

# Descartes' Error and the Barbarity of Western Philosophy. Schopenhauer in Dialogue with Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello

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## Introduction

Yet, although I see that the best way to win acceptance from this learned gathering would be for me to join myself, like a tributary stream running into a great river, to the great Western discourse of man versus beast, of reason versus unreason, something in me resists, foreseeing in that step the concession of the entire battle.<sup>1</sup>

Elizabeth Costello, protagonist of Coetzee's famous book *The Lives of Animals*, is, as she repeatedly states, only a writer, not a philosopher. Therefore the first lecture she delivers for a public of scholars at the fictional Appleton College makes no claims to logical coherence, and does not attempt to formulate philosophical principles: it is rather a passionate defence of the rights of the animals. Even if Coetzee titles the first chapter of his narration, in which this lecture is contained, "The Philosophers and the Animals", it seems that Elizabeth's speech aims at unveiling the philosophers' incapability – perhaps even an impossibility – of understanding the world of the animals, which is the first step towards changing our behaviour toward them. The "great Western discourse", from Plato, to St. Thomas, to Descartes, and its faith in the power of reason, remain foreign to her. Reason itself appears a mere "tendency in human nature", at which she looks with *suspicion*.<sup>2</sup> It was the preference given to *reasoning* that enabled St. Thomas, and later Descartes, to draw the distinction between man and animal – that it to say the opposition between "reason against unreason", "man versus beast", as the novelist Elizabeth Costello puts it. She refuses to follow the main stream of western philosophical thought, and argues instead that if *reason* has been used to underline our enormous superiority to animals, *feeling* can instead bridge this same gap: only through feeling can we perceive the internal similarity of all forms of animal life and overcome the sense of distance and alienation between man and animal. While opposing the view of cold rationality, Elizabeth concludes: "To thinking, cogitation, I oppose fullness, embodiedness, the sensation of being [...]"<sup>3</sup>

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1 Coetzee, J. M.: *The Lives of Animals*. Princeton 1999, 25.

2 Ibid., 23.

3 Ibid., 33.

Coetzee's philosophical fiction offers a first insight into the field that constitutes the background for this essay, namely the possibility of an ethical system capable of including animals and the main problems that such a foundation would encounter. In fact, even if Elizabeth Costello seems to regard philosophy as the wrong instrument to use in order to change our behaviour toward animals, she delivers a series of lectures in front of a public of scholars and philosophers, a fictional strategy which might suggest that her provocative speech actually seeks a confrontation with the world of philosophy.<sup>4</sup>

Schopenhauer is never mentioned in Costello's lectures; western philosophy, both modern<sup>5</sup> and ancient, is not only declared incapable of thinking the difference between man and animal in other terms than those of "reason" and "lack of reason", but it is also considered responsible for the creation of an abyss dividing mankind from the world of animals. It might not be by chance that Elizabeth omits Schopenhauer from the list of thinkers she challenges in her paper: despite the quantity of material on this topic in his works, and despite the striking complexity and originality of his position, Schopenhauer's point of view on animal-ethics hasn't been often considered in depth.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, Schopenhauer represents in many ways an ideal interlocutor for Elizabeth Costello and for the questions she asks: what differentiates man from animal and what, on the other hand, do they have in common? How does philosophy – understood as reasoning – deal with feeling?

I argue that Schopenhauer's concept of compassion (*Mitleid*) and his understanding of nature as a continuum, alongside his detailed reports on the differences between man and animals – often the results of direct, careful observation of animal behaviour – constitute a fitting, philosophical answer to the problems of modern ethics which Coetzee presents in his short novel. In this way Schopenhauer's ethical philosophy, whose defining characteristic – as the philosopher himself recognized – lies in the capacity of including animals in its discourse, enters the modern discussion on animals' rights, offering an organic set of ideas which not only appears to have strikingly anticipated today's debate on the place of animals within philosophical moral systems, but can also actively interact with and contribute to this discussion itself.

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4 Also, as Singer among others pointed out, Coetzee cleverly intertwines Elizabeth Costello's lecture with the critical and bitter commentaries of Norma (her daughter-in-law), thus providing the reader with an opposite point of view on the question of animal rights (cfr. Singer, P.: *The Lives of the Animals*, 91).

5 Thomas Nagel's *What Is It Like to Be a Bat?* is directly criticized (see *ibid.*, 31 ff).

6 Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* for instance refers to Schopenhauer only briefly (*Animal Liberation. Die Befreiung der Tiere*. Transl. by Claudia Schorcht. Hamburg 1996, 333–334). On the "unpopularity" of Schopenhauer's animal-ethics see Dahl, Edgar: *Der Schleier der Maya. Das Tier in der Ethik Arthur Schopenhauers*. In: *Jb.* 79, 1998, 106.

Schopenhauer's ethical philosophy represents an exception within the "great Western discourse" criticized by Elizabeth Costello: it can be read as a coherent and challenging answer to Costello's questions, to her rather rough opposition between feeling and reason and to her strong disbelief in the possibility of basing an animal-ethics merely on the speculations of the latter. While not denying that reason plays an important role in defining what differentiates man from animal, Schopenhauer deviates from the main tradition of western philosophy in that he asserts the equality of all living beings (anticipating Singer's famous first chapter of his *Animal Liberation: All Animals are Equal*). It follows that mankind and animals don't differ in their essence but only in purely secondary characteristics – and reason is nothing more than one of them. The common basis shared by animals and men is the capacity of *feeling*, that is to say the perception of pain and pleasure and the tendency to seek the latter and avoid the former. Schopenhauer stated that the foundation of a new ethical system must be developed coherently with this basic general assumption – all living beings (with the exception of plants, which lack a nervous system)<sup>7</sup> are capable of feeling and suffering.

In response to Elizabeth Costello's bitter denunciation of the limits of a philosophical approach to the topic, I suggest we look to Schopenhauer's work as a precious (and too often forgotten) source as well as an important contribution to the discussion; its chief importance consists in the way it overcomes the conflict that dominated western philosophy for centuries, that it to say the conflict between the reasoning human being and the nature-bound and reasonless animal. My essay will therefore interrogate Schopenhauer's work under this particular point of view, with the aim of revealing the striking modernity of his thought in the first half of the nineteenth century, and its interest for the evolution of today's debate on the necessity of including animals in ethical discourse.

### *1. The historical background of Schopenhauer's animal-ethics: the necessities of the new science and the doubts of the philosopher*

Commentators have noted that Schopenhauer's attention to the problems of animal-ethics significantly increased with time.<sup>8</sup> It might be suggested that his awareness of the importance of this topic grew in response to the bigger role that experiments on animals, and particularly vivisection, started to play in the context

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7 Hans Werner Ingensiep has objected that it is not clear why plants should not be included in Schopenhauer's ethical philosophy (Zur Lage der Tierseele und Tierethik. In: *Die Seele der Tiere*. Hrsg. von Friedrich Niewöhner und Jean-Loup Seban. Wölfenbüttel 2001, 316). But since Schopenhauer clearly stated that the capability of *feeling* represents the guiding principle of his ethics, and since plants can't feel in the way animals do, this critique doesn't undermine the coherence of Schopenhauer's ethical system.

8 See Libell, Monica: Active Compassion in Schopenhauer's View on Animals. In: *Jb.* 79, 1998, 119.

of medical, zoological and physiological research at the main German universities of the time. At the university of Berlin, where Schopenhauer studied from 1811 to 1813 and where he later worked as a lecturer (from 1825 to 1831), he was able to observe this development at first hand. During the first half of the nineteenth century animals entered universities as pure *objects* of study.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the horror he expressed for the pitiless experiments that Ernst von Bibra zu Nürnberg performed on rabbits – letting them starve slowly with the aim of understanding how their brains would react to the fatal deprivation of food<sup>10</sup> – Schopenhauer’s approach to vivisection remained careful almost to the point of indecision, oscillating between a firm condemnation of unnecessary torture and the acknowledgment of the requirements of the evolving medical science. Referring directly to the notorious case of the starved rabbits, Schopenhauer wrote:

[...] für dieses Wissen giebt es noch viele andere und unschuldige Fundgruben; ohne daß man nöthig hätte, arme hülflose Thiere zu Tode zu martern. Was in aller Welt hat das arme, harmlose Kaninchen verbroschen, daß man es einfängt, um es der Pein des langsamen Hungertodes hinzugeben?<sup>11</sup>

The rhetorical question about the reason for the suffering of the innocent rabbit could at first suggest the hasty conclusion that Schopenhauer considered vivisection simply wrong – the scientist performing vivisection being guilty of a moral crime against poor, innocent animals that rely completely on men and are unable to protest. The assumption that vivisection could be avoided thanks to “many other innocent sources” points in the same direction. But if we consider this passage more closely, it becomes evident that Schopenhauer intended to complain more about the nature of the experiment – unnecessary and in the end not particularly enlightening from a scientific point of view – than about the practice of vivisection *per se*. The long section of *Parerga und Paralipomena* from which the previous passage was quoted, is entirely dedicated to the discussion of this problem, showing Schopenhauer’s instinctive recoiling from the idea of vivisection and his attempt nevertheless to deal with both the costs and the possible future advantages of the fast growth of scientific discoveries after 1800. In the same text he states:

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9 Vivisection was already practised long before the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Descartes himself used to perform it). Nevertheless, the systematic use of animals in university studies dates from that period (cfr. Singer, Peter: *Animal Liberation. Die Befreiung der Tiere*, 322). On the growth of an ethical consciousness among *Naturwissenschaftler* regarding the treatment of animals see Hans Werner Ingensiep, 316ff.

10 See P II, 397: “[...] er [Baron Ernst von Bibra zu Nürnberg] hat zwei Kaninchen planmäßig *rothungern* lassen! um die ganz müßige und unnütze Untersuchung anzustellen, ob durch den Hungertod die chemischen Bestandteile des Gehirns eine Proportionsveränderung erlitten!”.

11 E, 398.

Zu Vivisektion ist Keiner berechtigt, der nicht schon Alles, was über das zu untersuchende Verhältniß in Büchern steht, kennt und weiß.<sup>12</sup>

It follows that the scientist is morally allowed to use animals for his research if, and only if, his experiment appears both absolutely necessary and new: that is to say that he should consult *all* books on the topic and check whether the results for that examination are already available before deciding to experiment on animals. Pushed to its extreme conclusion, this principle leads to the consequence that no one is entitled to perform vivisection before he has browsed carefully through entire libraries, looking for the data he would hope to gain by the experiment.<sup>13</sup> Of course, Schopenhauer's desire to limit the need for vivisection to be performed at all appears very clear; at the same time he tries and maintains an open channel, through which to observe and communicate with the scientific development of modern universities and its increasing necessities. The result of this difficult combination is showed in these pages of *Parerga und Paralipomena*, where Schopenhauer avoids establishing fixed moral principles and chooses instead to confront specific cases of scientific research involving vivisection, in order to judge their moral status. This cautious and rather flexible approach to vivisection incurred a great amount of criticism.<sup>14</sup>

Certainly, Schopenhauer's position was rooted in its time and in the society he lived in, and it would be historically wrong to expect his thought on animal rights to match our contemporary sensitivity for the problem. In fact Schopenhauer was perfectly aware that he was *witnessing* a radical and fast change in the attitude scientists showed towards "animal testing" (to use a modern term) – the section of *Parerga und Paralipomena* we are considering can be read as a report of this active witnessing.<sup>15</sup>

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12 Ibid.

13 E, 397.

14 For instance Magnus Schwantje (*Tierseele und Tierschutz*. Hrsg. von dem Bund für radikale Ethik. Berlin 1919) reproached Schopenhauer for not having spoken more clearly about the right of the animals, vivisection and also vegetarianism. More recently Sandro Barbera and Giuliano Campioni, who edited a new Italian translation of Richard Wagner's *Offenes Schreiben an Herrn Ernst von Weber Verfasser der Schrift "Die Folterkammer der Wissenschaft"* (Wagner's position on the topic was certainly influenced by Schopenhauer's own speculations) point out that Schopenhauer merely reacted against unnecessary cruelty, but in no way against the legitimate use of animals for scientific purposes. I am suggesting that Schopenhauer's view appears actually more complicated and subtle than these critics assert (Wagner, Richard: *Sulla Vivisezione*. A cura di Sandro Barbera e Giuliano Campioni. Pisa 2006, Introduzione).

15 See especially P II, 396–397, where Schopenhauer draws a distinction between the habits and the rules of the "classical education", which he himself received in Göttingen with Blumenbach, and the new, immoral tendency of torturing animals without necessity in the context of university studies. The "classical education" did involve vivisection too, but only when it was judged absolutely necessary.

From this point of view Schopenhauer's animal-ethics displays a remarkably close affinity with contemporary ethical reflections, such as Ursula Wolf's in her book *Das Tier in der Moral*. Wolf discusses the principles that vivisection should be avoided if unnecessary and that the aim of the experiment should be considered extremely important and unattainable by any other means except animal testing. As we've just seen, Schopenhauer himself had already drawn attention to the problem of the *necessity* of the experiment (while trying to reduce as much as possible the number of such cases). Despite the progress that alternative research methods have reached since the publication of *Parerga und Paralipomena*, Wolf states that it still remains *doubtful* whether animal testing (for instance within pharmaceutical research) is to be considered inevitable or not today.<sup>16</sup> Even if Schopenhauer himself expressed his own doubts about the inevitability of vivisection, he underlined what he considered to be the basic moral principle in the treatment of animals, that is that animals should not suffer, whether in the laboratories or in the slaughterhouses. This might seem like a very feeble moral principle after all, allowing men to use and dispose of animals as they wish, as long as chloroform is used to mitigate the animals' pain.<sup>17</sup> Yet precisely in this basic assumption – that animals can suffer, in a very similar manner to the way human beings do – lies the foundation of Schopenhauer's ethical thought, and its revolutionary meaning for the development of a western philosophical tradition of animal-ethics. Again, Schopenhauer derived his persuasion of the humanlike nature of animals' pain from direct observation of animals and their behaviour, which completed and integrated his close engagement with the destiny of animals as university research-objects. It should be recalled that the idea that animals are not unfeeling machines, but that on the contrary their nervous system closely resembles the human one (in some cases almost to the point of perfect correspondence), wasn't at all the most common position amongst university professors around 1800: cartesianism, and its belief that animals are similar to mechanical clocks, proved to be an efficient alibi, permitting any kind of cruel experiment on animals, and therefore remained very popular among scientists long after Descartes' death.<sup>18</sup>

In this sense Schopenhauer's practice of personal observation appears particularly relevant. His interest in zoology is mainly directed by the desire to understand the nature of the difference between man and animal – a difference which he

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16 Wolf then addresses the moral possibility of testing on human beings rather than on animals. The general condemnation of the idea of human testing reveals the fact that our morality is split into two: what is allowed in regard to animals wouldn't be generally allowed in regard to people (see Wolf, Ursula: *Das Tier in der Moral*. Frankfurt am Main 1990, 24ff.).

17 P II, 399. I won't consider Schopenhauer's view on vegetarianism, since the philosophical basis of his critique doesn't differ in substance from his discussion of the problems involved in performing vivisection.

18 See Singer, Peter: *Animal Liberation. Die Befreiung der Tiere*, 322–323.

did not take for granted, but tried to focus with maximal precision. As early as 1811 Schopenhauer began writing marginalia on zoological treatises, integrating the scientists' statements with comments based on his own observations. In a notebook from his first stay in Berlin, we find a marginalium to the theory that birds lack the sense of taste: Blumenbach's parrot, notes Schopenhauer, does definitely react with enthusiasm to the taste of sugar.<sup>19</sup>

One might argue that Schopenhauer didn't practice animal observation on a big scale, but only from the limited point of view of understanding and challenging single assumptions which he found in scientific books – or judging the nature of single cases of vivisection that were constantly carried on in the scientists' torture chambers (*Marterkammer*). After all, he neither believed in a neutral and detached way of observing experiments on animals<sup>20</sup>, nor meant to write a scientific treatise based on his observations, which might not prove to be of striking scientific relevance after all<sup>21</sup>: his reflections on animals are, instead, of deep *philosophical* interest, in that they represent the beginning of a new course in the western philosophical discourse Costello criticized. Challenging Descartes' powerful and long-lasting influence, Schopenhauer opened a way to the possibility of re-thinking the nature of animal suffering and re-discovering the bond that links mankind to the world of the animals, taking leave from Descartes' "ratiocentric" interpretation.

A long text from Schopenhauer's *Quarant* [1824] will show how the philosopher made use of his private observations and of the confrontation with the academic world for the foundation of an animal-inclusive ethical system, while moving a first step toward a possible answer to Elizabeth's Costello reason-feeling dilemma.

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19 HN II, 222: "[201a] Die Vögel haben wenig Geschmack [...] [*Schop.*?] Blumenbachs Papagey verdreht aber über den Wohlgeschmack des Zuckers die Augen vor Freude [...]" Since Schopenhauer usually marks his commentaries with the word *Ego* (for instance HN II, 223: "[213] Flußschildkröten kommen in Frankr[eich] und [im] südl[ichen] Teutschland vor. [*Schop.*] *Ego*. Ich habe an der *Rhone* welche gesehn"), there is no absolute certainty of him being the author, but only high probability. See also the text n. 95 in HN III, 227–232, which contains a series of notes on the reading of several treatises on animal anatomy.

20 P II, 396–397.

21 In his book *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge 1993, 118–119; German translation by Oscar Bischoff, Jean-Claude Wolf und Dietrich Klose: *Praktische Ethik*, Stuttgart 1994, 157), Peter Singer discusses the importance of private, "unscientific" observations, similar to those carried out by Schopenhauer.

## 2. Descartes' error: a relevant text from the Handschriftlicher Nachlass

The text I'm now going to consider in detail presents the form of a sketch for a wider study; it begins with the words "Analyse des Bewußtseyns", which seem to be a kind of provisional title.

Analyse des Bewußtseyns.

Die Welt ist im Bewußtseyn vorhanden: darum ist das Bewußtsein der wesentliche Ausgangspunkt für jede Philosophie; als solchen hat ihn zuerst *Cartesius* erkannt und ist deshalb der Urheber und Ausgangspunkt der neuern Philosophie.<sup>22</sup>

The starting point for Schopenhauer's reflection is nothing less than Descartes' principle that consciousness is the defining feature of human nature. This very assumption – with which Schopenhauer agrees<sup>23</sup> – makes of Descartes the founder of modern philosophy. But, straight after this beginning Schopenhauer's discourse suddenly and decisively departs from Descartes: consciousness, he argues, represents the essence of *every* living being, not only of men but also of animals, which Descartes considered to be only sophisticated automatons (therefore lacking also consciousness, not only reason!):

Was in *jedem* tierischen Bewußtseyn, auch dem unvollkommensten und schwächsten, vorhanden seyn muß, ist das unmittelbarste Innwerden eines *Verlangens* und der abwechselnden Zustände der Befriedigung oder Nichtbefriedigung desselben, die wieder sehr verschiedene Grade zulassen. Dies wissen wir gewissermaßen *a priori*: denn so wundersam mannigfaltig und verschieden auch die zahllosen Gestalten der Thiere sind; so ist doch das Innre und Wesentliche in ihnen dasselbe, nämlich das eben Besagte, woran zu zweifeln uns nicht einmal einfallen kann. So fremd und oft, zum ersten Mal gesehn, die Gestalt eines Thieres seyn mag, so sind wir doch stets mit seinem Innern *a priori* vertraut und kennen gar wohl das Grundwesen seines Bewußtseyns. Dies ist also das *jedem* Bewußtseyn zukommende: folglich das *Wesentliche*.<sup>24</sup>

It is worth noticing that the observation of the animals plays again a very important role: we recognize immediately, *a priori*, that the life of every living being is characterized by the *conscious* tendency to the satisfaction of its needs – although this consciousness, which leads both men and animals to desire pleasure and to escape pain, presents a very differentiated scale of degrees. The truth of the basic equality of all living creatures is so powerful and deeply rooted in our way of

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22 HN III, 244.

23 On the role of Descartes as "Vater der neuern Philosophie", see also: *Skizze einer Geschichte der Lehre vom Idealen und Realen*, in P I, 3–4.

24 HN III, 244.



perceiving the world, that even in the case of a strange creature we encounter for the first time (the action of *seeing* being therefore essential) we must spontaneously agree that it shares with us this basic attitude toward life. In this sense we can have *no doubt* whatsoever (“woran zu zweifeln uns nicht einmal einfallen kann”) that consciousness, which implies the capability of *feeling*, represents the shared, internal essence of all sensitive creatures. The distance from Descartes, according to whom mankind and animals are divided by an unbridgeable abyss, is immediately evident. The fundamental equality of men and animals is then stated even more clearly in another passage from the same text:

Man betrachte jedes Thier, vom Polypen aufwärts zum Insekt, zum Reptil, zum Vogel, zum Elephant, Hund, Affen, Menschen: und man wird nicht zweifeln können daß der besagte Vorgang in ihm Statt findet. Derselbe ist also als die Basis und das Wesentliche des Bewußtseyns anzusehn. Ein Verlangen, Begehren, Wollen, oder Verabscheuen, Fliehen, Nichtwollen, beides bald befriedigt, bald nicht: dies ist jedem Bewußtseyn eigenthümlich, der Mensch und Polyp haben [127] es gemein und sind sich hierin gleich [...].<sup>25</sup>

I have already noted the similarity between the radicalism of Schopenhauer’s assertion of the basic equality of all living beings and the theory that Singer presented in *Animal Liberation*: and it should be remarked that this seemed revolutionary enough even in the 1970s.<sup>26</sup> Far from having lost its power, the very basis of Schopenhauer’s ethical theory shows today its full strength and its value. Moreover, Schopenhauer’s use of Descartes’ philosophy deserves to be particularly underlined: Schopenhauer begins this text with a reference to the sixteenth-century philosopher, but only in order to use his general principle (the key role of the consciousness) for his own speculation, which will lead in the end to the very opposite result. Schopenhauer has used Descartes against Descartes, employing the principle of consciousness to undermine the foundation of Descartes’ theory about the enormous gap that divides men and animals.

We might now go back to Elizabeth Costello’s attack against western philosophy and its claim that reason represents the insurmountable limit between the world of intelligence – mankind – and that of pure instinct – animals. Elizabeth herself refers to Descartes, in a way that constitutes an immediate link with

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25 HN III, 244–245.

26 Of course Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarian philosophy represents a very important precedent for Singer’s speculation. Given the limited space of this essay I’m not able to discuss the similarity between Schopenhauer’s, Bentham’s and Singer’s theories in any detail, therefore I can only refer to (among others): Wolf, Ursula, cit., 48ff.; Wolf, Jean-Claude: Willensmetaphysik und Tierethik. In: *Jb.* 79, 1998, 87. For Singer’s assertion of the equality of all living creatures and the meaning of *feeling* as the shared basic characteristic, see especially *Animal Liberation*, chapter 1 (*Animal Liberation. Die Befreiung der Tiere*, 37–38). See also: Wolf, Ursula, cit., 43ff.

Schopenhauer's *Quartant* text: what Descartes saw, she argues, was exactly what anybody *immediately* sees, that is that "an animal – and we are all animals – is an embodied soul", capable of feeling; despite this evidence, that Schopenhauer put at the core of his argument too, Descartes chose to deny the essential similarity (or more: the equality) of man and animal.<sup>27</sup> Deeply influenced by Descartes' conception, western philosophers proved unable to elaborate a different ethical philosophy, and failed to break free from the paradigm of reason versus unreason.

Indeed, Schopenhauer text leads precisely to this conclusion, offering at the same time an alternative explanation for the problem:

Daher es auch kommt, daß alle bisherigen Philosophen, wenn sie den geistigen Theil des Menschen erklären, oder von der sogenannten *Seele* reden, allezeit als das erste und hauptsächlichliche setzen, daß sie *erkennend* sei, wodurch die das sekundäre zum primären, gleichsam das Accidenz zur Substanz machen, und dadurch von vornherein auf einen Irrweg gerathen, aus welchem nachher kein Herauslenken mehr ist, und der stets zu falschen Resultaten führt.<sup>28</sup>

Schopenhauer doesn't deny that man and animal differ in many ways: quite on the contrary he argues that consciousness (*Bewußtsein*) is present in all living being but with great qualitative disparity.<sup>29</sup> The capability of gaining a representation of the world outside (*Vorstellung*), which Schopenhauer also discusses in this text and that represents the second level of animal nature after the basic stage of consciousness, is different from case to case in a similar way.

An diesen ersten Grundvorgang des thierischen Bewußtseyns ist der zweite geknüpft, die *Vorstellung*: Und wenn jener erste, in allen Thieren derselbe, sie alle im Wesentlichen *gleich* setzte; so begründet der 2<sup>te</sup> die *Verschiedenheit* des Bewußtseyns in den Species der Thiere.<sup>30</sup>

In other words, on the common ground of consciousness depends the ability of producing representations; on this second level, the difference between more and less evolved species of animals and especially between mankind and animals becomes stronger and more visible.<sup>31</sup> It is nevertheless important to underline that

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27 Coetzee, J. M.: *The Lives of Animals*, 33.

28 HN III, 248.

29 Some animals, for instance, are more conscious of their belonging to a species (*Gattung*) than of their life as individual beings (see for instance: HN III, 349).

30 HN III, 245.

31 HN III, 245–246: "Zwar ist in allen Thieren auch die *Form* der Vorstellung dieselbe, nämlich Subjekt und Objekt, Zeit, Raum, Kausalität: aber ihr Inhalt und die Größe der Sphären desselben, sodann ihre Deutlichkeit und Vielseitigkeit hat unendliche Grade, wodurch die große Verschiedenheit des vorstellenden Theils des Bewußtseyns in den verschiedenen Thierspecies, und sodann in den verschiedenen menschlichen Individuen entsteht [...]". Schopenhauer shows

even at this stage no abrupt separation of the world of animals from that of humans takes place: instead, we observe the progressive and smooth growing of a series of distinctions, which starting from the definition of a shared foundation, leads ultimately to a new understanding of man's place in nature and of his relationship to the animal. As Schopenhauer's student Julius Frauenstädt very clearly stated, the main thought on which this theory is based is that of the continuity of nature ("*Continuität der Natur*"):<sup>32</sup> nature is therefore represented as a continuum in which gradual diversification occurs.

What philosophers traditionally considered to be the crucial point in differentiating man and animal, that is that man is a rational being, capable of knowledge (*erkennend*), whereas the animal doesn't elaborate its perception of the world into thoughts, is for Schopenhauer *Accidenz*, a secondary attribute that comes into play only at the last step of the analysis.<sup>33</sup> Rooted in its turn in the faculty of building representations, reason, or the capacity of conceptual thinking, is defined as "Vorstellung der Vorstellung"<sup>34</sup>, that is as the capability of elaborating representations on a higher level. Even if he does, of course, recognize that reason makes human life "very different"<sup>35</sup> from that of any other living creature, Schopenhauer also clearly states that western philosophy exchanged a secondary for a primal characteristic, in that it accorded to reason the key role. Even if Descartes isn't here directly mentioned, the result is clear: since he confused what's primal with what's secondary, he made a terrible *mistake*.

Correcting this mistake is precisely the aim of Schopenhauer's ethical system. That his ethical philosophy will finally lead to a complete new interpretation of the relationship man-animal, and, above all, to the inclusion of animals in the ethical discourse, is therefore not a by-product, but one of its main purposes. Having accorded consciousness to animals and, at the same time, having denied to reason the central position which western philosophy traditionally granted to it, Schopen-

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in the following part of the text that genius belongs exclusively to human beings, in that it is generated by the capacity of gaining distance from the level of the consciousness while achieving extreme clarity in the representation (HN III, 248).

32 Frauenstädt, Julius: *Briefe über die Schopenhauer'sche Philosophie*. Leipzig 1854, 157: "Bei der Schopenhauer'schen Ansicht ist die *Continuität der Natur* gewahrt. Der Mensch tritt ein als höchstes Naturproduct als die höchste Stufe des leiblich erscheinenden Naturwillens, als die *höchste Tiergattung*. Schopenhauer betont daher sehr stark die zoologische Verwandtschaft des Menschen mit dem Thier [...]"

33 Similarly, Schopenhauer writes in P II, 398–399: "Man muß an allen Sinnen blind [...] sein, um nicht einzusehn, daß *das Thier* im Wesentlichen und in der Hauptsache durchaus das Selbe ist, was wir sind, und daß der Unterschied bloß im *Accidenz*, dem Intellekt liegt, nicht in der Substanz, welche der Wille ist."

34 HN III, 248.

35 HN III, 248: "[...] von dieser [*d. h. von der Vernunft*] kommt die *Besonnenheit*, vermöge welcher der Mensch so unzähliges leistet, woran beim Thier nicht zu denken ist, und wodurch sein Leben sehr verschieden von dem aller Thiere ausfällt."

hauer embarks on the project of “overturning” the basis of western philosophical-ethical thought – mainly cartesianism. The subtle attack on Descartes, begun in the *Quartal* text just considered, develops and comes to a more definite conclusion in *Preisschrift über die Grundlage der Moral*, where Descartes’ conception of the insurmountable abyss stretching between man and animal is now clearly labelled as nothing more than the result of his philosophical errors:

In der Philosophie beruht sie [*die Robheit und Barbarei des Occidents*] auf der aller Evidenz zum Trotz angenommenen gänzlichen Verschiedenheit zwischen Mensch und Thier, welche bekanntlich am entschiedensten und grellsten von *Cartesius* ausgesprochen ward, als eine nothwendige Konsequenz seiner Irrthümer.<sup>36</sup>

The evolution of Descartes’ erroneous theory, he continues, led to the anthropocentric idea that only human beings possess an immortal “*anima rationalis*”, whereas animals are denied this privilege. In a sarcastic tone, he describes the feeble philosophical foundation of this ratiocentric interpretation of the man-to-animal relation:

Nun mußten die von ihrem intellektuellen Gewissen geängstigten Philosophen suchen, die rationale Psychologie durch die empirische zu stützen, und daher bemüht sein, zwischen Mensch und Thier eine ungeheuere Kluft, einen unermesslichen Abstand zu eröffnen, um, aller Evidenz zum Trotz, sie als von Grund aus verschieden darzustellen.<sup>37</sup>

Instead of giving an empirical basis to their speculation, cartesian and post-cartesian philosophers took the opposite, counterintuitive, route, namely denying what they perceived with their senses and what they observed during their experiments (we might think of the most famous episode: Descartes himself hitting a dog and arguing that its reactions didn’t prove that it was feeling any pain, but that it rather responded to the beating in the way an automaton would). On the contrary, observing animal behaviour should show us the deep kinship between human animals and non-human animals (using Singer’s modern terminology); trusting what we *immediately* perceive is therefore from Schopenhauer’s point of view the first step toward a new, non-cartesian, animal-ethics, that will finally try and bridge

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36 E, 238. Schopenhauer affirms that if Descartes contributed to the “Barbarität des Occidents” (western barbarity) with his *philosophical* theories, the Judeo-Christian tradition contributed to the same result from a *religious* point of view. Since I’m primarily discussing how western *philosophy* dealt with the problem of animal-ethics, I can only mention here that there is a second and parallel side of Schopenhauer’s attack.

37 E, 239.

the enormous gap, the “horrible abyss” (“ungeheuere Kluft”), which divides us from the world of the animals.<sup>38</sup>

His project, which he presents as a revolutionary new start in the context of European philosophy, is thus already announced:

Die von mit aufgestellte moralische Triebfeder bewährt sich als die ächte ferner dadurch, daß sie auch *die Thiere* in ihren Schutz nimmt, für welche in den andern Europäischen Moralsystemen so unverantwortlich schlecht gesorgt ist. Die vermeinte Rechtlosigkeit der Tiere, der Wahn, daß unser Handeln gegen sie ohne moralische Bedeutung sei, oder, wie es in der Sprache jener Moral heißt, daß es gegen Thiere keine Pflichten gebe, ist geradezu eine empörende Rohheit und Barbarei des Occidents [...].<sup>39</sup>

In fact, even if western philosophy was certainly dominated by this very strong “ratiocentric” tradition, Schopenhauer points out that his effort toward an animal-inclusive ethical system does have a few precedents, the most important of them being Rousseau. Thus in terms of attitudes toward animals, western philosophy is for Schopenhauer thereby at least split into two, whereas Elizabeth Costello views western thought as a more or less uniform stream.<sup>40</sup> Schopenhauer considers therefore his ethical project as a necessary innovation (it is time to reverse the entirely European habit of leaving animals out of moral speculation), that nevertheless looks for inspiration to the work of the main moralists of the modern period.<sup>41</sup>

Schopenhauer uses the concept of *Mitleid* (compassion) in order to distinguish between those moral systems that refused to pay attention to the problem of animal-ethics (including Kant’s<sup>42</sup>) and those whose principles directly lead to a more respectful attitude towards animals and to an open-minded position about the question regarding their similarity with human beings. According to Schopenhauer, a moral system which states the importance of discussing the problem of animal-ethics must be based on the key role of compassion. The last section of this

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38 Even our daily language reminds us constantly of this gap, in that we use different verbs to express the basic actions of life (for instance: being born, giving birth, dying) in case they are performed by men or by animals. Schopenhauer underlines that it is precisely this corporeal level of life which we share with animals (see E, 239).

39 E, 238.

40 Peter Singer summarizes the main western philosophical positions on animal-ethics (stressing particularly the role of Descartes and of Bentham’s utilitarianism as a reaction) in chapter V of his *Animal Liberation*.

41 E, 246: “Dagegen aber hat meine Begründung die Auktorität des größten Moralisten der ganzen neuern Zeit für sich [...]”. Schopenhauer praises particularly the fact that Rousseau didn’t ground his moral theory on *books* but on *life* and *experience* (ibid.).

42 On the critique of Kant’s ethical system see: Hauskeller, Michael: *Vom Jammer des Lebens. Einführung in Schopenhauers Ethik*. München 1998, 30ff.

essay will look at Schopenhauer's notion of *Mitleid* from a double perspective: the two main guidelines of the previews chapters – the feeling of compassion for the mistreated animal (both in the universities' torture chambers and in the European moral tradition) and the concept of compassion intended in its etymological sense as *con-patire* (men and animals suffer *together*, that is to say that they share the capability of feeling and suffering) – now intertwine.

### 3. *Mitleid: from pity to compassion*

“Denn grenzenloses Mitleid mit allen lebenden Wesen ist der festeste und sicherste Bürge für das sittliche Wohlverhalten und bedarf keine Kasuistik”,<sup>43</sup> argues Schopenhauer in *Preisschrift über die Grundlage der Moral*. Compassion is the pivot of Schopenhauer's ethical revolution, the concept which he uses to bridge the fearsome abyss that divides mankind from animals, challenging all other European moral systems and their incompleteness.

According to Schopenhauer the essence of compassion consists in the capacity of identifying oneself in the feeling of another living creature – be it a human or non-human animal, for *Mitleid* is *grenzenlos*, it can't be limited by the criteria of the species. As he writes quoting Rousseau: “La commisération sera d'autant plus énergique, que l'*animal spectateur s'identifiera* plus intimément [sic] avec l'*animal souffrant*”;<sup>44</sup> or, differently said (but again with Rousseau's words): “[...] comment nous laissons-nous émouvoir à la pitié, si ce n'est en nous transportant hors de nous et en nous *identifiant avec l'animal souffrant; en quittant, pour ainsi dire, notre être, pour prendre le sien* ?”.<sup>45</sup> Since compassion extends beyond the limit of human relationships, that implies that in its essence the suffering of an animal is not different from that felt by humans.<sup>46</sup>

The *martyrdom*<sup>47</sup> that animals suffer in western culture (especially in university laboratories) becomes therefore the emblem of the gap that the cartesian philosophical tradition has opened up between men and animals: humans have lost the capability of feeling compassion for the tortured non-human creature, slaughtered as a victim on the altar of the science.<sup>48</sup> As a consequence, the main relationship that western society (in Schopenhauer's time but even more today)

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43 E, 236.

44 E, 247.

45 E, 247–248.

46 See Hauskeller, Michael, cit., 54–55: “Der breite Graben, der gewöhnlich zwischen Mensch und Mensch liegt (sowie der noch breitere Graben zwischen Mensch und Tier), beginnt sich zu schließen, wenn das Leiden des einen für einen anderen nicht mehr eine bloße *Vorstellung* ist, sondern es mit ihm auf einmal so ernst ist, wie mit dem eigenen Leiden”.

47 Schopenhauer repeatedly uses the verb *martern* to refer to the suffering that humans cause to animals (see for instance P II, 394).

48 See P II, 396–397: “[...] das grausame Opfer auf dem Altar der Wissenschaft [...]”.

bears to animals is that of persecutor to victim, where humans play the part of the torturer and the animals suffer as victims. The feeling of compassion is able to work a revolution in this pattern: the persecutor recognizes himself in his victim, and the enormous distance stretching between the human being (as subject of the action) and the animal (as a mere object in the experiment) can be overcome.<sup>49</sup>

Of course, the principle of identification through compassion should not be understood in the sense that human suffering doesn't differ qualitatively from the pain felt by the animals. While stating that *all* animals, human and non-human, perceive the world through a body, and therefore share the basic capability of feeling (as we already discussed, this capability represents the *essential, primal* common characteristic), Schopenhauer also emphasizes that animals "suffer less" than humans, because they live in an endless present, with no precise memory of past painful events and no fear of the future and especially of death.<sup>50</sup> In fact he writes:

Wie sehr müssen wir die *Thiere* um ihre Sorglosigkeit beneiden! Unglücklich sind die *Thiere* in 99 Fällen aus hundert nur dann, wann Menschen sie unglücklich machen.<sup>51</sup>

His belief that, if animals must be used for scientific experiments (or for food) they should be previously anaesthetized with chloroform, is based precisely on the assumption that the quality – the *depth* – of animal suffering is not equivalent to the human: animals don't know anything about the subtle worries that oppress human beings. Nevertheless, mankind is responsible for the pain of the animal – as he puts it – in "99 cases out of 100", that is to say that the human responsibility concerning the treatment of animals is enormous. This is why he insists that western culture lacks a correct approach to compassion, a situation that can be altered only by stating the (in Europe) revolutionary principle of the "common suffering", of *con-passione*.

First of all, *compassion* (*Mitleid*), interpreted as the principle of identification with another suffering being, is not the same as *pity* (*Erbarmen*), since even the

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49 Schirmacher, Wolfgang: Tägliche Ethik. Schopenhauers Mystik aus Erfahrung. In: *Ethik und Vernunft. Schopenhauer in unserer Zeit*. Hrsg. von Wolfgang Schirmacher. Wien 1995, 103–115, 110: "Das Gaukelbild, das uns vormacht, wir seien vom Leiden aller Kreaturen durch Individualität geschützt, zerbricht, und Opfer und Täter erkennen sich als dieselben: *Tat tvam asi* – Das bist du."

50 See for instance HN III, 160 (*Brieftasche 1822/1823*): "Die *Thiere* leiden unendlich weniger als wir, weil sie keine andern Schmerzen kenne als die welche die [67a] Gegenwart unmittelbar herbeiführt: die Gegenwart ist ausdehnungslos; Zukunft und Vergangenheit, in denen unsre Leiden liegen, sind unendlich und enthalten neben dem Wirklichen noch das bloß Mögliche. Die Leiden die rein der Gegenwart gehören können bloß physisch seyn: Das größte derselben ist der Tod: der kann aber vom *Thiere* nicht empfunden werden, weil es nicht mehr ist sobald er eintritt. Wie beneidenswerth ist das Loos der *Thiere*!".

51 HN III, 382 (*Foliant II 1828*).

feeling of pity falls into the subject-object scheme we have already mentioned, reinforcing the conviction that the way western culture understands its relationship to animals must be thought anew.<sup>52</sup> The feeling of pity (and even of horror) for the cruelties committed on animals must evolve into compassion intended as *mit-leiden*, suffering together with the animals, that is to say: into the philosophical conclusion that humans and animals have the same right to a life with the least possible quantity of suffering, because their bodies react in a similar way to a painful stimulation.

The European philosophical tradition – Rousseau represents a significant exception – doesn't conceive compassion in this deeper sense: even the new-born *Tierschutzvereine*, which started to spread all over Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and which Schopenhauer welcomed as a positive achievement<sup>53</sup>, are nevertheless the proof that the western world lacks a philosophical basis for the concept of compassion. The feeling of pity and mercy for the suffering of a non-human creature can well be the starting point – England, for instance, is praised by Schopenhauer for being the “fein fühlende Nation”<sup>54</sup>, the European nation which showed the highest degree of sensitivity for the problem of cruelty to animals – but can't be considered as the ultimate result, since pity leads no further than to the foundation of “societies for the protection of animals”. Instead, if compassion is rightly understood as the common basis shared by all living beings, we must conclude that even those societies are the direct product of a misunderstanding: *Tierschutzvereine* are necessary only where the animals are considered foreign, unfamiliar beings, whose lives have nothing in common with those of the humans. In other words: if animals need a society devoted to their protection, then the usual pattern – humans as subjects and animals as objects – remains all too stubbornly in place. According to Schopenhauer, only recognizing the root of suffering in all sensitive creatures (the universality of compassion as *con-patire*) will finally be unable to escape from this reductive pattern, and from pity's subtle deception.<sup>55</sup>

Schopenhauer looks to the eastern world for inspiration. Through the Buddhist tradition, which preaches the existence of a bond connecting all living creatures (as the doctrine of reincarnation clearly shows), the Asiatic world managed to avoid the process of objectification of the animals which has affected centuries of

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52 See for instance P II, 395: “Nicht Erbarmen, sondern Gerechtigkeit ist man dem Thiere schuldig [...]”.

53 On Schopenhauer's involvement with the first societies for the protection of animals in Germany see: Libell, Monica, cit., 122–123.

54 E, 242.

55 See Hauskeller, Michael, cit., 58: “Mitleid als moralisches Phänomen ist also nur möglich, wenn das Leiden des anderen, sei er Mensch oder Tier, als solches erkannt und ernstgenommen wird.”



western philosophy.<sup>56</sup> In fact, Buddhism insists particularly on the principle of identification with the animal: according to the famous statement *tat tvam asi*, “this is you”, man and animal are parts of a whole, whose internal motion leads to a constant exchange of roles between them.<sup>57</sup> Reincarnation itself can therefore be understood as the expression of a high form of compassion. This explains why no such things as *Tierschutzvereine* exist in the eastern world, while in Europe they must be considered as nothing more than a necessary absurdity. In this context, the “great word”<sup>58</sup> *tat tvam asi* represents for Schopenhauer a possible way of breaking through the “subject-object” pattern which characterizes all aspects of the western approach to animals – from vivisection to the work of the *Tierschutzvereine*.

Alongside and as a kind of completion of Rousseau’s influence and his identification-principle, Schopenhauer’s *Mitleid* shows therefore a strong affinity with the Buddhist tradition, presented as an alternative to the fixity of European philosophical categories. From the critique of compassion intended as mere pity, to the creation of a new philosophical background (where Rousseau’s ethics finds an indirect link to Buddhist philosophy), Schopenhauer outlined a new concept of *compassion*, whose internal complexity could only be sketched in this paragraph. The idea that compassion must be recognized as the common ground on which humans can become aware of the suffering of their fellow creatures (animals included), appears to Schopenhauer as the starting point for a new beginning in western philosophical speculation.

For the last time we may now consider the implications of Schopenhauer’s view on animal-ethics in relation to Elizabeth Costello’s lecture, where this essay began. The value of Schopenhauer’s speculation on compassion for today’s debate on animals’ rights lies – as I hope to have shown – in the philosophical foundation on which he builds his reflection.

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56 See also E, 242–243: “Die diese Lücke [*d. h. die in der Moral von der Religion gelassene Lücke*] eben ist Ursache, daß man in Europa und Amerika der Thier-Schutz-Vereine bedarf, welche selbst nur mittelst Hülfe der Justiz und Polizei wirken können. In Asien gewähren die Religionen den Thieren hinlänglichen Schutz, daher dort kein Mensch an dergleichen Vereine denkt. Indessen erwacht auch in Europa mehr und mehr der Sinn für die Rechte der Thiere, in dem Maaße, als die seltsamen Begriffe von einer bloß zum Nutzen und Ergötzen der Menschen ins Dasein gekommener Thierwelt, in Folge welcher man die Thiere ganz als Sachen behandelt, allmähig verblässen und verschwinden. Denn diese sind die Quelle der rohen und ganz rücksichtslosen Behandlung der Thiere in Europa [...]”.

57 See P II, 233: “[die mystische Formel] [...] *tat tvam asi* (Dies bist du), welche mit Hindeutung auf jedes Lebende, sei es Mensch oder Thier, ausgesprochen wird [...]”.

58 See for instance W I, 259–260: “[...] so würden wir am besten jene Sanskrit-Formel, die in den heiligen Büchern der Hindu so oft vorkommt und *Mahavakya*, d. h. das große Wort, genannt wird, dazu gebrauchen können: „Tat tvam asi“, das heißt: „Dieses Lebende bist du.“

### Conclusion

Just like Schopenhauer, Elizabeth Costello demands a new course in the way humans understand their relationship with animals. And again just like the German philosopher, she argues that observing animals' behaviour is a direct, efficient method to become aware that animals are able to feel and suffer: for both Costello and Schopenhauer this conviction builds the foundation for the ethical treatment of animals. But what for Costello represents the conclusion, the final step of her reflection (with the declaration of feeling's supremacy over reasoning), is for Schopenhauer only the beginning of his speculation on animal-ethics. Close observation of animals and the consequent immediate perception of their similarity with humans – a similarity which Descartes kept anyway denying – play an important role in Schopenhauer's ethical discourse on animals. Yet, far from implying that feeling constitutes therefore our sole means of understanding the world of the animals, and at the same time keeping away from the sharp opposition between feeling and reason which is the core of Costello's argument, Schopenhauer heads toward the realization of a "philosophical revolution". He argues that the barbarity of western philosophy, stemming directly from Descartes' erroneous conclusions, must be corrected by means of a new philosophical approach to the problem of the human-to-animal relation. His own ethical philosophy, inspired partly by the "great moralists" of the modern period (especially Rousseau) and partly by the Buddhist tradition, is centred on the concept of *compassion*, which he interprets to be the shared ground of mankind and animals, linking them together. Elizabeth Costello's own discourse also reveals a great feeling of *compassion* for the suffering of animals: but whereas her compassion seems often to mix and be confused with a generic feeling of *pity* and *horror* (feelings which anyway often emerge also in the pages of *Parerga und Paralipomena*), Schopenhauer's *Mitleid* is intended as the basis for a new ethical philosophy capable of including the animals within its territory. Imagining Schopenhauer responding to Costello's lecture, we may therefore conclude that the value of his speculation on animal-ethics lies in the attempt to challenge western philosophy on its own ground, by declaring that reason can't be the criterion on which to base the distinction between animals and men, but also by stating the continuity of nature, where feeling and reason aren't considered as opposites. Costello's own proposal in favour of an ethical treatment of animals remains trapped in the same dualistic logic she attacks (the logic of the beast against man, feeling against reason). Schopenhauer's ethical foundation reveals instead a sincere effort to undermine this way of thinking (starting with the critique against Descartes), even if this implies that he often suggests only possible solutions instead of absolute certainties, aiming at the correct definition of problems for which the European society of the mid nineteenth century could not yet offer a precise answer.

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