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Sympathy and Scapegoating in J. M. Coetzee

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INTRODUCTION

For some years now, whenever the South African novelist J. M. Coetzee has been invited to deliver a lecture, he has been in the habit of reading a work of fiction instead. When Coetzee won the Nobel Prize in 2003, for example, rather than deliver the customary speech, he shared with his Stockholm audience a curious, elliptical narrative that evoked Daniel Defoe and his famous creation, Robinson Crusoe (the inspiration for Coetzee's 1986 novel, *Foe*). Before that, Coetzee's public appearances often saw him read different stories about a recurring character named Elizabeth Costello. Coetzee's protagonist is herself a writer, and readers of the Costello stories have noted many teasing resemblances between Costello and her creator. These include the fact that Costello is from Australia, where Coetzee has lived since 2002 (and where he recently took out citizenship). Costello is also described as a "major world writer" whose work has inspired "a small critical industry," statements that are both also true of Coetzee (*Elizabeth Costello*, 1-2). Both writers have a disdain for the trappings of literary celebrity but reluctantly participate in it. Coetzee and Costello have each retold a canonical work: what *Foe* did to *Robinson Crusoe*, Costello's *The House on Eccles Street* does to *Ulysses*. Most strikingly, the setting of a Costello story often resembles the institution to which Coetzee has been invited to talk. When Coetzee spoke at a conference on evil in Amsterdam, for

example, he read a story describing Costello's attendance at . . . a conference on evil in Amsterdam.

The Costello stories, most of which had been previously published, were brought together in 2003 as *Elizabeth Costello*, which is subtitled "Eight Lessons." Each chapter or lesson is preoccupied with a different topic, such as Eros or literary realism. At the center of the book, however, are two linked chapters, "The Philosophers and the Animals" and "The Poets and the Animals," both of which revolve around our relationships with our fellow creatures. The animal chapters were originally delivered as lectures at Princeton University and then published, with commentaries from prominent academics, in Coetzee's 1999 book *The Lives of Animals*. These two "lessons" have since elicited a considerable amount of commentary and a certain amount of shock. In them, Coetzee's protagonist likens the treatment of food and laboratory animals to the annihilation of European Jews during the Holocaust.

Elizabeth Costello marks the second time Coetzee has published his two strange animal chapters in book form. Does that mean he wants to draw them especially to our attention? Regardless, it is worth singling out the animal chapters for critical examination. For if we focus our attention on them, two philosophical preoccupations emerge. The first is evident in Coetzee's use of animals to evoke a particular conception of ethics, one very similar to that of the philosopher Mary Midgley. Such a view affords a central role to sympathy and is fundamentally opposed to a longstanding rival view, most clearly exemplified by the social contract tradition, which prioritizes an instrumental conception of rationality. Coetzee's second, darker theme connects animals to the phenomenon of scapegoating, as it has been characterized by the philosophical anthropologist René Girard, who has visibly influenced Coetzee. Coetzee uses animals to symbolize Girard's idea that we often copy the desires of people who at first glance seem our rivals or opponents. Such a view holds the result to be a jealous spiral of rivalry and imitation, from which we seek release through the joint infliction of violence on some third party, whether animal or human.

As we will see, these two themes have several features in common. Perhaps the most important is that while they both involve human interactions with animals, each ethical leitmotiv transcends application to that particular issue and raises deeper philosophical questions concerning the foundations of morality and the therapeutic allure of political violence, respectively. Among the benefits of making the ethical preoccupations of Coetzee's animal chapters explicit is that doing so enhances our understanding of his fiction: both themes appear elsewhere in his work, particularly in *Disgrace* (which was first published, like the animal lessons, in 1999). However, when Coetzee's two philosophical strands are separated and analyzed in

their own terms, the ethics of sympathy is shown to be a more coherent notion than the understanding of politics he takes over from Girard.

THE ETHICS OF SYMPATHY

This interpretation of Coetzee's animal lectures tries to move beyond a critical divide that has largely defined the early response to *Elizabeth Costello*. David Lodge spoke for many reviewers when he said that while the chapters on animals compelled him to reexamine some of his own assumptions concerning the treatment of animals, "the reader is not quite sure whether he is intended to spot some confusion or contradiction or non sequitur in Elizabeth's arguments." On the other side of the divide, many readers have taken Elizabeth Costello to be a device through which Coetzee is issuing a clear message. Such was the view, for example, of the philosopher Tom Regan, author of *The Case for Animal Rights*, who wrote of Coetzee that "it is not fanciful to believe that some of his characters speak for their creator. Elizabeth Costello, the main character in Coetzee's latest novel of the same name, is a case in point."²

Both of these interpretations grasp part of the truth without being fully satisfying. Lodge is correct that many aspects of Coetzee's lessons resist paraphrase, and there are some fairly basic questions—such as what genre they belong to—that have no clear answer (several commentators have likened them to a cross between works of fiction and absurdist philosophical dialogues). But Lodge is too quick to throw up his hands and declare the animal chapters to be without coherent or legible themes. Similarly, Regan is right to sense an ethical challenge to our thinking about animals at work in Coetzee's texts. Yet Regan's reading is simplistic in the way it takes *Elizabeth Costello* to perform only a polemical function (if that were Coetzee's only goal, one wonders why he did not write a nonfiction essay about animals instead). That Regan allows to pass without comment, and may even himself accept, Costello's wild analogy between the treatment of animals and the Holocaust, is a still more off-putting aspect of his view.³

A better approach begins by noting both Costello's Holocaust analogy and the strong reaction it generates on the part of another character. "Let me say it openly," Costello says, "we are surrounded by an enterprise of degradation, cruelty, and killing which rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of, indeed dwarfs it, in that ours is an enterprise without end, self-regenerating, bringing rabbits, rats, poultry, livestock ceaselessly into the world for the purpose of killing them" (*Elizabeth Costello*, 65). Costello makes this remark in the first of the two animal lessons, dur-

ing a speech at an American university (in many ways similar to Princeton, where the chapter was first read). Afterward there is a reception in Costello's honor. But an elderly poet on the faculty declines to attend and sends her a note instead:

Dear Mrs. Costello,

Excuse me for not attending last night's dinner. I have read your books and know you are a serious person, so I do you the credit of taking what you said in your lecture seriously.

At the kernel of your lecture, it seemed to me, was the question of breaking bread. If we refuse to break bread with the executioners of Auschwitz, can we continue to break bread with the slaughterers of animals?

You took over for your own purposes the familiar comparison between the murdered Jews of Europe and slaughtered cattle. The Jews died like cattle, therefore cattle die like Jews, you say. That is a trick with words which I will not accept. You misunderstand the nature of likenesses; I would even say you misunderstand willfully, to the point of blasphemy. Man is made in the likeness of God but God does not have the likeness of man. If Jews were treated like cattle, it does not follow that cattle are treated like Jews. The inversion insults the memory of the dead. It also trades on the horrors of the camps in a cheap way.

Forgive me if I am forthright. You said you were old enough not to have time to waste on niceties, and I am an old man too.

Yours sincerely,

Abraham Stern

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This exchange occupies a central place in the animal chapters. What are we to make of it? Costello's speech certainly forces us to reconsider many of the painful practices we currently inflict on animals. Yet even if we agree with her that meat eating and other common habits are wrong, Stern's powerful rebuttal should remind us that it is still a leap to liken such practices to the Holocaust. When the animal chapters were published in *The Lives of Animals*, one of the responses was by Peter Singer, author of *Animal Liberation*, and even he thought Costello went too far. "There's a more radical egalitarianism about humans and animals running through her lecture than I would be prepared to defend," Singer wrote in his slightly exasperated reply.⁴

When Coetzee's animal chapters first appeared, they included footnotes to titles such as *Animal Rights and Human Obligations*, a collection of writings about animals by moral philosophers, and *The Great Ape Project*, an anthology-cum-

manifesto that argues that higher primates should be granted legal personhood. The footnotes have been dropped in *Elizabeth Costello*, no doubt because none of the other chapters has any, but there is a related reference in the text that, indirectly, sheds light on Costello's exchange with Stern. It comes when Costello explicitly rejects using philosophical terms to make her case. "Such a language is available to me, I know" she states. "It is the language of Aristotle and Porphyry, of Augustine and Aquinas, of Descartes and Bentham, of, in our day, Mary Midgley and Tom Regan" (*Elizabeth Costello*, 66).

What the thinkers Costello mentions have in common (perhaps the only thing they have in common) is that they are frequently cited in academic debates over the ethical status of animals. Porphyry, for example, is a third-century pagan who has been embraced by contemporary animal advocates because of a tract he wrote advocating vegetarianism. Augustine, Aquinas, and Descartes, by contrast, usually wear the black hats in the animal rights literature and are blamed for establishing the Christian view of animals as morally insignificant or, in the case of Descartes, for denying animal sentience. A much-cited passage from Jeremy Bentham says of animals, "The question is not, Can they *reason*? nor, Can they *talk*? but, Can they *suffer*?"

The most conspicuous name, however, is that of Mary Midgley. Midgley is a contemporary English philosopher who has written several books on animals. She does not go quite as far as Peter Singer and other advocates of vegetarianism: "What the animals need most urgently is probably a campaign for treating them better before they are eaten," she wrote in her 1983 work, *Animals and Why They Matter*.⁵ What makes Midgley's name leap off the page is that she and Coetzee would seem to share several abiding concerns and preoccupations.

Much like Coetzee, Midgley has had a longstanding fascination with Robinson Crusoe ("Had Robinson Crusoe any duties?" begins one of her most well known papers).⁶ Midgley is a feminist critic of the moral philosophy that predominated during the Enlightenment; *Foe*, which has a female protagonist, is often taken to offer a feminist critique of the literary realism that predominated during the same period. Costello, in keeping with her eschewal of philosophical and rationalist approaches to ethics, embraces a conception of morality based on imaginative identification. As she summarizes it, "The heart is the seat of a faculty, sympathy, that allows us to share at times the being of another" (*Elizabeth Costello*, 79). Despite Midgley's presence on Costello's list, she upholds a similar view of morality. "It can be our duty to *feel* in one way rather than another," Midgley has written, "something for which the [philosophical] tradition has little room." Perhaps more than anything, Midgley and Coetzee both see animals as a key test case for the soundness of any ethical philosophy.

The best way to see what an ethic of sympathy might amount to is to contrast it, as Midgley has, with the social contract tradition. Two influential strands of that tradition originate with Kant and Hobbes and continue into our own time in the work of distinguished thinkers such as John Rawls and David Gauthier (representing the Kantian and Hobbesian approaches, respectively).⁸ Although there are important differences between these two types of contract theory, both use the notion of a hypothetical agreement to outline an account of moral obligation.⁹

In the case of Hobbesians, the contract device is used to express the idea that morality is ultimately rooted in self-interest. This view begins from the basic fact that you and I could potentially hurt each other. For this reason, we both have a strong incentive to establish rules prohibiting bad behavior. For a modern Hobbesian such as Gauthier, "ethics" is simply another name for these mutually advantageous conventions. Strictly speaking, on this view, there is nothing inherently wrong with killing, cheating, or stealing. Rather, we should refrain from such activities because we recognize that we are all potential victims of such crimes and it is in everyone's interest to abide by a moral code that keeps social life flowing smoothly for all concerned.

Kantian contractarianism in many ways represents the opposite approach. Unlike Hobbesians, Kantians do not reject the commonsense belief that there is something intrinsically objectionable about killing, stealing, and the rest. Rather, they use the idea of a contract precisely to express this everyday understanding of morality. For thinkers such as Rawls, individuals matter on a moral level because they are "self-originating sources of valid moral claims," or what Kant referred to as ends in themselves.¹⁰ Implicit in this view is a conception of moral equality: each person is due impartial moral concern. In Rawls's theory, the idea of a contract is used to capture this basic moral insight. In particular, Rawls asks us to consider what social institutions would be agreed to by people who did not know their race, gender, class, or other personal characteristics. Such a contract is likely to be based on impartial standards that, for Rawls, represent the true standards of justice.

At the heart of Hobbesian and Kantian contractarianism, then, are two very different conceptions of justice. For Hobbesians, it is the amoral idea of mutual advantage. For Kantians, it is the highly moral concept of impartial respect. Nevertheless, the two approaches have obvious similarities. In both cases, for example, the idea of social contract is not meant to be taken literally (neither theory claims there was any point in time when people actually negotiated a social contract). They are philosophical rather than historical theories, which use the idea of a hypothetical agreement to help us clarify to ourselves the nature and scope of our moral obligations.

The two theories have something else in common: they both raise questions about who is included in the social contract. A basic assumption of all versions of contract theory is that where there can be no contract, there can be no ethics. That

would pose an obvious problem regarding the moral status of animals. Chickens, dogs, and rabbits can not meaningfully "agree" to anything, so the notion that they make any direct moral claims on us must be false. Leave aside the idea of animal rights: If the contractarian approach is correct, even mainstream animal-welfare laws are difficult, if not impossible, to justify.

That is not the only exclusion problem. Midgley quotes a contractarian named G. R. Grice, who notes the many entities his moral theory excludes:

It is an inescapable consequence of the thesis presented in these pages that certain classes cannot have natural rights: animals, the human embryo, future generations, lunatics and children under the age of, say, ten. In the case of young children at least, my experience is that this consequence is found hard to accept. But it is a consequence of the theory; it is, I believe, true; and I think we should be willing to accept it. At first sight it seems a harsh conclusion, but it is not nearly so harsh as it appears.¹¹

According to Grice, what makes his theory not quite as harsh as it first appears is that parents—who are party to the social contract—will ensure that their children are granted an indirect moral status. But as Grice himself notes, this is simply a contingent fact about the society we live in. It is easy to imagine a cultural milieu in which children are treated quite savagely (as was of course the case during much of our own society's history). "In this circumstance the morally correct treatment of children would no doubt be harsher than it is in our society. But the conclusion has to be accepted."¹² As Midgley points out, this is not very reassuring. We normally think of innocent children as making a fairly direct moral claim on us. Yet Grice's Hobbesian approach cannot accommodate this basic ethical notion. Nor is the problem solved by switching to a Kantian framework. Although Rawls's highly detailed theory can grant moral standing to one category on Grice's list, namely future generations, it is now a well-documented problem that Rawls cannot bestow moral consideration on the mentally handicapped (a serious failing, given Rawls's goal of outlining a truly impartial theory), let alone animals.¹³

Midgley has long been an outspoken critic of contractarian approaches to ethics. She wants to bring home to us just how many entities there are that can not be party to a contract yet that nonetheless make moral claims on us. To that end, her list of examples includes the following:

- The dead
- Posterity
- Children
- The senile

The insane
 "Defectives, ranging down to 'human vegetables'"
 Embryos
 Sentient animals
 Ecosystems
 Countries
 Oneself
 God⁴

A reader does not have to agree with all of the items on Midgley's list to take her point. If we can have ethical obligations, however minimal, to even a few of the categories she mentions, then morality cannot be modeled on the idea of a contract. Even leaving aside all the nonhuman entities the contractual approach excludes, when it comes to human beings, contract ethics sees us as worthy of moral concern only in our capacity as rational beings capable of negotiating agreements. As Midgley puts it, such an understanding "isolates the duties which people owe each other *merely as thinkers* from those deeper and more general ones which they owe each other as beings who feel. . . . Such an account may not be *Hamlet* without the Prince, but it is *Hamlet* with half the cast missing, and without the state of Denmark."⁵

Midgley's rejection of the idea that moral concern extends only to rational beings finds a strong echo in Elizabeth Costello's speech. "Even Immanuel Kant, of whom I would have expected better, has a failure of nerve at this point," Costello says. "Even Kant does not pursue, with regard to animals, the implications of his intuition that reason may not be the being of the universe but on the contrary merely the being of the human brain" (*Elizabeth Costello*, 67). Crucially, however, Coetzee is not content with having Elizabeth Costello announce this idea. He also dramatizes it, in the form of Costello's exchange with Abraham Stern.

Much like Midgley, albeit in a more literary and imaginative way, Coetzee's fictional episode brings home just how far our moral obligations extend beyond other rational contracting agents. Costello and Abraham Stern both make moral claims on behalf of a category on Midgley's list, namely, animals and the dead. To be sure, Costello does her cause a considerable disservice by suggesting that the mass killing of pigs and chickens represents a comparable wrong to the mass killing of people, let alone an act of systematic murder such as the Holocaust (a topic to which we shall return below). Such an equation sits uneasily with us because it is an ethical wrong of its own, one that, as Stern says, "insults the memory of the dead." But if we wade into Costello's analogy with a pair of tongs, a genuine ethical truth can be extracted from it: animals do make moral claims on us.

The full scope of that claim is, of course, subject to debate. But regardless of whether we are more drawn to the idea of animal welfare or animal rights, Costello's exchange with Stern involves two genuine moral claims coming into conflict. From *Antigone* to *Sophie's Choice*, literature has long used such conflicts to shed light on the nature of moral experience. In this case, the dispute is between two parties who both have a certain type of moral motivation. That motivation is one an ethic of sympathy can explain and make sense of, but which a rationalist ethic such as contractarianism, even in its most inclusive Rawlsian form, cannot. Coetzee's conflict between the ethical significance of animals and our duty of memory toward the dead thus causes the full horizon of ethical meaning, concern, and obligation to flash before our eyes.

Coetzee's interest in the ethical treatment of animals seems inseparable from this larger concern with the nature of morality. Elizabeth Costello often stresses the importance of sympathetic identification, as when she remarks that "sympathy has everything to do with the subject and little to do with the object" (79). Costello repeatedly links this notion to literature and its capacity to place us inside the mind of a fictional creation. This should cause us to realize that animals have long played an important role in Coetzee's own fiction. In particular, they have functioned as a crucial test case for the integrity of his characters. *Foe*, for example, mentions apes living on the island with Cruso (as Coetzee spells his name), which he and Friday kill as pests. Images of the gratuitous killing of animals appear as far back as *Dusklands* (1974), Coetzee's first novel, in which a psychotic hunter sheds blood with abandon. But the place where Coetzee's animals highlight the wellsprings of morality most powerfully is *Disgrace*.

Disgrace's protagonist is a university professor who is stripped of everything. He has been undone by a sex scandal of his own making, and after losing his job he must stand helplessly by while his daughter is raped. Eventually he finds a strange peace working at an animal shelter. The shelter is run by a woman named Bev Shaw, and the professor's job is to take the bodies of unwanted dogs to the incinerator after she kills them. In between death and incineration the dogs' bodies stiffen with rigor mortis, and workmen at the incinerator hack at them with shovels, in order to make the corpses more manageable. The professor, however, soon discovers that he cannot bear to watch the animals treated in this way and, without quite knowing why, takes over the work of incineration himself.

Why has he taken on this job? To lighten the burden on Bev Shaw? For that it would be enough to drop off the bags at the dump and drive away. For the sake of the dogs? But the dogs are dead; and what do dogs know of honour and dishonour anyway.

For himself, then. For his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing.

The dogs are brought to the clinic because they are unwanted . . . that is where he enters their lives. He may not be their saviour, the one for whom they are not too many, but he is prepared to take care of them once they're unable, utterly unable, to take care of themselves, once even Bev Shaw has washed her hands of them. . . . He saves the honour of corpses because there is no one else stupid enough to do it.

(*Disgrace*, 146)

Is it possible to think of a more ignoble and worthless thing than the corpse of an animal? Yet as Ian Hacking has written, the former professor's behavior is "not so crazy. We need to attend to the bodies of those we love, and to save them from humiliation after death."⁶ Hacking gives the examples of family members seeking to reclaim the bodies of their loved ones killed in war or airplane disasters. Coetzee's ethical vision, however, is more radical. It asks us to take seriously a sense of obligation not to dead human beings or living animals but to the corpse of a dog. The contrast with the Hobbesian strand of contractarianism, in particular, could not be more striking. Coetzee's quietly affecting scene portrays an act of sympathy mercilessly purged of any possibility of reward. The dead dogs can give the broken teacher absolutely nothing in return, not even a friendly lick on the face. And yet he feels compelled to honor their dignity nonetheless.

It seems no accident that over the course of *Elizabeth Costello*, Costello herself descends into senility. Slowly, she becomes the kind of being who demands our sympathy without being able to consciously return it. Perhaps that explains why she is often likened to an animal herself, as when her son characterizes her as "an old, tired circus seal." It might also explain a vision she has at the end of the book, when we no longer know if she is in possession of her faculties. The last thing the old woman sees is heaven. And its sole occupant is an old, tired dog, badly mangled yet contentedly sleeping.

Mary Midgley takes Robinson Crusoe to symbolize her conception of morality. Even when no other human being is present, she wrote in a paper called "Duties Concerning Islands," Crusoe has ethical obligations: to himself and to his island's animals and ecosystem. At one point Midgley also characterizes Crusoe as an emblematic figure of "the history of colonization." All of these themes are taken up in *Foe*, which was published three years after "Duties Concerning Islands" first appeared.⁷ This raises the possibility that Coetzee was inspired by Midgley. As it happens, a similar question preoccupies Elizabeth Costello, who wonders whether Kafka read a particular primatologist before writing a story about an ape. Costello

concludes that it is impossible to say for sure that Kafka read the primatologist in question. "But I would like to think he did, and the chronology makes my speculation at least plausible" (*Elizabeth Costello*, 71). Regarding Midgley and Coetzee, however, we do not need even to go that far. It is enough merely to note their shared preoccupation with an ethic of sympathy, whether or not Midgley's philosophical writings inspired Coetzee's more literary lessons

THE SCAPEGOAT AND THE SACRIFICE

This, then, is the first ethical theme we find lurking beneath the surface of Coetzee's animal chapters. There is, however, a second preoccupation present in Costello's exchange with Stern. And while it is also connected to Coetzee's interest in animals, it would seem to stem from a decidedly less generous ethical impulse.

Abraham Stern and the Holocaust are not the first Jewish character or concern to appear in Coetzee's work. Ian Hacking has pointed out that a Kafka story Elizabeth Costello discusses at length, "A Report to an Academy," was originally published in a German journal called *The Jew*, and most readers at the time took Kafka's ape to symbolize German Jewry.⁸ In *Disgrace*, the professor character, David Lurie, and a student he has most likely raped, Melanie Isaacs, both have Jewish names. Lurie at one point wears a bandage that is described as a skullcap. After witnessing an African character rub his thumb and forefinger together and remark "always money, money, money," Lurie reflects: "A long time since he last saw that gesture. Used of Jews, in the old days: money-money-money, with the same meaningful cock of the head. But presumably [the African] is innocent of that snippet of European tradition" (*Disgrace*, 130). Finally, when dogs are killed at Lurie's animal shelter, it is referred to as "Lösung," German for "solution," which some critics have interpreted as a reference to the "final solution" of National Socialism.

This last reference may take some readers aback. Does Coetzee's work suggest a crude parallel after all? Does *Disgrace* endorse Elizabeth Costello's view that the mass killing of animals is as bad as the Holocaust? A more plausible explanation, I believe, is suggested by a scene in *Elizabeth Costello* that takes place after her lecture on animals. She attends a faculty dinner (the one Abraham Stern refuses to attend) where the topic of conversation turns to animal sacrifice in the ancient world: "The Greeks had a feeling there was something wrong in slaughter," another character says to Costello, "but thought they could make up for that by ritualizing it. They made a sacrificial offering." Costello then makes a curious reply that mentions the idea of scapegoating, in the sense of blame projection: "Per-

haps we invented gods so that we could put the blame on them" (*Elizabeth Costello*, 86).

When it was first published in *The Lives of Animals*, this passage included a footnote mentioning a book called *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth* (1983) by a German scholar named Walter Burkert. Burkert is a prominent name in the field of ancient religion. René Girard has written about similar themes, particularly in his 1977 book, *Violence and the Sacred*.¹⁹ It seems hardly a coincidence that two characters at the dinner where animal sacrifice is mentioned have the last name "Garrard." Why would Coetzee draw attention to Burkert and Girard? I believe it is because he shares with them both, but Girard especially, a concern with ritual sacrifice and scapegoating.

Girard is famous for his theory of mimetic or imitative desire. In essence, it is the view that human beings are fundamentally mimics: we unconsciously copy the aspirations of the people around us. Because the causes of this mimicry lie deep in the human psyche (Girard has a complicated debt to Freud), the people we imitate simultaneously copy us. The result is that human desires give rise to the aspirational equivalent of an arms race, in which rivals not only compete for the same object but increasingly resemble one another: they want the same thing.

This fraught process constantly threatens to explode into violence. In the ancient world, Girard argued, rituals of sacrifice and scapegoating brought release from the spiral of endless rivalry and conformity when a human or animal victim was selected for immolation or expulsion. Hence the term "scapegoat," originally denoted a goat ceremonially driven off into the wilderness while another was killed. According to Girard, such sacrifices achieved a highly therapeutic outcome, which he termed a "scapegoat effect":

By a scapegoat effect I mean that strange process through which two or more people are reconciled at the expense of a third party who appears guilty or responsible for whatever ails, disturbs, or frightens the scapegoaters. They feel relieved of their tensions and they coalesce into a more harmonious group. They now have a single purpose, which is to prevent the scapegoat from harming them, by expelling and destroying him.²⁰

Bluntly speaking, Girard's theory amounts to the view that bloody sacrifice is what made human society possible.

Girard is a committed Catholic, and his writings portray the coming of Jesus Christ as a major turning point in the history of sacrifice. Christ is the target of sacrificial violence, yet there is a written record documenting his innocence, in the form of the Gospels. According to Girard, this means there can be no more effective sacri-

fices after Christ's death, as the unconscious projection that always underlay the "scapegoat mechanism" has finally been exposed. Nonetheless, scapegoating has its roots in our very makeup, and so, even though it no longer has any positive outcome, it continues into the present day. In Girard's declinist view, the modern world continues to witness sacrificial violence but without the resulting social harmony.

Girard has exerted a noticeable influence on Coetzee. "What I take over from Girard," Coetzee has written, is "the outline of a politics of desire" (*Giving Offense*, 118). References to Girard appear throughout Coetzee's nonfiction writings, including a thought-provoking essay on advertising that uses Girard's theory to explain why ads so frequently employ an image of a model, such as a beautiful woman, alongside an image of the product (because we allow our desire to be shaped by the model's desire, Coetzee says) (*Doubling the Point*, 127-38). Coetzee's debt to Girard, however, is perhaps most clearly evident in an essay in his anthology *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship*, which examines Alexander Solzhenitsyn's struggle with the Soviet government.

Coetzee is hardly impartial between Solzhenitsyn and his Stalinist opponents. Nonetheless, despite their differences, Coetzee argues, on a psychological level the Russian writer and his censors were "carried on waves of polemic toward identity and twinship" (*Giving Offense*, 118). Solzhenitsyn internalized his enemies' notion of a war to the death and attacked the state with a rhetoric of denunciation and abuse that was in every way identical to the discourse of abuse directed at him. Coetzee quotes with approval the judgment expressed by one of Solzhenitsyn's dissident editors: "Having been rightly schooled in hatred of Stalinism, without realizing it Solzhenitsyn also imbibed the poisons of Stalinism" (137). The Russian writer's relationship with the Soviet authorities thus illustrates Girard's notion of rivals who come to mirror each other.

By invoking the notions of sacrifice and scapegoating in *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee would again seem to be highlighting an overlooked theme in *Disgrace*. The novel ends, for example, with Lurie making a sacrifice of a dog whom he carries "in his arms like a lamb" (*Disgrace*, 220). The image of a sacrificial lamb is suggested earlier in the novel when Lurie wants to rescue two sheep that a neighbor plans to kill. Lurie himself is made into something of a scapegoat by his university's sexual harassment committee, just as the last name of his own victim, Isaacs, recalls Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac in the Book of Genesis. At one point Coetzee's protagonist even offers a history of scapegoating:

Scapegoating worked in practice while it still had religious power behind it. You loaded the sins of the city on to the goat's back and drove it out, and the city was cleansed. It worked because everyone knew how to read the ritual, including the gods. Then the

gods died, and all of a sudden you had to cleanse the city without divine help. Real actions were demanded instead of symbolism. The censor was born, in the Roman sense. . . . Purgation was replaced by the purge.

(91)

184 Lurie does not see the rise of Christianity as a major transition in the same way that Girard does. Rather, he takes the key turning point to be the disappearance of religious meaning altogether. With that important exception, however, Lurie's view of history is pure Girard, as is evident in his interpretation of the role of sacrifice in ancient societies and his pessimistic view of the modern world as having descended into nontherapeutic political violence.

In Girard's theory, animal and human scapegoats are interchangeable: hence the possibility of replacing goats with the human figure of Christ. Yet there is never any implication in Girard's writings that slaughtering an animal and murdering a person are morally indistinguishable. Coetzee would seem to understand scapegoating in a similar way, highlighting a psychological drive that can result in the violent destruction of people or animals, yet without implying they are equally wrong. And just as Girard has written about the scapegoating of Jews in the Middle Ages, who were blamed for the bubonic plague, Coetzee's references to Jews, European anti-Semitism, and *Lösung* would seem to highlight modern anti-Semitic scapegoating, most obviously by Nazi propagandists. It is this status as scapegoats, whether metaphoric or literal, that Coetzee's animal and human victims share, rather than any crude moral equivalence.

Political violence is a major theme of *Disgrace*. The relationship among David Lurie, his daughter, and the men who assaulted her is plausibly read as an allegory for the relationship between white and black South Africans in the early post-Apartheid period, when there was a real possibility of political life descending into an ongoing spiral of violent revenge. In keeping with this theme, an important moment occurs near the end of the book, when Lurie's daughter, Lucy, tells him she is not going to press charges against the men who raped her. According to her, "in another time, in another place," it might be appropriate to make her assault a public matter. Given that it took place in South Africa, however, she feels that what happened is her business alone. Her father rejects this line of reasoning. "Do you think that by meekly accepting what happened to you," he angrily asks, "[you will receive] a sign to paint on the door-lintel that will make the plague pass you by? That is not how vengeance works, Lucy. Vengeance is like a fire. The more it devours, the hungrier it gets" (112).

The reference to a door-lintel recalls the theme of sacrifice and bloodshed in the book of Exodus, in which the Israelites are instructed to slaughter a lamb and mark

its blood on their doors: "God will pass through to kill Egypt with a plague, and He will see the blood on the lintel and the two doorposts. God will then pass over that door." Lucy's father dismisses the possibility that any action she can take will allow her to escape the ongoing pattern of vengeance. It is no surprise then, when he physically assaults one of her attackers, who in turn threatens to retaliate. Lucy is unique among Coetzee's characters in that the only person or animal she turns into a scapegoat is herself. In terms of Girard's theory, she does the opposite of coming to resemble her attackers. They inflicted on her their violent fantasies, but she wants nothing from them in return, not even justice. Only she, it would seem, personifies the ideal Coetzee has characterized elsewhere as "replacing a dialectic of violence by one of healing" (*Giving Offense*, 120) And so when she discovers she is pregnant, she chooses to keep her rapist's baby.

This is a disturbing resolution to a powerful book. But Coetzee's Girardianism, it bears pointing out, also leaves a disturbing trace in *Elizabeth Costello*. The unsettling element concerns Coetzee's decision to name Costello's Jewish interlocutor after a real person. The historical Abraham Stern was not only a poet (like Coetzee's character) but the founder of the notorious Stern Gang, the most militant of several armed Zionist groups active in Palestine in the early 1940s. Stern managed the unprecedented feat of being both a Zionist and—there is no other word for it—a fascist. Influenced by Social Darwinism and an admirer of Mussolini and Hitler, he so loathed Palestine's British occupiers that he supported the Axis and sent an infamous letter to representatives of the German government offering to enter the war on Germany's side. Writing in 1940, Stern called for a joint German-Jewish alliance that would see "the re-establishment of the Jewish state in its historic borders, on a national and totalitarian basis, allied with the German Reich."²¹

The historical Stern would seem a particularly chilling case of the process Girard highlighted: he came to resemble his deadliest rivals. But why does Coetzee have a character who speaks on behalf of the victims of the Holocaust call to mind Zionism's worst historical spokesperson? Is Coetzee suggesting that invoking the history of injustice against the Jewish people—a history Coetzee's own writings powerfully evoke—can itself function as a political tool, one that causes us to overlook the shortcomings of Israel, which Stern presumably represents? These are only some of the questions that Coetzee's enigmatic text raises but never answers.

CRITICISM

These, then, are two related themes underlying Coetzee's preoccupation with animals. On the one hand, Coetzee's work often highlights the sharp divide between

YES approaches to morality that set the boundary of moral concern at the boundary of rationality and a more inclusive and humane ethics of sympathy. As Elizabeth Costello summarizes such a view, which she associates with the superiority of literature to philosophy, "There is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination" (*Elizabeth Costello*, 80). Yet animals also illustrate Coetzee's interest in precisely the opposite form of vicariousness, the act of projecting our own worst traits onto another entity that we then blame, in the manner highlighted by Girard.

What are we to make of these two themes? Several critics of *Elizabeth Costello* have pointed out that sympathy was the central idea in the ethics of Adam Smith and David Hume, thereby suggesting that Coetzee is writing in the tradition of the Scottish Enlightenment. Smith and Hume, however, have been criticized for failing to take adequate note of the negative side of imaginative identification.²² Midgley captures this negative quality when she points out that exploitation also requires sympathy. A sadist cannot derive pleasure from inflicting pain on a rock or other unfeeling objects. Deliberate brutality, rather, requires that the perpetrator be able to enter into his victim's perspective at least enough to imagine the experience of agony. As Midgley points out, "Cruelty is something which could have no point for a person who really did not believe the victim to have definite feelings."²³ Coetzee's Girardian concern with negative forms of psychic identification would seem to align his understanding of entering "the being of another" less close to that of Smith and Hume than to Midgley's more nuanced modern view.²⁴

If an ethic of sympathy and a Girardian politics of desire are linked forms of vicariousness, both also call into question a purely instrumental conception of rationality. Such a conception is particularly evident in the Hobbesian strand of contract theory: we have our pre-given desires, and reason is the tool we use to act on them. This view often goes hand in hand with the notion that we are creatures who seek only to maximize our own self-interest (*homo economicus*). On a Girardian understanding of desire, however, the idea that our self-interest alone gives shape to our desires is immediately called into question. Although Girard's view would seem to have its own bleak elements, when accompanied with an affirmative ethic of sympathy, it would at least admit the possibility that, at least some of the time, we will be motivated to act on the interests of others.

This is more than some contract theorists have been willing to allow. As David Gauthier has written, there are large categories of human beings his ethic of mutual advantage excludes. "The primary problem is care for the handicapped. Speaking euphemistically of enabling them to live productive lives, when the services required exceed any possible products, conceals an issue which, understandably, no

one wants to face."²⁵ But the notion that we should not care for others when it is not in our interest to do so is only a problem if we accept Gauthier's flawed understanding of morality. If an ethic of sympathy has intuitive appeal, one reason is that a morality expansive enough to include animals will also be wide enough to include every member of our own species. The same cannot be said of some of the most distinguished moral philosophies in the Western tradition. Sympathy deserves to be seen as more than a corrective to the excesses of the Enlightenment and warrants serious consideration as an ethical starting point in its own right.

Taking the ethics of sympathy seriously, however, should not cause us to ignore the oversimplifications it can give rise to. In particular, it seems neither desirable nor possible to fully separate sympathy from reason in the way Costello repeatedly suggests. Our sympathies extend in many different directions and often come into conflict. We need reason to serve as adjudicator and guide if we are ever to act on our moral convictions in an effective way. Moreover, a certain form of rationality would already seem to be at work in our acts of sympathetic identification.

For us to sympathetically identify with a being requires that it have a consciousness. Elizabeth Costello seems aware of as much. She discusses at length a famous paper by Thomas Nagel titled, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" Revealingly, no one ever asks us to consider what it is like to be a river or a tree. Bats and other animals may not be rational, but the fact that they are sentient makes the difference between their awareness and ours seem a matter more of degree than of kind. Acts of sympathetic identification would thus seem to presuppose that we have first singled out for empathetic concern a particular type of entity, one in regard to which the notion of identification is intelligible to us. Such an act of discrimination and classification seems just as much the product of reason as of sympathy. If so, that would call into question simplistic dichotomies of the kind Costello not only explores at length, but often takes to show the superiority of literature over philosophy. There is more philosophy already present in literature than her remarks would allow.

Turning to Coetzee's second theme, it is worth noting that there is no clear Christian message in his work and that he rejects much of Girard's theory (on an anthropological or historical level, Coetzee notes, it "lacks an empirical basis and may even be unfalsifiable" [*Giving Offense*, 248]). Yet Coetzee's debt to Girard can help us to make sense of what has long seemed a curious aspect of Coetzee's attitude toward politics. During the Apartheid era, Coetzee was often contrasted with more politically outspoken South African writers, such as Nadine Gordimer. Gordimer herself once said of Coetzee that his work embodies a "revulsion against all political and revolutionary solutions."²⁶ Coetzee's embrace of Girard's politics of desire would

explain how he could unambiguously oppose Apartheid yet nonetheless still be wary of entering into psychic combat with an authoritarian regime. On a Girardian view, that way lies Solzhenitsyn and "the belligerence that tends to be generated in any field ruled over by censorship." (*Giving Offense*, 117)

188 This, however, would ultimately seem an unsatisfactory view of politics. Surely some things are worth getting belligerent over. How Coetzee the individual comport himself in regard to political issues is his own affair, but on an artistic level, one struggles to find any awareness in Coetzee's work that sometimes we should resolutely oppose a political entity or institution. Political regimes that foster severe injustice would seem the most obvious example. Coetzee's Girardian notion of enemies coming to resemble one another, however true on an abstract level (and surely it does contain some truth), downplays the material differences between a courageous individual such as Solzhenitsyn and the vast apparatus of the Soviet state. The eliding of this distinction is in keeping with the fact that, for all Coetzee's genius, he often seems tone deaf to the positive side of political activity: to its transformative possibilities, to its shared excitements, to its genuine joys. (Perhaps this is one reason why Elizabeth Costello, with her gratuitous Holocaust analogy, sometimes seems like a parody of a politically engaged writer.)

This brings us back to Abraham Stern. The historical individual lived in a period leading up to the establishment of a new state, and his own life was defined by political violence (Stern was killed by British police in 1942). In this, he evokes the setting of *Disgrace*, South Africa on the cusp of a new future, as well as the novel's concern with politically inspired acts of vengeance. In addition, Stern the literary character is "carried on waves of polemic toward identity and twinship" with Costello. In short, all the Girardian tropes are there. And yet, one cannot help wishing Coetzee had plucked a different name out of the past.

Stern's name evokes more than an individual. It evokes the history of Zionism and of Israel itself. Surely it is a distortion of historical reality to have a Jewish fascist occupy this symbolic space. Many criticisms can be made of Israel, including the charge that a form of "Apartheid thinking" defines its treatment of the Palestinians. But acknowledging that Israel is guilty of a great wrong should not come at the expense of historical perspective. The role of European anti-Semitism and the Holocaust in motivating Jewish immigration to Israel, as well as terrorist attacks on Israeli civilians, should cause us to recognize that the Israel-Palestinian conflict is too complex to warrant equating Zionism with fascist ideology. Inserting a reference to Abraham Stern and no other Israeli characters fails to do justice to a complex political reality.²⁷ Ironically, the result on a symbolic level is precisely the type of crude political denunciation that Coetzee is normally at such pains to avoid. In a text that

has so much to say about imaginative identification, Coetzee's invocation of Abraham Stern seems itself to reveal a failure of sympathy.

CONCLUSION

189 At one point in *Elizabeth Costello* another character worries over the way she is often treated as "a Mickey Mouse post-colonial writer." (*Elizabeth Costello*, 9) This is another similarity between Costello and Coetzee, who has attracted a considerable amount of attention from postcolonial critics. The Mickey Mouse comment raises the possibility that Coetzee is unhappy with being pigeonholed in this way and that *Elizabeth Costello* is on one level a commentary on overlooked themes in his fiction. Whether or not Coetzee was in fact trying to offer such a commentary, this is how I have interpreted the animal lessons. They articulate thematic preoccupations with which Coetzee has long been concerned yet which have not traditionally featured in the discussion around his work.

It is unlikely, however, that anyone ever comes away from writing about *Elizabeth Costello* with a sense of complete satisfaction. It is too strange, too riddling, too baffling for that. If, as Elizabeth Costello states, there is no limit to the extent we can think ourselves into the being of another, there may be a limit to how much we can think our way into Coetzee's book. I have left aside the chapters on African literature, artistic depictions of evil, and other topics, and I have not attempted to relate them to the animal chapters. If I have managed to convey the sense that there are intelligible themes in Coetzee's animal lectures, including a philosophically respectable account of the role of sympathy in ethics and a less appealing politics of desire, I will have accomplished enough. These themes can be taken to illuminate Elizabeth Costello's seemingly mad obsession with animals. As for her creator, however, one never quite escapes the feeling that he is still out in the darkness, smiling a Cheshire grin.

Notes

1. D. Lodge, "Disturbing the Peace," review of *Elizabeth Costello*, *New York Review of Books* 50, no. 18 (2003): 10.
2. T. Regan and M. Rowe, "What the Nobel Committee Also Failed to Note," *International Herald Tribune*, December 19, 2003. My approach is partly inspired by a detail in Regan and Rowe's article, which mentions a reading Coetzee gave from *Disgrace*. According to

Regan and Rowe, "Coetzee began with the observation that, although many critics had commented on the book's depiction of human relationships and violence, none had discussed the animal theme, one that appears frequently in his writing." However, I am less interested in Coetzee's conscious intention than the effect of taking *Elizabeth Costello* as an indirect commentary on *Disgrace*.

3. For other critics who share Lodge's bafflement, see P. Singer, "Reflections," in *The Lives of Animals*, ed. A. Gutmann (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), 85-91; and J. Yardley, review of *Elizabeth Costello*, *Washington Post*, November 16, 2004. For critics who are sympathetic to the Holocaust analogy, see T. M. Costelloe, "The Invisibility of Evil: Moral Progress and the 'Animal Holocaust,'" *Philosophical Papers* 32, no. 2 (2003): 109-31, and D. Szybel, "Can the Treatment of Animals be Compared to the Holocaust?" *Ethics and the Environment* 11, no. 1 (2006): 97-132. Costelloe and Szybel both attribute Costello's view to Coetzee.
4. Singer, "Reflections," 86. Singer's disagreement with Costello is worth stressing. Singer has grappled at length with the comparative moral worth of human and nonhuman animals, and the position he arrives at is far more considered and careful than Costello's. The average human being has intellectual abilities far greater than that of any animal, Singer notes, and for this reason we will normally occupy a higher moral status than any other species. Singer illustrates this point by asking us to consider a scenario in which we decided to perform painful medical experiments on normal adult humans and randomly kidnapped people from city parks for this purpose. In addition to the pain of the experiments themselves, such a scheme would also result in widespread terror, as people became afraid to walk through parks. Were the same thing done to animals, however, they would certainly experience the pain of the experiments, but not the "anticipatory dread" of being kidnapped. See *Animal Liberation*, 2nd ed. (New York: New York Review, 1990), 15. This shows that however much we might wish to improve the treatment of animals, there will always be good reasons not to rank them on a moral par with normal adult humans.

I believe Singer is right about the moral superiority of human beings. However, there is a second reason to emphasize his disagreement with Costello. Singer is highly critical of the way our culture treats animals, and this should remind us that objecting to Costello's analogy is not the same as defending the status quo regarding animals. If Costello's analogy is sloppy and emotional, it does not follow that activities that inflict pain on other species are justified. Indeed, my own view is that meat eating and other widespread practices involving animals are morally wrong. Although I do not make the case for this view below, I do want to be explicit that my criticisms of Costello do not stem from a rejection of the cause of animal protection. Like Singer, I believe the best position is one that rejects both Costello's crude analogy and the many unnecessary

cruelties that are regularly inflicted on animals. For a more detailed outline of my views regarding animals, see "Food Fight! Regan vs. Davis on the Ethics of Eating Beef," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 38, no. 2 (2007): 331-48.

5. M. Midgley, *Animals and Why They Matter* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984), 27.
6. M. Midgley, "Duties Concerning Islands," in *Environmental Ethics*, ed. Robert Elliot (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 89-103.
7. M. Midgley, *Beast and Man*, rev. ed. (London: Routledge, 1995), 259.
8. J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971); D. Gauthier, *Morals by Agreement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).
9. My account of the differences between Hobbesian and Kantian contractarianism follows W. Kymlicka, "The Social Contract Tradition," in *A Companion to Ethics*, ed. Peter Singer (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 186-96.
10. J. Rawls, "Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory," in *Collected Papers*, ed. S. Freeman (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 330.
11. Quoted in M. Midgley, "Duties Concerning Islands," 90.
12. G. R. Grice, *The Grounds of Moral Judgement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 149.
13. For a small sampling of the literature on Rawls's exclusion of the mentally handicapped (and animals), see M. Midgley, "Duties Concerning Islands"; B. Barry, *Theories of Justice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); P. Cavalieri and W. Kymlicka, "Expanding the Social Contract," *Etica and Animali* 8 (1996): 5-32; and M. Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Nationality, Disability, Species Membership* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006).
14. Midgley, "Duties Concerning Islands," 97.
15. Midgley, "Duties Concerning Islands," 93.
16. I. Hacking, "Our Fellow Animals," review of *The Lives of Animals*, *New York Review of Books* 47, no. 11 (2000): 20.
17. Midgley, "Duties Concerning Islands."
18. Hacking, "Our Fellow Animals," 27.
19. Originally published in French as *La violence et le sacré* (Paris: Grasset, 1972).
20. R. Girard, "Mimesis and Violence," in *The Girard Reader*, ed. J. G. Williams (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 12.
21. The German (or Sternist) Memorandum, quoted in J. Heller, *The Stern Gang: Ideology, Politics, and Terror, 1940-1949* (London: Frank Cass, 1995), 85-86. See also A. Perliger/L. Weinberg, "Jewish Self-Defence and Terrorist Groups Prior to the Establishment of the State of Israel: Roots and Traditions," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 4, no. 3 (2003): 91-118.

22. P. Railton, "Toward an Ethics That Inhabits the World," in *The Future for Philosophy*, ed. Brian Leiter (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 278.
23. Midgley, *Animals and Why They Matter*, 114.
24. For an excellent discussion of the complex role sympathy plays in *Disgrace*, see M. Marias, "J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and the Task of the Imagination," *Journal of Modern Literature* 29, no. 2 (2006), 75-93. Marias persuasively rebuts the view that Coetzee's work expresses an Enlightenment view of sympathy.
25. Gauthier, *Morals by Agreement*, 18.
26. N. Gordimer, "The Idea of Gardening," Review of *The Life and Times of Michael K*, *The New York Review of Books* 31, no. 1 (1984): 6.
27. The names of two other characters in the animal lessons evoke Jewish historical figures. Both, however, were critical of Zionism. There is an English professor named Elaine Marx and an academic dean named Arendt (whose first name is not given). Such references would seem to again evoke Midgley's work. Midgley has pointed out how philosophers such as Marx often isolate a single human capacity or attribute (in Marx's case, freely given labour) and celebrate it on the grounds that it is the quality that most separates us from animals. This approach is misguided, Midgley points out, because it runs together a moral claim and a question of biological classification. As she puts it, exalting one particular attribute as humanity's highest good is "a particular moral position and must be defended as such against others; it cannot ride into acceptance on the back of a crude method of taxonomy" (M. Midgley, quoted in W. Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1989], 190). YES The problem with Marx's view is that there are human activities in which people find considerable value, such as giving birth, that are capacities we share with animals. Similarly, there are some actions, such as committing suicide, that may be unique to human beings yet that we do not celebrate. Like Marx, Hannah Arendt lauds one particular human attribute, in her case our capacity to take part in a shared world of political speech and action, on the grounds that it is what separates us from animals. See H. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958). There is a certain casual brilliance in the way Coetzee extends Midgley's critique of Marx to Arendt, whose philosophy is often thought to invert Marxism. In the context of the allusion to Abraham Stern, however, recalling the authors of "On the Jewish Question" and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* does not provide us with a rounded picture of Zionism or Israeli history.

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