Derrida* (London: Routledge, 2003). Royle asks: 'Is the text in the box separate from the text outside the box? How is it linked? What is the border, the margin or frame? Is it inside or outside the box? [...] What are we trying to hide? Or what is hereby hiding?' 14-15. In this case, the entire problem of determining the nature of pain, and the particularly problematic nature of determining pain in the fetus, is contained or hidden in the text box.

usefulness of this definition. I will not explore in detail here the various arguments against or in favour of the IASP definition in the philosophical literature; my interest is in the working party report's interpretation of it.

One frequent criticism of the IASP definition has been the possibility for interpreting its reference to *description* in linguistic terms, as if in order to feel pain one must also be capable of articulating—in language—one's experience of it. Pain becomes the capacity to say to oneself or to others, 'I am in pain.' There is indeed a move in the report's argument from pain as a sensation to pain as a word that one learns and may or may not use appropriately. And this linguistic elaboration is complicated further, beyond a linguistic realm and into a psycho-social one, by the caveat that 'pain is a part of knowledge and requires the existence of a conceptual apparatus that can marshal all its dimensions into a coherent experience.' This adds an epistemological argument, which again has a circular structure: even if the fetus could feel pain, it wouldn't *know* it was in pain, and this knowledge of a sensation is what such an argument defines as pain—but this knowledge of a sensation can only be understood by reference to the sensation that has been redefined as *not* a sensation, but as a form of knowledge.

As Ayat Aydede notes in a lengthy defence of the IASP definition, the work of Sunny Anand has been instrumental in the recognition of *neonatal* pain, and this is now universally accepted in medical practice. Anand is one of the critics of the first type that I mentioned earlier, who believe that fetuses are neurophysiologically capable of pain experience earlier than the report's threshold of 24 weeks. Anand has argued that 'the prevalent denial of neonatal pain was partially attributed to the current definition of pain promulgated by [IASP]', which emphasises 'the exclusive reliance on linguistic reports of pain'. Aydede defends the IASP definition against this charge by pointing out that the 'unpleasant experience' mentioned in the IASP definition is not necessarily tied to what he calls 'verbal effects' resulting from the pain. Aydede suggests instead that what is problematic is not the IASP definition itself but certain interpretations of it, those which understand pain to be a serious concept only if it can be understood as, in some way, a linguistic phenomenon.⁵⁷

In the working party report's interpretation of the IASP definition, this linguistic element appears to be very important, as indicated by the authors' introduction of the notion of a correct 'application of the word' pain. However, the report's definition of pain seems to go a step further still, with an additional requirement for 'a conceptual apparatus that can marshal all its dimensions into a coherent experience.' What is the nature of this coherence of experience? Does it simply indicate a certain phenomenological consciousness that is aware of itself as existing? Perhaps; but can such a concept of phenomenological coherence really be distinguished from a much more problematic notion of coherence? For such a coherence seems to demand not only the capacity for consciousness, and a capacity for language, but a capacity for narrative, for storytelling: it requires the capacity to say 'I am

⁵⁷ Murat Aydede, 'Defending the IASP Definition of Pain,' *The Monist* 100 (2017), 4: 449, 459.

in pain, and this is what pain means to me in the context of my past, present, and future; this is how it thwarts my plans' etc. In short, it requires the ability to produce autobiography: to be in pain I must have the experience of pain, be capable of expressing that experience in internal or external linguistic representations, and I must also be capable of situating this expression in a broader account of my life, all of which must have, for myself and for those to whom I express my situation, a certain coherence, the nature of which is not defined.

It is only correct, then, that the report acknowledges that its interpretation of the IASP definition of pain tends 'towards a view of pain as being a constituent part of higher cognitive function.' This seems to me an understatement. To the authors' credit, they recognise that 'There is disquiet in denying a rawer, more primitive, form of pain or suffering that the fetus, neonate and many animals might experience.' But their definition seems also to exclude pain as a possibility for anything not capable of marshalling the events of its life into this coherent experience.

This seems to me to be a major interpretative event in the report, one which goes far beyond the limits of the scientific methodology it repeatedly affirms. It might be said that the report's authors are in the process of writing the kind of autobiography of which the fetus is incapable, articulating their view of what it is that humankind should tell himself about itself, to distinguish itself from those other 'simple' animals from which it is determined stand aloof. I will develop this idea later. Humankind here also tells itself not to ask too many questions: it provides no response to its own 'disquiet' about its definition, stating only: 'One *possible* solution is to recognise that the newborn infant might be said to feel pain, whereas only the older infant can experience that they are in pain and explicitly share their condition with others as an acknowledged fact of being.' This, however, only returns to the unargued contention that pain is a phenomenon of internal communication ('experience that *they* are in pain'), of external communication ('share...with others'), and of autobiography ('acknowledged fact of being').

The solution to this ambiguity is to stretch the IASP definition to its outermost limits, and it is consequently only tentatively invoked by the report: it is 'possible'. But this ambiguous possibility is essential to the unambiguous conclusions that will be drawn in the closing pages of the main body of the report—conclusions which can be drawn conclusively because the uncertainties that would otherwise founder them are safely contained within the text box.

The report does provide a citation to support this possible slide from sensation to knowledge, but notably the citation is an example of the report exceeding the bounds of the scientific evidence to which it is methodologically committed. The citation that supports its possible view of pain as a constituent part of the highest of cortical functions is the work of physician and philosopher Raymond Tallis, a book entitled *The Knowing Animal: A Philosophical Inquiry into Knowledge* (2005).⁵⁸ The

⁵⁸ The report cites Tallis's philosophical work to support its view of pain as a matter of epistemology; other philosophers have argued for the opposite view. In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry argues that pain is precisely

title of this book alone seems adequate to demonstrate that the report is relying for its argument on a form of evidence that lies outside its stated scientific methodology. It is however worth noting that the principal argument of Tallis's work is that humans are special among living creatures because they are the only creatures capable of knowledge, according to his definition of that word. In-keeping with this position, on which the RCOG report's conclusions depend, it will be essential for the report's authors to establish that the fetus is not a *human* animal, but some other type of animal. This is precisely what the report does, in an allegory I will consider shortly.

Having suggested the possibility that questions of fetal pain can be resolved by the implementation of Tallis's speculative philosophical views, the report then concludes the text box, remarkably, by stating that 'Currently there is no immediately obvious way of resolving these arguments empirically'. This lack of a resolution, which is in fact the acknowledgement that the task it has set itself is impossible to achieve, does not prevent the unambiguous resolution of the report's conclusions, precisely because it is hidden in plain sight in the text box. And this uncertainty is underlined by the report's attempts to mitigate this uncertainty with another tentative possibility: 'It is *possible*, [...] to argue that even a raw sense of pain involves more than reflex activity and will, therefore, require the higher regions of the cortex to be connected and functional.' But this only returns us to the opening argument of the text box, the arbitrary gesture of distinguishing between the simple animal with the capacity for reflex activity, which must, out of some necessity the report does not describe, be opposed to some other animal capable of some other gesture.

To summarise, the report concludes unambiguously in several places that the fetus cannot feel pain 'in any sense,' but a more accurate reflection of its argument would be the following conclusion: the fetus cannot feel pain, provided one defines pain according to the IASP definition; and interprets that definition with an emphasis on pain as a subjective, linguistic, autobiographical, epistemological phenomenon, according to the view of the philosopher Raymond Tallis. The report's argument is not at all restricted to the consideration of scientific evidence.

A final but crucial problem for the report's authors is that the IASP definition states that pain is 'always a subjective experience'—that is, something experienced by a subject. Yet neither the report nor IASP provide a definition of a subject. Indeed, in the case of the fetus, it seems to be the case that the existence of fetal subjectivity is determined by whether it feels pain. Certainly, despite the title of the report being Fetal Awareness, the only sensation discussed of which the fetus might be aware is pain. There is no discussion of happiness or contentment, for example. The report states that 'pain

the undoing of the coherence of experience and internal representational power that the report requires for pain experience. For Scarry, pain is 'the unmaking of the world,' and 'the destruction of language,' and this, Scarry argues, is precisely its political power, as wielded by torturers. *The Body in Pain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 54.

does not have primacy over subjectivity, existing before and in addition to subjectivity, but is experienced through subjectivity.’ This means that if there is any possibility that the fetus might be capable of pain, it must first be counted as a subject, i.e as something capable of subjective experiences like pain. But the report provides no explicit definition of subjective experience—awareness—other than the capacity for pain. In its references to the IASP definition it mentions the following terms: ‘cognition,’ ‘sensation,’ and ‘affect,’ noting only that ‘These *psychological* concepts are inevitably harder to address in a fetus but should not be ignored’ (my emphasis). Yet the report does ignore them, considering only pain as a psychological content of which the fetus is capable. On the grounds that no forms of awareness other than pain are in fact addressed by the report, and that the authors assert that subjectivity does not precede experience but only comes into being through experience, I hypothesise that its authors directly equate the possibility of pain with the possibility of the ‘awareness’ referred to in its title; that is, pain is the first and only sensation of which the fetus might in this context be aware. If this is the case, they share the position of Bonnie Steinbock, who argues in *Life Before Birth* (2011) that pain is the only sensation a fetus would be capable of in the first stages of its conscious life. She defends this view on the grounds that pain ‘is arguably the most primitive form of conscious experience.’⁵⁹

If this is indeed the unstated position of the report, there are two problems its authors must address. Firstly, there is no neuroscientific research to which the authors can refer in support of this claim, and in making this suggestion they would again have to go beyond the bounds of scientific evidence to which they are methodologically committed.⁶⁰ Secondly, if fetal subjectivity is determined by the capacity for pain, and pain is determined by the capacity for subjectivity, then the report’s argument depends in its entirety on circular reasoning. The purpose of the IASP definition has never been to act as a method for determining the presence of subjectivity. It is to acknowledge pain in cases in which the subjectivity of the type it takes for granted can be assumed to exist. Thus the IASP definition is not a suitable definition for the report to use.

Derrida and Two Types of Gesture or Sign

One of the essential axioms of the report’s argument can be summarized in the following way: there are two types of gesture: in the first kind, the arc of the gesture’s production passes through a locus which endows the gesture with meaning, and in the case of the fetus in the RCOG report, this locus is a site of consciousness that is located in the cerebral cortex; in the second kind of gesture, the arc of

⁵⁹ Bonnie Steinbock, *Life Before Birth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 46.

⁶⁰ René Descartes, in an irony that will become evident later in the chapter, supposed that the first ‘passion’ experienced by the fetus was not pain but joy. Remo Bodei, *Geometry of the Passions: Fear, Hope, Happiness: Philosophy and Political Use* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 269.

its generation does not pass through such a locus. The latter gesture is described in the report using the conventional term 'reflex,' and diagrams are given to illustrate how sensory nerves can 'speak' to motor nerves in the spinal cord, producing gestures without any intervening conscious awareness or will that is situated in the cortex.

To put it differently, the scheme posits two types of sign: one that is meaningful, because it means something the cortex wishes to express; and one that is not. It is precisely such a scheme that Derrida analyses in the work of Edmund Husserl, in one of Derrida's earliest works, *Speech and Phenomena*. In the early sixties, Derrida published and presented work on various thinkers, with particular emphasis on the phenomenological tradition established by Husserl. In 1967, however, Derrida's career as a major philosopher began, for in that year he published *Writing and Difference*, *Of Grammatology*, and *Speech and Phenomena*.

Writing and Difference is a collection of essays, including perhaps the best known, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,' which was presented at a conference in honour of Claude Levi-Strauss at Johns Hopkins in 1966. This essay is held by many to mark the beginning of the tradition of 'post-structuralism' that was characterised by a critique of the work of Levi-Strauss and other structuralists, all of whom applied the work of the linguistic Ferdinand de Saussure to various fields of the humanities, including anthropology and psychology. In so doing, they were arguing for the kind of formal structure in all human practices that Saussure had argued for in language.

Of Grammatology, perhaps Derrida's best known work, consists of two parts. In the first, Derrida presents his argument for the existence of 'logocentrism,' a privileging of *logos* in the Western philosophical tradition, characterised by the various meanings of the term *logos*: immediate presence, rationality, and systematisation, are among some of the denotations. In the second part, Derrida develops this theme through a reading of Rousseau, arguing that the privileging of speech (over writing) is an essential dimension of logocentrism. This logocentrism is an unspoked (and unwritten) commitment at the heart of the Western philosophical tradition, and its preoccupation with metaphysics, the philosophical and theological quest to determine an ultimate nature of reality.

In the structuralist view, a sign is constituted by a *signifier* and what is *signified* by that signifier. In Husserl a related scheme appears in the form of *expression* versus *indication*: we might say that for Husserl an expression has a corresponding signified which the indication lacks. As Derrida writes, expression is for Husserl a truly meaningful sign, one which is in some sense an expression of intentional consciousness; it will in a crucial sense be the externalization of an internal message. That is to say, expression will be a sign with a corresponding signified, which is specifically some kind of *urge to express* that arises in a consciousness. An indication, by contrast, will be a sign that lacks such a corresponding internal content or urge. The principal example of the expression is intentional speech, and indeed Derrida notes repeatedly that speech is not only an example of expression but the form into which anything called expression must ultimately be realizable. To be a meaningful sign, to

have meaning, is always to *mean to say* something. If for Husserl there are expressions which do not take the form of speech, in the final analysis their meaningfulness is always underpinned by the possibility of their being expressed as speech. Derrida writes: ‘Meaning doubtless comes to the sign and transforms it into expression only by means of speech, oral discourse.’ And furthermore, Derrida writes, a sign as Husserl understands it—a gesture—must not only have something to say but must contain within it a certain intention to express itself, what Derrida will call ‘wanting’ to speak.⁶¹

The example Husserl gives for indication is canals on the surface of Mars: these may or may not indicate the presence of running water or intelligent life, but these geographical phenomena did not arise from an intention to communicate, a *wanting to say*, or a desire to externalize the content of an ‘internal’ discursive consciousness.⁶² Similarly, involuntary gestures, even those made in the course of conversation, are not expressions, as they lack the property of conveying an intentional (and ultimately discursive) content. Interestingly, one of Derrida’s recent commentators, Vernon Cisney, in his own explanation of this scheme, repeatedly gives the example of physiology as a form of indication, rather like Flusser does in his account of gesture. Cisney writes that ‘A fever *indicates* an illness or infection in the body, but a fever does not *mean* illness or infection.’⁶³

For Husserl, the concept of expression is essential to his account of a phenomenal consciousness that is in some sense capable of relating to itself in the form of internal monologue. This monologue takes place for Husserl without the need for indicative signs, which are contingent upon circumstances and the forms of communication that pre-exist the phenomenal subject. Husserl wants, Derrida writes, ‘to put out of play all constituted knowledge’ in his construction of a phenomenal consciousness.⁶⁴ It is important, in order to preserve this phenomenal and monologuing subject, that Husserl prevent expression being a sub-category of indication. Derrida will argue against Husserl by suggesting that expression is intimately bound-up with indication, and will suggest that expression is in fact a species of indication; or that terms such as sign simply fail to capture the complexity and heterogeneity of the various phenomena that Husserl is concerned with.

Derrida’s critique of Husserl’s scheme is not my interest here, but Derrida’s inadvertent critique of the scheme as it appears in the RCOG working party report is. Derrida observes that the scheme of indication and expression appears to be closely related to a metaphysical dualism. He writes: ‘What is excluded is, for example, facial expressions, gestures, the whole of the body and the mundane register, in a word, the whole of the visible and spatial as such. [...] The opposition between body and soul is not only at the center of this doctrine of signification, it is confirmed by it; and, as has always

⁶¹ Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 17, 32, 35.

⁶² Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 27.

⁶³ Vernon Cisney, *Derrida’s Voice and Phenomenon* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 211. This example also appears at 27, 59, and 76.

⁶⁴ Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 4.

been at bottom the case in philosophy, it depends upon an interpretation of language.’⁶⁵ In an important sense, something integral to Derrida’s subsequent and voluminous oeuvre is captured by this concern with the relationship between the body and language, for the dualism of Husserl’s doctrine of signification is a paradigmatic example of the kind of binary oppositions that Derrida will in various subsequent works repeatedly show to be intertwined, or in some other important and figuratively significant way not opposed to one another but more complicatedly arranged. Indeed, it is with this brief account of one element of *Speech and Phenomena* in mind that we can proceed to a related critique that Derrida will make of philosophy’s best known exponent of this dualism, René Descartes.

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It is in a work produced close to the other chronological end of Derrida’s career, in the 1990s, that Derrida makes his critique of Descartes, as part of a series of lectures devoted to the place of animals and animality in European philosophy. In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, published in 2002 and first delivered as a series of lectures in 1997, Derrida brings to our attention the place of animality in European philosophy, suggesting that the very concept of animality as a general category is an absurd and self-serving homogenization of a heterogeneity of lifeforms. This category is used by humans for their own benefit, and he frames that philosophical abuse of animals as nothing less than a bloody war, waged by mankind since the time of the Old Testament if not before. Kant, Heidegger, Lacan and Levinas are all implicated, and Descartes emerges not as a disinterested and rational scientist but as another soldier meting out rhetorical violence to nonhuman animals. This violence is a response to animals that is very much in the religious tradition from which Descartes’s work is assumed to be distinct.

In perhaps the best-known section of *The Animal*, Derrida describes his own experience of being seen by his cat as he stands naked in his bathroom. This experience of seeing and being seen *by a specific animal*—as opposed to some abstract mental gazing at a gazeless concept of animality in general—evokes in Derrida a variety of responses. But what is made clear is that the moment of seeing an animal *seeing you* has a particularity and force that cannot be captured by theorising about a general category of the living. Derrida uses this experience partly to argue that the notion of animality as a general category is an absurdity. Animals are not an organic homogeneity, for the forms of life encompassed by that noun, with which we can interact in a great many singular ways, are so diverse: each responsive gaze is unique. For Derrida, references to animality in general—or, I think he would argue, ‘simple’ animals—demonstrate a uniquely human stupidity; and such references are furthermore a cause for suspicion that some other purpose is being served when animals are thrown

⁶⁵ Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 35.

thoughtlessly into a rhetorical scene. It is usually the case that animals *in general* are being invoked so that a particular animal can be put to some use or abuse, literal or rhetorical, in a way that will serve the immediate needs or desires of certain humans.

In the case of Descartes, the animal is represented as a creature devoid of significance, in various senses: the animal is not significant because it is not capable of signifying, of producing genuine signs, Descartes says, and Derrida emphasises this, namely that the animal is not capable of *responding*, only of *reacting*. This reaction is like the reflex, a gesture which might appear to indicate a conscious experience or will but which is in fact mere imitation. Derrida focuses on some comments Descartes makes to a correspondent, which express his views of animals as automata, biomechanical networks of reactions, and Derrida shows that Descartes's account of animals therein depends crucially on exactly this distinction between two types of gesture: the mere reflex ('reaction to stimuli'), and the meaningful or 'responsible' response, where, as in Husserl and the RCOG report, the latter indicates a gesture, the arc of production of which passes through some internal principle (for Descartes, the soul) and which animals by definition will lack.

Like the RCOG report, Descartes acknowledges that animals make gestures, and in particular he notes that they make gestures in response to harm, but the meaningfulness of these gestures depends entirely on whether there is a 'true passion,' a 'true sentiment' that is indicated by those signs.

Derrida writes that for Descartes:

[T]hese automatons are incapable of responding. For immediately after evoking the possible resemblance between the signs we use 'in order to witness to our passions,' and those of automatons [...], Descartes proposes two criteria (he calls them two 'methods') for discerning the true from the false, the authentic from the mimetic simulacrum of the automaton. These two means are those of the *Discourse on Method*. It is a question of two criteria that we will have to keep well in mind, for they will govern the whole tradition of discourses that I would like to outline later, all the way to Heidegger and Lacan: (1) nonresponse, the inability to respond, to respond to our questions, hence to hear our question marks; (2) a lack, defect, or general deficit, a deficiency that is nonspecific except to say that it is a lack that is incommensurable with lack [...].⁶⁶

The imposition of the reaction as nonresponse is the interpretation of the animal as being in a state of deprivation, relative to a certain kind of human being which is taken to be a standard and the only responsible responder. For Descartes, animals are brilliant mechanical imitators of the kind of gestures to which we customarily attribute some corresponding internal experience (or 'passion,' in Descartes's terms). But they are not brilliant enough to outsmart Descartes, for he argues that animals

⁶⁶ Derrida, *The Animal*, 81.

give themselves away, because even those animals apparently capable of responding, like talking parrots, always respond in the same manner. They cannot ‘produce different arrangements of words so as to give an appropriately meaningful answer to whatever is said in [their] presence, as the dullest of men can do.’⁶⁷ The animal can say, but, Descartes says, it always says the same thing, and it is this thoughtless repetition which betrays the false testimony of animal signs, for even the dullest man can change his response according to the question put to him.

For Derrida, much of the interest lies in the distinction between two types of organic gesture which Descartes implicitly sets out, and in the communicatory and ethical valence of his attribution and withholding of the *response*. It is from this scheme that Derrida develops, throughout *The Animal*, a vocabulary that brings into question precisely what kind of human or animal gesture should properly be called a response. In the opening pages, Derrida in fact sets out the status of this term as the principal concern of his lectures. He tells his audience: ‘Everything that I am about to entrust to you no doubt comes back to asking you to respond to me, you, to me, reply to me concerning what it is to respond. If you can. The said question of the said animal in its entirety comes down to knowing not whether the animal speaks but whether one can know what respond means. And how to distinguish a response from a reaction.’ Later, in his analysis of Descartes, Derrida says again: ‘everything is in play in the distinction between reaction and response,’ and, he emphasises, ‘in particular of reaction to harm’.⁶⁸

This mention of harm attributes to Descartes’s thought experiments an ethical dimension that Descartes does not recognise, and this is symptomatic of the kind of disposition Descartes has adopted—adopted in advance, in fact—in his response to animals. He has, from the start, taken animals to be deficient in the internal principle that confers upon them the kind of responsiveness or responsibility that would make their gestures meaningful. In Derrida’s reading, Descartes’s theory is itself being brought into focus as a kind of gesture, and one that must be subjected to the analysis Descartes himself reserves for the gestures of animals: does Descartes, according to his own criteria, demonstrate here a meaningful response?—where meaning is determined by the passage of that gesture’s arc of production through some privileged locus within the person concerned? And which locus do we wish to privilege? A cortically-located site of reason or will, or indeed a true passion in the pineal gland, is only one possibility. What of the faculty or locus that is so keenly stimulated in Derrida, simply by his permitting himself the fullness of his own response when falling under the gaze of his cat?

Furthermore, Derrida’s mention of harm is crucial to his reading because the signs of special interest to Descartes—the signs he wishes to relegate to the mechanical status of the reaction—are precisely those that represent some misfortune that befalls the animal concerned, or to be more

⁶⁷ Derrida, *The Animal*, 84.

⁶⁸ Derrida, *The Animal*, 8, 81.

precise, a misfortune or harm inflicted on the animal by a man. Animals imitate, Descartes says specifically, the act of ‘crying out when struck, or fleeing when there is a lot of noise around them.’ As Derrida points out, ‘Descartes does not, for his part, give any sign here that he paid attention to his own choices, to the examples of animals chosen by him, and especially not to the examples of imitated signs that he chose. [...] Descartes does not seem to attribute any significance to the signs themselves, [...] as if by chance, they both manifest a misfortune, the pain or fear of a hunted animal, in essence persecuted, chased, maltreated’. Descartes, Derrida suggests, does not consider that *these* signs in particular, rather than the signs that follow from them, might perhaps best be approached with a cautious intellectual humility, rather than the swingeing sceptical method he rather thoughtlessly applies.

Descartes’s Vivisections

Strangely, in examining Descartes’s suspicious attention to signs of harm, Derrida makes no mention of the maltreatment that Descartes inflicted on animals in the course of his many animal vivisections. These have been detailed by Gary Steiner, an analytic philosopher who certainly is not sympathetic to Derrida, but who responds to Descartes with similarly grave concern.⁶⁹ Steiner writes that ‘Descartes describes with enthusiasm his own forays into vivisection. [...] Descartes notes that the hearts of fish, “after they have been cut out, go on beating for much longer than the heart of any terrestrial animal”’; he goes on to explain how he has refuted a view of Galen’s concerning the functioning of cardiac arteries by having “opened the chest of a live rabbit and removed the ribs to expose the heart and the trunk of the aorta. . . . Continuing the vivisection, I cut away half the heart.”’⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Steiner is strongly critical of Derrida’s writing, especially his writing about animals. See Chapter Three of his *Animals and the Limits of Postmodernism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

⁷⁰ Gary Steiner, ‘Descartes, Christianity, and Contemporary Speciesism,’ in *A Communion of Subjects: Animals in Religion, Science, and Ethics*, eds. Paul Waldau and Kimberley Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 123. Steiner’s account of Descartes’s dissection of the rabbit has evoked a powerful response in J.M Coetzee. In a recent short story, Coetzee has his perennial character Elizabeth Costello attend a lecture by Steiner. Costello is overcome by an urge to fall to her knees in the lecture theatre, to prostrate herself before God, the rabbit, herself, or Descartes. But there is no room to do so, and she exits as quickly as possible. Like Descartes’s animals, Costello herself is struck or stricken by Descartes’s treatment of animals, so she cries out and flees. A question for elsewhere is whether Costello’s response, in its fictional form, should be considered a false signifier of the kind Descartes attributes to his animals, or if the fictionality of the response further problematises Descartes’s scheme. A video of Coetzee reading this short story is available at:

<https://johannesburgreviewofbooks.com/2017/09/25/the-jrb-daily-jm-coetzee-reads-a-new-story-the-glass-abattoir-and-announces-a-new-book-to-feature-elizabeth-costello/> (Accessed May 2019). The story was

It is important to note that Descartes certainly did not invent animal experimentation. As Donna Yarri points out, such experiments are recorded as far back as 450 BC. But she also points out that Descartes's work marked a notable intensification of this practice:

The scientific thought and practice of René Descartes in the seventeenth century provided a stronger foundation for the general acceptability of the practice of animal experimentation. His mind-body dualism and his theory that animals were mere machines undermined the notion that animals could feel pain, and this therefore justified the already commonly accepted view of the absolute superiority of humans over animals. As a result of Descartes' theory that animals could not really feel pain, experimentation became more widely accepted and practiced. The scientists Francois Magendie and his student Claude Bernard, two well-known heirs of Descartes' scientific tradition, performed many dissections on live animals.⁷¹

Magendie is perhaps best known for a public experiment in which he severed the spinal cords of a litter of live puppies to demonstrate the distinction between types of nerves, sensory and motor, and this demonstration was a critical development in the history of physiology and in the concept of the reflex in particular. Magendie built on the concept of the reflex put forward by Descartes, but refuted the idea that these two elements of the reflex system shared a single two-way channel of communication. Aside from this contribution to biological knowledge, we must consider the other consequences of a tradition that encouraged the torture of puppies. When we speak of Cartesianism, then, Derrida gives us to think, we must keep in mind that this tradition is not marked simply by a dualist metaphysics. Cartesianism denotes a disposition that is remarkably unsympathetic to the objects of its analysis. As Stephen Thompson writes in his discussion of Derrida's critique, at no point does Descartes attempt to prove his 'judgement of an unthinking animal "reaction" [that is] categorically unequal to human "response"'—rather, this unthinking animal reaction 'predetermines that testimony.'⁷² If Derrida finds himself open to the moment of the singular gaze of each animal that confronts him, Descartes has determined his own unsympathetic response in advance. And if that is the case, Derrida implies, Descartes's responses cannot be said properly to be a response at all, at least not according to the very scheme Descartes himself proposes. In responding to animals, like the parrot he talks about, Descartes says the same thing every time.

included in Coetzee's 2018 collection *Siete Cuentos Morales* (Madrid: Random House), which so far has been published only in Spanish translation.

⁷¹ Donna Yarri, *The Ethics of Animal Experimentation: A Critical Analysis and Constructive Christian Proposal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 6..

⁷² Stephen Thompson, 'Jeu d'ecarts: Derrida's Descartes,' *Oxford Literary Review*, Volume 39 Issue 2, Page 189-209.

Derrida therefore understands Descartes not as the founder of a careful and objective philosophical methodology divorced from suspicion and dogma, but as an important link in a tradition of human entitlement to harm animals that stretches back to what Derrida identifies as the mythological and religious foundations of Western culture. Descartes re-iterates without thinking, like the animals whose repetitive and thoughtless gestures he renders meaningless, the gestures of a brutal anthropocentrism. As a result, Derrida concludes that: ‘Cartesianism belongs, beneath its mechanistic indifference, to the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition of a war against the animal, of a sacrificial war that is as old as Genesis.’⁷³ This notion of sacrifice, a practice often characterised by the ritual or performative substitution of the animal for the human, is repeated again in rhetorical form in the Cartesian account offered by the RCOG report, and which I will now describe. It is also repeated in a not-so rhetorical form by the responses of other organisations to the RCOG report, and I will describe this later.

I said earlier that the report offers an account of two types of gesture. In developing this account, the authors state that there is, when responding to gestures made in response to harm, a necessity to distinguish between pain and ‘behavioural response to noxious stimulation,’ to ensure a corresponding distinction between ‘the responses of simple versus complex organisms.’ The necessity of this distinction between simple and complex is never explained, and the reader can only assume that another circular argument has been proposed: simple organisms are those which cannot feel pain like ‘we’ do; the fetus is a simple organism; therefore/because the fetus cannot feel pain. The distinction between simple and complex is determined in the report by the metaphorical invocation of one of these so-called simple animals, namely the fruit fly larva. The analogy for fetal movements is given in the text box, and it goes as follows: ‘Fruit fly larvae, for example, have been demonstrated to bend and roll away when approached with a naked flame but most people would agree that larvae do not feel pain in the way that we do. Ruling out the responses of larvae and similarly simple organisms as indicating pain is possible if we suggest that responses must include more than mere reflex responses to be labelled as a pain response.’

It must be noted that even this analogy has a certain circularity to its argumentation, for the simple animal presented in place of the human fetus is in fact a fruit fly in comparably fetal—or larval—form. Furthermore, it is also worth noting that, like Descartes, who offers no explanation as to why the animals he mentions are being struck, no explanation is offered in the report as to why a person has chosen to threaten the fruit fly larva with a flame. The only reason, as in Descartes, seems to be that the fruit fly larva has been attacked so that it demonstrates a gesture whose meaning has already been determined in advance—otherwise it would be a more serious matter to elicit that gesture by seeking to harm the larva and some justification would presumably be given.

⁷³ Derrida, *The Animal*, 101.

This metaphorical animal sacrifice is complicated further by a development of the analogy, which results in a mixing of metaphors, and which produces a confusing and unresolved scheme of which the report's authors appear to be unaware or feel no need to investigate. It appears that the fruit fly larva is substituted here for the fetus in toto—for the fetal body. But the report continues in the following way: 'When someone reaches out and accidentally touches something very hot, there is an immediate tendency to drop the object. That reaction is entirely regulated by a simple loop of sensory neurons speaking to motor neurons in the spinal cord. Typically, the person will drop the object before there is any conscious appreciation of pain. The action of dropping the object indicates the presence of something noxious but does not necessarily indicate the presence of pain.'

The reader may accept that the response to a noxious stimulus does not necessarily indicate pain, but what is not clear is how that experience of pain now relates to the subject in general, and how much of that subject has been excluded from itself to make this argument. The fruit fly larva appears to have been interposed into the human subject who accidentally touches something hot: it stands in place of this human subject's peripheral nervous system. This scheme seems then to imply that we are to understand that we all contain within ourselves a fetal or larval component which is our peripheral nervous system but which is not properly speaking part of us as meaningful subjects. Such reflex responses remain meaningless. What the report seems to depend on here is an Aristotelian scheme in which subjectivity is achieved by an organism only in the accrual of such attributes as the capacity for the kind of conscious subjectivity that is the report's concern, adding layers of forms of life onto the mere organic object itself. This follows the conventional hierarchies of analytic bioethics in which 'moral status'⁷⁴ is determined precisely by the accrual of such attributes, with adult post-fetal human beings assumed to be at the pinnacle of that hierarchy precisely by being constituted by but surpassing the plant-like and animal-like life forms over which they have dominion.

For Derrida, the capacity to tell such stories about ourselves is essential to our relationship to other forms of life, and to the lives of animals in particular. This boundary that man makes between himself and animals is precisely 'the bordercrossing from which vantage man dares to announce himself to himself, thereby calling himself by the name that he believes he gives himself'.⁷⁵ As David Wood puts it, Derrida thinks the animal is instrumental in the 'symbolic reaffirmation of our own humanity.'⁷⁶

⁷⁴ My own belief is that the hierarchies of moral status are a philosophical expression of the grammatical animacy hierarchy. These moral hierarchies are determined not by particular philosophical attributes that a being may or may not possess, but by the structure of language. I intend to pursue this idea elsewhere.

⁷⁵ Derrida, *The Animal*, 12.

⁷⁶ David Wood, 'Thinking With Cats,' in *Animal Philosophy: Essential Readings in Continental Thought*, ed. Matthew Calarco and Peter Atterton (New York and London: Continuum, 2004), 133.

Agamben's Inclusive Exclusion

This Derridean bordercrossing with which humans affirm their humanity marks the point of exclusion of animal-fetal life from the domain which mankind wishes to preserve for himself. This idea is presented rather more clearly and in more detail by Giorgio Agamben, an Italian philosopher on whom Derrida has been a considerable influence.⁷⁷ Agamben is perhaps best known for his theorizations of life, or rather, for his theorizations of how life has been theorized. In the opening of his best-known work, *Homo Sacer* (1995), he writes that ‘The Greeks had no single term to express what we mean by the word “life.” They used two terms that, although traceable to a common etymological root, are semantically and morphologically distinct: *zoē*, which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods), and *bios*, which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group.’ Any living thing stripped of its status as a form of *bios*—that is, reduced to its *zoē*—becomes what Agamben calls *vita nuda*, which typically is translated as ‘bare life,’ but could also be translated as ‘mere,’ or ‘naked’ life. This is the living creature ‘detached from any brain activity and, so to speak, from any subject,’ and consequently stripped of its political status and the protections (such as rights) that full political status would afford.⁷⁸ It is life only because it demonstrates the homeostatic and nutritive teleological operations of self-sustenance that we associate with the organic. In this way, Agamben reverses and retraces the Aristotelian scheme implicit in our thinking about living creatures, undoing the scheme operating in the RCOG report, peeling back the layers of consciousness, animal motility, and nutritive plant-like systems of homeostasis.

It is in Agamben's collection of short essays *The Open* (2004) that he most clearly and powerfully demonstrates how this Aristotelian scheme results in the desperate and ongoing effort of man to try and exclude from himself, from his unique identity, the forms of plant-like and animal life by which mankind is in fact profoundly and inescapably constituted. The RCOG's metaphors are a good example of this effort of exclusion. Agamben notes that Aristotle, the first theorist of living things, devoted considerable attention to categorising modes of life, but never actually defined what life is:

He breaks it down, isolating the nutritive function, in order then to rearticulate it in a series of distinct and correlated faculties or potentialities (nutrition, sensation, thought) [...]. [A]mong the various senses of the term “to live,” one [of those senses] must be separated from the others and settle to the bottom, becoming the principle by which life can be attributed to a

⁷⁷ For more on this influence, and on Agamben's unique contributions beyond that influence, see Kevin Attell, *Giorgio Agamben: Beyond the Threshold of Deconstruction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

⁷⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 9; *The Open*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 15.

certain being. In other words, what has been separated and divided (in this case nutritive life) is precisely what—in a sort of *divide et impera*—allows the construction of the unity of life as the hierarchical articulation of a series of functional faculties and oppositions.⁷⁹

The continuum that follows from this scheme of incrementally developed attributes will inevitably imply a kind of ranking, but Agamben notes that this ranking scheme does not just separate individual organisms from one another—cats from dogs, humans from snakes—but separates organisms from themselves. He comments on the influence of Aristotle on the physiologist Xavier Bichat: ‘According to Bichat,’ Agamben writes, ‘it is as if two “animals” lived together in every higher organism,’ one which is ‘the repetition of, so to speak, blind and unconscious functions (the circulation of blood, respiration, assimilation, excretion, etc.), and another which is ‘defined through its relation to the external world.’⁸⁰ Agamben borrows from Furio Jesi the term ‘anthropological machine’ to indicate that humanity can be understood not so much as a stable category, but as the constant work of distinguishing between these two parallel creatures as they exist or constitute man himself. This work consists in excluding the lower so that man can be defined purely by the higher form of life. The anthropological machine therefore describes both an intellectual project, a philosophical disposition, and a discursive apparatus, a peculiar and pathognomonic human enterprise which works by ‘animalizing the human, by isolating the nonhuman within the human’, and then by declaring—explicitly or implicitly—that this nonhuman-but-human element is not to be included in any definition of the human. By the process of such isolation and exclusion—frequently effected by rendering that excluded dimension as a form of inferior or relatively simple animality—mankind seeks to provide a definition of his nature that sets him apart, not just from the other animals and forms of life, but from himself.

This artificial ‘caesura’ between the human and the animal, Agamben writes, is not primarily a distinction between man and other animals, for it ‘passes first of all within man.’ Consequently, a distinction or definition of the human is impossible, and Agamben argues that mankind’s nature has no conclusive determining feature other than its commitment to *this* very paradoxical enterprise of perpetual philosophical separation of himself from himself. ‘The truly human being [...] is only the place of a ceaselessly updated decision in which the caesurae and their rearticulation are always dislocated and displaced anew.’ The result of this ceaselessly updated decision, Agamben suggests, is ‘neither an animal life nor a human life, but only a life that is separated from itself—only a bare life’.

The consequences of the production of bare life can be absurd, as in the case Agamben highlights of medieval theologians trying to determine whether those who are resurrected in the afterlife will still need to defaecate. But the consequences can also be ‘lethal and bloody,’ and Agamben argues that it

⁷⁹ Agamben, *The Open*, 14.

⁸⁰ Agamben, *The Open*, 14-15.

is by a development of this gesture of separation that Nazi ideology became effective, stripping Jews of their political rights and legitimising their extermination by producing the ‘nonman within the man’.⁸¹

Agamben’s account provides a powerful analysis of the RCOG working party’s allegorical argument: the fetus, as kind of pure peripheral nervous system, or simple animal, or larval creature, is isolated within the human who accidentally touches the hot object, but this fetal and reflexive system is then tacitly excluded from the subject to whom the report then refers as dropping the hot object.

Such a scheme, strangely enough, provides no resources for speaking about the fetus itself: the subject indicated by the term ‘Fetal Awareness’ was always in advance excluded from the fetal body by the report’s exclusively consciousness-based response to the fetal gesture. Thus, the report is closed to ways in which fetal life precisely problematises, in what could otherwise be an interesting way, the concepts of pain, subjectivity, and consciousness which it instead takes for granted. And one could even further suggest that this process of exclusive inclusion, as Agamben calls it, is evident in the very textual form of the report: by its use of a text box, the fetal animal and its complications are included in the report, but simultaneously excluded from the trajectory that runs from its premises to its conclusions. It is as if in order to affirm its scheme of a living body divided up and separated into meaningful and meaningless parts, the report has done the same to itself.

This brings us back to the idea, put forward by one of the working party members, that the report was aloof from political debates. As Matthew Calarco writes, Agamben demonstrates that ‘deciding what constitutes “the human” and “the animal” is never simply a neutral scientific or ontological matter. Indeed, one of the chief merits of *The Open* is that it helps us to see that the locus and stakes of the human-animal distinction are almost always deeply political and ethical.’⁸² This seems to be an especially apposite warning when what is at stake is the animal *within* the human, as is the case in the RCOG report.

It is important to note in passing that because Agamben seems to be working to invest meaning into forms of non-conscious bare life that have otherwise been stripped of value, he has attracted criticism from scholars concerned that this very dimension of his work either is, or could be developed into, an account of fetal life that could be politicised as an argument against abortion. This criticism is compounded by what some commentators see as his pervasive inattention to gender. A forceful critique of this type has been made by Melinda Cooper, who writes that Agamben ‘consistently and inexplicably eludes the one figure of contemporary political life that would seem to illustrate most fully his philosophical conception of bare life. This is the figure of the ‘unborn’ [...] [T]he figure of potential human life is curiously absent from Agamben’s most well known work, or

⁸¹ Agamben, *The Open*, 37-38.

⁸² Matthew Calarco, *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 96.

rather it is present in the passages where he considers bare life from a philosophical and genealogical point of view (bare life in Aristotle and Bichat) but absent where he draws his most ominous political conclusions.’ Cooper argues that the ominous political conclusion Agamben withholds is his determination to give ‘voice’ to ‘the unborn,’ and ‘the very internal logic of Agamben’s thought places him squarely within the discursive space of Catholic doctrine – or rather it places him in dialogue with a Catholic theology’.⁸³ (Other commentators, it should be added, such as Karen Weingarten, have argued that Agamben’s work can instead be understood to frame the pregnant woman, whose political status is made precarious by her capacity for reproduction, as bare life).⁸⁴

What seems to be assumed by critical accounts such as Cooper’s is closely related to the assumption made by the parliamentarians who responded to the fetal gesture, and which led to the RCOG report: that any attribution of meaning or value to fetal life and its gestures is necessarily a sign that abortion should be prohibited. This seems to me to be a mistake, which reiterates the reflex of normativity in confronting the fetal sign. These responses must be avoided if anything meaningful and enduring is to be said. Rather than taking it to be the case that discovering certain facts, or making certain arguments, about the fetus will lead to inevitable normative views, we should instead create a space in which abortion is taken to be a phenomenon from which moral concepts *can be developed*. The fetal gesture provoked by an abortion is one in a network of responses, and hence it sits in a network of responsibilities that might, instead of being answerable to concepts of individual subjectivity, challenge concepts of subjectivity. This wider contextual complexity is lost when our response involves the application of philosophical concepts which are themselves taken from a tradition that has, until recently, drawn little or nothing at all from female experiences, including pregnancy, birth, and abortion.⁸⁵

I have tried to use Agamben here to illustrate more clearly what Derrida might mean by his contention that the animal is a ‘the bordercrossing from which vantage man dares to announce himself to himself’.⁸⁶ And I have tried to argue that the RCOG working party report is a prime example of precisely this kind of philosophical announcement; or, in Agamben’s terms, it is an example of the anthropological machine at work. What Derrida and Agamben bring to our attention is that using a

⁸³ Melinda Cooper, ‘The Silent Scream: Agamben, Deleuze, and the Politics of the Unborn,’ in *Deleuze and Law*, eds. Rosi Braidotti, Clare Colebrook, and Patrick Hanafin (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) 142, 152, 156.

⁸⁴ Karen Weingarten, *Abortion in the American Imagination: Before Life and Choice, 1880-1940* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 7. For a recent review of Agamben, abortion and gender politics, see Chapter Four of Penelope Deutscher, *Foucault’s Futures: A Critique of Reproductive Reason* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

⁸⁵ This is the argument made by Adriana Cavarero in *In Spite of Plato: A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*, trans. Serena Anderlini-D-Onofrio and Aine O’ Healy (New York: Routledge, 1995).

⁸⁶ Derrida, *The Animal*, 12.

metaphor is a political, and indeed philosophical, project.⁸⁷ Furthermore, figures of animality are especially significant and revealing. They can be, as Derrida writes in the epigraph to this chapter, ‘axiomatic,’ of what is unstated but nevertheless forcefully expressed in what claims to be merely the explication of scientific evidence.

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I suggested earlier that in parallel to the figurative use of animals, the report—and the chain of reactions and responses of which it is a major part—includes reference to the literal use of animals that partly characterises the Cartesian attitude. As a safety-net beneath its anatomical argument, the report makes the physiological claim that fetuses are not capable of pain at any gestation because of the sedating effect of placental hormones. In support of this claim, the report cites the following account of an experiment, the results of which were published in 1986: ten pregnant ewes had their flanks and their uteruses cut open, and into this fenestration a sheet of Plexiglas was sutured, permitting direct observation of the sheep fetuses for the duration of their gestation. The investigators reported that the fetal sheep did not respond in any physiologically detectable way to the stimuli to which they were subjected—there were no changes in heart rate or blood pressure—leading them to conclude that wakefulness is non-existent in utero.⁸⁸ It is surprising that the report refers to this study, for its observations contradict the observations of human fetuses which initiated the series of responses that led to the working party’s formation: the report here uses the absence of fetal sheep gestures, anatomical or hormonal, which we might call an absence of external signifiers, to confirm the absence of an internal principle; and at the same time the entire Cartesian argument of the report is based on the poor predictive value of those physiological phenomena for this purpose. More interesting still is the resonance of this study with another episode from Descartes’s biography. At some point in the seventeenth century, Descartes arranged for the slaughter of one or more pregnant cows for the specific purpose of observing the fetus inside it, as part of the anatomical studies that engaged him for a period.⁸⁹ In citing the 1986 study, which is in fact incompatible with the report’s

⁸⁷ I have taken this phrase from a review of Lakoff and Johnsons’s *Philosophy In The Flesh* by Edward Rothstein, <http://movies2.nytimes.com/books/99/02/21/reviews/990221.21rotht.html>. Lakoff and Johnson’s work on the intimate relationship between metaphor and philosophical thought has much in common with Derrida’s. Derrida’s work precedes theirs. His ‘White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy,’ predates their first book on the subject, *Metaphors We Live By*, by seven years, a fact that Lakoff and Johnson, so far as I can determine, never acknowledge.

⁸⁸ Henrique Rigatto, Michael Moore, Don Cates. ‘Fetal breathing and behavior measured through a double-wall Plexiglas window in sheep.’ *Journal of Applied Physiology* 61 (1986): 160-164.

⁸⁹ Desmond M. Clarke, *Descartes: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 332.

premises, the working party is perhaps alluding to (or, Derrida might say, confessing) its Cartesian and vivisectionary provenance.

More remarkable is how these animal-sacrificial gestures of Cartesianism are not only acknowledged but perpetuated by the reactions of other professional bodies to the RCOG's report. In addition to its request to the RCOG, Parliament asked the Medical Research Council to respond to the RCOG report, specifically to suggest further research that might help resolve some of the unanswered questions identified by the report. As we have seen, there are many such unanswered questions, most of which are contained in the text box in which the report's authors discuss the philosophically problematic nature of pain and the relationship of this concept to subjectivity. The Medical Research Council, however, acknowledges none of these gaps in understanding, which the RCOG report says are currently empirically unresolvable. Instead, the MRC makes its own mechanical reiteration of the Cartesian vivisectionary sensibility. Having reviewed and restated some of the various neurological schemes of the RCOG report, the MRC states in its conclusion—which are its recommendations to Parliament, no less—that experiments involving the injection of formalin into the hind paws of rats have been useful in understanding the physiology of pain. They therefore propose that similar experiments, perhaps undertaken on 'transgenic mice,' be pursued further.⁹⁰

Derrida gives us resources to critically consider this vivisectionary gesture, made in the face of uncertainty. It is also possible to read such a gesture more sympathetically. Like the reflex by which a person drops the hot object that is described in the RCOG report, this reiteration of a thoughtless response to the fetal response may have a protective function. Cartesianism as a protective, or even analgesic, device has been described by Gayle Whittier in her analysis of the rhetoric of neonatal intensive care. She recounts a conversation between a doctor and the worried mother of a sick newborn who is, to the mother's eyes, clearly suffering through the effects of invasive testing and medical support. 'How come she flinches every time a needle gets stuck in her?' the woman asks the doctor. The doctor replies: "*Reflex...*" And then, Whittier writes, the doctor's 'smile blinks on with its own kind of *reflex*.' Whittier suggests that this 'extreme re-somatizing of the infant as sheer matter' is a form of 'Cartesian gymnastics, the function of which is to provide 'psychic anaesthesia' for the doctor. In this way, one can 'theorize away an ethical dilemma, deflecting the practitioner's knowledge from a *body* in pain to the selective impairment of the *mind* of the patient [...] the doctor attributes to the infant what is really the suppression of his own knowledge' (emphasis in original).⁹¹ As the working party report shows, Cartesianism is easily reproducible, and its doctrine is pervasive enough to allow automated reiteration without explicit acknowledgement of this disposition as one interpretative framework among others. However, Cartesianism is only an analgesic in the way

⁹⁰ Medical Research Council, Report of the MRC Expert Group on Fetal Pain (London: Medical Research Council, 2001), section 4.2, and section 5.2, and section 9.

⁹¹ Whittier, 'The Ethics of Metaphor,' 228-9.

decapitation is an analgesic, for it demands as a price for its pain-relieving effects the separation of the head from the body. This decapitative gesture—what Derrida might call ‘cutting up a subject’⁹²—has the further protective benefit of severing us from the various responses that culminate in, and emanate from, the fetal gesture, in whose arc of production we are all in some way implicated, even if only by virtue of our nonresponse to it.

The Concept of the Reflex

I now want to consider two concepts that are important in the report, and which can be analysed with reference to Derrida’s work to demonstrate their complex nature—a complexity which the RCOG report does not acknowledge. The distinction between reflex and response on which the report depends can be understood as being situated in the history of the very concept of a reflex. This concept can itself be subjected to critique, and in fact the historical development of it has been a major subject for French philosophers. That this context is not mentioned in *The Animal* seems to be a significant omission, and I want to briefly relate Derrida’s argument to this history. When Derrida says at the beginning of *The Animal* that everything he is about to say to his audience comes back to the question of what it means to respond, he is surely also saying that everything comes back to what it means to *not* respond—that is, it concerns the concept of the nonresponse that is also termed reaction or ‘reflex.’

Descartes is often identified as the originator of the physiological concept of the reflex. *De Anima* contains illustrations of precisely the kind of situations described in the RCOG report: a person touches fire, and this produces, without passage through the soul, a response of withdrawal. Perhaps surprisingly, Derrida does not mention another French philosopher who was very concerned with the Cartesian reflex, namely Georges Canguilhem, with whom Derrida worked as a young academic. Canguilhem’s doctoral thesis was in fact on the concept of the reflex with specific reference to Descartes. Nor does Derrida mention the critique of the reflex in behaviourist psychology, as developed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Nor does he mention the succession of physiologists whose animal experiments led to the development of the modern-day concept of the reflex, experiments whose animal sacrificial victims—their nerves dissected, spinal cords severed, their bodies decapitated—must number in the millions. This history would provide compelling evidence for Derrida’s argument that mankind is involved in ‘a war against the animal,’ and furthermore that this

⁹² ‘We know less than ever where to cut—either at birth or at death. And this also means that we never know, and never have known, how to cut up a subject. Today less than ever.’ In “‘Eating Well ,” or the Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida,’ in *Who Comes After the Subject?* eds. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor and Jean-Luc Nancy (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 117.

war has been waged both through and by the concept of the reflex, by which Descartes and his successors continue to divest certain gestures of meaning.⁹³

(Furthermore, as one looks back over the history of the physiological research by which the concept of the reflex has been determined, one sees that each of these experiments is its own response or reaction to the reacting animal as framed by the preceding vivisections. We might borrow Derrida's language in the opening pages of *The Animal*, and suggest that the reflex concept these investigators were pursuing, like hunters, through the *terra incognita* of the animal body, was itself a kind of mythical beast, constructed in the imagination of mankind, and its mystique reinforced with each new vivisection that brought it closer to capture.)⁹⁴

George Canguilhem published his doctoral thesis in 1955 as *La formation de concepte du reflex au XVIIe et XVIIIe siecles*. In that book (which is yet to be translated into English in full) he reviews the historical development of the concept of the physiological reflex from Descartes to 1800. He argues that while the concept of a reflex is thought to have originated with Descartes, the physiological details of the concept that would emerge in the nineteenth century were actually more closely identified with the concept as developed by Thomas Willis, a contemporary of Descartes who is associated with the vitalist tradition to which Cartesian mechanicity typically is opposed. Canguilhem argues that the explanatory metaphors by which Descartes describes the reflex concept, using analogies of pulleys and strings, bellows and pipes, are not compatible with a truly 'physiological' concept of the reflex, of the type that would later emerge. Willis's theory, which depends on the ideas of energetic fuses, bears more terminological resemblance to the reflex that was later verified by animal experimentation, and which was taken to be scientific fact in the twentieth century. As Stuart Elden writes, Canguilhem explains that 'Descartes's analysis of involuntary movement is filled with conceptualizations which would today be rejected, and his work contains "neither the term nor the concept of reflex."' ⁹⁵

In this analysis, Canguilhem wants to show, at the level of scientific conceptual detail, that vitalists have made valuable contributions to the development of an important contemporary scientific concept, and that furthermore their work has in retrospect been erased from that historical development, because vitalism itself has fallen entirely from favour. He wants to show that vitalism is in fact intellectually continuous with a modern science of physiology that now, ironically and unjustly, rejects vitalism outright. Physiology's rejection of its vitalist ancestors is, Canguilhem

⁹³ See *The Animal*, 102. '[T]he Cartesian concept of animal-machine [is part of] [...] a war without mercy against the animal in the form of a pax humana, just one moment in this war to the death, which should in effect end in a world without animals, without any animal worthy of the name and living for something other than to become a means for man: livestock, tool, meat, body, or experimental life form.'

⁹⁴ Derrida, *The Animal*, 10-11.

⁹⁵ Stuart Elden, *Canguilhem* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019), 72.

thinks, a kind of flawed history. As Elden writes, Canguilhem revises the history so as not only to parse the conceptual and experimental details, but because by re-inserting vitalism into the intellectual history of bona fide contemporary science, Canguilhem can challenge the dominance of mechanistic biology more generally.⁹⁶

Canguilhem's account is interesting not only because it parses out the specific details of various physiological theories over the past three centuries, but because it charts the history of the involuntary gesture as the descent of the point of reflection (the actual anatomical point at which the sensory stimulus is reflected back to produce the motor movement), down the spinal column, to eventually give us the reflex as a concept that is entirely isolated from the brain—a brain which will, moreover, as the RCOG report shows, eventually be identified with the concept of a subject.⁹⁷ For Descartes and Willis, the reflex may have bypassed the conscious cogito or soul, but it nevertheless was routed through the brain. Various physiologists subsequently would hypothesise that the site of this *reflection* was lower in the central nervous system: firstly, at the level of the brain stem, just below the cortex and just above the spinal cord; and then, eventually, the American physiologist Marshall Hall would controversially propose that the spinal cord itself was capable of reflecting back the stimulus to produce the reflex, a theory which would later be proved correct.

However, towards the end of the nineteenth century, researchers noticed that while reflexes did indeed function partly at the level of the spinal cord, they could not reliably be isolated as discrete events within the organism: the stimuli that produced them had other effects in the organism beyond the reflex loop, the absence of a reflex did not always indicate pathology, and the successful elicitation of the reflex required appropriate conditions in the organism and its environment (an example being the need for relaxation of the muscle group being stimulated to contract). This is an observation that Merleau-Ponty would later explore, suggesting that the organism must be 'attuned' in a certain way for reflex gestures to be produced. Lawrence Hass glosses Merleau-Ponty's view in this way. 'It is self-evident that a reflex response in my leg occurs when the doctor taps my knee. But it is equally evident that for the "kick" to occur, I have to be set up "just so". I have to make myself a sort of object.'⁹⁸ Thus the reflex is a physiological fact that can only be produced by a certain pre-existing commitment to an objectification of the body, as the kind of mechanical being that the reflex is supposed to prove to be the case.

The reflex, Canguilhem's history shows, appeared increasingly not to be isolatable within the organism, but was in fact integrated within it: the organism was modified by the reflex and the reflex

⁹⁶ Elden, *Canguilhem*, 68.

⁹⁷ For an account of the development of this 'neurocentric' cerebral subject in intellectual history, see Fernando Vidal and Francisco Ortega, *Being Brains: Making the Cerebral Subject* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).

⁹⁸ Lawrence Hass, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 80-81.

modified by the organism; thus the concept of distinct anatomical separations between neurological pathways was shown to be a coarse schematic representation whose mechanicity failed to convey a complex integration, the kind of integration which for Canguilhem distinguishes the physiological from the mechanical. Canguilhem in fact calls the demonstration of this integration ‘the crowning achievement of nineteenth century neurophysiology.’ Again, it is surprising that Derrida makes no mention of an argument which so powerfully supports his contention that we human beings are, as he writes, integrated or ‘suspended’ over ‘an abyss [...] between the law of nature (reaction) and the law of freedom (response and responsibility).’⁹⁹

This integration was first of all observed clinically by Ernő Jendrassik, but it was described in physiological detail by Charles Scott Sherrington. Sherrington’s experiments on decerebrated rhesus monkeys, dogs, and rodents demonstrated the precise nature of the integrated reflex, showing, for example, how certain stimuli produced not only a reflex contraction of the stimulated muscle group, but relaxation of the opposing muscle group to better facilitate the effective contraction of the activated muscles. In demonstrating the ways in which the reflex was complicatedly a part of the living creature as a whole, Sherrington achieved, Canguilhem writes, ‘the dialectical synthesis of the reflex concept with the concept of organic totality’.¹⁰⁰

In 1932 Sherrington was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology, largely for his work clarifying this complex integration of the reflex. Later in his career, he underlined the importance of this integration, rejecting in rather philosophical terms the idea of a reflex as meaningfully separable from the organism or its locus of responsibility or ‘will.’ Writing in a somewhat speculative tone, he suggests that ‘Before medicine as science could give any general endorsement to [a] Robot-view of man it would have to ask more exactly what ‘will’ is. Where in regard to motor acts do we draw our line between “will” and not “will”? [...] we are partly reflex and partly not.’¹⁰¹ Sherrington calls the notion of an isolatable reflex ‘a convenient fiction,’ ‘a purely abstract conception, because all parts of the nervous system are connected together and no part of it is probably ever capable of reaction [without] affecting and being affected by various other parts’.¹⁰² This connection is mentioned (but ignored) in the RCOG working party report by one of the physiological details it describes: the release of hormones into the fetal bloodstream, as part of the fetal response to harm. These chemicals certainly do reach the fetal organism in general, and do reach the cortex, for they are not limited in their range by the kind of mechanical-anatomical barriers that are assumed to limit the effects of

⁹⁹ Derrida, *The Animal*, 83.

¹⁰⁰ Canguilhem, Georges, and Francois Delaporte, ed. *A Vital Rationalist: Selected Writings from Georges Canguilhem*, ed. Francois Delaporte, trans. Arthur Goldhammer. New York: Zone Books, 1994, 201.

¹⁰¹ Charles Sherrington, *Man on his Nature* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1940), 199-200.

¹⁰² Charles Scott Sherrington, *On The Integrative Action of The Nervous System* (New Have: Yale University Press, 1906), 8. Robert E. Burke, ‘Sir Charles Sherrington's The integrative action of the nervous system: a centenary appreciation,’ *Brain* 30, no.4 (2007): 887–894.

electrical impulses passed along nerves. This is precisely the kind of organic totality that Canguilhem worked to bring to our attention: our truly physiological, as opposed to a mechanical, nature.

In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Derrida also wonders at the nature of this will or ‘who,’ that is partly reflex and partly not, that is suspended between the reaction and ‘the response and responsibility’. For Derrida, as for Sherrington, this position cannot be resolved by the introduction of a conscious subject that purportedly can be located on one side of this distinction. In an interview with Jean-Luc Nancy, conducted a decade before Derrida delivered the lectures that would be published as *The Animal*, Derrida argues that the very concept of subjectivity, around which so much bioethical and biopolitical debate is frequently structured, is itself the product of urges and impulses that would certainly fall within the category of reflex, in their gustatory and libidinal generation. While his argument is somewhat preliminary, and would never be developed more fully, Derrida suggests that the notion of a subject is itself of a ‘carnophallogocentric’ nature. With this description, he is adding to his concept of logocentrism (the privileging of a present and rational consciousness) to suggest that subjectivity is the privileging of a flesh-consuming (carno), and virile male (phallo) master narrative about what kind of beings deserve the status of subjecthood. We can read this in the following way: the project of determining the nature of subjectivity is itself a kind of response or reaction to the phenomena we encounter in our lives, and if Derrida’s carnophallogocentrism is taken seriously as an impulse that drives our thinking, it almost certainly resides, in its corporeal and orectic origin, on the side of that distinction that one would call the domain of the reaction.

If this is the case, it should not be surprising that the rhetorical dissection of bodily subjectivity, such as that undertaken in the RCOG working party report, fails to succeed, on close analysis, in its endeavour to parse out the meaningful regions from the non-meaningful, the subject within the nonsubject. Derrida says:

[W]e never know, and never have known, how to cut up a subject. [...] There is no need to emphasize that this question of the subject and of the living “who” is at the heart of the most pressing concerns of modern societies, whether they are deciding birth or death, including what is presupposed in the treatment of sperm or the ovule, pregnant mothers, genetic genes, so called bioethics or biopolitics (what should be the role of the State in determining or protecting a living subject?), the accredited criteriology for determining, indeed for “euthanastically” provoking death (*how can the dominant reference to consciousness, to the will and the cortex still be justified?*), organ transplant, and tissue grafting [my emphasis].¹⁰³

¹⁰³ “‘Eating Well,’ or the Calculation of the Subject’: An Interview with Jacques Derrida,” in *Who Comes After the Subject?* eds. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor and Jean-Luc Nancy (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 115.

For Derrida, the tension between the organic individual and a consciousness that may or may not be therein is what is always at stake in bioethical analysis; it is not a principle by which bioethical matters can be resolved, but what those matters and our responses to them generate. In its apparent undecideability, I take it that Derrida is suggesting that this tension—‘the ethics and the politics of the living’—demands not the imposition of the decapitated animal models that so prodigiously explained the concepts they generated, but a continuous analysis of the arc of that tension’s production, at individual, discursive, and societal levels.¹⁰⁴ Derrida therefore speaks in a rather complicated but nevertheless Sherringtonian voice when he speaks of that abyss between reaction and response, which is, like Derrida’s own bordercrossing between the animal and man, and Agamben’s ceaselessly updated space of biological division, the true locus of what might properly be called the human. The reflex occupies a special place in this space of biological division.

If Derrida’s critique of the distinction between reaction and response can be situated in a critical history of the concept of the reflex, I should note in passing that this debate can itself be situated in the historical debate between vitalist and mechanistic biologies, as the place of the reflex concept in the work of Canguilhem demonstrates. In several places in *The Animal*, Derrida’s concern with nonhuman animals becomes a concern ‘for the living in general’; and throughout the work he draws on a vitalist vocabulary, using such terms as ‘irritability’ and ‘sensibility’ to characterise this living-in-general.¹⁰⁵ One finds this same attention to the living-in-general, in what appears to be a rather vitalist manner, in Agamben, but with even more explicit concern for the status of the living being

¹⁰⁴ Neurological research is in-keeping with Sherrington’s view and with Derrida’s statement that it is not possible to cut up a subject into neat constituent parts, some of which are meaningful and some of which are not. The mapping of capacities onto the nervous system is certainly not as straightforward as it might seem, and the schematic relationship between specific neurological structures and specific conscious faculties appears to be complicated. The neurologist Alan Shewmon has reported on children born with congenital brain malformations involving total or near-total absence of the cortex, which would conventionally rule out the possibility of consciousness of the type referred to in the RCOG report, and would also rule out the so-called higher conscious faculties. These children, however, were nevertheless able to engage in social interaction, demonstrate appropriate affective responses, and recognise familiar people and environments. Some even demonstrated musical preferences. Without a cortex, Shewmon argues, one can still favour Prokofiev over Mozart, or ‘Send In The Clowns’ over a Bach partita. See D. Alan Shewmon, Gregory L Holmes, Paul A. Byrne, ‘Consciousness in congenitally decorticate children: developmental vegetative state as self-fulfilling prophecy’ *Developmental Medicine & Child Neurology*, 41 (1999): 364–374.

¹⁰⁵ Catherine Packham, *Eighteenth-Century Vitalism: Bodies, Culture, Politics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 9. Martin Hägglund has noted the possibility of a vitalist reading of Derrida (though he does not mention *The Animal*), but dismisses it rather quickly and concludes that instead of pursuing a ‘form of vitalism, [we should] instead begin to think the movement of living on in its essential dependence on the lifeless, inorganic, and mechanical repetition of archematerial temporality.’ Martin Hägglund, ‘The Trace of Time: A Critique of Vitalism,’ *Derrida Today* 9, no.1 (2016): 36-46, 45.

that lacks any associated consciousness (the ‘dominant reference’ to consciousness that Derrida mentions in the quote above).

As has been noted by Agamben’s critics, such as Melinda Cooper, this merely living creature is brought to prominence in Agamben’s work in specifically human form in various places. He refers, for example, to Kleist’s ‘Über das Marionettentheatre,’ an essay in the form of a short fiction, in which one of the interlocutors concludes that ‘Grace will be most purely present in the human frame that has either no consciousness or an infinite amount of it’.¹⁰⁶ Agamben writes positively of Deleuze’s definition of life as ‘contemplation without consciousness, a passive creation that is but does not act, that exists in a state of sensation and habitual praxis,’ and which Agamben contrasts with ‘the prestige of consciousness in our culture’. He admires the thought experiments of Maine de Biran, who ‘indefatigably seeks to grasp, beyond the ego and the will, a “mode of existence that is so to speak impersonal,” which he calls “affectability” and defines as the simple organic capacity to be affected without consciousness or personality’. And he speaks of Condillac’s statue, an imaginary ‘marble statue with the complete organic structure of a human body, but insentient,’ which constitutes, in Agamben’s words, ‘a positive and complete manner of existing in its kind’.¹⁰⁷ These are just a few examples.

It would perhaps be possible to read much of Agamben, then, as a development of the nascent vitalism one can read into Derrida’s work. Agamben is concerned not so much with a refutation of the Cartesian automaton, but in reversing the philosophical divestment to which Descartes subjected this automaton, reinvesting it with the curious possibilities of perfection and grace that Kleist imagined such a being to possess. This only adds to the case put forward by Melinda Cooper, that Agamben is in various places subtly investing the fetal form, devoid of consciousness, with the kind of religious or humanist significance one associates with those who oppose abortion.

For Agamben, however, this project seems to be more complicated and radical than the production of normative arguments about abortion. Agamben calls the contemplation of these nonconscious figures ‘experiments without truth’, asking us to think about that creature which ‘is only its own ways of Being’. ‘Whoever submits himself to these experiments,’ he writes, ‘jeopardizes not so much the truth of his own statements as the very mode of his existence; he undergoes an anthropological change

¹⁰⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities*, trans. David Kishik and Stephan Pedatella, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 113-114

¹⁰⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 63-64. It is worth noting that centuries before medical technology would allow us to understand our in utero physiological development, Condillac imagines this statue developing sensory capacities one by one, in a manner remarkably similar to that of the human fetus. Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, *Condillac’s Treatise on the Sensations*, trans. Geraldine Carr (London: Favil Press, 1930), xxiii, 3; Lecanuet JP, Schaal B. Fetal sensory competencies. *European Journal of Obstetrics, Gynecology and Reproductive Biology*. 68 (1996):1-23.

that is just as decisive in the context of the individual's natural history as the liberation of the hand by the erect position was for the primate.'¹⁰⁸

It is in this way that the fetus and our responses to it can be understood to bring into question the concepts of sentience, will, and subject that are frequently applied to the fetus, and to show how the operations of responsibility cannot be accounted for satisfactorily by reference to chronologically and spatially delimited boundaries of the subject within the cortex. If the fetus is another phenomenon, like those Agamben lists, by which we can radically re-evaluate the grounds of anthropocentric humanism, it is not obvious to me that this leaves pregnant women who are requesting abortion in a precarious state. Rather, it would open up the space for a discourse around fetal life and its destruction in abortion that is truly informed by the complexities that those matters present.

The Concept of Communication

The second concept I want to focus on that has an important place in the RCOG working party report and which Derrida has examined in considerable detail throughout his career, is that of communication. As I have tried to show, the report depends for its conclusions on the argument that because pain is essentially verbal in nature, and the fetus cannot speak to itself or to others, the fetus cannot experience pain. At the same time, the report offers the idea that neurons are capable of 'speaking' to one another. The fetus itself is a nonspeaking animal, precisely because its neurons are capable of speech, but the words carried in these nerves never reach their cortical target.

The report proves Derrida's contention that at the heart of distinctions between mind and body is a question of language, a question about the form taken by signs and their status as valid (meaningful) instances of such. The report uses the concept of communication widely and in various ways, and this use is both literal and figurative: the neurons in the peripheral nervous system speak to each other and speak or fail to speak to the cortex; but at the same time the fetus itself is not capable of speaking to us about the situation to which it is responding. Therefore there is an important place for rhetoric in reading the report, and an important place for attention to the literal-figurative divide therein, for this is a distinction that Derrida frequently problematises.

¹⁰⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 260. I would add to this list the tick described by Jacob von Uexküll, which Agamben describes in *The Open*. This tick, deprived of the few stimuli to which it is capable of reacting, lives for decades in a state of suspended animation. But, Agamben asks, But what becomes of the tick and its world in this state of suspension that lasts eighteen years? How is it possible for a living being that consists entirely in its relationship with the environment to survive in absolute deprivation of that environment? And what sense does it make to speak of "waiting" without time and without world? Agamben, *The Open*, 47. See my conclusion for further comment.

The capacity for fetal communication is in fact withheld by a special form of communication, namely the use of metaphors, of metaphors of speech and animality. This is notable for two reasons. Firstly, the capacity for ‘literal,’ or what might only tentatively be called ‘real’ communication, from the fetus to anyone witnessing its gestures, is withheld by metaphorical communication. But metaphors are, as Derrida argues in ‘Signature, Event, Context,’ instances of communication which are, in their own way, questionable in their status as communication, for they are in their very nature of a substitutive a form, and therefore in a sense they speak by *not* speaking about what it is they are supposed to be speaking about; they speak about something else instead (the fruit fly larva instead of the fetus, for example).

In ‘Signature, Event, Context,’ Derrida considers and complicates the concept of communication in the course of analysing the concept of performative language described by J.L. Austin. For Austin, performative utterances are those like the ‘I do’ of a wedding ceremony, speech acts made into specific and highly convention-determined circumstances. For Derrida, all utterances function only within such a context; it is just that our day-to-day contexts are so pervasive as to have been forgotten and pass without notice. Derrida develops Austin’s account to argue that language is so radically dependent on context that all utterances can be subjected to analysis as what Austin calls performative. Communication always depends on context.

In the course of this discussion, Derrida makes several remarks on the word communication more generally, reminding us that this word refers not only to the use of language, but, in what might be deemed either a figurative or literal sense, to a channel or passageway, and to the propagation of a force that is ‘communicated’ through matter in the form of transferred energy. These comments both problematise the certainty of a distinction between literal and figurative communication, while radically opening up the field of what counts as communication. While language frequently is taken to be, in a sense, the gold-standard form of meaningful or true communication, this is, it seems, only one of its forms. As Derrida writes in *Speech and Phenomena*, in the excerpt that forms one of the epigraphs to this chapter, once distinctions between meaningful and meaningless signs or communications is shown to be arbitrary, we are led to the conclusion that the spoken word is but one form of communicative gesture among a broader field of such gestures, forces, and interactions.

Importantly for Derrida, we cannot decide which of these meanings of communication—the transmission of signifiers or the patent passageway—is ‘primary’ or literal, and which is ‘secondary’ or metaphorical: communication is all these things, language, connection, transmission, dissemination—of anything that can be so communicated, including and not limited to semiolinguistic signs, metaphors, currents of chemical depolarisation, and physical or physiological forces. We would only seek to determine whether communication is primarily literal rather than figurative if we are attempting to close down the possibilities of what counts as communication—which is in a sense precisely the goal of the RCOG working party report and of Descartes in his account of animals.

In characteristic fashion, Derrida points out the irony that consequently there is a communicative uncertainty in the word communication itself. 'The word communication [...] opens a semantic field which precisely is not limited to semantics, semiotics, and even less to linguistics.' He writes:

[W]e will not say that this nonsemiotic sense of the word communication, such as it is at work in ordinary languages, constitutes the proper or primitive meaning, and that consequently the semantic, semiotic, or linguistic meaning corresponds to a derivation, and extension, a reduction, a metaphoric displacement [...] because the value of literal, proper meaning appears more problematic than ever, because the value of displacement, or transport, etc., is constitutive of the very concept of metaphor by means of which one allegedly understands the semantic displacement which is operated from communication as a semiolinguistic phenomenon to communication as a nonsemiolinguistic phenomenon.¹⁰⁹

What Derrida points out for a reading of the RCOG report is how language there regulates what can meaningfully be said about fetal gestures: the linguistic or verbal standard dominates our horizon of interpretative possibilities. But to limit the fetal capacity for communication in this way, the report in fact uses what is itself an ambiguous form of communication: the metaphors of neurons speaking and of fetus-as-animal.

The problem such linguistic framings pose for fetal life is more serious than simply their internal inconsistency and arbitrary commitment to certain forms of communication. It seems. Depriving the fetal gesture of a capacity to speak renders those gestures what Derrida would call 'a signifier without signified,' (a term which Derrida takes from Levinas, who has himself developed these terms from Saussurean linguistics),¹¹⁰ and this deprivation severely limits our ability to speak meaningfully about the fetus and its gestures. Within the RCOG account the fetal gesture takes on not just a kind of semantic emptiness; it becomes a sign of the fetal body's capacity for deception. One of the working party members, Stuart Derbyshire, has in his own independent work compared the fetal reflex gesture to the fruit fly larva, but also to the movements of a thermostat that alters its reading and output in response to changes in temperature. (In his remarkably mechanistic account, Derbyshire even compares fetal gestures to rocks shattering apart under an applied force.) This reference to an instrument of measurement implies that the fetal gesture and the fetal body itself, if it is significant at all, is to be understood as an instrument for the measurement of an internal state. Consequently, the fetal body and the fetal gesture, the fetus in its entirety, becomes not just a signifier without signified but a *false* signifier; because, if the fetal gesture takes on value only in its accurate representation of

¹⁰⁹ 'Signature, Event, Context,' in *Between the Blinds: A Derrida Reader*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991): 82-83.

¹¹⁰ Derrida, *The Animal*, 117.

an internal state, the fetal body in this case has been proven by reference to neuroanatomy to be a faulty instrument for the measurement of any internal state, just as a thermostat that reads ‘30°’ when it is in fact -20° would be faulty. In this way, the report implicitly but powerfully re-enforces a sceptical disposition towards the body which we can again see as an echo of Descartes, or of the Platonic or Neoplatonic account of the body as a deceptive form that conceals from us the true nature of reality. In the RCOG report the fetal gesture is not to be ignored but is in fact a sign that bodies *must be* ignored.¹¹¹

Mirroring the Reaction or Response

The consequences of rendering the fetal hand as an instrument of false signification in this way are profound, then, and it is not surprising if one finds that within the terms of the RCOG working party report it is almost impossible to articulate a meaning for the fetal gesture. Consequently, for anyone concerned to reinvest the fetus and fetal gesture with meaning, a radically different disposition from that which operates in the RCOG report must necessarily be adopted. This is why my argument has been concerned primarily to expose that disposition and its more strikingly problematic and disturbing dimensions.

¹¹¹ A more complicated example of this attitude that I will mention only in passing here—one in which pain and the bodily metonymy of the hand that has already been mentioned by Peter Saunders are prominent—can be found in Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, where Wittgenstein asks: ‘But isn’t it absurd to say of a body that it has pain?—And why does one feel an absurdity in that? In what sense is it true that my hand does not feel pain, but I in my hand? What sort of issue is: Is it the body that feels pain?—How is it to be decided? What makes it plausible to say that it is not the body?—Well, something like this: if someone has a pain in his hand, then the hand does not say so (unless it writes it). Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (London: Blackwell, 2009), §286 §.284 314. The absurdity Wittgenstein mentions here is perhaps related to the absurdity that David Lurie feels in his careful treatment of the dead dogs in *Disgrace*. In this connection see also Wittgenstein’s comment: ‘And so, too, a corpse seems to us quite inaccessible to pain...’ Interestingly, in §314, Wittgenstein makes a short note in double brackets after his famous comment concerning roses having teeth: ‘((Connexion with pain in someone else’s body))’. This is not discussed further. P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte in the notes to the revised fourth edition of *Philosophical Investigations* annotate this comment as follows: ‘In the 1930s Wittgenstein toyed with the idea of the intelligibility of feeling pain another person’s body, on the grounds that the criteria for pain location is where the sufferer points, and it is conceivable that when asked where one has a pain, one might (with eyes closed) point to someone else’s body. It is unclear what reminder this note is meant to be, in particular whether Wittgenstein wished to reaffirm the intelligibility of pain in another’s body, or, arguably better, to put the supposition on the same level as the statement that a rose has teeth in the mouth of an animal.’ (London: Blackwell, 2009), 265. One might develop this account by suggesting that the pain that is purportedly not felt in the fetal body is nevertheless felt by a witness to its gestures, but I will not pursue this here.

But what are the consequences of the reaction-response distinction in how we interpret our own responses to the fetus and its destruction? In the field of bioethics, certain types of response to our practices are frequently excluded from the domain of validity in a similar fashion; that is, they are effectively excluded as valid—meaningful—ethical responses. These responses—or reactions—are typically those associated with a kind of corporeality or non-cortical origin, and which are often referred to as emotions or intuitions.¹¹²

Two written accounts of performing abortion provide a useful conclusion here, concerning the effects of this reflex-response distinction on our capacity to respond, and to articulate our responses, to complex matters like performing or otherwise taking responsibility for an abortion. The gynaecologist Lisa Harris has written movingly about her experience of performing an abortion on a woman at 18 weeks gestation, while Harris herself was 18 weeks pregnant. She feels her own fetus moving as she performs the abortion, and she writes: ‘Tears were streaming from my eyes—without me—meaning my conscious brain—even being aware of what was going on. I felt as if my response had come entirely from my body, bypassing my usual cognitive processing completely. A message seemed to travel from my hand and my uterus to my tear ducts.’¹¹³ Harris’s honesty is striking here, and indeed some of her colleagues expressed deep concern that she was providing ammunition to opponents of abortion by speaking with such frankness. But by doing so, Harris hopes to ‘change the discourse’ around abortion, so that medical, sociological and philosophical debate reflects more accurately what abortion is and how it is experienced by women and their medical providers. This seems to be a very important task, because, as Harris writes in her article, currently it is the response of those who oppose abortion which engages most honestly with the bodily reality of the fetus, typically in the form of placards showing dismembered fetuses, which are displayed to women entering abortion clinics.

However, what is also striking is the manner in which Harris’s description of her response to the abortion uses the same anatomical scheme of the reflex-reaction distinction that is used in the working party report. The ‘message’ that travels from the fetal body to her own, from one part of a body to her own, is powerful and overwhelming; but Harris seems to reject the notion that this message is really received by *her*, suggesting instead that it bypasses the locus of personhood that she equates with her conscious brain. With one gesture Harris both acknowledges and passes on to her readers the force of this message, but she simultaneously reduces the communicative impact by excluding that force from

¹¹² For a recent and concise review of this situation, see Mark Sheehan, ‘The Role of Emotions in Ethics and Bioethics: Dealing With Repugnance and Disgust.’ *Journal of Medical Ethics* 42 (2016): 1-2. Sheehan is sympathetic to the idea that emotions should be taken into account, but does not accept that they are meaningful responses in the way that, for example, arguments are taken to be.

¹¹³ Lisa H. Harris, ‘Second trimester abortion provision: breaking the silence and changing the discourse.’ *Reproductive Health Matters*, 16 (2008): 76.

the realm of truly inter- or intra-subjective cortical communication. She presents it explicitly in the terms of the reflex. Yet, what her article shows so generously is that this force has in fact breached the threshold between reflex and response, body and consciousness, for it is surely the synthesis of these two gestures by which the article has been produced.

More than thirty years ago, another abortion provider, Warren Hern, wrote with equal candour about the various responses experienced by staff at his abortion clinic in Colorado. These included nausea, nightmares, and relationship breakdown. Contemplating this, Hern writes that ‘Some of our cultural and perhaps even biological heritage recoils at a destructive operation on a form that is similar to our own, even though we know that the act has a positive effect for a living person.’ It is instructive to pay close attention again to the language here: Hern invokes a phylogenetic and physiological explanation for his own recoiling, which mirrors that of the reflexes we can observe in the fetus being destroyed. Yet significantly he makes no attempt to separate this gesture from the subject which he identifies as his self. In fact, in the following sentence, he leaves open how this recoiling and the force that produces it might be understood: ‘No-one who has not performed [surgical abortion] can know what it is like or what it means; but having performed it, we are bewildered by the possibilities of interpretation.’¹¹⁴ Hern’s response is not to appeal to any distinction that would explain his or the fetal response in abstracted or outdated physiological terms; rather, his response is to maintain an openness to the proliferating possibilities of interpretation that such an event presents. I have tried here to develop one such interpretation, one which chooses to open-up the possibilities of communication by which the question of fetal pain is dominated; and to thereby re-invest the fetal body—without normative commitments—with possibilities of meaning that are withheld by the RCOG and the tradition from which it is derived.

¹¹⁴ Hern’s comments echo those of George’s Canguilhem, who writes that ‘Only the operating surgeon [...] can say if the operation has gone beyond a strictly surgical gesture, that is, beyond the therapeutic intention.’

Georges Canguilhem, *Knowledge of Life*, trans. Stefanos Geroulanos (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 20.

CHAPTER TWO
Abortion in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

In what respect does this demonic mystery of desire involve us in a history of responsibility [...]?

Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*

J.M. Coetzee's 1999 novel *Disgrace*¹¹⁵ follows the fortunes of a fifty-two year-old, white, divorced professor of literature in Post-Apartheid South Africa, as he renegotiates his place and responsibilities in the shifting hierarchies of racial and sexual power. This renegotiation takes place because the politics of South Africa is changing after the fall of the apartheid government, and it is catalysed more acutely by three other events: the ending of David's arrangement of weekly meetings with a prostitute named Soraya; the ignominy David brings on himself when he begins an affair with and, as he understands it, 'not quite' rapes one of his students, Melanie Isaacs; and the gang-rape of David's daughter Lucy at the hands of two men and a boy, who may be in league with Lucy's apparently benevolent neighbour in the remote farmland of the Western Cape. These events seem calculated to disprove David's claim, made in the novel's first sentence, that he has solved what he calls 'the problem of sex' (1).

Lucy herself therefore plays a critical role in the narrative, but as a character she is undeveloped, as David Attwell observes in a biography that draws heavily on the notebooks Coetzee kept during the writing of *Disgrace*. While Coetzee tried at various stages to develop Lucy's 'inner life,' he felt unable to do so, partly because the nature of that experience as female seemed inaccessible to him (and David himself speaks of the difficulty of imagining himself in his daughter's place) and partly because it seemed impossible to do so without derailing the novel and whatever image he had in mind for it.¹¹⁶ Consequently, Lucy serves the plot, David, and his renegotiations; like all the women in the novel, her purpose is to teach him something. But this edification comes at her expense, both in the events of the novel itself and in her undeveloped status in the text.

David's renegotiations, in particular those with the women in whom his sexual interest does or does not lie, are mediated to a considerable degree through a shift in his relationship to animals. Cast-out from the university after the scandal of his affair with Melanie, David moves to his daughter's

¹¹⁵ JM Coetzee, *Disgrace*, (London: Vintage, 2000). For this text only all page citations are referred to in brackets in the text.

¹¹⁶ David Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing: Face to Face With Time* (New York: Viking, 2015), 204.

smallholding and begins working at a clinic where unwanted dogs are put-down by a woman named Bev Shaw. David has ambivalent feelings about Bev. She is a ‘priestess, full of New Age mumbo jumbo’ (84), possessing both a profound affiliation with animals and a questionable disposition that allows her to kill them. He goes so far as to wonder if ‘beneath her show of compassion’ there hides ‘a heart as leathery as a butcher’s’ (144). In his speculation, David does not shy away from calling Bev—and eventually himself—a murderer (143).

Yet he becomes increasingly focused on how Bev kills these animals, and on the subsequent disposal of their bodies. He takes over the role of loading the carcasses into the furnace in the grounds of the local hospital, sparing them the dishonour of being ‘beaten into a more convenient shape for processing’ (146) by the incinerator workmen, who smash the dogs’ stiffened bodies into the fire. And in the final pages of the novel, we read that ‘He has learned by now, from her [Bev Shaw], to concentrate all his attention on the animal they are killing, giving it what he no longer has difficulty in calling by its proper name: love’ (219).

David’s concentrated attention to the killing and disposal of bodies that he participates in is excruciating for him. ‘What used to be as hard as hard can be grows harder yet,’ he thinks in the novel’s final pages. But ‘one gets used to things getting harder’ (219), and this hardness never turns into an urge on David’s part to stop the relentless process of canine euthanasia, which appears to be the only available solution to the problem of abundant sexuality and fertility that the dogs embody, suffering as they do ‘from their own fertility’ (142)—in other words, the problem of sex. This attention intensifies the proximity in the novel of sexuality and killing, of life and death, and through his experience of this proximity, David seems to come to terms with the crimes he has been able to commit because of his position of privilege, and indeed with the crimes of others that are part of the inheritance this privilege confers.¹¹⁷

It is perhaps partly this coming-to-terms—with a body, and a body marked by the problem of sex—that is dramatized by David’s careful disposal of the dead dogs. Coetzee’s description of David loading the corpses into the hospital incinerator has been read carefully by a significant proportion of the novel’s commentators. David himself is fully aware of the striking bathos of his actions, which for him have both the solemnity of ritual and an absurdity which borders on psychopathology.

David and Bev might be read respectively as representatives of sexual irresponsibility and responsibility: David submits to *eros* (52), and feels deep sympathy for dogs who are beaten over the head to curtail their sexual impulses (90); and in a novel full of sex, the only character who thinks about contraception is Bev Shaw, who passes David a condom during their first rendezvous at the clinic (149). But this over-simplified interpretation is thrown into disarray by that rendezvous, and in particular by its taking place in the very room in which the pair kill the innumerable dogs that David

¹¹⁷ Or at least he doesn’t commit suicide, which was one of the endings Coetzee entertained throughout writing the book. Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee*, 221

will later send into the incinerator: David and Bev even have sex on the floor while surrounded by the bagged-up corpses of a day's work. This further intensifies the proximity of sex and death, such that even David cannot face the idea of having sex on the surgical bed itself (149).

The troubling nature of the sexual response—the problem of sex, again—is represented repeatedly in the novel as a force close to the infliction of death or other forms of profound violence, but David nevertheless maintains at the end of the novel that he has been ‘enriched’ by his sexual life (193). Lucy Graham has suggested that David's ‘care for the dogs could be seen as his own attempt to recover redemption, or the grace that he feels he has lost. In other words, one could read Lurie's care as further evidence of the selfish nature of a human being.’¹¹⁸ I have wondered, in a somewhat related way, whether there is indeed something sexually self-regarding in David's care for the dogs: perhaps their stiffened legs represent for him a terminal crescendo of Augustinian tumescence over which the body has little or no control.¹¹⁹ This could be read as a somewhat perverse reframing of the ‘placid concupiscence’ David enjoys¹²⁰—as Coetzee sketched the character in his notebooks—and which Coetzee wanted to disrupt with the novel's events.

Other readings of this scene have been more sympathetic to David, understanding his intervention in positive terms. However, these accounts often include a problematic reference to the terms of analytic philosophical ethics. Don Randall writes that Coetzee has ‘affinities with a modern line of Anglophone-world utilitarian ethics, for which Peter Singer provides the most prominent contemporary voice.’ David Lurie refuses ‘to violate what one might call a poetics of sentient being, which discerns in a dog's lifeless body the formal affirmation of sentience.’¹²¹ However, the essay contributed by Singer to *The Lives of Animals* (1999), the published form of Coetzee's Tanner Lectures, demonstrates clearly that while Coetzee and Singer share a deep sympathy for animals who are mistreated by humans, the ways in which they reach and articulate that sympathy are very different. In *The Lives of Animals*, which was written and published contemporaneously with

¹¹⁸ Lucy Graham, ‘“Yes, I am giving him up”: Sacrificial responsibility and likeness with dogs in J.M. Coetzee's recent fiction,’ *Scrutiny* 27, no.1 (2002): 4, 11.

¹¹⁹ In 2017, Coetzee published a short story in the *New Yorker* entitled ‘The Dog’. In addition to the reappearance of canines, the story is charged with the threat of sexual violence, and Coetzee writes: ‘Augustine says that the clearest evidence that we are fallen creatures lies in the fact that we cannot control the movements of our own bodies. Specifically, a man is unable to control the motions of his virile member.’ November 27, 2017. Available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/04/the-dog> Accessed May 2019. I think it bears noting that involuntary erections begin in the human male in utero, from as early as 15 weeks gestational age. See D.A. Hitchcock, J.H. Sutphen, T.A. Scholly, ‘Demonstration of fetal penile erection in utero.’ *Perinatology and Neonatology* Vol. 4 (1980): 59–60.

¹²⁰ Attwell, *Coetzee*, 205

¹²¹ Don Randall, ‘The Community of Sentient Beings: J. M. Coetzee's Ecology in *Disgrace* and Elizabeth Costello,’ *English Studies in Canada* 33, nos.1-2 (2007): 209-25.

Disgrace, the principal character Elizabeth Costello is drawn into a philosophical debate about animals, and she says to an interlocutor: ‘What I mind is what tends to come next. They have no consciousness therefore. Therefore what?’¹²² The posing of this question obviously does not endorse the kinds of ethical schemes, grounded in a utilitarian sentientism, which Randall invokes as a theoretical correlate of Coetzee’s fiction.

Yet Randall is not alone in trying to reframe David and the dogs in the terms of Anglophone philosophy, with which his work is, in many ways, in polemical dialogue (as I argue in the introduction to this thesis). Carol Clarkson sees David connecting with other ‘sentient beings.’¹²³ Andy Lamey (to whom we will return), in the volume *JM Coetzee and Ethics* (2010), writes: ‘To sympathetically identify with a being requires that it have a consciousness [...] No-one ever asks us what it’s like to be a river or a tree.’ And Elisa Aaltola’s chapter in the same volume speaks of adopting the ‘animal point of view’.¹²⁴ I believe these readings, centred as they are around the concept of sentience that dominates much contemporary moral philosophy, miss the possibility for a more fundamental reappraisal of ethics that is offered by Coetzee’s work, and by this moment of *Disgrace* in particular.¹²⁵ Indeed, they fail to recognise the way in which responsibility as an ethical concept is bound up in the novel with a specifically sexual responsibility, or, in the case of Lurie and other male characters, a sexual irresponsibility.

For Alice Crary, writing in her book *Inside Ethics* (2016), this section of the novel is of interest because it depicts David Lurie ‘as sensitive to what he sees as dishonor to which dogs’ bodies may be subject [...] in a way that encourages us to imaginatively explore his perspective. Coetzee’s novel invites its readers to look at dogs’ corpses as if from Lurie’s perspective’.¹²⁶ Derek Attridge, commenting on an earlier essay of Crary’s which contains a similar argument, finds this account insufficient. He writes: ‘I’m not sure this reading does justice to the way the novel, as an experience

¹²² J.M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (London: Vintage, 2003), 90.

¹²³ Carrol Clarkson, “‘Done because we are too menny’”: Ethics and Identity in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*,’ *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa* 15, no.2 (2003): 77-90.

¹²⁴ Andy Lamey, ‘Sympathy and Scapegoating in JM Coetzee,’ and Elisa Aaltola, ‘Coetzee and Alternative Animal Ethics,’ in *J.M. Coetzee and Ethics: Philosophical Perspectives on Literature*, eds. Anton Leist and Peter Singer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 187, 125.

¹²⁵ For more on the fundamental differences in approach to writing about animals and ethics in Coetzee and Singer, see Stephen Mulhall’s chapter on Singer’s contribution to *The Lives of Animals*, in Stephen Mulhall, *The Wounded Animal: JM Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 58-68.

¹²⁶ Alice Crary, *Inside Ethics: The Demands of Moral Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016), 156.

the reader lives through, challenges the very basis of our moral norms.’¹²⁷ And indeed Crary’s analysis, with its reference to imagining different subjective perspectives, depends ultimately on concepts of sentience which seem inapplicable to the corpses of the dogs, and which could be perfectly well represented by David making a gesture of kindness to dogs who are still alive. David’s response to the bodies of the dogs seems to have something to do with the physicality of bodies in general, not with their associated properties of sentience, a word which (so far as I can determine) never appears in Coetzee’s fictions. This attention to the body per se appears again in *Disgrace*, when David imagines a surgeon hunched over his torso, which is laid open ‘from throat to groin’, growling ‘What is all this stuff?’ as he prods at the various organs (171).¹²⁸ And again, there is a special emphasis in the novel on the sexual dimension of those bodies and their ethical responses, which is not recognised by Crary and is recognised as a somewhat separate issue by Attridge.

Coetzee himself expresses the fascination of the surgeon depicted as vivisectioning David Lurie, in the comment made during an interview with David Attwell: ‘If I look back over my own fiction, I see a simple (simple minded?) standard erected. That standard is the body. Whatever else, the body is not “that which is not,” and the proof that it *is* is the pain it feels. The body with its pain becomes ‘a counter to the endless trials of doubt.’¹²⁹ As I suggest in the introduction to this thesis, it is in this way that David’s gesture towards the corpses of the dogs can be understood as a gesture of defiance towards a Neoplatonic and Cartesian philosophical tradition in which the body is regarded with indifference, aversion, or is ignored completely.

In Attridge’s account the important challenge posed by the novel to our ethical thinking is as elusive as it is profound. There are two places in which Attridge has analysed David’s relationship to the dogs. Firstly, in *J.M. Coetzee and The Ethics of Reading*, this elusiveness is demonstrated by the various terms Attridge tests-out as he considers David’s intervention:

¹²⁷ Derek Attridge, ‘A Yes without a No’ Philosophical Reason and the Ethics of Conversion in Coetzee’s Fiction,’ in *Beyond the Ancient Quarrel: Literature, Philosophy and JM Coetzee*, ed. Patrick Hayes and Jan Wilm. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 98.

¹²⁸ The two organs mentioned specifically are the heart and the gallbladder. The first has obvious associations with eros and care, while the second has a special place in sacrificial ritual because, as David notes, it cannot be eaten (124); hence it was often the part conveniently sacrificed to the gods in Ancient Greek sacrificial practice.

¹²⁹ J.M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. David Attwell (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1992) 248. ‘That which is not’ presumably refers to the Platonic—and hence fundamentally philosophical—enterprise of ontology, that is, determining what is and what is not. I will not explore further here the obvious connections between my analysis in Chapter One, and in particular the conversation that one could develop between Coetzee’s comment regarding the body with its pain, and Wittgenstein’s belief that it is not the body that has pain; a comparative reading of Coetzee’s oeuvre alongside the *Philosophical Investigations* is beyond the scope of my thesis.

This degree of attention to the corpses is excessive by any rational accounting [...]. [T]his can't be termed an ethical response, nor is it really an affective reaction; it's an impulse more obscure if no less commanding than these. One can't call it a biocentric attitude in the sense of taking on the animals' perspective: the dogs feel nothing at this point, and the values that Lurie is safeguarding on their behalf—honor, dignity—are products of human culture through and through. Yet in this absurd misapplication of the terms of human culture to dead animals there is an obstinate assertion of values more fundamental, if more enigmatic, than those embodied in the discourses of reason, politics, emotion, ethics, or religion—those discourses that govern the new South Africa and much else besides.¹³⁰

Attridge provides here at least seven possible accounts of David's behaviour: an excessive degree of attention; a compulsion; an 'ethical response'; an 'affective reaction'; an 'impulse'; a 'biocentric attitude'; and, finally, an 'absurd misapplication of the terms of human culture.' Elsewhere in the same essay he reads David's actions as 'a profound need to preserve the ethical integrity of the self'.¹³¹

From all these possibilities, those which Attridge feels to be most suitable are 'impulse' and 'absurd misapplication...' The former term seems again to invoke the involuntary Augustinian sexual response; but it also develops a vocabulary for the ethical response, a gesture that is generated without passing through some locus of a rational cognitive faculty. The problem exposed by Attridge's detailed analysis of David's intervention, and particularly by the notion of an impulse that is misapplied yet nevertheless ethically meaningful, is the very problem of what counts as an ethical response; and facing this problem is another way of asking about the fundamental nature of ethics. Impulse here has connotations of involuntariness that would put it not just on a sexual plane, but would position it in contrast to the concept of an ethical agent as a locus of rational free will, the autonomous Kantian agent led by contemplative reason. Can an impulse be termed, in a meaningful or ethical sense, a response or a sign of responsibility? How could such an impulse be factored into the calculus of an ethics of pure or quantifiable rationality, the type of ethical thinking that dominates the philosophical tradition against which David's actions seem so wrongheaded? 'It is precisely the

¹³⁰ Attridge, J.M. *Coetzee*, 186. Medical ethics is one of the entities one might include in Attridge's 'much else besides'. In North America there is increasing interest in the 'moral experiences' of medical and nursing practitioners; but this has resulted primarily in projects like Johns Hopkins University's Mindful Ethical Practice and Resilience Academy (MEPRA), where one can learn to 'transform moral adversity into moral resilience.' I make this observation not to suggest such projects are without benefits, but to underscore that this is a very different approach to moral experience than the one taken by Coetzee, and by Attridge in his reading of Coetzee. See Georgina Morley, 'What is "moral distress" in nursing? How, can and should we respond to it?' *Journal of Clinical Nursing* (2018) 27;19-20:3443–3445.

¹³¹ Attridge, J.M. *Coetzee*, 187.

notion of cost, the measurement of profit and loss, that Coetzee questions in *Disgrace* and that literature puts to the test,' Attridge writes of *Disgrace*.¹³² What then is gained and what is lost when ethical gestures are subjected to this kind of calculus? Or when certain gestures, because sexual or otherwise impulsive in character, are dismissed from the domain of ethics? David himself, despite submitting to his strange impulse, appears to have internalised that calculating mentality, and views his impulse to intervene in the disposal of the dogs as somewhat ridiculous.

Attridge returns to David Lurie and the dogs in his contribution to the recent collection *Beyond the Ancient Quarrel: Literature, Philosophy, and J.M. Coetzee* (2018). There he focuses on the scene in which David, having completed his day's work disposing of the dogs, is driving home and stops at the roadside when he begins to cry and shake uncontrollably. This experience of crisis is, Attridge suggests, a kind of 'ethical conversion experience,' which exceeds the limits of what philosophical discourse can capture about the human experience of ethics and responsibility. Describing ethical experience as an *event*, rather than the successful exercise of a predetermined moral system, Attridge relates the ethical charge of Coetzee's fiction to the work Emmanuel Levinas, which, according to archival material, Coetzee was reading around the time that he was writing *Disgrace* and *The Lives of Animals*.¹³³ Yet it is important to note that Attridge would not argue that Coetzee's fiction should be read as the staging of any philosophical theory, including those of Levinas. Rather, Coetzee appears to share the Levinasian view that ethics is anterior to everything else, including the faculties of reason. It is something to do with the body: prerational, sub-rational, or supra-rational.

This chronological sense of anteriority appears to have an evolutionary, phylogenetic dimension, and also an ontological one: ethics is first philosophy, as Levinas put it. And for Coetzee, our ethical responses, if grounded in the past, are essential to and constitutive of our current lived reality. Coetzee's fiction of course does not make an explicit argument for such a view; rather it might be thought of as transmitting to the reader the same forces of realisation and responsibility that are experienced by his characters, such that the reader can, if so disposed, undergo an ethical conversion experience of their own, and take that experience seriously as something ethically meaningful. This conversion need not have any religious implication; rather, it is perhaps best thought of as a *reversion* or *integration*, the validation of fundamental impulses that our dominant contemporary discourses of rationality have caused us to neglect, doubt, or reject. Attridge points out that in Coetzee's fiction, such pre-rational impulses are certainly not a cause for unambivalent celebration, and of course *Disgrace* very clearly represents the impulse of sexual desire as 'permanently ambiguous'.¹³⁴

¹³² Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee*, 191.

¹³³ Derek Attridge. 'A Yes without a No' Philosophical Reason and the Ethics of Conversion in Coetzee's Fiction,' in *Beyond the Ancient Quarrel: Literature, Philosophy and J.M. Coetzee*, ed. Patrick Hayes and Jan Wilm. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

¹³⁴ Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee*, 190.

Alongside the story of David and Bev and the dogs, the plot of the novel develops more broadly around other forces of sexual desire, the pregnancy that results from Lucy's rape, and her refusal to abort the pregnancy, as her father immediately suggests she should do. It should not be surprising that Coetzee is interested to juxtapose the problem of sex and the problem of ethics. Eileen John argues that much of the ethical force of Coetzee's work derives precisely from the place of erotic drives in it. She draws on the account of eros given by Diotima in Plato's *Symposium*, as an urge that is not purely sexual in nature but is 'a beauty-seeking, moving force that can take us all the way from narrowly physical, individual erotic attractions to love for virtue.' John argues that 'eros has a capacity to awaken us to the reality of others. [...] The erotic impulse seems to have a crucial but difficult role in moral transformation.'¹³⁵

This account of Platonic eros as a positive force is, considering the events of *Disgrace*, rather optimistic, but nevertheless it helpfully brings together the problem of sexuality—or, to be more precise, heterosexuality, for it is this form of sexuality the novel is almost exclusively concerned with—and ethics in an enlightening way. This approximation is all the more valuable in a book which is, at least partly, about abortion and its rejection. The ethics of *Disgrace* is utterly embedded in a matrix of heterosexual behaviours of varying characteristics: romanticised, overtly or tacitly violent, wistful, biologically forceful, or driven by a Freudian id. (The novel invokes Freud explicitly when David considers—and rejects—the 'pleasure principle' as a motivating force for Lucy's rapists, this psychobiological urge being secondary to political and territorial concerns, in David's view.) And abortion in the novel is as much a sexual issue as it is an ethical one; or rather, sex is peculiarly ethical, just as ethics is peculiarly sexual; and sex is peculiar in its ability to shape our response to others more generally. This is what Eileen John argues, with sex occupying a curiously particular position in our moral lives. It thereby places on us special demands and requires special awareness of our responsibilities, passivities, and privileges.

To further emphasise the differences between Coetzee's and Peter Singer's views on ethics, it is worth noting that the account of sex and ethics I have developed from John stands in marked contrast to the account put forward by Singer in his widely read and widely taught *Practical Ethics*. This book starts with a section titled 'What Ethics Is Not':

So the first thing to say about ethics is that it is not a set of prohibitions particularly concerned with sex. Even in the era of AIDS, sex raises no unique moral issues at all. Decisions about sex may involve considerations of honesty, concern for others, prudence, and so on, but there is nothing special about sex in this respect, for the same could be said of decisions about driving a car. (In fact, the moral issues raised by driving a car, both from an environmental and from a safety point of view, are much more serious than those raised by sex.)

¹³⁵ Eileen John, 'Coetzee and Eros: A Critique of Moral Philosophy,' in *Beyond the Ancient Quarrel*, 120.

Accordingly, this book contains no discussion of sexual morality. There are more important ethical issues to be considered.

One can understand what Singer is trying to do: he wants to get rid of the idea that ethics is a kind of puritanical and quasi-religious project. But to do so he goes to an absurd extreme, in a manner which betrays not only a gross inattention to gender, but a gross inattention to the ways in which the removal of sex from the domain of ethics could be seen as self-serving for a heterosexual man. Singer's book includes a substantial chapter on abortion, which, in keeping with this overarching metaethical principle, never mentions sex. The view that ethics, and the ethics of abortion, have nothing to do with sex is rather like the psychiatrist noted by Freud in one of his introductory lectures on psychoanalysis: 'I have been told that the pupils of a celebrated psychiatrist made an attempt once to convince their teacher of how frequently the symptoms of hysterical patients represent sexual things. For this purpose they took him to the bedside of a female hysteric, whose attacks were an unmistakable imitation of the process of childbirth. But with a shake of his head he remarked: "Well, there's nothing sexual about childbirth."¹³⁶ The pupils found this ridiculous of course, and we should find Singer's position ridiculous, too. In contrast to Singer's view, David's complex ethical relationship with the dog corpses is intimately related to his experience of his own sexual forces and responsibilities, to abortion and to sex—all of which are disturbingly co-implicated in the events of the novel.

Lucy Lurie's Non-Abortion

Like David's treatment of the dogs, Lucy's response to what the forces of heterosexuality violently impose on her—a pregnancy resulting from gang rape—has attracted much interest from the novels' commentators. Many have framed her refusal to have an abortion within its political context, as an act of self-sacrifice, a gesture of peace-making with which Lucy seeks to atone for the crimes of her father or forefathers. This reading has much textual support. She is willing, she tells her father, 'to make any sacrifice [...] for the sake of peace' (208). This reading is also supported by the notes Coetzee made during his writing of the novel, which talk in various places of the 'reparative' nature of her decision.¹³⁷

Kate McInturff writes that 'David, as well as several critics of the novel, read this in terms of the racial history of South Africa—as Lucy's abject sacrifice of herself as a form of reparation for past

¹³⁶ *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (Part III), trans. James Strachey. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1963), 303-304.

¹³⁷ Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee*, 206.

racial violence.’¹³⁸ Michael Marais interprets Lucy’s acceptance of her pregnancy as a self-abnegating gesture which aims to break, or live outside, a cycle of domination and counter-domination between the feuding parties of South Africa.¹³⁹ For Elleke Boehmer, Lucy is a ‘secular scapegoat,’ unjustly paying the price for her ancestors’ guilt.¹⁴⁰

Lucy Graham reads *Disgrace* with reference to Derrida’s *The Gift of Death* (1992), in which Derrida ruminates on Kierkegaard’s rumination on Abraham’s near sacrifice of Isaac in the Book of Genesis. For Graham, Derrida’s work sets ‘the sacrificial landscape’ of the novel. Derrida even singles out gender as a governing principle in the story of Abraham and Isaac, noting the almost total absence of women from the narrative, and he wonders if sacrifice as a concept implies ‘at its very basis an exclusion or a sacrifice of woman’. He then wonders whether sacrifice of all or any kind could ever be rejected by modern society, which he sees as built on sacrifice as a central principle: ‘Would the logic of sacrificial responsibility within the implacable universality of the law, of its law, be altered, attenuated, inflected, or displaced, if a woman were to intervene in some consequential manner?’ Graham does not explicitly suggest that Coetzee is attributing to Lucy this Derridean pacifying power, shifting to womankind the responsibility for disrupting the sacrificial scheme, but if one believes that *The Gift of Death* sets the landscape of the novel such a reading would seem to follow.

In a reading that does not mention the word sacrifice, but which alludes to sacrifice in its reference to ‘scapegoating,’ Boehmer notes a problem of these readings. It seems to her that Coetzee is suggesting that ‘[W]omen as ever [must] assume the generic pose of suffering in silence or, as does Lucy, of gestating peacefully in her garden.’ The ‘ethic of unstinting love’ that Lucy appears to express demands of women a corresponding ‘elision and/or subjection’ of their bodies. In this way, Coetzee, or his sacrificial reader, could be understood as perpetuating an attitude described by Jacqueline Rose in *Mothers* (2018). There she argues ‘that motherhood is, in Western discourse, the place in our culture where we lodge, or rather bury, the reality of our own conflicts [...] it is the ultimate scapegoat for our personal and political failings, for everything that is wrong with the world, which it becomes the task of mothers to repair.’¹⁴¹ This would put both Derrida’s suggestion that women are charged with a special sacrificial responsibility, and Coetzee’s narrative decision to sacrifice Lucy (or worse, to have her choose to sacrifice herself and thereby partially mitigate his own authorial responsibility), in a very problematic light.

¹³⁸ Kate McInturff, ‘Rex Oedipus: The Ethics of Sympathy in Recent Work by J. M. Coetzee.’ *Postcolonial Text*, 3, no. 4 (2007): 16.

¹³⁹ Michael Marais, ‘Very morbid phenomena: “liberal funk”, the “Lucy-syndrome,” and J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*’, *Scrutiny* 2, no.6 (2000): 32–8.

¹⁴⁰ Elleke Boehmer, ‘Not Saying Sorry, Not Speaking Pain: Gender Implications in *Disgrace*,’ *Interventions* 3, no. 4, (2002): 350.

¹⁴¹ Jacqueline Rose, *Motherhood: Essays on Love and Cruelty* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 1.

In addition to Lucy's decision, the novel is filled with allusions to the rituals of sacrifice in the Ancient Greek and Judaic tradition. These allusions frame David's and Bev Shaw's killing and disposal of the dogs and much else. Here are three more examples of such references¹⁴²: The Binding of Isaac in Genesis, Abraham's near sacrifice of his son on Mount Moriah, intimated by Melanie's family name, and which connects the novel again to Derrida and to Kierkegaard; the recurring motif of fire and the burning of bodies; and the scene with which the novel ends, with David carrying a dog 'like a lamb' to Bev Shaw, to meet its end on a surgical table that is figured thereby as a sacrificial altar (220).¹⁴³

One can find in this sacrificial motif the precise details of Ancient Greek and Judaic practice. In these traditions, forms of sacrifice are a continuum between two poles, at one end there is what was called in Greek *thysia*, and at the other there is *holocaust*. In *thysia*, the animal was ritually killed, and then essentially cooked and eaten, with a small portion kept aside to be burned for the gods. The parts not eaten were often conveniently inedible, the bones and the gallbladder, for example, which is, in its inedible uselessness, an organ of interest to Coetzee in *Disgrace*.¹⁴⁴ In a holocaust, by contrast, the animal was burned completely, with nothing left over for the sacrificial party to eat. Greek and Judaic traditions appear to differ importantly in that for the latter the holocaust was the norm, while in the Greek tradition a holocaust was reserved as an extreme measure, 'a reaction to some kind of stress, disaster, or crisis.' One scholar of Ancient Greece, Gunnel Ekroth, appears to diagnose David Lurie's behaviour at the hospital incinerator, in particular his concern that the dogs are completely burnt up (220), when she notes that 'one of the few cases of a holocaust performed alone concerned problems related to a ravenous or uncontrolled appetite'.¹⁴⁵ Ekroth also notes that behind some ritualised killings was the simple desire to get rid of what was killed and burned: 'the destruction itself may have been what was principally required; the annihilation by fire removes something *unwanted* from the world of men' (my emphasis).¹⁴⁶

¹⁴² See Margaret Herrick, 'The Burnt Offering: Confession and Sacrifice in JM Coetzee's *Disgrace*,' *Literature & Theology* 30, no.1 (2016): 82–98.

¹⁴³ This plinth is one of the sites that establishes a relationship between sex and killing in the novel. When David and Bev first rendezvous in the clinic, David considers the surgical table as a place on which they can have sex but chooses the floor instead (149).

¹⁴⁴ David Lurie imagines the gallbladder as the last place from which the soul might hide from humanity: 'Nothing escapes, except perhaps the gallbladder, which no one will eat. Descartes should have thought of that. The soul, suspended in the dark, bitter gall, hiding.' (124) And the surgeon who cuts open Lurie's body removes the gallbladder, 'tosses it aside,' asking "What is this?" (171)

¹⁴⁵ Gunnel Ekroth, 'Burnt, Cooked, or Raw? Divine and Human Culinary Desires at Greek Animal Sacrifice' in *Transformations in Sacrificial Practices from Antiquity to Modern Times*, eds. Eftychia Stavrianopoulou, Axel Michaels, Claus Ambos (Berlin, Münster, Wien, Zurich, London: Lit Verlag, 2008), 91.

¹⁴⁶ Ekroth, 'Burnt, Cooked, or Raw?', 91-92.

Maria-Zoe Petropolou provides further historical detail with which to interpret David's behaviour: 'Individual Jewish sacrifices were either a sign of thankfulness, or they were made by people in a certain physical or moral condition.' Sacrifice, she writes, and the holocaust specifically, was a way of atoning for a failure to master one's urges: 'Jewish ritual makes worshippers contain desire.'¹⁴⁷ Coetzee makes subtle reference to these traditions in his references to burning, and burning up completely; and by having David wear a skullcap to cover his singed scalp after the attack on the farm (135), to flee from a Greek spiritual heritage—in which the body is something to be used by men—to a Judaic one, in which it is something to be commended to the gods.

It is entirely justified, therefore, that Lucy's decision be framed explicitly by Coetzee's readers as a form sacrifice. There is, however, a wealth of anthropological and sociological literature on sacrificial practices, and given Coetzee's attention to the details of this motif, it is worth considering whether any of those theorisations might be referenced more specifically in the novel. The philosopher Andy Lamey has read Lucy's decision as a maternal or feminine self-sacrificing gesture that has been described by others, some of whom I have already mentioned. But Lamey is especially diligent in pursuing the sacrificial motif, and he develops his account with emphasis on the work of the theorist of sacrifice René Girard. Girard is a Christian scholar of interest to Coetzee, whose work crosses the boundaries between literary scholarship, anthropology, philosophy, and theology. It was in *Violence and the Sacred* (1972), which is perhaps his best known work, that Girard developed an account of religious sacrifice as a form of sublimated and controlled violence, which redirects in a controlled form the aggression that he thinks accrues inevitably in human society.

Lamey argues convincingly for Girard's influence on Coetzee. Coetzee has written elsewhere in some detail about Girard's work, examining his notion of mimetic desire as a theory of advertising. Lamey notes that one of the characters in Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals*, written contemporaneously with *Disgrace*, is called Garrard, which Lamey takes to be an allusion to Girard. He also observes that another theorist of sacrifice, Walter Burkert, is mentioned in a footnote in *The Lives of Animals*, indicating that Coetzee is familiar not just with the references to sacrifice that are found throughout the Bible and Greek epic poetry, but with the work of those theorists who have analysed the practice of sacrifice as an anthropological phenomenon. Lamey argues that Lucy's rejection of abortion is the 'disturbing conclusion' to a fictional staging of 'Coetzee's Girardianism,' and that in this scheme Lucy 'personifies the ideal Coetzee has characterized elsewhere as "replacing a dialectic of violence by one of healing." [...] so when she discovers she is pregnant, she chooses to keep her rapists'

¹⁴⁷ Maria Zoe Petropolou, *Animal Sacrifice in Ancient Greek Religion, Judaism, and Christianity 100 BC – AD 200*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 120-121.

baby'¹⁴⁸ In other words, Lucy rejects abortion because it is figured here—by Coetzee—as a form of Girardian violence against the fetus and its paternal line.¹⁴⁹

The corollary of such a sacrificial reading, which passes without comment in all the examples I have mentioned, is the problematic but implicit suggestion that Coetzee himself frames abortion—the abortion Lucy chooses not to have—as a form of *sacrificial* violence, Girardian or otherwise. It is this violence, this child sacrifice, that Lucy rejects, inflicting on herself a gesture of political and reproductive violence which is instead *self-sacrificing*. Such a gesture could be read in the Derridean terms of a woman's singular intervention, but it could also be understood as a reference to the foundational Christian gesture of Christ's self-sacrifice. This framing would put the novel in close proximity to criticisms of abortion outside of the novel's context of post-Apartheid South Africa, particularly those from Christian anti-abortion campaigners in the United States who frequently emphasise that abortion is a form of violent killing, and some of whom, as we will see, have even called it a form of sacrifice.

A particularly apposite example of such a Christian anti-abortion framing can be found in an article published in 2000 (and by coincidence, therefore, contemporaneous with *Disgrace*) by Bernadette Waterman Ward, entitled 'Abortion as Sacrament.' Although her article makes no mention of Coetzee or *Disgrace*, Ward, who is both a literary scholar and a president of an American organization called University Faculty for Life,¹⁵⁰ makes explicit the argument implicit in *Disgrace* and Lamey's reading of it: that abortion is a form of ritualised sacrifice. Moreover, she herself makes this argument with detailed reference to the sacrificial theory of Girard that Lamey argues is staged in *Disgrace*. To appreciate Ward's analysis, and to understand it as a fuller expression of the reading that Lamey proposes, I will first sketch the general principles of the Girardian theories to which both Ward and Lamey refer.

¹⁴⁸ Lamey, 'Sympathy and Scapegoating,' 182-185.

¹⁴⁹ Killing a fetus as an act of violence against its paternal line is documented in the anthropological literature, and it has a cannibalistic dimension. See Georges Devereux, *Abortion in Primitive Societies* (New York: International Universities Press, Inc., 1976 [1955]), 19: 'Cannibalism is at the root of two types of abortions whose motivations are diametrically opposed to each other. Some central Australian women abort in order to feed the fetus to their starving children. In that region small children are also killed in order to feed to their older siblings. Among the Tupinamba, prisoners of war are sometimes given a local girl as a bedfellow or wife. The offspring of such a union is then eaten, since it belongs to its father's kin, whose feelings they wish to hurt by this action. Sometimes, however, the Tupinamba wife of the prisoner does not like the idea of having her child eaten, and therefore aborts, in order to safeguard it from such a fate.'

¹⁵⁰ Bernadette Waterman Ward, 'Abortion as a Sacrament: Mimetic Desire and Sacrifice in Sexual Politics,' *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 7 (2000): 18-35.

Girard's Theory of Sacrifice

Girard's theory of sacrifice is described in his book *Violence and The Sacred*. In the wide and interdisciplinary field of the study of sacrifice, in which there are innumerable theories about the origin, function, and meaning of sacrifice as a cultural practice, Girard's theory is neither understood as the most convincing, nor is it the most empirically informed. As Lamey points out, Coetzee has drawn on Girard's work in several of his nonfiction writings, including essays on censorship, advertising, and what Coetzee calls 'a politics of desire,' but Coetzee has also acknowledged that Girard's theory 'lacks an empirical basis and on a scientific level may be unfalsifiable.'¹⁵¹ Whatever its flaws, Girard's theory is compellingly ambitious, and Girard is sincere in his effort to understand, and to end, human violence, in all its various forms.

For Girard, sacrifice is the moderation and redirection of disruptive and uncoordinated violence into an acceptable and non-disruptive form. Girard's theory of violence is therefore essential to his theory of sacrifice, and it is quite simple: violence is inevitable in human communities because we compete for the same things, even things that are not biologically essential. Girard offers a psychological explanation for this, that beyond our basic survival needs we do not spontaneously or creatively develop our desires, rather we simply want whatever we see other people wanting. This wanting validates the other person's belief that the object of their desire is desirable, and thus conflict always ensues and always escalates into violence. Because of its imitative nature, Girard calls this original violence 'mimetic.'¹⁵²

Girard argues that ritual sacrifice emerged as a way of resolving the spiralling conflicts caused by mimetic violence, which threatened the stability, progress, and prosperity of society. At some point in human history, after many generations of mimetic conflict, the feuding rabble united, Girard believes, quite spontaneously, and transferred its burden of violence onto one victim, and did so in an organised manner. Examples of these victims include slaves, animals, or any other group that is identified as belonging to the community but which is sufficiently marginalised that it lacks recourse to appeal or revenge in response to the violence it suffers. This victim is the scapegoat, like the scapegoat described in Leviticus, on whom the sins of the community were ceremonially loaded before it was driven out into the wilderness or killed. In its abuse and expulsion, the scapegoat was acknowledged by all to have extracted the problems or guilt of the community.

However, the burden the scapegoat actually relieves, Girard says, is the inevitable violence of human co-existence, which will otherwise boil over into chaotic conflict. The purpose of ritual

¹⁵¹ Quoted in Lamey, 'Sympathy and Scapegoating,' 187.

¹⁵² Coetzee has written about mimetic desire, with reference to the techniques of modern advertising.

'Triangular Structures of Desire in Advertising,' *Critical Arts* 1, no. 2 (1980): 34-41.

sacrifice is not to end violence, but ‘to trick violence into spending itself on victims whose death will provoke no reprisals,’¹⁵³ to allow violence some regular and controlled release.

This focused release of violence, Girard believes, was effective and did in fact bring peace, but because it was still a form of violence, it was necessary that humans develop some account of why sacrifice was required, to conceal the unjust and arbitrary nature of scapegoating one individual (and perhaps to conceal the unpalatable truth of the mimetic violence which it soothes). Without such an account, the sacrificial ritual would be exposed as the simple transference of violence from one group or person to another, and such an exposure would cause the whole practice to lose its efficacy. Consequently, stories were developed to explain or justify the practice of sacrificing and scapegoating. These stories, Girard argues, are the origin of religion, and religion is the origin of culture. One can see how grand Girard’s theory is, and the radicality of its fundamental premise that all human culture has followed from a need to control our unavoidably violent nature.

Sacrificial ritual thereby establishes a distinction between two types of violence: a ‘good’ form, which is sacrificial, ritualized, public, unifying, and organized *en masse*; and a ‘bad’ form, which is non-ritualized, private, disruptive, and vigilante in nature. This distinction is, Girard points out, hypocritical, and there is hardly any form of violence that cannot be described in terms of sacrifice.’¹⁵⁴ Bernadette Ward takes advantage of this apparently hypocritical distinction, drawing on Girard to argue that abortion is ‘surgery after the pattern of ancient sacrifice,’ and she maps his theory in detail onto what she sees as the social context of abortion in her native United States. Here, she argues, mimetic violence arises in the context of heterosexual relationships, because women compete with one another for male sexual partners, while also competing with men in the workplace. Ward sees post-sexual revolution America as filled with the kind of unrestrained copulation that David Lurie sees among the dogs of South Africa. Often unintentionally, of course, fetuses result from this copulation, and according to Ward it is the fetus who becomes the ‘victim who cannot strike back’ in this landscape of escalating tension and nascent violence: in a social scene marked by sexual and corporate competition, it is the fetus who will ‘absorb the community’s violence.’¹⁵⁵

Ward argues quite compellingly that the philosophical, political, and legal arguments by which abortion is defended in the United States are a kind of secular scripture, and hence, according to Girard’s theory, the purpose of those materials is simply to conceal the true nature of abortion as a form of arbitrary and unjust—that is *sacrificial*—violence. She points out that laws designed to protect places of religious worship have been used to protect abortion clinics from antiabortion

¹⁵³ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 36.

¹⁵⁴ Girard, *Violence and The Sacred*, 1, 19.

¹⁵⁵ Ward, ‘Abortion as a Sacrament,’ 18.

protestors, and argues that abortion law in the United States, with its central notion of abortion as private, ‘protect[s] only sexual privacy, the sacred space accorded to the divine act of desire.’¹⁵⁶

These interesting arguments have a parallel in the work of some feminist theorists who believe, in a related but somewhat different way, that the availability of abortion facilitates male sexual irresponsibility, permitting men to escape one of the consequences of their sexual behaviour. Ward mentions two theorists in her argument: ‘Feminist theorists like Germaine Greer and Andrea Dworkin are not speaking mere nonsense when they deplore all heterosexual activity as “rape culture;” but the coercion they detect has to do with an atavistic social fear.’¹⁵⁷ A contemporary of Dworkin, Catherine Mackinnon, has indeed written about abortion in this light, arguing that ‘The right to privacy looks like an injury presented as a gift, a sword in men’s hands presented as a shield in women’s.’ For Mackinnon, if abortion increases the heterosexual availability of women for men there is, at the very least, reason to be suspicious of heterosexual men who make arguments in favour of it, because, as she says, borrowing a phrase of Dworkin’s, getting laid is at stake. As evidence of this conflict of interest, MacKinnon points out that the Playboy Foundation funds pro-choice campaigners and identifies itself thereby as a feminist organisation with a wider mission of protecting the rights of the individual in a free society. For Mackinnon, arguments about ‘choice’ and ‘autonomy’ mistakenly assume that ‘women significantly control sex’ in any setting, inside or outside marriage, inside or outside religious doctrine. But when Mackinnon writes that ‘sexual freedom is not and will not be equally divided, no matter how many women are sacrificed on its altar,’ it is women who are the sacrificial victims of the liberal rituals that Ward takes to task; they are not, as Ward believes, the sacrificers.¹⁵⁸

The argument that abortion facilitates heterosexual male irresponsibility also appears in the work of Rosalind Petchesky, who critiques a ‘sexual division around responsibility for pregnancy [which] lets men off the hook’. Like Ward, Petchesky connects individualistic abortion ethics to a broader ideological concern: ‘The ease with which the principle of individuality and control over one’s body may be perverted into bourgeois individualism—and capitalist greed—should make us pause, clear our heads, and think more rigorously the social conditions of individual control.’ Ward herself is certainly concerned by abortion as an expression of underlying ideological conditions (a sexual or

¹⁵⁶ Ward, ‘Abortion as a Sacrament,’ 18, 30.

¹⁵⁷ Ward, ‘Abortion as Sacrament,’ 21. As Lianna Barnard argues, *Disgrace* also contains ‘traces of radical feminism’: ‘The politics of rape: Traces of radical feminism in *Disgrace* by J. M. Coetzee,’ *Tydskrif Vir Letterkunde* 50, no. 2 (2013): 19-29. Coetzee has written in detail on Catherine Mackinnon in a review of her book *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (1989) in *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 61-82.

¹⁵⁸ Catharine MacKinnon, ‘Abortion: On Public and Private’ in *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 184, 188, 190, 191. *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law*. (Cambridge, USA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 11.

general libertinism, for example) but for Ward it is the society's rejection of (her version of) Christianity that is at issue, not the economic injustice that is identified by Petchesky.¹⁵⁹

Ward recommends two decisions that women must make to escape the sacrificial system of abortion: 'The first of those decisions is, in Christian terms, marriage; the second, virginity. [...] If the male in a sexual relationship understands his sexual activity as volunteering for the role of the sacrificial victim, he takes on, as much as possible, the uncontrollable danger and restriction to which he exposes the woman.'¹⁶⁰ However unpalatable this may seem, Ward thinks women must make these political and personal sacrifices to change the sacrificial economy. In so doing, women can return us to what Ward terms a 'Christian rationality,' which in 'a sexual context acknowledges the dangers to which one can expose another by one's actions, and either voluntarily accepts the full physical and psychological consequences, or refrains from imposing them.'¹⁶¹

This moment in Ward's essay seems remarkably close to the sense of responsibility that Lucy Graham draws out of Coetzee's *Disgrace*, when she emphasizes how the novel brings to our attention 'the physical consequences of sexual relationships, such as pregnancies, abortions, and sexually transmitted diseases including Aids.'¹⁶² Graham suggests that these consequences heighten the responsibility that David fails to recognise in the moment of submission to his sexual response. But an even more strikingly acute, if inadvertent, reading of the novel can be found in the conclusion to Ward's article, where she writes: 'To provide an escape from the endless cycle of sacrificial violence—of sacrificial abortion in particular—we must recognize the ways in which reproduction is a burden for women and address the truly deep terrors of sexuality with self-restraining love, love which agrees to suffer the consequences of evil it has not caused. Such love constitutes the only rational way to live.'¹⁶³

This self-restraining and self-sacrificial love seems to speak directly to Lucy Lurie and to reflect perfectly so many of the readings imposed on her rejection of abortion. This kind of 'love' also forces a reframing, in Ward's view, of the rhetoric of "unwantedness" that is found frequently in discussions of abortion and the love David Lurie develops towards his unwanted dogs. Ward argues that unwantedness is not 'a permanent state of a child's being,' but is only 'a reflection of its mother's immediate personal concern.'¹⁶⁴ This, however, seems a rather unsympathetic and overly-demanding ethic, and one which women alone must put into practice.

¹⁵⁹ Rosalind Petchesky, *Abortion and Women's Choice: The State, Sexuality, and Reproductive Freedom* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990), 8.

¹⁶⁰ Ward, 'Abortion as Sacrament,' 22, 32.

¹⁶¹ Ward, 'Abortion as Sacrament,' 32.

¹⁶² Graham, 'Yes, I Am Giving Him Up,' 7.

¹⁶³ Ward, 'Abortion as Sacrament,' 35.

¹⁶⁴ Ward, 'Abortion as Sacrament,' 26.

Nevertheless, Ward's attention to the rhetoric of unwantedness is illuminating for a reading of *Disgrace*. In a Girardian reading of this kind, the unwantedness of the novel's dogs might be seen to offer a broader and more subtle account of the unwanted human bodies. While only the dogs are discussed explicitly with references to fertility and unwantedness, this vocabulary is evidently related to the terms in which reproductive decisions such as abortion are often discussed. And a more significant moment in the novel brings these threads together. When Lurie says the dogs must be put down because they are the 'unwanted consequences of their own fertility,' he follows immediately with a rather sudden reference to Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*: the dogs are, he thinks, 'too menny' (146). This might be read as a simple allusion to another novel in which a male protagonist falls foul of his sexual attractions, and in which the maltreatment of animals is something of a concern, illustrating David's familiarity, as a university professor, with the English canon. (Hardy describes in detail, for example, Jude's excruciating experience of slaughtering a pig for its meat, taunted all the while by his deceitful wife Arabella.)¹⁶⁵ But as Michiel Heyns has noted, this reference to Jude specifically invokes Little Father Time, who in *Jude* hangs himself and his siblings as a solution to the poverties caused by human procreation. It seems impossible to avoid the conclusion that Coetzee thus deliberately conflates the dogs and the humans who are deemed to be unwanted in the clinical and literary scene,¹⁶⁶ and so it is not clear to me that the resonance of Ward's argument with *Disgrace* is entirely coincidental. It seems possible that Coetzee might be deliberately inviting the Girardian reading of abortion—and Lucy Lurie's abortion—that Ward offers.

Girard and Coetzee on Abortion

It seems appropriate therefore to read *Disgrace* with some consideration of any views that Coetzee and Girard have expressed explicitly about abortion. Interestingly, while Girard has commented on abortion, he has never done so in terms of sacrifice. It is clear, however, that he sees abortion as an act of violence. In a series of conversations published as *When These Things Begin* (2014), Girard makes the following scathing comment to his interlocuter regarding abortion rhetoric: 'nobody is "pro-abortion," they're "pro-choice."' The real message is simple: if there are too many babies, destroy

¹⁶⁵ Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* (London: Penguin, 1984 [1896]), 74-76. From a Derridean perspective it bears noting that this 'too menny'/'too many', as an allusion to Jude, is only evident in the specific form of writing, recognizable by Little Father Time's misspelling.

¹⁶⁶ Michiel Heyns, 'Call no man happy': Perversity as narrative principle in *Disgrace*, *English Studies in Africa* 45, no.1 (2002), 57-65, 61. Heyns reads this conflation as reinforcing 'the consistent human-animal parallel that informs the novel,' and 'a device of the sympathetic imagination'. Also Cf. Elizabeth Costello speaking of hunting: "You do not feed four billion people through the efforts of matadors or deer hunters armed with bows and arrows. We have become too many. There is no time to respect and honour all the animals we need to feed ourselves' (my emphasis). Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 97.

them.’ Later in the same book, Girard makes the following comment: ‘In America, as elsewhere, fundamentalism results from the breakdown of an age-old compromise between religion and anti-religious humanism. And it’s anti-religious humanism that is responsible for the breakdown. It espouses doctrines that start with abortion, that continue with genetic manipulation, and that tomorrow will undoubtedly lead to hyperefficient forms of euthanasia.’¹⁶⁷ Here the fetus is not a surrogate victim who suffers the inevitable violence accrued by mimetic desire, but a body divested of value by secular humanism and rendered mere life, in all its vulnerability and manipulability. What Girard seems as a ‘humanistic’ understanding of the human form initiates a bioethical slide towards a world in which creating life and inflicting death become matters of efficiency. Abortion is the starting point of a technoscientific liberalism which leads to a brutal indifference to our living bodies. Girard’s reference to efficiency is recalls David Lurie at the incinerator, who wishes for a world in which corpses can be attended to without a concern for more efficient processing.

There is however nothing in Coetzee’s published work to suggest that he shares Ward’s strong opinions on abortion. In fact, the other appearance of abortion in his oeuvre affirms his own responsibility for an abortion, and he recounts the event in terms that are unedifying for him. The event also takes the form, familiar from *Disgrace*, in which a woman teaches a man how to behave. In the autobiographical novel *Youth* (2002), Coetzee describes his young adulthood, and in one of the early chapters he describes an illegal abortion undergone by one of his girlfriends, named Sarah, in 1950s South Africa.¹⁶⁸ Throughout the episode, Sarah is calm and competent in arranging the procedure. Yet she is certainly not unfeeling; she demonstrates a kind of dignified purpose, shouldering a burden by which Coetzee is both confused and ashamed. Coetzee describes himself as emerging from the episode ignominiously, or perhaps disgracefully. He is useless as an arranger and as a nurse, and he ends up, he thinks, with a death ‘chalked up against him.’ The abortion is described in terms familiar from *Disgrace*, with various references to the pain and bleeding which David Lurie refers to as ‘blood matters, a woman’s preserve’ (104). This is, as I will show later, a very Girardian framing of female experience, a fact that is significant because, as I have already noted, during the writing of the novel Coetzee found Lucy’s inner experience entirely inaccessible. It seems he has, as an alternative, inserted Girard’s view of female experience in its place.

In *Youth*, Coetzee writes of the aftermath of the abortion: ‘She has issued no reproofs, made no demands; she has even paid the abortionist herself. In fact, she has taught him a lesson in how to

¹⁶⁷ René Girard, *When These Things Begin: Conversations with Michael Treguer*, trans. Trevor Cribben Merrill (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2014), 85, 110. There are intimations of the scenario Girard imagines in *Disgrace*, when David describes the animals who are to be put down as ‘the old, the blind, the crippled, the maimed’ (218).

¹⁶⁸ J.M. Coetzee, *Youth* (London: Vintage, 2003), 33-35

behave. As for him, he has emerged ignominiously, he cannot deny it.' And Coetzee is troubled further:

His thoughts keep going to what was destroyed inside her – that pod of flesh, that rubbery manikin. He sees the little creature flushed down the toilet at the Woodstock house, tumbled through the maze of sewers, tossed out at last into the shallows, blinking in the sudden sun, struggling against the waves that will carry it out into the bay. He did not want it to live and now he does not want it to die. [...] He has barely emerged into the world himself and already he has a death chalked up against him. How many of the other men he sees in the street carry dead children with them like baby-shoes slung around their necks?¹⁶⁹

This imagined scene is traumatic, and perhaps even melodramatic or cartoonlike, displaying precisely a kind of hysterical reaction that contrasts with Sarah's pragmatic and dignified demeanour. Perhaps in this way Coetzee simply seeks to convey the profound effect this experience had on him as a young man. But he also establishes a filiation between his younger self and that drowning fetus, when he reflects that he is 'out of his depth', a filiation which is not cultivated in his relationship to Sarah by this event of responsibility.

Importantly for those commentators who wish to read Coetzee as the expression of certain analytic ethical principles, there is no mention here of philosophical concepts such as rights, sentience, or autonomy, nor is the responsibility Coetzee feels for the fetal body separable from the sense he feels concerning his ignominious treatment of Sarah. Coetzee's concern is his own sense of responsibility, the uncertain boundaries of that responsibility come into view through a consideration of the age-old response—and ritual—of mourning. Mourning is an uncertain response: 'Is he too going to mourn?' he asks. 'How long does one mourn, if one mourns? Does the mourning come to an end, and is one the same after the mourning as before; or does one mourn forever the little thing that bobs in the waves off Woodstock, like the little cabin-boy who fell overboard and was not missed? Weep, weep! cries the cabin boy, who will not sink and will not be stilled.'¹⁷⁰ Responsibility is framed through a mourning that is potentially unlimited.

This unending mourning implies the impossibility of reparation, and brings to mind the endless task David Lurie takes upon himself of conveying the corpses of an ever-multiplying population of dogs into the flames of the hospital incinerator, in never-ending atonement for his inability to contain his desires. In *Youth*, This unresolved mourning is a kind of trauma that Sarah's abortion has inflicted on the young Coetzee, and it raises a question about the words the older Coetzee gives Lucy Lurie, when she responds to her father's suggestion that she have an abortion: abortion is, she tells him,

¹⁶⁹ Coetzee, *Youth*, 35.

¹⁷⁰ Coetzee, *Youth*, 36.

something she is not willing to go through with again. But this unwillingness might be read as another example of Coetzee struggling to connect with a female experience, and now, instead of interposing Girard's feelings into the female experience of his character, he interposes his own feelings instead.

There are two other explicit references to abortion in Coetzee's published work. One is in a 2008 article published in *Reform*, the journal of the Australian Law Reform Commission. In this short essay, Coetzee takes up some of the philosophical concepts which typically are applied to moral arguments about animals and reproduction. He is concerned in particular with the notion of rights as it is applied to nonhuman animals, and in approaching this subject he considers the right to life as it functions in debates about abortion. While he does not draw an explicit conclusion about the right to life of those 'still at the embryonic stage of life,' he does comment that 'When we speak of the right to life of human beings, we seem to mean not only the right of living human beings to go on living but the right of unborn human beings to enter life, a right claimed against all powers, in some cases even against their biological parents.' Coetzee observes that 'Only in the debate over abortion in certain Western countries where the Christian legacy is still strong, does the right to a life by those not yet born have any meaning. Even within that debate, the unborn are taken to mean those still at the embryonic stage of life, in the nine months between conception and birth.'¹⁷¹

Similar comments appear in Coetzee's contribution to a roundtable discussion that was later published as *The Death of the Animal* (2009). Now, however, Coetzee complicates things further. As in the *Reform* article, he suggests that a right to life for animals would only be meaningful if it included a right of those who are living to perpetuate life, that is, to reproduce. Coetzee then provides the following account of that right to reproduce, which seems to be inflected by the Christian legacy he mentions earlier:

At the borders of being—this is how I imagine it—there are all these small souls, cat souls, mouse souls, bird souls, souls of unborn children, crowded together, pleading to be let in, pleading to be incarnated. And I want to let them in, all of them, even if it is only for a day or two, even if it is only so that they can have a quick look at this beautiful world of ours. Because who am I to deny them their chance of incarnation?¹⁷²

In his earlier comments, Coetzee wonders at a Christian legacy that enforces a right not only to continue life but to a predestined incarnation; and in the later comments Coetzee questions *his own* right to deny that incarnation. Coetzee offers no resolution to this double-bind, but gives us something of his experience of it.

¹⁷¹ J.M. Coetzee, 'On the right to life,' *Australian Law Reform Commission: Reform Journal* 91 (2008): 9-10.

¹⁷² Paola Cavalieri, *The Death of the Animal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 23.

Coetzee is sceptical about the concept of rights that is so frequently applied to debates about animals, fetuses, or anything else, for often it ‘turns out that the right we are arguing for is so qualified and so attenuated that we might doubt that right is the best term for it.’¹⁷³ And he seems to adopt a position of ambiguity and ambivalence concerning this conceptual uncertainty, leaving himself between the compelling spiritual and biological forces of a will-to-incarnation, and the vicissitudes which might prevent someone from sharing, or living in accord with, such a view.

*

One does not need to read much of *Violence and the Sacred* to see that Bernadette Ward’s reading of Girard’s theory is selective and at odds with some of Girard’s most interesting observations. Most noticeably, she refuses to acknowledge the connection between sex and violence that Girard himself emphasises, a connection that is portrayed so perturbingly in Coetzee’s novel. For Ward, such a connection is tentative. The only sexual coercion she sees women suffering is the pressures to conform to social mores, which amounts to nothing more than what she calls ‘atavistic social fear’. For Girard, by contrast, there is an ‘affinity between sexuality and [...] diverse forms of violence that invariably lead to bloodshed.’ This affinity is reinforced by sex and violence sharing a certain essence as dangerous and unavoidable energetic forces ‘that sooner or later [burst] forth, causing tremendous havoc.’ Girard adds: ‘Sex and violence frequently come to grips in such direct forms as abduction, rape, defloration, and various sadistic practices, as well as in indirect actions of indefinite consequences. Sex is at the origin of various illnesses, real or imaginary; it culminates in the bloody labours of childbirth, which may entail the death of the mother, child, or both together.’ Girard here seems to provide much of the vocabulary with which David Lurie’s notion of the problem of sex, and the nature of female experience of that sex, is conveyed in *Disgrace*.¹⁷⁴

Girard also rejects the appeal to marriage on which Ward’s closing argument depends, when she offers marriage and total abstinence as the only rational choices a woman can make to escape the sacrificial economy. Girard writes: ‘Even within the ritualistic framework of marriage, when all the matrimonial vows and other interdictions have been conscientiously observed, sexuality is accompanied by violence; and as soon as one trespasses beyond the limits of matrimony to engage in illicit relationships—incest, adultery, and the like—the violence and the impurity resulting from this violence grows more potent and extreme. Sexuality leads to quarrels, jealous rages, mortal combats. It is a permanent source of disorder even within the most harmonious of communities.’ Girard even provides his own theory as to why contemporary thinkers are so determined to deny this affiliation: ‘In refusing to admit an association between sexuality and violence—an association readily

¹⁷³ Coetzee, ‘On the right to life,’ 10.

¹⁷⁴ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 35, 37.

acknowledged by men over the course of several millennia—modern thinkers are attempting to prove their broadmindedness and liberality.’¹⁷⁵

If Ward were to acknowledge this affiliation it would trouble the rather restricted focus of her argument. Abortion is violence, Ward argues; but so is sex, says Girard, inside or outside of marriage; and so of course are restrictions on abortion, although neither Ward nor Girard acknowledge this. But this more complicated situation is played out in *Disgrace*, so if the novel is to be read, as Lamey suggests, as a staging of Coetzee’s Girardianism, I think it is evident that Coetzee’s Girardianism, and indeed Girard’s Girardianism, are not Ward’s Girardianism.

One of the dangers of reading the novel as a staging of Coetzee’s Girardianism is that the possibilities for interpretation become limited by that theoretical framing. As Derek Attridge argues, much of Coetzee’s fiction tempts the reader into such allegorical readings. But, he argues, at the same time it frequently undercuts such readings. Lamey’s reading appears to me to represent the kind of fixed reading that Attridge cautions against, presenting the fiction as if it mapped onto a theoretical framework that saturates the hermeneutic possibilities of the fiction. Such fixed schemes, as Attridge argues, are in fact precisely what is problematised by literature, and, Attridge thinks, by Coetzee’s literature in particular.¹⁷⁶

Lucy herself even cautions her father, and the reader, against such dangers, when she tells him: ‘You keep misreading me’ (112), so we should take Attridge’s caution seriously. He writes that in *Life and Time of Michael K*, when the title character manages to escape the confines of a detention centre, the prison doctor shouts after him: ‘Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory, if you know that word. It was an allegory—speaking at the highest level—of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it.’¹⁷⁷ If K’s stay in the camp was an allegory, Coetzee seems intent on ensuring that K himself does not permit himself to be a mere part of it.

In his comments on Michael K, Attridge suggests that part of what encourages Coetzee’s readers to read allegories into his fictions is his political biography. He writes that there is a ‘specific type of allegorization that Coetzee’s fiction invites, deriving from the widespread assumption that any responsible and principled South African writer [...] will have had as a primary concern the historical situation of the country and the suffering of the majority of its people.’¹⁷⁸ However, for Attridge, this should be resisted, ‘if by allegory we mean the impulse to seek “beyond” the text, to treat elements in the text as symbols or metaphors for broader ideas or entities.’ The special property of Coetzee’s fiction, and perhaps a hallmark of the literary in general, lies precisely in the possibilities of non-

¹⁷⁵ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 35-37.

¹⁷⁶ Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee*, 172.

¹⁷⁷ J.M. Coetzee, *Life & Times of Michael K* (London: Vintage, 2004), 166.

¹⁷⁸ Derek Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee*, 33.

allegorical, or what Attridge calls ‘literal,’ readings. Attridge presses us to respond to literature not as allegory, nor as not-allegory; not as fiction, nor as bound entirely with a political or historical situation. This is the special power of Coetzee’s novels, which ‘exemplify an openness to the moment and to the future.’ He further explains this openness: ‘Allegory, one might say deals with the already known, whereas literature opens a space for the other. Allegory announces a moral code, *literature invites an ethical response*. [...] [Coetzee’s] novels demand, and deserve, responses that do not claim to tell their truths, but ones that participate in their inventive openings’ (my emphasis).¹⁷⁹

So Attridge certainly does not deny the opportunities for allegorical reading that Coetzee’s work offers, and he accepts that such readings can be illuminating. But he argues that to limit one’s reading to allegory, in the way Lamey seems to have done, is to foreclose the very possibilities the novels create. If, as Attridge writes, allegory takes a fiction to be the expression of a scheme already decided, the ‘opening’ of literal readings can both acknowledge the possibility of allegory while considering how the fiction simultaneously liberates itself, its characters, or the reader from those pre-determined allegorical formations, forcing the reader towards a response characterised not by interpretive precision, nor one validated by archival or biographical detail, but by whatever it is that compels the reader to produce a meaningful response.

Abortion, and Lucy’s decision not to have an abortion, is in fact a good example of the consequences of making assumptions about the significance of women’s reproductive decisions. As Rosalind Petchesky writes in *Abortion and Women’s Choice: The State, Sexuality, and Reproductive Freedom* (1990), women’s decisions about their pregnancies are frequently taken to indicate some wider political or philosophical commitment, but ‘How women choose to resolve an unwanted pregnancy is not in itself expressive of their consciousness’.¹⁸⁰ When Lucy tells David that her decision ‘has nothing to do with belief’ (198), we should perhaps listen carefully to be sure that we are not using her decision for the sake of some political or philosophical project we presume to be at the forefront of the character’s or the author’s mind.

An important question for readers of *Disgrace*, then, is whether Coetzee provides enough opportunities to read Lucy Lurie beyond the limits of the sacrificial allegory. I will not consider this question in detail here. However, while much of the novel can be read outside that allegorical framing I am not convinced that Coetzee develops Lucy sufficiently that she can read as much more than a term within it. The difficulty Coetzee faced in helping her escape these limits is reflected throughout the account of his writing the novel found in David Attwell’s biography. This lack of character development has even caused the writer Fiona Snyckers to write a metafictional novel in which Lucy Lurie, recovering from the psychological effects of the gangrape, ruminates on and finally confronts

¹⁷⁹ Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee*, 60,64.

¹⁸⁰ Petchesky, *Abortion and Women’s Choice*, 8, 364.

Coetzee himself about his depiction of her experiences.¹⁸¹ This debate warrants more detailed consideration than I can give it here, but it would seem there is a case to be made that the responsibility for sacrificing Lucy to a sacrificial allegory lies not with Andy Lamey, but with Coetzee himself.

However, what is most striking about allegorical-sacrificial readings of *Disgrace*, and of Lucy in particular, is that commentators read the novel as if Lucy actually continued her pregnancy to term and gave birth. In fact, Coetzee ends the novel before the pregnancy's conclusion. One could argue that Coetzee in fact ensures that the outcome of that pregnancy—and the possibility of abortion—is never foreclosed. This significant detail might indicate on Coetzee's part a nuanced understanding of how women's feelings about their pregnancy can change dramatically as it progresses. It may of course reflect the opposite, an assumption on his part that because Lucy has rejected abortion she will continue to do so, and hence there is no need to include the birth within the novel itself. Obviously my reading here is informed by my own experiences of providing abortions to women later in pregnancy, sometimes to women who, due to various circumstances, only reached that decision after several months had passed, and sometimes in the context of sex that was either rape or 'not quite' rape. To consider performing an abortion later in pregnancy would no doubt put pressure on the Coetzeean urge to permit all nascent forms of life to join us in the world, and it might even require the kind of dubious moral disposition that David sees in Bev Shaw. But surely it would take a heart as leathery as a butcher's to refuse Lucy such a request.

Derridean Responsibility

I have suggested that David Lurie's acknowledgement of his responsibilities, through an unending sacrificial atonement, is perhaps rather like the young Coetzee's unending mourning over Sarah's abortion. Such experiences of, and responses to, responsibility, in their apparent boundlessness, have a Derridean nature. For Derrida, any meaningful conception of responsibility must have this boundless nature, partly because responsibility is tied to a project of problematising the bounds that of the political or philosophical subject by which responsibilities are otherwise determined. As Keith Peterson writes, Derrida repeatedly invites us 'experiment with the "impossible" thought of a responsibility which no longer passes through a philosophical "subject", "ego" or an "I think."' ¹⁸². I have already mentioned in Chapter One that one way Derrida does this is by suggesting that the whole conception of subjectivity and ego, as something determinable within the bounds of anatomy (our bodies) or consciousness (the experiences and intentions of a consciousness within that body) arises,

¹⁸¹ *Lacuna* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2019).

¹⁸² Keith Peterson, 'Derrida's Responsibility,' *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 28:3 (1997), 287-303.

he thinks, because of a primal need to make such determinations; but the urge to make those determinations is not driven by a desire for justice, for example, but by the desire to ensure that certain subjects are rendered nonsubjects so they can serve our primal appetites, namely the urges to eat and to copulate. This is what Derrida sketches as a ‘carnophallogocentric’ conception of the subject. Carnophallogocentrism is, as David Baumeister and Kelly Oliver emphasise, a ‘schema of ingestion,’ one which is ‘manifested not only in our eating practices, where one would expect it to be, but [...] dispersed throughout the (human) cultural or civilizational field, inflecting morality, religion and politics. [...] no matter what is literally ingested, the schema of ‘carnivorous virility’ will be symbolically in operation.’¹⁸³ Derrida implies that our notions of subjectivity, and the philosophical determinations that are related to it, are not a disinterested metaphysical project but designed to ensure that the urges of a privileged, carnivorous, virile male existence are satisfied.

This rational, meat-eating male is taken by Derrida to be paradigmatic of the modern philosophical concept of a subject, a ‘virile figure [installed] at the determinative center of the subject,’ and it is entirely predictable that such a subject would ensure that its philosophical concepts secure the satisfaction of its appetites; appetites which are, in fact, his (the subject’s) true master.¹⁸⁴ His concepts must entitle him to other subjects that he desires and who do not resemble him: namely those creatures that are nonhuman or nonmale.

This concept of carnophallogocentrism appears only briefly in Derrida’s oeuvre. As David Baumeister points out, it is first mentioned in an interview with Jean-Luc Nancy with a provisional, and somewhat improvisatory, tone. It seems as if Derrida intends to develop the idea and write about it more comprehensively in the future. However, Derrida will make only two rather brief references to the term in the decades that followed. He mentions it, again as something he intends to explore at a later date, in an interview with Daniel Birnbaum and Anders Olsson.¹⁸⁵ And when the term next appears, in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, he speaks of it historically, as part of his ‘intellectual biography’ but not as something of active interest. He intimates that something about this attempt to isolate ‘a single phenomenon or law’ is inadequate to the task of critiquing anthropocentrism that is his focus in *The Animal*; but it was, however, a necessary step that led him to that fuller critique.¹⁸⁶

Carnophallogocentrism is only one element of Derrida’s discussions of responsibility, and it is perhaps minor element that Derrida would now reject. Nevertheless, it illuminates the sexual and animal dynamics of responsibility in Coetzee’s *Disgrace*. The subjugation of nonmale and nonhuman

¹⁸³ David Baumeister, ‘Derrida on Carnophallogocentrism and the Primal Parricide,’ *Derrida Today* 10, no. 1 (2017): 55, 59.

¹⁸⁴ Derrida, ‘Eating Well,’ 113.

¹⁸⁵ Baumeister, ‘Derrida on Carnophallogocentrism,’ 54-55.

¹⁸⁶ Jacques Derrida, and Marie-Luise Mallet, ed. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 104.

bodies is one of its principal themes: there is David's wistful sexual entitlement, which he exerts over prostitutes and students, and which must inevitably bear comparison with the politically-motivated rape of Lucy; and there are the dogs, sheep, and goats who are killed for various reasons, but generally to serve the needs of humans. Lucy's dogs are needlessly killed in the attack on the farm (they are locked in their cages), and Lucy's neighbour Petrus kills sheep for the party to celebrate his progress cultivating his—and soon Lucy's—farm. And indeed it is through the proximity of carnality and phallogocentrism that David's responsibilities are brought to consciousness. It is only after Lucy's rape that David finds himself feeling uncomfortable about eating the sheep, for example (123).

This is not to suggest that Coetzee is staging in *Disgrace* his commitment to Derridean carnophallogocentrism. Rather, it is to suggest that this element of the Derridean concept of responsibility is probably one of several sources by which Coetzee was inspired to develop his theme of the problem of heterosexual male appetites.

Derrida's carnophallogocentrism is similar in many ways to the work of Carol J. Adams, who in 1990 published *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, which she describes as a work of 'feminist-vegetarian critical theory.' Coetzee summarizes the book, in his dustjacket endorsement on the 25th anniversary edition, in the following way: 'The connections traced between rampant masculinity, misogyny, carnivorism, and militarism operate as powerfully today as when Carol Adams first diagnosed them twenty years ago.' For Adams, men typically are both misogynistic and carnivorous because the two dispositions reinforce and recapitulate one-another. She argues convincingly that meat is identified with maleness and virility, and that this virility renders women as objects for the sexual appetite. Misogyny even pervades the meat industry in a literal sense: the most efficient breeding practices require that the majority of animals eaten by humans are female. 'We subsist by-and-large on female flesh', Adams writes, from animals that are 'seduced' along the slaughterhouse production-line to ensure the taste of their bodies is not marred by the release of stress-related hormones. Conversely, Adams writes that consumption 'appears to be the final stage of male desire', an argument made convincing by her identification of the theme in ancient myth—Zeus raping Metis before eating her pregnant body—and in the present-day menus of fast-food restaurants, which offer images of bikini-clad chickens with come-to-bed (or come-to-dinner) eyes. This pervasive double subjection of women and animals creates a mutually reinforcing relationship whereby each 'absent referent'—the living body made invisible by its use and abuse as a piece of satisfying flesh—helps to maintain the subjection of the other.¹⁸⁷

A related account of heterosexual men's treatment of animals and women is found in an author known to be of considerable significance to Coetzee: Tolstoy. For Tolstoy, the rejection of eating meat was 'the first step' towards a more respectful relationship with women, a relationship that

¹⁸⁷ Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (London and New York: Continuum, 2010[1990]), 60, 67, 84.

transcended sex.¹⁸⁸ David too aspires towards a life beyond the problem of sex; but he is also like Tolstoy in his failure to live up to this aspiration. As Andrea Dworkin writes, the Countess Sophiya Tolstoy endured her husband's unchecked libido in various ways, right up until the end of their lives together. She gave birth to thirteen children in total, eight of which were born in the space of eight years, and Tolstoy often demanded the resumption of intercourse before the trauma of childbirth was healed.¹⁸⁹ Dworkin writes of Tolstoy that 'In *The Kreutzer Sonata* he knew, as artists often do, more than he was willing to act on in real life'.¹⁹⁰

At least in his writing, Tolstoy thought of the act of penetrative sex as similar to men's killing of animals, and he dramatized this view in his novella *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1889). Indeed, the imagery David uses when he thinks of Lucy's rape—of a bed of blood—and Lucy's description of her father's own sexual behaviour as 'pushing the knife in' (158), seems to recall not just Girard's imagery of 'women's matters' as blood-soaked, but Tolstoy's character Pozdychev, who murders his wife in a fit of deranged sexual jealousy.

Derrida's concept of carnophallogocentrism, however, extends these accounts because, in blurring the legitimacy of the concept of subjectivity, he also blurs the boundary between the literal and figurative ingestions and penetrations to which that subject considers itself to be entitled. The ingestions Derrida mentions are not just pieces of meat, lumps of flesh removed from the bodies of those who are categorised as nonsubjects; we ingest ideas, too, Derrida argues, truths, dogmas, and doctrine, and our own subjecthood is constituted precisely by our taking-in of these materials, by permitting the passage of certain material *into* ourselves. Derrida writes of 'the passage through the mouth,' as permitting the entrance of 'words or of things, of sentences, of daily bread or wine, of the tongue, the lips, or the breast of the other',¹⁹¹ indicating that the consumptions by which subjects are constituted crosses, as so many concepts do for Derrida, the distinction between the literal and the figurative.

Derrida is even more explicit about an anthropophagic dimension of this ingestive economy. 'The symbolic is very difficult to delimit in this case [...]. The so called nonanthropophagic cultures practice symbolic anthropophagy and even construct their most elevated socius, indeed the sublimity of their morality, their politics, and their right, on this anthropophagy. Vegetarians, too, partake of

¹⁸⁸ Leo Tolstoy, 'The First Step,' *Essays and Letters*, Trans. Aylmer Maude (Frowde, 1909); 'Sequel to The Kreutzer Sonata,' in *The Kreutzer Sonata* (New York: Modern Library, 2003), trans. Isai Kamen, 81-82. Sophie Pinkham writes of the public response to *The Kreutzer Sonata* that 'One particularly enthusiastic young Romanian castrated himself' ('Sofiya Tolstoy's Defense,' *The New Yorker*, October 21, 2014. In *Disgrace*, David Lurie considers this procedure as a solution to the problem of sex (9).

¹⁸⁹ For a brief overview of the Tolstoy's domestic life, see Dworkin's essay on Tolstoy in *Intercourse* (New York: Basic Books, 1987) and Doris Lessing's introduction to *The Kreutzer Sonata* in the edition cited above.

¹⁹⁰ Dworkin, *Intercourse*, 23.

¹⁹¹ Derrida, 'Eating Well,' 112, 114.

animals, even of men.’¹⁹² We survive on our fellowmen, Derrida implies, on their labour and therefore on their bodies; and in this way, it can be said that we consume them.¹⁹³

One of the problems of an approximation of woman and animals, of the type that takes place in *Disgrace*, is that an image of women as animality is reinforced. As Elleke Boehmer writes of Lucy’s decision, ‘a feminizing or animalizing atonement represents a meaningful recompense for a man; for a woman, always-already a creature of dumb animality, it is a matter of no change – a continuation of subjection which it would be wrong to propose as redemptive.’¹⁹⁴ To avoid this consequence, one can suggest that the scheme of subjugation in *Disgrace* goes beyond the scheme of animal-female subjugation that Adams argues for, and that this subjugation is really only one axis in a broader and more fundamental scheme of subjugation, which can be brought to consciousness through what Derrida calls ‘the metonymy of introjection.’¹⁹⁵ This introjection brings all our responsibilities, or all our sacrifices, into view as in some figurative or literal way ‘ingestive.’

Ingestion is one of the principle gestures that is either required or prohibited as part of certain sacrificial rituals, and so it is important to consider the ingestions that do or do not take place in a novel like *Disgrace* that is dense with sacrificial imagery. This blurring of the literal and the figurative is staged quite strikingly in *Disgrace*, again in the scene at the hospital incinerator. David depicts the hospital grounds as a scene not just of a post-Apartheid world, but as a post-apocalyptic one. Women and children are picking through the hospital waste, looking for syringes, pins, bandages, and pills, ‘anything for which there is a market.’ Vagrants live among the refuse. These scavengers are not

¹⁹² Derrida, ‘Eating Well,’ 115. Sara Guyer is the only commentator I have found who emphasises this dimension of carnophallogocentrism. She writes that Derrida meets ‘the sacrificial valence of philosophy in the West’ with his own ‘ethics of cannibalism’. For Guyer, ‘eating qua eating is not at all what is at stake in Derrida’s remarks.’ In Guyer’s psychoanalytical account: ‘the literal ingestion of food becomes introjection when viewed figuratively.’ For Guyer, the psychic experience of ingestion is effectively a form of oral mourning: ‘The passage from food to language in the mouth presupposes the successful replacement of the object’s presence with the self’s cognizance of its absence. Sara Guye, ‘Albeit Eating: Towards an ethics of cannibalism.’ *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 2:1 (1997): 63-80

¹⁹³ This symbolic ingestive dimension is one of the important differences between Derrida and Adams otherwise closely related accounts. While both Derrida and Adams share an attention to the relationship between theorisations of gender and of animality as violent institutions, Adams (and her interviewer Matthew Calarco) want to use the articulation of this proximity to develop a progressive political strategy. Derrida’s account offers a more fundamental—and, in Calarco and Adams’s view, less practical—re-appraisal of philosophy and the concept of subjectivity that is so important to it. Carol J. Adams and Matthew Calarco, ‘Derrida and The Sexual Politics of Meat,’ in *Meat Culture* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017), 31-53.

¹⁹⁴ Boehmer, ‘Gender Implications in *Disgrace*,’ 350.

¹⁹⁵ Derrida, ‘Eating Well,’ 115.

interested in what David brings to the furnace only because ‘the parts of a dead dog can neither be sold nor be eaten’ (145).

This assumption concerning the possibility of consumption, however, must be read alongside David’s contemplation of the sheep tied up for Petrus’s feast. Every part of the animal, David thinks, will be turned to some use—except the gallbladder, which no-one will eat. This discarded organ is perhaps the last hiding place of the human soul, David thinks. ‘Descartes should have thought of that,’ he says, in ironic reference to the Cartesian tradition that has, we are to presume, turned the body into precisely such material (Descartes believed the soul was located in the pineal gland) (124).¹⁹⁶ If David had reason to worry that the dogs might be subjected to the same kind of use and subjection as the sheep, one might hypothesise that the reason he takes such care to ensure they are ‘burned up’ is to prevent their being used in this way. But David appears to be confident that no such utilisation will occur; he wishes only to protect the dogs from the utter indifference of the workmen with their shovels. This indifference to the body is the other side of a scavengers’ scrutiny that reduces the body to parts for food, medical research, and other uses: if there is no use to be made of it, then there is no other kind of attention that the body demands.

However, David seems not to appreciate that the dogs ultimately do become a resource for his fellow men, and they will be subjected to a form of consumption through a kind of Derridean figurative introjection I have described. The scavengers who live in the hospital grounds ‘sleep by night against the wall of the incinerator, or perhaps even in the tunnel, for the warmth.’ (145), and so the dogs are in fact fuel for the fire around which the unnamed populous of this dystopian community is huddled. The sacrificial fire is the very hearth of their home, in fact, the central monument of their *oikos*; they survive on the heat given off by a funeral pyre. Recalling now the approximation of canine and human bodies that Coetzee effects with his reference to Little Father Time (‘done because we are too menny’), the novel offers us a disturbing glimpse of Derrida’s symbolic anthropophagy, hidden in the flames of the incinerator. Perhaps this moment in the novel strikes me in this way because it brings to mind a story carried in several newspapers in 2014, in which it was reported that human fetal remains from abortions and miscarriages were being burned alongside other material to heat hospitals, as part of a government-led ‘waste-to-energy’ programme.¹⁹⁷

There is furthermore a sense in which the carnophallogocentric subject one can read into *Disgrace* depends partly on abortion in particular for the satisfaction of its sexual urges, in the way that Ward,

¹⁹⁶ This is another reference to the details of Greek sacrificial ritual, for the gallbladder was one of those inedible parts that was not eaten and instead, rather conveniently, commended to the dogs. See Gunnel Ekroth, ‘Burnt, Cooked, or Raw?’ 91.

¹⁹⁷ ‘Aborted babies used to heat UK hospitals.’ *Daily Telegraph*, 24 March 2014. There are echoes of the discredited 1974 exposé *Babies for Burning* by Michael Litchfield and Susan Kentish, in which abortion providers were accused (falsely) of selling fetal tissue for a variety of purposes, including the manufacture of cosmetics. Fetal tissue is sometimes used in research, with the consent of the pregnant woman.

Dworkin, and Mackinnon, all argue for in their accounts of male irresponsibility. David's immediate suggestion that Lucy have an abortion is surely as much tied to his own attitudes to sex and its consequences as it is to Lucy's putatively more political situation, and perhaps David is so shocked by Lucy's decision because he is left to consider the consequences of Melanie making a similar choice, if she were to find herself pregnant as a result of David's not-quite rape. This is perhaps one of the many shudders of realisation David experiences in his ever-expanding awareness of his responsibilities.

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This brings us back to a more general consideration of the Derridean concept of responsibility. This concept can be developed from the questioning of the notion of subjectivity that Derrida offers with carnophallogocentrism. One of the earliest substantial mentions of responsibility comes in the essay 'Mochlos,' in which Derrida asks the following: 'would it not be more interesting, though difficult and perhaps, impossible, to think of responsibility—a summons, that is, requiring a response—as no longer passing, in the last instance, through an ego, an "I think", an intention, a subject, an ideal of decidability? Would it not be more "responsible" to try pondering the ground, in the history of the West, on which the juridico-egological values of responsibility were determined, attained, imposed?'¹⁹⁸ For Derrida, responsibility is not to be determined by this subject or ego or its relations to other such subjects. Rather, responsibility becomes extant in any situation in which we are summoned to respond; and responsibility is moreover the questioning of exactly *what* constitutes a responsible response. This questioning does not and cannot rely on any kind of fixed notion of subjectivity by which one resolves the urge to respond. Keith Peterson glosses the implications of Derrida's framing in the following way, using the example of nonhuman animals as something to which we must respond:

A new task for thinking then would be to "solicit" (in Derrida's sense) our tradition [...] We can no longer think ourselves, in Descartes' words, "the masters and possessors of nature". This absolute non-mastery should in fact be affirmed and recognized as a positivity, the open possibility of a truly democratic community which counts beings other than human among its members, with the respect and sensitivity which they deserve. Derrida's would be an "ethics" which does not call for final terms, principles or rules, [...] This is instead a positive challenge for more: more giving, more thought, more tolerance, more compassion, more responsibility, more life.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁸ Quoted in Peterson, 'Derrida's Responsibility,' 290.

¹⁹⁹ Peterson, 'Derrida's Responsibility,' 301.

This repeated reference to ‘more’ indicates that while responsibility for Derrida is somewhat undetermined, this is because it has a profligacy, a capacity to reproduce itself, to mutate and grow unpredictably. Once the anatomical and chronological limits of the subject are abandoned, the possibilities for responsibility are endless.

Around the time Peterson would have been writing his account of Derridian, responsibility, Derrida published a work that would come to be considered his most comprehensive consideration of this concept, *The Gift of Death*. This work considers the origins of responsibility in the tradition of European philosophy, proposing a mystical and religious origin, which is subsequently incorporated into Platonism which carries on into the wider philosophical consciousness. Instead of investigating the concept of the subject, Derrida focuses on what he frames as a kind of primordial gesture of responsibility, namely Abraham’s near-sacrifice of his son Isaac in Genesis. Derrida discusses this tale with a close reading of *Fear and Trembling* (1843), Kierkegaard’s own close reading of Abraham and Isaac. (It is this chapter of *The Gift of Death* (1995) that Lucy Graham reads alongside *Disgrace*, and which she believes is the inspiration for the sacrificial motif of the novel.)²⁰⁰

One of the arguments that Derrida develops from his reading of Kierkegaard is that the awareness of responsibility, which is foundational to all the Abrahamic religions, is an awareness of sacrifice. Derrida posits the idea that sacrifice, and moreover, an awareness that one is sacrificing, is in fact the very condition of responsibility. Derrida thinks that Abraham’s moment of sacrificial awareness is the condition of anything one might call ethics; because, he suggests, we are all sacrificing, like Abraham, every second of every day. The difference between us and Abraham is that Abraham knows it. As in *The Animal*, Derrida illustrates his view with reference to his cat. When Derrida chooses to feed his cat, he says, he chooses in the same moment not to feed any other cat. He then asks: ‘How would you ever justify the fact that you sacrifice all the cats in the world to the cat that you feed at home every day for years, whereas other cats die of hunger at every instant?’ It is obvious how many other such examples of ‘sacrifice’ one could list according to this principle, and Derrida concludes that ‘Day and night, at every instant, on all the Mount Moriahs of this world, I am doing that, raising my knife over what I love and must love, over those to whom I owe absolute fidelity, incommensurably.’²⁰¹ For Derrida, responsibility is the recognition that we are all, constantly and unendingly, sacrificers of one kind or another. This is simply the condition of human existence, our state of disgrace.

This is an intimidatingly broad perspective on responsibility, in which we are seen to be sacrificing, and hence responding to and responsible for, every thing that might be understood to summon us to a response. Derrida is reminiscent here of another author of importance to Coetzee,

²⁰⁰ Lucy Graham, ‘“Yes, I am giving him up”: Sacrificial responsibility and likeness with dogs in JM Coetzee’s recent fiction,’ *Scrutiny* 7, no.1 (2002): 4

²⁰¹ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1995), 71, 68. Mount Moriah is where Abraham, sacrificed, or nearly sacrifice, Isaac.

Dostoevsky. In *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879), we read the famous line that “We are all responsible for everyone but I am more responsible than all the others”. Nina Pelikan Strauss has suggested that while Derrida never mentioned Dostoevsky in his published work, Levinas, by whom Derrida was profoundly influenced, frequently did, and Levinas’s influence is particularly prominent in Derrida’s writing about ethics. She writes that ‘Implicit in [the] return of ethical concerns to literary culture was the influence of Dostoevsky on Levinas, who woke Derrida, as the latter wrote in *Adieu*, “to a conception of ‘an unlimited’ responsibility that exceeds and precedes my freedom.”’²⁰²

Perhaps more surprisingly, Derrida is reminiscent here of the call to ‘expand the circle’ made by the utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer, whose work I have already in several places situated as in polemical dialogue with the kind of disposition Coetzee and Derrida might be thought to embody. Singer famously argued that moral responsibility should not be diminished by physical distance, nor by the opposition of ‘letting die’ to some other more deliberate act of killing. Rather, we should respond to a child dying of starvation in a distant country in the same way that we would respond to a child drowning in a pond on our own street: we should act and do what we can to save the child’s life. This is especially the case when what we must sacrifice to do so—in Singer’s example, our new shoes that will be ruined by our wading into the pond—is relatively minor.²⁰³

Derek Attridge is struck by Derrida’s example of animal sacrifice, and wonders: ‘If ethics enjoins on me equal responsibility to and for every person in the world, living, dead and *unborn*, and does this at every instant, it is hard to see how any act could be called, even fleetingly or imperceptibly, “ethical”’ (my emphasis).²⁰⁴ Attridge argues that Derrida is, however, pointing out that ethics, as Peterson suggests, is in its very nature something that cannot be reduced to any ‘general system’ that would resolve that seemingly unbearable responsibility. So while Singer calls for the drowning child to be included in a moral calculation, in Derrida’s expansion of responsibility such an effort of calculation would inevitably be the sacrifice of someone or something else from the moment it began. Some other principle would have to be given up, some other response forsaken, some other calculation left unattended; and none of this could be satisfactorily or conclusively weighed against the alternatives that might have been taken in the first moment of responsibility, if there is such a moment.²⁰⁵ Put differently, Singer argues that there are correct answers to ethical problems concerning what should or should not be sacrificed, while Derrida thinks the impossibility of avoiding

²⁰² See Nina Pelikan Straus, ‘Dostoevsky’s Derrida,’ *Common Knowledge* 8, iss. 3 (Fall 2002): 567.

²⁰³ Peter Singer, ‘Famine, Affluence, and Morality,’ *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1, no.3 (Spring 1972): 229-43.

²⁰⁴ Derek Attridge, *Reading and Responsibility: Deconstruction’s Traces* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 61.

²⁰⁵ As I have discussed elsewhere, there are tempting similarities and very significant differences between Coetzee’s and Singer’s approaches to ethics. Stephen Mulhall discusses Singer’s response to Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals* detail in his book on *Elizabeth Costello, The Wounded Animal*. See Chapter Four.

sacrifice is the very condition of the complex and paradoxical experience of responsibility. Ethics is not the elimination of this experience by its resolution into a correct solution, as in donating money to a charity as Singer suggests, but the dwelling upon it, and the impossible but essential task of responding to it responsibly. This does not mean that what Singer is advocating should be opposed, and indeed I am sure that Derrida would celebrate his work to encourage overseas aid and donations to charity. For Derrida, however, that is not, properly speaking, ethics.

*

In Bernadette Ward's analysis of abortion as a form of sacrifice there is, perhaps surprisingly, a questioning of the boundaries of responsibility, not unrelated to Derrida's account, when she includes the following quotation from an 'abortion worker,' who expresses what Ward calls 'sacrificial ambivalence': 'I see more of murder the further along [in pregnancy] they get [...] I believe that, yes, it is a potential life or being, person, but at the same time it is not independent of the mother and it's not able to live by itself. Until we can reach that point, it's really the mother that has the decision over the life.' Ward writes that for this worker it is 'as if not "we" [the abortionists] but other forces made abortion happen.'²⁰⁶ This unsympathetic reading contains a grain of truth. Ward interprets this blurring of responsibilities as disingenuous and self-serving hypocrisy, a claim of innocence that shirks responsibility. The responsibility for the abortion, Ward thinks, lies with the abortionist and the woman who seeks his services. But this only reveals that Ward's interest is, in her own use of sacrifice, shutting down the cultivation of responsibility that such a powerful reference might otherwise expand and cultivate.

I will conclude now with a vignette that acknowledges the kind of responsibility that Ward attributes to me, but which does not endorse the kinds of limits she would impose on it. Shortly after I first read *Disgrace*, I received a call from the father of a 13-year-old girl on whom I had recently performed a second-trimester abortion. He wanted to inform me that two days after the procedure his daughter had suffered bouts of heavy bleeding and severe abdominal cramping, all of which culminated in the expulsion of a small hand into her underwear. It was clear that I had, in performing the operation, failed to empty the uterus with my usual care. I was ashamed, of course, but relieved when he explained that his daughter had been assessed at her local hospital and that no further treatment would be needed. I can't recall exactly what I said, but it was something to the effect that this is a recognized complication of the operation, although it is, for obvious reasons, extremely regrettable, and especially so in this case of a barely teenaged girl, whom one hopes, rightly or wrongly, to protect as much as possible from the fetal body and the evidence of its destruction.

For a month or so after this conversation I was obsessed with the idea of bringing to the attention of this girl's adolescent boyfriend the miniature hand he had created inside the object of his desire,

²⁰⁶ Ward, 'Abortion as Sacrament,' 24.

and one particularly disturbing thought kept returning to my mind: I wanted the hand to appear on his plate at every meal and for the rest of his life. Only in this way, I thought, would it be possible to impress upon him a sense of what I presumed to be his moral deficiency, his irresponsibility, his inescapable culpability as the root cause of the traumatic appearance of that hand. I even convinced myself that there must be something wrong with this boy—with all boys, in fact—some disturbance at work in a young man whose actions could cause such a gruesome episode.

Finally, however, I concluded there was something wrong with me for having these thoughts, which were probably explicable by psychodynamic theory as phantasies through which I could eject from myself uncomfortable responsibilities: I was extruding them from myself and forcing them across the boundaries of another subject.

This whole episode of professional incompetence and psychological incontinence remains far from edifying. Yet the disturbing culinary mixing of bodies and body parts from which I was suffering—which I was creating—was not unique. I confided to a colleague, who told me she knew of a doctor who was resolutely committed to providing abortions but could no longer do so because on performing one he was always overpowered by uncontrollable retching. I read reports in the medical literature, almost forty years old now, of abortion clinic staff who suffered, among other psychic phenomena, terrifying dreams in which they vomited whole fetuses.²⁰⁷

As Carol Adams points out in her discussion of Zeus's rape of Metis, Greek myth gives an indication of the disturbing proximities of our bodies and the bodies on which our sexual and gustatory appetites are sustained. Thyestes and Atreus fought against one another for the throne of Mycenae, and Walter Burkert writes that: 'Atreus slaughtered Thyestes' infant sons and served them up for dinner, so that Thyestes unsuspectingly ate the flesh of his own children.' He continues: 'Of the brothers, one was a killer, the other an eater, but the worse pollution belonged to the eater. [...] Thyestes had previously committed adultery with his brother's wife, Aerope, whence the motivation for Atreus's dreadful deed.' The 'eater,' Burkert concludes, 'could not restrain himself sexually either.'²⁰⁸ It is always in the grip of these miscellaneous thoughts of killing, eating, and unrestrained sexuality that I re-read *Disgrace*, and Lucy Lurie's decision in particular. To my mind, Lucy Graham has discerned an essential axis of the novel's ethical and literary force when she speaks of the sex depicted there in terms of its 'physical consequences.'²⁰⁹ This physicality, when bodies are concerned, inevitably invokes physiology, too. The challenge posed by the novel is neither Ward's call to abstinence, nor is it the philosophical dismissal of abortion as morally insignificant or politically

²⁰⁷ Warren Hern and Billie Corrigan, 'What about us? Staff reactions to D&E,' *Advances in Planned Parenthood* 15 (1980):3–8.

²⁰⁸ Walter Burkert. *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth*, trans. Peter Bing, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1983), 104.

²⁰⁹ Graham, 'Yes, I am Giving Him Up,' 7.

expedient. Nor should we accept David Lurie's suggestion that one can only submit oneself to castration or accept one's state of disgrace. The novel challenges us to develop a heterosexual responsibility that is equal to the heterosexual response.

At the feast held by Lucy's neighbour Petrus, offal is boiled in a cooking pot (127), and in Greek culinary practice it was the choice of boiling as the cooking method that provided, as Atreus knew, the opportunity for the mixing of human and animal flesh.²¹⁰ Petrus serves grilled meat too, which is undoubtedly safer fare, but my own thoughts refuse to be separated and prepared so cleanly for rumination. This mixing reflects the many intertwined sacrificial responsibilities that continue to emanate from that fetal hand, responsibilities which blur the figurative and literal ingestions that are so important to my reading of Coetzee's novel, and to my reading of the abortions for which I am responsible.

²¹⁰ Gunnel Ekroth, 'Burnt, Cooked, or Raw? Divine and Human Culinary Desires at Greek Animal Sacrifice' in *Transformations in Sacrificial Practices from Antiquity to Modern Times*, ed. Eftychia Stavrianopoulou, Axel Michaels, Claus Ambos (Berlin, Münster, Wien, Zurich, London: Lit Verlag, 2008), 99.

Chapter Three

The Hand as a Sign: Wolfe Reading Coetzee

In a draft to one of his hymns, Hoelderlin writes: “We are a sign that is not read.”

Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*

In a memorable section of J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (1999), David Lurie is driving home from the Animal Welfare clinic after spending the day killing dogs in the operating room. The number of dogs he has helped kill on this particular day is not stated, but elsewhere in the novel, on another day, the corpses are tallied at twenty-three, so the reader can assume it is something around this figure. ‘He had thought he would get used to it,’ Coetzee writes, ‘But that is not what happens. The more killings he assists in, the more jittery he gets.’ David stops his car at the roadside: ‘Tears flow down his face that he cannot stop; his hands shake [...] his whole being is gripped by what happens in the theatre.’²¹¹

In a collection of essays entitled *Philosophy and Animal Life* (2008), Cary Wolfe reads this scene alongside commentaries on Coetzee’s work by Stanley Cavell, Cora Diamond, John McDowell, and Ian Hacking. These essays focus largely on a character of Coetzee’s who does not appear in *Disgrace*, Elizabeth Costello, and especially the lectures she gives in the novella *The Lives of Animals* (1999). This novella was written contemporaneously with *Disgrace*, delivered by Coetzee as his 1997 Tanner lectures at Princeton University, and would later form two chapters of the novel *Elizabeth Costello* (2003). Wolfe’s is the only essay in the volume to discuss *Disgrace*—except for a brief but significant mention by Hacking, to which I will return—and it is this scene of David Lurie trembling at the roadside that Wolfe considers. He writes: ‘what suddenly shakes David Lurie to his very soles as he is driving home that night, is the sheer weight and gravity of what has become one of the central ethical issues of our time: our moral responsibilities toward nonhuman animals.’²¹²

For Wolfe, this moment in the novel portrays an acute episode of the more chronic psychic collapse endured by Elizabeth Costello in *The Lives of Animals*. In that work, Costello is invited to a university to give two lectures. Instead of laying out an argument about animal rights, for example, she presents the audience with herself, giving what some of her audience think of as a rambling monologue which just betrays her own incoherence or instability. But this instability is precisely the point: the audience, and the readers, must bear witness to how devastatingly she has been affected by

²¹¹ J.M. Coetzee, *Disgrace*, (London: Vintage, 2000), 219, 142-143.

²¹² Cary Wolfe, ‘Exposures,’ in *Philosophy and Animal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 3.

the reality of animal slaughter. She gives the audience the fullness of her response, refusing to exclude any of its dimensions from her presentation. In recounting that confrontation with reality, Costello offers herself, her own wearied body and its philosophically dubious responses. This offering is itself a kind of intervention into philosophical or academic debate about humans' treatment of animals. It is her very presence in the lecture-hall, her state of *woundedness*, as Cora Diamond writes in her contribution to *Philosophy and Animal Life*, that Costello (or Coetzee) parades to her audience, and later in the novel, to her interlocuters.

When she hauls herself up to the podium in place of, and as supplement to, the lives and bodies of the animals whose deaths are so unbearable for her, we see that those wounds have inflicted a wound upon her own body. So her response to questions about the ethics of animal rights, for example, is to demonstrate the crisis provoked in her by the very existence of such an abstract debate *as a response* to the killing of animals; she shares with the reader a sense of horror towards the suggestion that abstracted philosophical notions are a suitable response to the unabstracted facts with which that debate is concerned. And when Costello speaks of knowing what it is like to be a corpse, we can imagine that she is, in a sense, throwing her own corpse onto the stage alongside her still-living but faltering body—as one might suddenly throw the body of a dead animal onto a table in the middle of just such a debate—presenting it as a factual response to one's interlocuter, a dramatization in which she serves herself up as a portion of meat. For Wolfe, Lurie's moment in the car is a comparable rhetorical manoeuvre, another instance of a body, and its reactions or responses, being presented to the reader as Exhibit A: a body suffering an unbearable 'pressure of reality'.²¹³

The Coming Apart of Thought and Reality

Cora Diamond's contribution to *Philosophy and Animal Life* is entitled 'The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,' and it is the starting provocation of the other essays in that volume. The contributions by McDowell, Cavell, and Hacking are all written to some degree as responses to that essay. Wolfe provides an introduction which frames Diamond's account alongside his own posthumanist and Derridean reading of Coetzee.

The pressure described by Wolfe in his reading of Diamond and Coetzee has two dimensions. These dimensions are related to a notion of the world, and the moral world in particular, being somehow beyond our intellectual reach, and the figure of distance and ungraspability that is indicated by this being-beyond-reach is central to Wolfe's and Diamond's accounts. Firstly, there is the fact of our treatment of animals, which Coetzee, Costello, Diamond, and Wolfe all suggest poses a kind of harm to those willing to recognise it: acknowledgement of humans' horrendous treatment of animals

²¹³ Wolfe, 'Exposures,' 1-3, 6. On Cora Diamond's description of Costello's woundedness, see 'The Difficulty of Reality and The Difficulty of Philosophy', in the same volume, particularly 46-56.

is by itself a harmful encounter, an encounter which has the capacity to inflict psychic wounds. Secondly, a further difficulty (and again, perhaps a further harm) resides in the incomprehension one might experience in trying to acknowledge that horrifying encounter: there is, for some of us at least, a dumbfoundedness that goes along with acknowledging such facts of human behaviour (including, or perhaps especially, our own behaviour). This incomprehensibility arises not just when we try to think about animals, about how different and yet how alike they are to us, for example, but when we try to think about how we treat animals, the extraordinary brutality we choose to inflict on them, or allow to be inflicted on them, for our benefit. To confront such facts as these is to confront what Diamond calls ‘a difficulty of reality’.²¹⁴

Diamond indicates two responses that one might have to the experience of that difficulty. One can intellectually reframe such matters, focusing one’s thinking on a particular element of the issue under discussion, some putatively important aspect or seemingly constitutive element of the problem, which is easier to think about and more amenable to procedures of analysis. Often this will re-present what is first considered a ‘moral problem’ as an empirical question, and the example Diamond mentions is the reframing of humans—or animals, surely—as bearers of a ‘moral status,’ and in particular a moral status which might be determined by reference to ‘sentience.’ Both Diamond and Wolfe are developing themes established by Cavell in his earlier work, and Diamond borrows a term from Cavell to describe this kind of response, calling it a ‘deflection,’ because it deflects away the perturbing stimulus and reframes it as a matter of concepts; and, I think, because it deflects us away from our own response in all its fullness. If we are horrified by the suffering of animals, we can decrease that horror by suggesting that what is at stake is simply a question as to whether animals are sentient, and if so whether they are sentient like us. While a positive answer to this question may not relieve our anxiety, such a reframing provides many opportunities for a negative answer, and at the very least establishes a starting position of scepticism. Hacking summarises deflection in the following way: it ‘substitutes a painless intellectual surrogate for real disturbance.’ By changing the discussion into one of moral status and its determinants, the crisis of a real disturbance that we first faced in the confrontation with reality is de-escalated and transformed into a scientific enquiry, with all the reassuring protocols that such an enquiry will permit us.

However, this reframing is not without a cost. Firstly, taking Diamond’s example, deflecting a question of bodies into a question of sentience makes ‘our own bodies mere facts—facts which may or may not be thought of as morally relevant in this or that respect.’²¹⁵ Diamond suggests that by conceding such framings we have already, before debate begins, lost something of value if we make our own bodies into mere facts. Someone might respond to that concern by defending this very view, and demand a reason why our bodies should *not* be talked about as if they were mere facts. As far as

²¹⁴ Diamond, ‘Difficulty of Reality,’ 45.

²¹⁵ Diamond, ‘Difficulty of Reality,’ 59. Ian Hacking, ‘Deflections,’ in *Philosophy and Animal Life*, 160.

this person is concerned, we *are* mere facts. But in response to that challenge, it must be appreciated that it will be difficult to articulate the nature of that value if one accepts the vocabulary and descriptive possibilities already instigated by the deflection. If one wants to articulate the value of bodies as something more than mere facts, one must resist from the outset the rhetorical reframing of bodies in terms of their possession or lack of sentience or any other property.

In the process of deflection we restrict our discussion to what is essentially a fragment of the matter that was initially at hand, albeit an apparently important fragment; the debate now concerns what is essentially a metonymy, which stands in for the entire issue and takes up the discursive space; and once that is established, our further responses will only seem legitimate if they are commensurable with the form and vocabulary of this particular fragment or metonymy.²¹⁶ If we reframe the treatment of animals as a question of sentience, animals are effectively removed from view, and we will find ourselves thinking that we are discussing animals when in fact we are discussing sentience: higher and lower forms, cognitive capacities, the putative content of one consciousness or another, and so on. The fullness of the problem has been lost, and so too have many possible responses been excluded. Nevertheless, we might choose to pay this price if we feel either that such an intellectual substitution is the proper way to proceed, or if the situation we are considering is so disturbing that we are compelled, consciously or unconsciously, to defuse the sense of moral danger it evokes in us. In short, deflection averts a crisis, but to do so it must narrow and impoverish the range of our responses.

In his analysis of Diamond's essay, Hacking is careful to point out that deflection is not necessarily a moral failure. 'Don't knock deflection,' he suggests. 'Deflecting is one of the things that we do quite well. Deflecting blows and deflecting anger is a good thing. Man is the Deflecting Animal. [...] Deflection can be perfectly healthy.'²¹⁷ However, it seems reasonable to suggest that one must be cognisant when deflection is in operation, especially if a deflection might already be in operation before the discussion began. Awareness of deflection also creates the possibility for understanding between those who, concerning a given matter, do and do not (or can and cannot) deflect, because of their own personality or disposition, and who consequently respond to the relevant problems in seemingly incommensurable ways. Awareness of deflection also prevents certain responses—Costello's, or Coetzee's—being dismissed on the grounds that they fail to take the form of a dominant philosophical attitude which is effectively a widespread discursive system of deflection.

It may be difficult to detect pervasive deflections like sentience, especially if they are in place before the debate has even started. As Diamond points out, the respondents to Coetzee's Tanner

²¹⁶ Hence philosophy demands what might be called a 'literary' or 'rhetorical' analysis, for we can ask: Is the metonymy a good one? Does it adequately convey the original problem?—much as the metaphor of the simple animal in the RCOG working party report demands this analysis.

²¹⁷ Hacking, 'Deflections,' 161.

Lectures generally think Costello has made a fundamental error or omission in her engagement with debates about the ways humans treat animals. Peter Singer agrees with Costello's views on animals and shares her concern about their maltreatment in a very general sense, but he wants to see these views in the form of logical arguments about properties such as sentience, like those employed by Singer in his own work. But Singer's response or reaction to Coetzee, as Diamond points out, fails precisely by ignoring that Costello is offering not an argument but a kind of self-presentation or testimony that could never take the form of the analytic philosophy Singer prefers—and that is precisely its challenge to that analytic tradition. The broader question that Singer misses is whether Costello's response is ethically meaningful; or rather, he misses the way in which his particular approach to philosophy dismisses a response like Costello's, and hence his own response could be considered to be devoid of a certain ethical meaningfulness.

Consequently, it seems that such responses as Costello's can only live in the purportedly non-philosophical discourses of literature. As Stephen Mulhall points out, what is staged in the debate about Costello's responses is, at least partly, the Platonic expulsion of the poets from the ideal republic. And for Mulhall, the point of bringing such a debate to our attention is not to then argue that literary, or poetic, or bodily, or aesthetic responses are superior to philosophical ones; rather, what is required is the reuniting of these responses in the shared world of human values: 'I am not suggesting that philosophy can or should become literature, or literature philosophy; but I am suggesting that for each properly to acknowledge the other would require both to confront the challenge of reconceiving their self-images, and so their defining aspirations.'²¹⁸

By ignoring the ways in which Costello's testimony might count as a meaningful response to the killing of animals, Singer is demonstrating that he takes for granted the deflection into sentience that dominates his own work. He therefore fails to see how Costello's response is also a response not just to the killing of animals but to the kind of arguments that Singer prefers. Mulhall points out that Singer's response to Costello's response merely evades the question of which responses may be taken seriously and which may not, and Singer merely restates the philosophical assumptions that Costello's fictional existence might be seen to challenge.²¹⁹

What is it, then, to reject deflection? One alternative is to face the difficulty of reality in its fullness, or at least try to do so, and to acknowledge the difficulty of one's ensuing response in all its fullness. But as Diamond makes clear, this is neither straightforward nor without danger. In forsaking the security of the deflection, there is the potential to experience a failure of thinking, or a failure of feeling—a failure to respond satisfactorily to both reality and to one's response to reality. In such moments, one feels one's intellectual inability to encompass, or to make comprehensible, or to *grasp*

²¹⁸ Stephen Mulhall, *The Wounded Animal: JM Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 3.

²¹⁹ Mulhall, *The Wounded Animal*, 58-68.

such matters as animal life, human life, and human violence.²²⁰ This refusal to deflect will not only exacerbate the discomfort caused by confronting unpleasant or baffling or unedifying matters; it will imperil a certain self-image, and shake our confidence in our ability to confront such matters at all. By acknowledging our ethical dubiousness in full an epistemological dubiousness follows.

Diamond uses suitably vivid and excruciating terms to convey this troubling situation when she speaks of this moral and intellectual crisis as ‘the coming apart of thought and reality,’ which is always possible when one chooses a response of non-deflection. This is a notably corporeal phrase, with a visceral evocation of a rupture between mind and world, and this connotation is further underlined when she concludes her essay by observing ‘how much that coming apart of thought and reality belong to flesh and blood.’²²¹ But this closing remark shifts the tone of her description, and illuminates Elizabeth Costello further. Diamond is describing not just a distance between a metaphysical mind and a mechanical world, but something like a bodily injury. This furthermore makes clear that we are to recognise this failure of thought as something peculiarly constitutive of human corporeal being.

Wolfe’s Hand

Drawing on Heidegger and Derrida, Cary Wolfe provides a parallel account to Diamond’s, but one in which it is the figure of the hand by which conceptual *ungraspability* is brought to our attention. The idea that human thought and the human hand are closely related goes back to pre-Socratic philosophy. In an essay on the phenomenology of the hand, Natalie Depraz explains that Anaxagoras ‘states in his *Fragments* that human beings possess “intelligence” (nous) *because* they have hands,’ suggesting that the hand is so critical in our relationship to the world that it makes thinking of our human type possible. ‘The development of the grasping function of the hand would allow the process of intelligence to emerge.’ (She also points out that ‘Aristotle in his work on biology [...] inverted the

²²⁰ The experience Diamond is describing is not exclusively negative, and she discusses, for example, a feeling of awe in the face of beauty or extraordinarily selfless behaviour as (for some people, in some cases) comparably difficult to understand.

²²¹ Diamond, ‘Difficulty of Reality,’ 78. In an excellent double review of *Philosophy and Animal Life* and Mulhall’s *The Wounded Animal*, Gerald L. Bruns writes: ‘Cavell’s substitution of the word “flesh” for “body” is worth some reflection. The body (soma) is a Greek (and heroic) concept: it implies strength, beauty, and imperviousness to suffering; flesh meanwhile is a biblical concept that implies weakness and vulnerability, corpulence and emaciation, and finally decay and death. Flesh is for eating and being eaten. Its distinctive feature is the wound which, perhaps until now with the volumes we have here, does not appear to have ever been a subject for philosophy.’ In the electronic journal *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, 21 May 2009, available at: <https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/book-1-philosophy-and-animal-life-book-2-the-wounded-animal-j-m-coetzee-and-the-difficulty-of-reality-in-literature-and-philosophy/>. Accessed May 2019.

logical causality.’)²²² Depraz notes other theorists who have given the hand a crucial position in human thought and a critical role in humanization more generally: Henri Focillon, Kant, and Andre Leroi-Gourhan.²²³ David Farrell Krell, in a reading of Derrida, also points out the evolutionary and practical significance of the development of our particular form of handedness, with which hand we can grasp food, and which liberates the mouth from this function, allowing the eventual evolution of the more refined contours of the lips and tongue that permit speech. There is a unity in the Western philosophical tradition, he writes, of ‘gesturing hand, speaking mouth, and reasoning brain.’²²⁴

Wolfe’s reading does not focus on a paleontological or neuroevolutionary account of the hand-mind relation, but on a figure of the hand that appears in Heidegger, firstly to complicate our understanding of what thinking, as a manual practice, might be; and secondly as a means by which Heidegger can give a biological credibility to his humanistic philosophy, through an account of the hand as a biologically unique sign that indicates a distinction between man and animal. Wolfe is furthermore interested in how Derrida both endorses Heidegger’s complication of this figure, and in how Derrida critiques Heidegger’s man-animal distinction.

Bringing this thread into contact with his opening concerns about nonhuman animals, Wolfe writes:

We may think we have left the question of our relation to nonhuman animals behind at this juncture, but as Cavell and Jacques Derrida remind us in their readings of Heidegger, the figure of the hand in relation to thought and to species difference is a linchpin of philosophical humanism. As Cavell points out, harboured in Heidegger’s famous contention that “thinking is a handicraft” is the “fantasy of the apposable [sic] thumb that separates the human from the animal not just anthropologically but ontologically.

David Farrell Krell also points out that Heidegger is not alone in his privileging of the hand as a sign of man: ‘The skilled and hospitably extended hand is one of the classic signs of the metaphysically

²²² Natalie Depraz, ‘Phenomenology of the Hand,’ in *The Hand, An Organ of the Mind: What the manual tells the mental*, ed. Zdravko Radman (Cambridge, Mass., And London: The MIT Press, 2013), 186.

²²³ Similar arguments, made squarely in a humanist tradition, have been made more recently by Raymond Tallis, who writes: ‘What the hand brought to the table was not simply increased dexterity but an utterly different sense of self.’ *The Hand: A Philosophical Inquiry into Human Being* (Edinburgh University Press, 2003) 273-279. Similarly, Frank R. Wilson writes that ‘There is growing evidence that *H. sapiens* acquired in its new hand not simply the mechanical capacity for refined manipulative and tool-using skills but, as time passed and events unfolded, an impetus to the redesign, or reallocation, of the brain’s circuitry.’ *The Hand: How Its Use Shapes the Brain, Language, and Human Culture* (New York: Pantheon, 1998) 59.

²²⁴ David Farrell Krell, *Phantoms of the Other: Four Generations of Derrida’s Geschlecht* (Albany: SUNY University Press, 2015), 51.

conceived *Geschlecht* [a term whose meaning I will address shortly] we call humanity, especially the humanity that is eager to oppose itself to animality. The opposable thumb we take to be in opposition to everything else that lives.²²⁵ This is true for Heidegger: the complex nature of the human hand (and hand of thought) is what justifies the privative phenomenology Heidegger will attribute to nonhuman, supposedly non-handed animals. But aside from this problem, Heidegger also develops the figure of the hand in a remarkable way, to question what we are doing when we are, in our peculiarly human way, thinking—or as Heidegger would have it, what we think we are doing when we try to think.

In *What Is Called Thinking?* (1952) Heidegger describes how this figure of thought invites an interpretation of thinking as a reaching after the world and its facts, but his reading of the figure limits our thinking to a form of conceptual grasping, as if understanding were only possible in the taking hold of things. But instead of suggesting that we abandon the figure, Heidegger develops it: '[T]he craft of the hand is richer than we commonly imagine. The hand does not only grasp and catch, or push and pull. The hand reaches and extends, receives and welcomes—and not just things: the hand extends itself, and receives its own welcome in the hands of others. The hand holds. The hand carries. The hand designs and signs, presumably because man is a sign.'²²⁶ As Stephen Mulhall writes, the human hand and the thought for which it is a sign becomes not just a 'grasping organ' but takes on here a quality of 'receptivity.'²²⁷ This somewhat passive receptivity is in marked contrast to the active grasp, and transforms the possibilities of the hand as a figure of thought, and transforms our thinking about what thinking itself might be.

Wolfe is interested in this figure in his reading of Coetzee because he and Coetzee share a concern for nonhuman animals; but for Heidegger, the human hand is constitutively different to the paws and grasping organs of other animals, and it marks a boundary of considerable significance. In fact, as Wolfe writes, the hand is 'a linchpin of philosophical humanism,'²²⁸ presumed by many commentators to be psycho-anatomically unique in the living world. As Wolfe points out, it is Derrida who both acknowledges Heidegger's contribution to our thinking about thinking, while also bringing to our attention the limits Heidegger imposes on that thinking, by withholding it from nonhuman animals. In fact, Wolfe draws on Derrida's reading of 'Heidegger's Hand' to point out that the hand can play no such role in privileging humans above the other animals: many species have opposable

²²⁵ David Farrell Krell, *Phantoms of the Other*, 49-51.

²²⁶ Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?* trans. Fred D. Wieck and J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 16.

²²⁷ Stephen Mulhall, *Inheritance and Originality: Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Kierkegaard*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, 298.

²²⁸ Wolfe, 'Exposures,' 7.

thumbs like ours, so the complex forms of thinking Heidegger gives us to think about could well be possessed by nonhuman animals, and indeed perhaps we could learn something about it from them.

Heidegger asks us to think in a way that does not correspond to seizing objects in the world in order to control or manipulate them. Derrida, in his reading of Heidegger's hand, summarises the idea in this way: 'If there is a thought of the hand or a hand of thought, as Heidegger gives us to think, it is not of the order of conceptual grasping. Rather, this thought of the hand belongs to the gift, of a giving that would give, if this is possible, without taking hold of anything.'²²⁹ And Derrida goes on to develop Heidegger's hand further, drawing out Heidegger's observation that the words 'think' and 'thank' share a common etymological root. Derrida then plays with the transitive and intransitive of this giving, and further affirms that thinking is not best thought of as mastery, but as a kind of gratitude, offering, or opening; it is almost a certain kind of humility and vulnerability. What the hand gives is, Derrida suggests, not what it might hold but the hand itself. This complex development leaves us with an empty hand, an image that forces us to dwell on the hand itself and not what might have been successfully seized or frustratingly dropped. Heidegger has, we could say brought thought *into* the hand, not as something else to be held but something the hand *is*. And Derrida points out that in so doing Heidegger is putting pressure on a Cartesian tradition in which thinking is metaphysically distinct from the body or any of its appendages. Heidegger, Derrida writes, binds thinking 'to a thought or to a situation of the body.'²³⁰ (Although Derrida explicates Heidegger's figure of the hand in a helpful way, the principal contribution of that reading is to critique Heidegger's use of the hand to separate humans from other animals. All of the developments of that figure are in Heidegger in the first place. It is only later, in *The Gift of Death*, that Derrida extends the figure of the hand, as a site at which *ethical* thought may be bound to the body, and I will consider this later.)

Wolfe brings this Heideggerian hand into contact with another exploration of this figure by Stanley Cavell. Cavell finds the figure in the work of Emerson, too, who writes: 'I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, that lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition.' Cavell observes that 'Emerson's clutching and Heidegger's grasping emblemise their interpretation of Western conceptualising as sublimised violence.'²³¹ Wolfe also manages to draw Cavell, Derrida, and Diamond together through this figure and its proximity to the notion of deflection, which now becomes a way of avoiding speaking about what we cannot grasp. Wolfe suggests that 'the duty of thinking is not to "deflect" but to receive and even suffer (remember Costello's woundedness) what Cavell calls our "exposure" to the world.'²³² This is

²²⁹ Jacques Derrida, 'Geschlecht II: Heidegger's Hand,' in *Deconstruction and Philosophy*, ed. John Sallis (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 172-173.

²³⁰ Derrida, 'Geschlecht II,' 171.

²³¹ Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 39.

²³² Wolfe, 'Exposures,' 8.

another way of saying, I think, that there is a responsibility not to deflect, and to instead put ourselves squarely in the way of those matters we find most perturbing or ungraspable, and to endure our responses to them in their fullness.

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One can see in Derrida's reading of the hand in Heidegger the beginning of the ideas that would be developed as a more substantial critique of philosophical humanism in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. For Heidegger, the hand and its multiplicity of meanings is a way of distinguishing man and elevating him above the other animals. It is a figure by which, as Derrida writes in *The Animal*, humanity announces itself to itself.²³³ The hand is a sign by which man, or so Heidegger thinks, can distinguish himself from other categories, or *Geschlechter*, which is the polysemic German word that Derrida considers in the first pages of his essay on Heidegger and the hand. This word can mean various things, depending on context: 'sex, race, species, genus, gender, stock, family, generation or genealogy, community,'²³⁴ but it is at heart a gesture of categorisation, of pointing, of classifying and separating.

Derrida shows that Heidegger's pointing to mankind as a special group among the animals, a pointing which Heidegger achieves rhetorically by pointing to his own hand, is a strangely reflexive and complex gesture. It is Heidegger himself who says that 'man is the pointing animal.'²³⁵ Man, it seems, is always gesturing to his world and his fellows to identify and communicate his distinctions, including the distinction he offers himself. But in characteristic fashion, Derrida suggests that Heidegger is correct about his special place for man, but for the wrong reasons. Man is not so much the pointing animal, Derrida might say, as the *Geschelchting* animal. Derrida's implication is that man can be distinguished not by his unique hand but by the gestures he makes with it; not by the opposable thumb but the pointing finger that Heidegger in fact brings to our attention. Man is the animal frantically trying to determine the various categories that he and other creatures will fall into and by which he will distinguish himself. Thus Heidegger proves his own point about man being the pointing animal, because he is trying to point to man while not pointing to animals. In so doing, he points to a sign—the human hand with its not-so-unique opposable thumb—that is not really there.

Heidegger's problematic philosophical humanism does not stop Derrida pursuing Heidegger's suggestion that the hand is 'a sign of man,' and the status of this sign is made even more complicated

²³³ Derrida, *The Animal*, 12.

²³⁴ Derrida, 'Heidegger's Hand,' 162.

²³⁵ Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking*, 9: 'What withdraws from us, draws us along by its very withdrawal, [...] As we are drawing toward what withdraws, we ourselves are pointers pointing toward it. [...] To say "drawing toward" is to say "pointing toward what withdraws."'

by Heidegger's additional contention that the hand is a sign of man *presumably because man is a sign*. Mankind is, therefore 'monstrous,' Heidegger suggests, playing with the polysemy of this word that implies not just the signalling connoted by 'demonstration,' but also a certain singular ominousness that man has for himself. Tracing the etymology, Derrida notes that a monster was a creature that portended something important. This signing and portending is related to the hand by Heidegger through gesture, binding thought to the body: pointing, indicating, making signs with the hand. Man is the signalling animal and is so because of the hand which he uses to signal; consequently we can miss, Derrida implies, the significance of the hand itself. Derrida summarises as follows: 'The hand is monstrosity, the proper of man as the being of monstration.' In making signs man becomes a sign, perhaps a sign of signs in general: a 'monstrosity of monstration'; but ironically, we are nevertheless unable to read the sign that the hand *is*.²³⁶

Derrida notes that Heidegger's demonstrative hand is immediately preceded in *What Is Called Thinking* by a reading of a draft of Hoelderlin's 'Mnemosyne,' which includes the line: 'We are a sign that is not read.'²³⁷ The situation Derrida lays out is now quite complicated: the hand is a sign of man, or a sign of the sign that man is; and the sign that man is, and that the hand is a sign for, is, in some important way, not read. We fail somehow to see ourselves, our hands, as signs, as signficatory or significant. For Derrida, to read this unread sign is partly to acknowledge the relationship of the hand to the gesture of giving a gift, which I mentioned earlier, and specifically to recognise that a hand, which is the instrument of giving, in fact *gives itself*. It is this essence that we have lost, or lost the ability to read, in our fixation on a hand that transitively grasps, gives, and takes, as if the hand were only valuable in its ability to contain or transport something else (and the nature of communication as a form of giving or transportation, which I discussed in Chapter One, is also relevant here). This reading seems closely related to Heidegger's wish to resituate thinking in the body, for it redirects our attention to the form the body takes, and to the hand in particular, focusing our attention on the body per se, rather than the body as the vessel or bearer of a selection of meaningful properties. A good example of such a property would be sentience.

Heidegger and Derrida can help us further understand David Lurie's treatment towards the dogs, as a gesture which stands in opposition to a philosophical tradition in which thought is precisely not bound to the body. Humankind is 'a sign that is not read' ("Long is/The time—the time in which we are a sign, a sign that is not read" reads Hoelderlin's drafted poem);²³⁸ but for David Lurie the bodily nature we share with animals transgresses the boundaries of species or anatomy that Heidegger imposes. The body of a dog is also a sign, and one we have not yet learned, or have forgotten how, to

²³⁶ Derrida, 'Heidegger's Hand,' 167.

²³⁷ Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking*, 10.

²³⁸ Quoted in Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking*, 11.

read. Hence David's feeling of absurdity at his kindly treatment of the dogs: it is a gesture whose meaning cannot be expressed in language. It can neither be written, nor, in this sense, can it be read.

Wolf does not take up this binding of thought to the body in his reading of Coetzee, but it seems to me that the novel stages, in a startling way, not just the body as a sign that is not read, but the hand specifically, as a particularly significant metonymy for that unread or unreadable body, and as a significant site of its responses to the world. Despite his sensitive reading of the moment when Lurie pulls his car over to the roadside, Wolfe does not, for example, notice the particularly manual nature of the crisis David then experiences: his *hands* shake and he is *gripped* by what happens in the theatre. David is crushed in the fist of a realisation while his own organs of grasping fail. This trembling of the hand registers what Derek Attridge terms an ethical conversion experience in the realm of the body, of flesh and blood: the moral crisis is also a physiological and anatomical one.

This powerful convergence of the ethical and the bodily in the site of the hand can perhaps be understood further with reference to Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), in which the narrator 'JC' writes: 'All parts of the body are not cathected to the same degree. If a tumour were cut out of my body and displayed to me on a surgical tray as "your tumour," I would feel revulsion at an object that is in a sense "of" me but that I disown, and indeed rejoice at the elimination of; whereas if one of my hands were cut off and displayed to me, I would no doubt feel the keenest grief.'²³⁹ This exemplifies Coetzee's ongoing efforts to cathect a body that has been divested of meaning.

This cathexis of the hand can furthermore be related back to the arguments I set out in Chapter One: bioethicists who argue for the importance of histologically diffuse neuroanatomical regions of the cortex, on the grounds that sentience is realised there, are simply cathecting those cells of the brain; but thought, as Heidegger indicates, resides in the hand too. And so Coetzee, or Peter Saunders from the Christian Medical Fellowship, cathect the hand, while Bonnie Steinbock and Peter Singer (to give just two examples) cathect the cortex—or those regions of it which are believed to be critical to the realisation or integration of a consciousness. And they do so even when that consciousness exists only partially, in a way that we cannot grasp.

It is not my intention here to argue for the hand as another feature which, like the face for Levinas, makes an indisputable claim on us to respond, or to argue that it is a primary bodily metonymy by which our responsibilities can be recognised. Rather, it is to suggest that all such metonymic cathexes are figurative ways of accounting for the bodily nature of ethics and responsibility. Nor is it my intention to argue that hands are more important or meaningful than the brain. But by recognising these cathexes as metonymic we appreciate that their communicative force, and their force in ethical arguments, is a gesture of rhetoric, and that these cathexes come at the expense of comprehensiveness: the body and the response can never be adequately represented by one, or even the sum of, its parts.

²³⁹ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Vintage, 2008), 60.

What we must be aware of is the problem of cathecting one part—the cortex, the face, the hand—at the expense of divesting the remainder of its ability to mean.

This is the problem Derrida describes as ‘cutting up a subject,’ a problem that is played-out in the very form of Coetzee’s *Diary of a Bad Year*. Most of that novel’s pages are divided into three parts: in the top section of each page run JC’s essays, which are to be published in a collection titled *Strong Opinions*; in the middle section JC provides a diary-like account of the period during which those essays were written; and at the bottom of the page is an account from Anya, the neighbour to whom JC is powerfully attracted and who is employed by him to type-up those essays and prepare them for his publisher. Jonathan Lear points out that with this arrangement, from the beginning of the novel, ‘As we move toward the lower part of the page, we also move to the lower part of the body—and, not accidentally, the “lower” part of the soul.’²⁴⁰

Diary of a Bad Year begins with a political essay on the origins of the state, in a suitably cool essayistic tone. The first paragraphs of this essay take up almost all of page one—except for a few lines at the bottom of the page, which suddenly interject against the established voice to describe JC’s initial encounter with Anya: ‘My first glimpse of her was in the laundry room.’ This line follows immediately after a paragraph on Thomas Hobbes, but within the graphological scheme of the text it is not so much a non-sequitur as an indication of the proximity of strong opinions and strong feelings, which can be separated in rhetoric but not in the living of a body. However eloquent JC’s careful analysis of Hobbes may be, his discourse still can be interrupted—indecorsously, uncontrollably, reverentially—by the breathless recollection of Anya. This might be read as a scholarly response interrupted by a biological reaction, but perhaps it is better understood as an expression of the inseparability of those two categories.

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Returning to the manual nature of David Lurie’s crisis at the roadside, I want to consider Hacking’s comments on *Disgrace* in his contribution to *Philosophy and Animal Life*. Hacking focuses on the

²⁴⁰ Jonathan Lear, ‘Ethical Thought and the Problem of Communication: A Strategy for Reading *Diary of a Bad Year*,’ in *J.M. Coetzee and Ethics: Philosophical Perspectives on Literature*, eds. Anton Leist and Peter Singer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). See also Stuart J. Murray’s reading of *Diary of a Bad Year*, which he argues that the book is a kind of paradoxical ‘allegory’ of ‘the tenets of mainstream bioethics,’ which ‘privileges respect for autonomy and self-determination and makes of these the basis of human dignity and ethical decision-making.’ Murray calls his reading allegorical precisely because the novel does not map onto any conventional account of bioethics in the symbolic manner one would expect; instead it questions with its multiple voices those tenets of ‘autonomy’ and ‘self-determination’ that are taken for granted by many people who write about bioethical matters. Stuart J. Murray, ‘Allegories of the Bioethical: Reading J.M. Coetzee’s *Diary of a Bad Year*.’ *Journal of Medical Humanities* 35 (2014):321-34.

scenes of killing in which David is engaged, the excruciating daily grind of canine euthanasia that becomes so distressing for David, yet to which he appears to be committed. Despite the prevalence of death in the novel, Hacking's chief remark on it is to state that *Disgrace* 'is no more primarily about death than are the Tanner Lectures. They are more about dignity.'²⁴¹ I do not agree entirely. *Disgrace* is not primarily about death in the passive sense, but it is very much concerned with inflicting death, and the crisis of fear and trembling this infliction of death provokes in David Lurie; and it is also concerned to show us David's reaction or response to the killings of the novel, both literal and figurative, all of which is conveyed to the reader through a failure of his hands. It is this moment in the novel that grips Cary Wolfe, and many other readers, as if the fiction transmits the force that makes those hands tremble. Yet despite Wolfe's powerful reading of this scene, the hands of David Lurie remain a sign that is unread.²⁴²

Stephen Mulhall has, with anatomical detail, read the hand in Heidegger, Derrida, Cavell, and also Wittgenstein, in a similar manner. He not only observes the proximity of Heidegger's hand to the pointing hand of the Augustinian and ostensive account of language that was of interest to Wittgenstein;²⁴³ he also writes of 'That distinctive fifth (or is it first?) digit, capable of pivoting out from the plane of the other four to provide an encircling hold on objects resting against the palm and thus to open a space for the use of tools—of handles, hammers, and pens.' Such imagery, he suggests elsewhere in a reading that is largely focused on Wittgenstein, 'invite[s] us to ask whether humanity rests in, or grows from, the human hand with its opposable thumb.'²⁴⁴ This need not, however, commit us to the hand (or thumb) being a linchpin of philosophical humanism, for as Derrida shows us, humanity can be seen to grow from this figure of the hand and its anatomical details without us drawing any conclusions about the inferior status of nonhuman animals that do or do not possess hands or thumbs.

²⁴¹ Hacking, 'Deflections,' 154.

²⁴² There is more that could be said about the Kierkegaardian and Derridean discussion of St. Paul's injunction that we 'work towards [our] own salvation in fear and trembling,' which seems so relevant to David Lurie's crisis and his work in the clinic. John Caputo has applied Derrida's work to his own poststructuralist Christian theology, including a detailed reading of Derrida on Kierkegaard in *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (1997). In *What Would Jesus Deconstruct* (2007), he makes the following comment: 'I approach the wilful killing of anything—animals or enemies, felons or fetuses—with considerable fear and trembling.' John D. Caputo. (Ada, MI: Baker Publishing, 2007), 112.

²⁴³ Stephen Mulhall, 'Re-Monstrations: Heidegger, Derrida and Wittgenstein's Hand,' *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* (1995) 26;1: 65-85. Mulhall points out the importance of the figure of the hand in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. He does not, however, point out how many of those hands are, in-keeping with a dominant philosophical tradition, deprived of the capacity for pain by Wittgenstein.

²⁴⁴ Stephen Mulhall, 'Remonstrations: Heidegger, Derrida and Wittgenstein's Hand,' *Journal of the British Phenomenological Society* 26 (1995): 65-68.

Consequently, Mulhall's shifting of attention from the pointing finger to the pointing thumb opens up further developments of the figure in Heidegger and Derrida: the hand is a sign of man, because man is a sign, and the thumb is a sign of that hand (that remains itself a sign). This thumb that is a sign plays a pivotal role in David Lurie's crisis in *Disgrace*, when it appears sign of the sacrificial responsibility that is invoked throughout the novel. It does so, furthermore, in a notably Derridean manner.

Pollux's Reaction

David engages in the figurative or metaphysical slaughter that marks the exercise of his sexual and alimentary drives, and this behaviour is brought powerfully to his awareness when his daughter is raped and he engages regularly in the actual killing of countless dogs and other animals. Near the end of the novel, David meets a character who some commentators have identified as 'a twin' of his, the child Pollux, who was one of the group who raped Lucy Lurie. As Sandra D. Shattuck points out, the name Pollux demands attention, both because it is unusual and because it is emphasised in the dialogue of the novel: in telling her father this name, Lucy says the name twice, and even spells it out to him.

The name itself invokes the mythical twins Castor and Pollux, the rapists of the daughters of Leucippus.²⁴⁵ Pollux participates in the rape of David's daughter Lucy as the possible father of the child forced upon Lucy, and by that rape he may come to be David's son-in-law, or some variation thereof. But the twinning denoted by that name implies to me a filiation more profound. Pollux's rape of Lucy, and David's 'not quite rape' of Melanie, invite a comparisons of the two males and their failures of sexual responsibility, one in which the operation of violence is overt, in the case of Pollux, and one in which it is covert, in David Lurie, where it operates through the networks of racist and misogynistic oppression that run through the South Africa of the novel (and through many other countries). If we recall the Tolstoyan imagery of *Disgrace*, the knife and the bed of blood that David and Lucy imagine, then David and Pollux, like Castor and Pollux, are affiliated as both literal and figurative rapists and killers.

Pollux, the rapist of Lucy, speaks only four lines in the novel: "I will kill you!" Pollux shouts, when he is caught spying on Lucy through the bathroom window. "I will kill you!" he shouts again. Then finally, "We will kill you all!" Three times, in a relatively short novel, and out of four spoken lines, the declaration of homicidal intent is made by the child called Pollux, who is David's agnate, and also the youngest character (excepting Lucy Lurie's fetus); that is, the freshest form of man in the

²⁴⁵ Sandra D. Shattuck, 'Disgrace, or White Man Writing,' in *Encountering Disgrace: Reading and Teaching Coetzee's Novel*, ed. William E. McDonald (Rochester: Camden House, 2006) 141-142.

entire book.²⁴⁶ This fixation on killing is remarkable, and one could justifiably call him a *Homo necans*: this term, meaning ‘killing man’ is the title of the best-known book by the scholar Walter Burkert, and it is, as Andy Lamey points out, cited by Coetzee in *The Lives of Animals*. In that work, Burkert develops an account of humanity as characterised by his killings, and by his responses to those killings, in the form of sacrificial practice and religion.²⁴⁷ Like Girard, Burkert thinks culture derived from the rituals that early man developed to appease his feelings of guilt, and indeed to appease the wrath of his slain prey. But Burkert is more interested in how these sacrificial practices develop in the context of hunting, rather than the scapegoat scenario that Girard describes. Aside from these details, Burkert offers an account of mankind as constitutively defined by his killings: by its perceived need to kill, and by its response to that need. Pollux, I suggest, almost always responds by threatening to kill.

It is unclear why, when Lucy tells David the young man’s name, she chooses to spell-out the word Pollux for her father: “P-O-L-L-U-X” (200). Does she do so merely as a matter of emphasis, by which Coetzee means to underline the allusion to the mythical twins, as Shattuck suggests? Or is it simply to counter David’s sarcastic and racist response to the name? “Not Mncedisi? Not Nqabayakhe? Nothing unpronounceable?” he says. Her response may be both these things. However, I would add to these suggestions that if Lucy had not spelled out the name, her father might have mistaken the young man Pollux for *Pollex*, that is, the Latin word for thumb. Such a misunderstanding could only be made in speech, and Lucy ensure it does not happen. Unlike David, the reader could not make such an error because she or he can see the word: it is thus a difference that exists only in the difference between speech and writing; just as the reader can distinguish Coetzee’s Robinson Crusoe from Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe by the act of reading the novel *Foe* (1986).²⁴⁸

This effort on Lucy’s part to prevent a mishearing or misreading by her father in fact creates confusion. Is it possible, to Lucy’s mind, that the boy might have been named Pollex, or thumb, or that her father would think as much? David’s twin rapist-cum-executioner is poised between being and not-being the romanticised emblem of those hands that tremble at the roadside, which are themselves romanticised as the emblem of man—and which David uses to help Bev Shaw yank the souls from the unwanted dogs. Does Lucy know that David, as a scholar of literature, is probably familiar with Latin and has probably read Derrida, and assumes that if her father mistook the name to be Pollex, this would be a sign too far? Perhaps such an unnecessary surplus of meaning would, for

²⁴⁶ Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 207. His other line, which perhaps I should heed in this increasingly esoteric reading, is “It’s not true!” (132).

²⁴⁷ *Homo Necans: the Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth*, trans. Peter Bing (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1983).

²⁴⁸ I heard this Derridean reading of *Foe* in a talk by Peter McDonald. I have not been able to find a written form to cite here—which seems appropriate.

someone of David's aesthetic disposition, render him utterly unable to come to terms with Lucy's situation and her decisions in the way she hopes he might.

This spectral appearance of the thumb in the form of a character who responds, seventy-five percent of the time, by suggesting the infliction of death, strikes me with considerable force, for it indicates to me that mankind has reached a point at which killing is no longer taken to be significant. Firstly, it seems almost to invoke the hallmark of the nonresponse, or reaction, which I showed Derrida drawing out of Descartes's account of animals in Chapter One: the nonresponse of the automaton identifiable because it always says the same thing: *Disgrace* intimates something about killing as a particularly human reaction or nonresponse.

Secondly, this appearance of the thumb affects me powerfully because for some time before reading *Disgrace* I had wanted to write about my experience of performing abortions by undertaking a study of the representation of the hand in Sartre, the title of which was to be *Hands in Sartre's 'The Age of Reason', Or How I Became a Vegetarian—With Special Emphasis On The Thumb*. My intention was to scrutinize the roughly two hundred appearances of the word *hand* in that novel, and of the thumb in particular. I was especially interested in the hands of the backstreet abortionist that Mathieu visits in the opening pages, whose hands are described as follows: 'They were a *man's* hands, a strangler's hands: furrowed, cracked, with broken nails, and black with scars and gashes. On the first joint of the left *thumb*, there were some purple warts, and a large black scab. Mathieu shuddered as he thought of Marcelle's soft brown flesh' (my emphasis).²⁴⁹

I wanted to relate these hands to my own hands, which, like the hands of the old abortionist whom Mathieu finds so repulsive, bear the unpleasant stigmata of the very operation Mathieu is seeking for his lover. There is a small lump, barely visible but easily felt, between the first and second joint of the thumb of my right hand, where the surgical instruments that I grasp, and that I use to grasp the fetus, press the thin layer of flesh against the underlying bone. From speaking to medical colleagues, I understand that I am not the only one who finds the surgical instruments to be unergonomic in this way. (The prevalence of these injuries or marks is worth bearing in mind in reading Sartre's novel, because the hands of the 'good' abortionist whose services Mathieu cannot afford are never seen—are they, we wonder, unblemished?)

Considering once more the hand in full, a similar attention to *Disgrace* reveals further suggestions that the hands are in some way a special site for the kind of responsibility faced by both Mathieu and David Lurie, two male characters offering easy recourse to abortion. When David first meets Bev and learns the nature of her work, he asks her about the dogs:

²⁴⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Age of Reason*, trans. Eric Sutton (London: Penguin, 2001), 21.

“Are they all going to die?”

“Those that no one wants. We’ll put them down.”

“And you are the one who does the job.”

“Yes.” (85)

David then asks Bev if she will have a use for him at the clinic, and she replies in the following way: “If you are prepared...” She opens her hands, presses them together, opens them again. She does not know what to say, and he does not help her.’ (86) Here, at the point of the ellipsis, where Bev is lost for words to describe what it is that David must *be prepared for*, or *be prepared to do*, she speaks with her hands.

In the final pages of the novel, when David has returned to the Western Cape, he tells Bev that he is once again “available to help at the clinic.” She replies, astonishingly, “That will be handy.” The obvious meaning is of course that his presence will be helpful. But it is also possible to read this as yet another affirmation of the relationship between the peculiarly human hand and the peculiarly human ways of killing depicted in the novel; it is as if Bev knows the manual nature of the crisis David is suffering; or as if she wishes to tell him and her readers that her work, as a specialist in sterilisation and euthanasia (91) is, in a Heideggerian sense, a *handicraft*. As such, it requires the attention, concentration, and love (219) that David finally learns from Bev by the time we reach the novel’s closing pages. This successful education (and not, as Andy Lamey argues, Lucy Lurie’s decision about her pregnancy) is the novel’s deeply satisfying conclusion, although it is a satisfaction that is achieved thanks to the efforts and sacrifices of the novel’s female characters.

The harm caused to my hands by the surgical instruments I use in my clinical work is perhaps an obvious point to make: a body using tools and physical force to destroy another body is likely to sustain a wound, and one of Sartre’s characters remarks, in fact, that one can only damage oneself through the harm one does to others.²⁵⁰ But it is remarkable to me that my thumb in particular is the site of this mark. That distinctive digit, as a sign of the hand that is a sign of man, confers upon the

²⁵⁰ Sartre, *Age of Reason*, 87. A phenomenological examination of this wounded hand could be built on the philosophical dimensions of tactile experience. For example, Brian O’ Shaughnessy writes that it is only in touch that ‘a body investigates bodies as one body amongst others, for in touch we directly appeal to the tactile properties of our own bodies in investigating the self-same tactile properties of other bodies.’ ‘The Sense of Touch,’ *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 67;1 (1989): 37-58, 38. And Elaine Scarry highlights the phenomenological aspects of tools (and weapons) as a haptic intermediary: ‘the object, whether weapon or tool, is a lever across which a comparatively small change in the body at one end is amplified into a very large change in the object, animate or inanimate, at the other end.’ She also suggests that ‘contemporary arguments about whether abortion is properly understood as a medical operation (tool) or instead as a murder (weapon) have sometimes turned on the question of whether or not the fetus is capable of experiencing pain.’ *The Body in Pain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 174, 175.

human a great many creative and destructive capacities, but it also creates the possibility for sustaining uniquely human wounds. In fact, it might be more in-keeping with the passivity and vulnerability that Heidegger develops in his figure of the hand, to speak of this vulnerability in more positive terms, and to say that this possibility for wounding is a valuable capacity—precisely the capacity that Costello and Diamond, and Derrida and Wolfe encourage us to develop. And this wound must also be a sign, one which exceeds in its ethical signification the capacities of semiolinguistic communication: it is, and must be allowed to stand as, a sign that cannot be read.

The Experience of Sacrifice

For Lucy Graham, Derrida's *Gift of Death* provides inspiration for the sacrificial motif of Coetzee's *Disgrace*, and the experience of sacrifice that Derrida describes in his reading of Kierkegaard resonates powerfully with David Lurie's ethical conversion experience at the roadside, when a species of fear and trembling is manifested in the hands. Derrida is especially interested in why Kierkegaard takes the title for his meditation on Abraham and Isaac from the New Testament: 'Work out your own salvation in fear and trembling,' Paul writes to the Philippians in Chapter 2, Verse 12. Derrida suggests that a significant relationship established in this choice of title, between an account of a sacrifice—a sacrifice foundational to all the Abrahamic religions and the cultures and responsibilities that ensued from them—and the trembling that St. Paul recommends as the proper comportment or disposition for those seeking salvation. This disposition arises from, or is taught to us, in the act of sacrificing, and in the cultivation of our own awareness as sacrificers. Derrida writes: 'The trembling of *Fear and Trembling*, is, or so it seems, the very experience of sacrifice,' an experience which Derrida will repeatedly relate throughout *The Gift of Death* to the possibility of responsibility.²⁵¹

If Heidegger binds thought to a situation of the body, Derrida binds responsibility to the effects of sacrifice on the body,²⁵² because responsibility makes itself felt in the tremble; that is, a response which is not so much physical as physiological (there is no purely physical force that causes David Lurie's hands to shake). As such the response to sacrifice, which is the response of responsibility, can truly be said to be a response of the body.

It is then Coetzee who then binds this responsibility not just to the body but to the hand in particular; to David Lurie's shaking hands specifically. This binding of the hand to the experience of responsibility is in fact present in Heidegger's original account: all the manual gestures beyond grasping that he lists are social, concerned with relational behaviours such as greeting or warning off: they concern our treatment of our neighbours. The Heideggerian figure of the hand has an ethical valency even before it is taken up and further developed in this aspect by Derrida.

²⁵¹ Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 59.

²⁵² Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 59.

In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida now appears to develop the ethical possibilities of Heidegger's binding of thought to the body. Derrida meditates on the appearance of hands in various Biblical injunctions, for example: "But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth," but he emphasises that these injunctions seem designed not reinforce the pairing of hands, but to break them up, so as not 'to reinscribe alms-giving within a certain economy of exchange.'²⁵³ This separation is required, Derrida thinks, because the symmetrical nature of our handedness predestines us for a certain form of ersatz ethical thinking that has, on closer inspection, a very unethical character: it seems to be an economic calculation concerning what, if we give with one hand, we will receive with the other. This is for Derrida a kind of pseudo-ethical principle which is really an economic one, because it invites a calculative element: of doing a good thing only in anticipation of receiving some suitable return. The net result will be that one has not, properly speaking, given anything at all. This two-handedness is a figure for, or perhaps creates the very possibility of, a notion of reciprocity, and the implication is that our concepts of responding responsibly to one another are enmeshed on our bilaterian form. Just as Heidegger thinks the hand is a useful figure for thinking, but not in the way we might first think, Derrida gives us that bilaterian form as a figure for ethics and responsible responses, but precisely because the economic relation the follows from that form must be rejected. For Derrida, an ethics of a transactional nature is not ethics at all, and a truly ethical gesture arises only from the interruption of this reciprocity.

This theme is develop in Derrida's *Given Time* (1992), which was written contemporaneously with the essays that would later form *The Gift of Death*.²⁵⁴ There he writes that: 'For there to be a gift [a truly ethical *giving*], there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, counter-gift, or debt. If the other gives me back or owes me or has to give me back what I give him or her, there will not have been a gift, whether this restitution is immediate or whether it is programmed by a complex calculation of a long-term deferral.'²⁵⁵ In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida now relates this economical ethics to the body, and emphasises the hands as the site at which these transactions take place.

However, Derrida asks: how can this transactional ethics be surpassed and replaced by the kind of gesture of selfless giving that Derrida that is trying to describe? 'One must give without knowing, without knowledge or recognition, without thanks: without anything, or at least without any object'²⁵⁶ The answer lies in developing further possibilities of the corporeal figure. Derrida gives specific examples of the *interruption* of this economy of giving and receiving from the New Testament itself.

²⁵³ Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 102.

²⁵⁴ *The Gift of Death* was originally part of a collection of papers given at a 1990 conference on 'The Ethics of the Gift.' But Derrida did not deliver this lecture; he delivered what would be published the following year as *Given Time I: Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf.(Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992).

See David Wills's introduction to the 2007 edition of his translation of *The Gift of Death*, vii.

²⁵⁵ Derrida, *Given Time*, 12.

²⁵⁶ Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 113.

Matthew 5: 27-30: ‘If thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee’; and, Matthew 6: 1-4: ‘But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth.’ For Derrida, these gestures of separating the hands, which amounts to literally or figuratively sacrificing ones hand, is a means to dissociate the pair, and this, Derrida suggests, makes possible the truly ethical gesture of giving without return.²⁵⁷

Derrida does not formulate any definitive scheme or hypothesis as to the bodily metaphors that might underlie our sense of responsibility. For Derrida, the idea that one can distinguish reliably between a notion of the body as a ‘primary metaphor,’ which is anterior to the reasoning mind that is shaped by it, would surely be precisely the kind of conviction that warrants deconstruction. The argument that ethics is formed of bodily metaphors must always be simultaneously reversed in its form: the body is formed of ethical metaphors. The hand is, before anything else, the organ of ethics that Heidegger and Derrida show it to be.²⁵⁸

Derrida indicates that what we call ethics is a matter of the body, but he goes on to remind us that this ethical body can never be accounted for fully, or symbolised adequately, or communicated with absolute fidelity. The phenomena of ethics and bodies, his analysis suggests, will never be explained by positioning one as merely a metaphor for the other. When David Lurie is at the roadside, experiencing his own fear and trembling, there is something mysterious about this experience: he has no idea what is happening to him. In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida’s fear and trembling has this same mysterious nature. We don’t know, Derrida writes, why we tremble *specifically*, why trembling as opposed to something else is our response to some fearful reality or shock. We might know the

²⁵⁷ Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 55, 101.

²⁵⁸ There are tentative similarities here with George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s *Philosophy In The Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), in which it is argued that ‘reason [including moral reasoning] is largely metaphorical’ and ‘embodied’. But caution should be advised in making such a comparison. Lakoff and Johnson interrogate various metaphors but they don’t interrogate the metaphoricity of the concept of a metaphor, as Derrida does. Lakoff and Johnson’s work is in fact filled with uninterrogated and undeveloped metaphors, including the argument that our unconscious mind is like a ‘hidden hand that shapes conscious thought.’ Derrida is notably absent from their work, which seems to me both profoundly indebted to Derrida’s arguments concerning the place of metaphor in philosophy, while largely giving the impression that Lakoff and Johnson are oblivious of Derrida’s work. When they do mention ‘post-structuralism’ it is to give a strikingly inaccurate account of it, caricaturing it in a familiar way as a system in which ‘all meaning is arbitrary, totally relative, and purely historically contingent, unconstrained by the body and the brain.’ [If Lakoff and Johnson have indeed read Derrida they would surely have noticed that the contingencies of our form are evident in much of his work, and therefore much of what they have to say has already been said. –cut?] One gets the sense that Lakoff and Johnson have instead just read Derrida’s unsympathetic critics, who provide an account which is conveniently and artificially antagonistic with their own.]

stimulus that produced this response (we know the ‘immediate cause’, Derrida writes); but this does not explain or interpret why it is that someone (David Lurie, for example) *trembles*, as opposed to any other response. This is a profound mystery for Derrida, something irrepressible is erupting out of or into the body when such a response occurs: ‘Why does the irrepressible take this form? Why does terror make us tremble, since one can also tremble with cold, and such analogous physiological manifestations translate experiences and sentiments that appear, at least, not to have anything in common? This symptomatology is as enigmatic as that of tears.’²⁵⁹

This connection is no less mysterious in the case of the bodily response of crying, Derrida says:

Even if one knows why one weeps, in what situation and what it signifies [...] that still doesn’t explain why the lacrimal glands come to secrete these drops of water that are brought to the eyes rather than elsewhere, the mouth or the ears. We would need to make new inroads into the thinking of the body [...], in order to one day come closer to what makes us tremble or what makes us cry, to that cause which is [...] the closest cause; not the immediate cause, that is to say, the accident or circumstance, but the cause closest to our body, that which brings about trembling or weeping rather than something else. What are they metaphors or figures for? What does the body mean (to say) by trembling or crying, presuming one can speak here of the body, of saying or meaning, and of rhetoric?²⁶⁰

This final question brings us to a conclusion that encompasses everything I have tried to say in the preceding chapters, because it lays out two challenges. Can we permit bodies to be meaningful—to mean—without requiring that such meaning be realisable in representational forms akin to language? And if that is not possible, and the meaningfulness of the body must and can only be defended on the frontiers of discourse, can we develop a language that is equal to it? This quote of Derrida’s, which invites us to make new inroads into the thinking of the body, was written late in his career, but it recalls a comment he made decades earlier in *Of Grammatology*. There he makes the following proposal: ‘We must attempt to recapture the unity of gesture and speech, of body and language, of tool and thought, before the originality of the one and the other is articulated and without letting this profound unity give rise to confusion.’²⁶¹ This unity of gesture and speech is, in a Derridean way, both

²⁵⁹ Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 55.

²⁶⁰ Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 56. Cf. Derrida’s comments in various places in *Speech and Phenomena* and also in *The Truth in Painting*, where he writes that all artistic productions typically are submitted, in the course of their interpretation, ‘to the authority of speech.’ When we ask: What does this production (this work of art, this gesture, etc.) ‘mean’, this question is inevitably interpreted as ‘what does this production mean to say’? Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1987), 22.

²⁶¹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (London and Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 85.

a necessary task and an impossible one: the body will always exceed what can be said. But it is this nature of the body as constitutively ungraspable in language that presses us to try and speak more meaningfully and enduringly about it. The Derridean approximation of body and language is not, it should be emphasised, merely the privileging of the nonlinguistic. It is simply to recognise that if a response's corporeal origin necessarily marks a distance from language, we must look more closely, as Coetzee and Derrida invite us to, at the apophatic margins of our bodied existence; for there, by definition, lies our difficulty to speak. We should offer neither an argument for the sacredness of bodily silence, nor for the subjection of those bodies to speech. We should instead try to make gestures which approximate—meaning both a unification and an estimation—the indeterminable margins at which the speaking 'I' becomes mute yet meaningful flesh.

Conclusion: Further Developments

There are four broad possibilities I want to identify for further development of the ideas that I have laid out in this thesis. These would all be concerned with articulating some meaning or meaningfulness for the body and its multiplicity of responses, a meaning that is not typically accommodated in the analytic philosophical tradition in which the nature and the legitimate uses of a body, including but not limited to the fetal body, are typically discussed.

The first direction for development would be further examination of the figure of non-conscious life forms that recurs throughout the work of Giorgio Agamben. One of the most interesting ways in which fetal life problematises our current prevailing philosophical conceptions of sentience is demonstrated by a chapter of Agamben's *The Open*, in which he considers the life cycle of the tick (a creature that bears some resemblance to the fruit fly larva of the RCOG working party report).²⁶² What biologists know about the lifecycle of *Ixodes ricinus*, Agamben suggests, brings into question our certainty about concepts such as sentience or insentience, which play such significant roles in philosophical ethics and in our understanding of our nature in general.

Agamben draws heavily here on the work of biologist Jacob von Uexküll, considering how the tick is thought to have only three dimensions to its relationship to the world: the scent of sweat, the awareness of which triggers it to fall from a branch; the awareness of body temperature of warm blooded mammals, which confirms it has landed on something from which it can suck blood and gain sustenance; and a limited sense of touch that is sufficient only to allow it to identify the least hairy part of the animal, into which it will bury its head and begin sucking up blood. The tick's *Umwelt*, or lifeworld, as Uexküll calls it, in a term that will have major importance for Heidegger, consists in 'only three carriers of significance'.

Agamben then explains Uexküll's account further, and we learn that in a laboratory setting, 'a tick was kept alive for eighteen years without nourishment, that is, in a condition of absolute isolation from its environment.' Uexküll 'gives no explanation of this peculiar fact and limits himself to supposing that in that "period of waiting" the tick lies in "a sleep-like state similar to the one we experience every night.'" He then draws the sole conclusion that "without a living subject, time cannot exist." This remarkable statement prompts Agamben to ask: 'But what becomes of the tick and its world in this state of suspension that lasts eighteen years? How is it possible for a living being that consists entirely in its relationship with the environment to survive in absolute deprivation of that environment? And what sense does it make to speak of "waiting" without time and without world? (This tick seems to invite a comparison with the frogs that Elizabeth Costello offers up to her panel of judges, as an example of what she believes).

²⁶² Giorgio Agamben, *The Open*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 45-47.

Our knowledge of the tick, Agamben argues, ‘constitutes a high point of modern antihumanism [...] the tick is immediately united to these three elements in an intense and passionate relationship the likes of which we might never find in the relations that bind man to his apparently much richer world.’ This is part of the challenge that Agamben makes, against a Heideggerian understanding of animal’s lives—their *Umwelts*—being less ‘rich’ than ours.

In much the same way, our development from apparently non-conscious fetal life into conscious fetal or post-fetal life poses a serious challenge to the stability of the too-easy distinction between the non-conscious and the conscious. As Jeff McMahan notes in *Ethics of Killing*, there is almost certainly no moment in our gestation at which consciousness, or the biological apparatus of its realisation, suddenly comes into being.²⁶³ Rather, consciousness emerges. But the meaning of such a statement is far from clear. For McMahan, what is to me a remarkably incomprehensible fact is comprehensible (graspable) simply by reference to an initial fetal state of ‘dreamless sleep,’ which subsequently develops into certain basic, primitive, or privative forms of conscious experience, which later progress to more complex or richer ones as we grow, are born, and relate to the world. Such an account of early human states of consciousness being impoverished in this way has no neuroscientific basis, and its philosophical basis is the idea of less rich conscious experiences that is, in a way that neither McMahan nor others such as Peter Singer and Bonnie Steinbock recognise, rather Heideggerian. It is such an account that has been examined and shown to be unsustainable, in the context of animal life, by Agamben, Derrida, and those scholars in animal studies who are influenced by their work, particular Cary Wolfe and Matthew Calarco.²⁶⁴ What Agamben invites us to consider is not the transition from so-called basic conscious life to complex conscious life, but the transition from non-conscious to any kind of consciousness; or rather, he indicates that this transitional state appears to be, in some cases, not transitional at all but the very state of being.

McMahan fails to remark on the space that Agamben’s attention to the tick opens up: what is the nature of the creature, of a so-called consciousness, that exists in the space between what we recognise as non-consciousness, and what we recognise as consciousness? How does such a form of existence problematise the notion of consciousness as something that either is or is not? How does the existence of such a space in our own biographies problematise the notions of subjectivity and subjecthood by which various bioethical problems, such as abortion or the removal of organs from

²⁶³ Jeff McMahan, *Ethics of Killing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 268.

²⁶⁴ See Matthew Calarco’s, *Zoographies* for a detailed account of both Heidegger’s conception of the impoverished animal Umwelt, and the critiques of that conception by Agamben and Derrida; and Cary Wolfe’s ‘In the Shadow of Wittgenstein’s Lion: Language, Ethics, and the Question of the Animal,’ which is his introduction to his edited volume *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal* (Minneapolis and London: Minnesota University Press, 2003).

comatose patients, are seen to be resolved? How does the fact that all our biographies begin in this way reframe our understanding of biography?

I have noted in the thesis that this Agambenian figure, which exists either without consciousness or without some form recognisable to us, has a close resemblance to fetal life. Consequently, Agamben has been subjected to strong critique by some feminist commentators. An important goal for any account that developed this theme would be to integrate that account of fetal life into a broader account of pregnant women and their experiences of making these curiously problematic existences exist. Penelope Deutscher has argued that we might be able to employ what she calls ‘ontological tact’ in our discussions of reproduction and the fetus, a tact which acknowledges that the fetus and its gestures have different meanings for different people, some of whom will feel a sense of responsibility which she captures with Judith Butler’s examination of ‘mourning’ (an account which is indebted to Derrida).²⁶⁵

Like Derrida, Agamben’s work is deeply influenced by Heidegger’s work but also critically builds upon it. Agamben’s analysis in *The Open* is concerned to unravel the anthropocentric scheme that Heidegger offers, in which the human *umwelt* is assumed to be somehow richer than the more narrow or impoverished lifeworlds of various other animals. That Heidegger is at the centre of the ‘antihumanist’ accounts developed by both Agamben and Derrida suggests that the work of Heidegger itself would be a profitable direction for exploration of the ideas I have developed in this thesis. That such a direction would be valuable became clear to me as I read *What Is Called Thinking?*; but it was beyond the scope of the thesis to further explore *Being and Time* (1927) and the readings of that work undertaken by Agamben and Derrida, which are nevertheless related in various important ways to much of my thesis. The need to move in this direction is made more compelling by the ways in which Derrida’s concept of responsibility derives from his reading of Levinas, and the way in which Levinas’s work is indebted to Heidegger.

Again, it was beyond the scope of this thesis to include readings of Levinas’s own work, but I acknowledge how much the Derridean language I have used demands a further understanding of its Heideggerian and Levinasian provenance, not only so that I might develop my own account of those concepts in meaningful ways, but also for the scholarly reason of determining what each of those authors contributes to the concept of responsibility that appears in Derrida. I acknowledge that in these questions should perhaps not be offered here as further directions of exploration, but should

²⁶⁵ She writes: Ideally, a consensual making and unmaking of the fetus takes place between women or parents and health professionals in conformity with the woman’s or the parents’ choices. [...] The mother or parents may desire to get rid of a dead fetus as soon as possible, to avoid sight and reference, to see the fetus as mere matter with no relationship to an anticipated future, and medical protocol can support that perception. But in some cases it may be just as important to consider the embryo not as biological waste but as a regretted or deceased or forestalled humanity, perhaps mournable.’ Penelope Deutscher. *Foucault’s Futures: A Critique of Reproductive Reason*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017, 170-173.

have formed part of my research for this thesis. It was only after I had developed my work along Derridean lines that I became aware of the vast number of thinkers and texts to which his work is indebted.

Such questions could first be explored through Derrida's three well-known essays on Levinas ('Violence and Metaphysics,' [1964], 'At This Very Moment In This Work Here I Am' [1980], 'The Word of Welcome' [1996]), or more recent commentaries such as Simon Critchley's *Ethics of Deconstruction* (1992). This interest in exploring the exact nature of Derrida's contribution to certain themes is not intended to be read as a scepticism towards the originality of his contributions. A preliminary account of just what it is that Derrida adds to Levinasian ethics is given very clearly by Geoffrey Bennington in an essay entitled 'Deconstruction and Ethics,' which could also form the first step in pursuing this line of research (For Bennington there is something important about the tension Derrida develops between responsibility to every singular *other*, and to the plurality such *others* represent).²⁶⁶ I hope I have made clear in the thesis how far from such a response my feelings to Derrida are. This question comes partly from my reading of Derrida's 'Geschlecht II: Heidegger's Hand,' because it is difficult to determine exactly what Derrida adds to Heidegger's account in *What Is Called Thinking?*, so far as the figure of the hand is concerned. He certainly adds something, but what he adds in relation to the volume of text seems to me, the more I read Heidegger's comparably concise account, to be skewed in a way that is not necessarily in Derrida's favour.

Another direction for further research would be to investigate the vitalist origins of the language Derrida uses in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, tracing those terms back through the work of Georges Canguilhem and Henri Bergson. Martin Hägglund has advised against such an analysis.²⁶⁷ He argues that if nonconscious life appears in Derrida's work as importantly inscribed within our conscious lives, any vitalist reading that such an inscription invites is undermined by Derrida's comparable attention to the ways that non-livingness—that is, a certain mechanical materiality—are inscribed into the category of the living. Hägglund's account, strangely, does not mention *The Animal*, and seems to me in its neglect of this text to shut down promising avenues for exploration. *The Animal* has many references to vitalist terms. This does not mean I believe Derrida is secretly a vitalist—although I think an argument of this kind could be made—but that the whole tradition of vitalism on the one hand, and Cartesian mechanicity on the other, invites a deconstructive analysis of that distinction.

The last direction for further research would be to pursue an analysis of representations of the body in Wittgenstein, and in the *Philosophical Investigations* in particular. The body—and as I have pointed out, the hand in particular—appears in that work in various forms and plays a significant

²⁶⁶ Geoffrey Bennington, 'Deconstruction and Ethics,' in *Deconstructions: A User's Guide*, ed. Nicholas Royle (Basingstoke Palgrave 2000).

²⁶⁷ Martin Hägglund, 'The Trace of Time: A Critique of Vitalism,' *Derrida Today* 9.1 (2016): 36-46.

rhetorical role in various questions that Wittgenstein asks and various claims he makes. Stephen Mulhall has written about the figure of the hand in Heideggerian thought and its relationship to Wittgenstein's thought, to indicate various similarities between those two thinkers.²⁶⁸ But there is more that could be said about how many times the hand appears in *Philosophical Investigations*, and what it can be taken to be indicating.

Such a reading could be pursued further through Cavell's *The Claim of Reason*. In that work, which is deeply influenced by Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein, Cavell devotes several pages to the consideration of what he calls, echoing the Cartesian terms I have alluded to in Chapter One, an 'automaton.' This is an entirely convincing human form that Cavell imagines (following Descartes) being constructed by a clever inventor. But the external appearance of this convincing automaton demands, according to a certain attitude, verification of a sort, and the 'inside' of this automaton becomes a matter of such urgent investigation that the inventor eventually lunges at his creation, preparing to pry open his chest and expose the mechanisms within.²⁶⁹ Through this tale, Cavell explores the consequences of a certain sceptical disposition, the effects and actions that follow from the very existence of a concept such 'automaton,' and the way such a conceptual being informs our understanding of our own bodies. Cavell's rich and complex account is concerned especially to consider how our bodily nature separates us from one another in meaningful ways, but ways which must, he suggests, be kept in careful tension with our unity as human beings, or souls.

Rather like Agamben's work, and that of some of the other male theorists I have focused on here, one of the greatest limitations of this thesis is that I have not included any account of how the concepts of reaction, response, and responsibility can be situated in the wider context of pregnancy. With this admission I mean to acknowledge that, barring a few exceptions, the experiences of pregnant women are almost entirely absent here. This is a deeply problematic omission, but it is not, I hope, inexcusable. Firstly, the experiences of women undergoing abortion dominate my clinical practice, and so while they are not evident here in explicit form, they are present in my own biography, and what I have written here is informed by my exposure to those experiences. If I felt the experiences of pregnant women were captured satisfactorily by discussions of abortion in bioethics, I could have accepted my own responses as aberrations and probably would not have been motivated to write this thesis. Secondly, in deciding to undertake this thesis, it was necessary to exclude, for a period of time, the experiences of the women whose abortions I have performed, and to focus on my own response to the fetus and its destruction. This is partly for confessional and reparative reasons, but it was also necessary so I could clarify the nature of my own responses to these phenomena. Consequently, this thesis is a rather self-regarding, or autobiographical, response. In its failure to

²⁶⁸ Mulhall, 'Remonstrations: Heidegger, Derrida and Wittgenstein's Hand,' *Journal of the British Phenomenological Society* 26 (1995): 65-68.

²⁶⁹ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 403-407.

respond to a wider context of experiences of pregnancy, of feminist discourse, and of the relevant political context, it is partly constituted by a significant nonresponse.

Appendix 1. The Text Box from the RCOG working Party Report on Fetal Awareness

Box 1. A discussion of the nature of pain

The word 'pain' is used in different ways. The most frequent use, especially with respect to subjects that cannot communicate verbally, is in describing the behavioural response to noxious stimulation. However, if we accept this use, we are presented with the difficulty of distinguishing between the responses of simple versus complex organisms. Fruit fly larvae, for example, have been demonstrated to bend and roll away when approached with a naked flame but most people would agree that larvae do not feel pain in the way that we do.

Ruling out the responses of larvae and similarly simple organisms as indicating pain is possible if we suggest that responses must include more than mere reflex responses to be labelled as a pain response. When someone reaches out and accidentally touches something very hot, there is an immediate tendency to drop the object. That reaction is entirely regulated by a simple loop of sensory neurons speaking to motor neurons in the spinal cord. Typically, the person will drop the object before there is any conscious appreciation of pain. The action of dropping the object indicates the presence of something noxious but does not necessarily indicate the presence of pain.

Most pain researchers adopt a definition of pain that emphasises the sensory, cognitive and affective response to a noxious event. This understanding of pain is supported by the International Association of Pain (IASP) which defines pain as 'an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage, or described in terms of such damage...pain is always subjective. Each individual learns the application of the word through experiences related to injury in early life'.¹ By this definition, pain does not have primacy over subjectivity, existing before and in addition to subjectivity, but is experienced through subjectivity. It suggests that pain is a part of knowledge and requires the existence of a conceptual apparatus that can marshal all its dimensions into a coherent experience.

Although there is considerable merit in the IASP definition of pain, it does tend towards a view of pain as being a constituent part of higher cognitive function. There is disquiet in denying a rawer, more primitive, form of pain or suffering that the fetus, neonate and many animals might experience.²⁻⁴ One possible solution is to recognise that the newborn infant might be said to feel pain, whereas only the older infant can experience that they are in pain and explicitly share their condition with others as an acknowledged fact of being.⁵

Currently there is no immediately obvious way of resolving these arguments empirically. It is possible, however, to argue that even a raw sense of pain involves more than reflex activity and will, therefore, require the higher regions of the cortex to be connected and functional. The age when this minimum requirement is fulfilled is explored in the rest of this chapter.

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