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The Difficulty of Reality, Divided Selves, and Sick Souls: Animal Ethics *after* William James's Philosophy of Religion

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Abstract

After Cora Diamond dismisses the utility of William James's philosophy of religion for animal ethics, this presentation seeks to recover James's philosophy of religion for animal ethics—even on the terms of Diamond's own animal ethics. James provides a philosophical framework for understanding what it means to be "haunted" (a divided self) vs. "wounded" (a sick soul). James offers a religious framework for animal ethics that, unlike most religious frameworks, does not "deflect" us away from suffering but helps us "acknowledge" the wounds of others. James's description of the "divided self" aids in the development of being "haunted" by animal suffering. To be aware of animal suffering but continuing to consume meat requires a kind of "divided self": a self that acknowledges the suffering of animals, and a self that continues to consume meat but remains haunted by the death and flesh of the animals consumed.

Introduction

According to Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at the University of Virginia, Cora Diamond, the current role that philosophy plays within the world concerns more of a "deflection" of reality than an "acknowledgement" of it. When it comes to animal ethics, in particular, she finds both Tom Regan's deontological reasoning and Peter Singer's utilitarianism insufficient because both "deflect" students and thinkers away from "the hardness of appreciating or trying to appreciate a difficulty of reality."[1] She says, further, that this deflection "makes our own bodies [and presence] mere facts—facts which may or may not be thought of as morally relevant in this or that respect, depending on the particular moral issue being addressed."[2] A portion of Diamond's proof for this claim about deflecting away from our own bodies is found in the four responses published in *The Lives of Animals* where all four authors treat the words of Elizabeth Costello as *arguments* and not as signals of her own wounds or wounded-ness.[3]

Cora Diamond offers a radical re-reading of the South African novelist J. M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*. Diamond focuses on the wounds of Elizabeth Costello's body and soul, and she refuses to read Costello's words as a philosophical argument abstracted from those wounds. According to Diamond, Costello does not want to persuade her audience through argumentation but seeks to express "a mode of

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[1] Cora Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," in *Philosophy and Animal Life*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008), 58

[2] Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," 59.

[3] See the four responses to J. M. Coetzee in *The Lives of Animals*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 73-120.

understanding of the kind of animal we are."[4] Indeed, Costello wants us to recognize "the moral life of this kind of animal" that we are. Costello's words signal her wounds, and the presence of her wounds is intended to make us aware of our own animal nature. Elizabeth Costello does not seek to settle the "difficulty of reality" but, rather, to show what kind of animals human beings are: we become wounded through wounding other animals, and we justify their wounded-ness by denying that we are animals.

Diamond defines the phrase, "difficulty of reality," as "experiences in which we take something in reality to be resistant to our thinking it, or possibly to be painful in its inexplicability, difficult in that way, or perhaps awesome and astonishing in its inexplicability."[5] After defining this phrase, she works through the question of the role of philosophy and concludes that the "difficulty of philosophy" is that philosophers tend toward a "deflection" away from animal suffering—rather than an "acknowledgement" of it.

This is where William James walks into Diamond's reflections on animal ethics. Diamond admits that James's philosophy of religion—by which she means the *Varieties of Religious Experience*—provides a possible place for beginning to think about how the "difficulty of reality" applies to animal ethics: "We can learn from [James's category of the] 'sick soul' how to see reality…."[6] She continues,

> The 'sick soul' in [*Elizabeth Costello*] lets us see one of the difficulties of reality, the difficulty of human life in its relation to that of animals, of the horror of what we do, and the horror of blotting it out of consciousness.[7]

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[4] Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," 56.

[5] Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," 45-46.

[6] Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," 55.

[7] Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," 55.

Diamond suggests that James's notion of the "sick-soul" applies to Costello's remark that she is a vegetarian in order to "save her own soul." Ultimately, however, Diamond makes the judgment that William James's category of the "sick soul" remains insufficient for helping us confront the "difficulty of reality" because it sustains our thinking on our own sickness and suffering.[8] At the very least, readers need more clarity from Diamond concerning how she can emphasize Elizabeth Costello's wounds but then assert that the problem of William James's category of the "sick soul" is that it sustains our thinking on our own sickness and suffering.

My primary disagreement with Diamond is that she dismisses James's philosophy of religion too quickly. I argue that James's explanation of the "sick soul"—in addition to his categories of the "divided self" and the "healthy-minded"—serves as an early formulation for what Diamond, herself, means by the "difficulty of reality." Furthermore, James gives us a philosophical framework for understanding what it means to be "haunted" (a divided self) vs. "wounded" (a sick soul) by animal suffering. James offers a religious framework for animal ethics—and for understanding what Elizabeth Costello means by being a vegetarian in order to "save her own soul"—that, unlike most religious frameworks, does not "deflect" us away from suffering but helps us recognize the wounds of others and how we might be wounded as well.[9] James's description of the "divided self" helps me develop what I mean by, not wounded-ness, but being haunted by

[8] About the word "difficulty," James writes: "If we admit that evil is an essential part of our being and the key to the interpretation of our life, we load ourselves down with a difficulty that has always proven burdensome" (James, *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, with an "Introduction" by Reinhold Niebuhr, [New York: Simon & Shuster, 1997], 117; hereafter cited as VRE).

[9] For the argument that religious frameworks also tend toward "deflection," see Stanley Hauerwas's "Bearing Reality," in *Approaching the End: Eschatological Reflections on Church, Life, and Politics*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmanns Publishing House, 2013), 139-156.

animal suffering. To be aware of animal suffering but to continue to consume animals as "meat" requires a kind of "divided self": a self that acknowledges the suffering of animals, and a self that continues to consume meat but remains haunted by the death and flesh of the animals consumed. In this way, James's reflections on ghosts can be applied to animal ethics: meat-eaters welcome the ghosts of animals during their dining experiences, in the kitchen, and on their plates.

Healthy-Mindedness Applied to Animal Ethics

"Healthy-mindedness," "Sick Soul," and "Divided Self" come to us as three consecutive chapters within James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*. In my judgment, these chapters are James's best in terms of fulfilling the promissory note of the sub-title of the *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*.

In relation to J. M. Coetzee's character, Elizabeth Costello, James's category of "healthy-mindedness" seems to be the one that applies to the audience at Costello's lectures on vegetarianism. This category applies, more broadly, to those people for whom eating the flesh of animals causes no moral quandary. Although James seeks to limit his judgments about or against those who are "healthy-minded,"[10] ultimately he cannot help but make negative moral judgments against them.

Building on and re-wording an argument he made four years earlier in "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," James claims in his chapter on healthy-mindedness:

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[10] "I am not yet pretending finally to judge any of these attitudes, I am only describing their variety" (James, VRE, 126).

> We divert our attention from disease and death as much as we can; and the slaughter-houses and indecencies without end on which our life is founded are huddled out of sight and never mentioned, so that the world we recognize officially…is a poetic fiction far handsomer and cleaner and better than the world that really is.[11]

For my purposes, it obviously becomes really interesting that James uses the phrase "slaughter-houses" in this passage—as if he envisions the possibility of applying his argument from "On a Certain Blindness in Humans Beings" to questions to what we now call animal ethics. Significantly, James also mentions "slaughter-pens" in his essay "Is Life Worth Living?"[12] I wish to move away from James's intentions and, instead, interpret James on Cora Diamond's terms. The "healthy-minded" deflect—to use Diamond's verb but not in the way she usually means it—"attention" away from death, disease, indecencies, slaughter-houses, and ultimately reality. The "healthy-minded" live in a world based upon their own "poetic fiction[s]." By starting with James's category of the "healthy-minded" in relation to animal ethics, I mean to categorize those for whom eating meat leads to thinking about neither the lives of animals nor the reality of animal suffering.

Sick Souls Applied to Animal Ethics

Elizabeth Costello tells the college president, with whom she is conversing and dining, that she is a vegetarian in order to "save her own soul." This comes as part of her response to the college president expressing his admiration for Costello's convictions

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[11] James, VRE, 87.

[12] "When you and I, for instance, realize how many innocent beasts have had to suffer in cattle-cars and slaughter-pens and lay down their lives that we might grow up, all fattened and clad, to sit together here in comfort and carry on this discourse, it does, indeed, put our relation to the universe in a more solemn light" (James, "Is Life Worth Living?"). For a helpful analysis of this passage, see Erin McKenna's "What Makes the Lives of Livestock Significant?" in *Pragmatism Applied: William James and the Challenges of Contemporary Life*, ed. Clifford S. Stagoll & Michael P. Levine, (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2019), 63.

about animals. Her first response to his admiration, however, comes as a shock; she says to him that he should not admire her because she "wear[s] leather shoes." Then, she says that she remains a vegetarian in order to "save her own soul." My claim, against Cora Diamond's own conclusion, concerns how this cognitive dissonance—"I wear leather shoes" and "I carry a leather purse" vs. I am vegetarian in order to "save her own soul"—falls right into James's description of the "sick soul."

James uses both religious and non-religious language to think through "sick souls." James categorizes sick souls in the following three ways: "the vanity of mortal things…; the sense of sin; and…the fear of the universe." In addition to being the ways in which sickness manifests itself, James adds, in "these three ways it always is that man's original optimism and self-satisfaction get leveled with the dust."[13] I interpret Elizabeth Costello as a "sick soul" with "the sense of sin"—not necessarily with "the vanity of mortal things" and "the fear of the universe." Costello expresses her "sense of sin," most dramatically, by using the analogy of concentration camps in Nazi Germany to depict the moral problems of factory farming.

For James, the sickness of one's soul concerns melancholy. Contrasting "sick souls" from the "healthy-minded," he writes:

> The method of averting one's attention from evil, and living simply in the light of good is splendid as long as it will work. It will work with many persons; it will work far more generally than most of us are ready to suppose; and within the sphere of its successful operation there is nothing to be said against it as a religious solution. But it breaks down impotently as soon as melancholy comes; and even though one can be quite free from melancholy one's self, there is no doubt that healthy-mindedness is inadequate as a philosophical doctrine, because the evil facts which it refuses positively to account for are a genuine portion of reality; and they may after all be the best key to life's significance, and possibly the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth.[14]

[13] James, VRE, 139.

[14] James VRE, 140.

Melancholy leads those who are "sick souls" to "the deepest levels of truth" about the world.[15] For Elizabeth Costello, "the deepest levels of truth" that she sees involves the reality of animal suffering and the treatment of animals within factory farms. The analogy between factory farming and the treatment of Jews in Nazi concentration camps becomes the way that she expresses how her eyes have been opened.

On Diamond's interpretation of *Elizabeth Costello*, the analogy and the argument do not matter as much as other philosophers think it does (those who "deflect"). Rather, what matters are Costello's own wounds. In James's words, what matters is the melancholy. I believe James would agree with Diamond's assessment that the melancholy of the sick-souled person matters more than the argument about what makes them "sick." However, I also think Diamond overplays her hand because Elizabeth Costello wants us to take notice of the reality of animal suffering and the treatment of animals within factory farms much more than she wants us to take notice of her own wounds. Her wounds come up only at dinner when the college president claims to admire her conviction about being vegetarian. While we can say that wounds matter more than arguments, we also should not neglect how the argument serves as a way to overcome a "certain blindness" that we might have.

For sick souls, returning to James, finding peace becomes difficult if not impossible. He writes with eloquence (as usual):

> [T]he world is a double-storied mystery. Peace cannot be reached by the simple addition of pluses and elimination of minuses from transient, there lurks a falsity in its very being. Cancelled as it all is by death if not by…enemies, it gives no final balance, and can never

[15] It should be noted that "melancholy" functions totally different in Sigmund Freud's philosophical psychology than it does in James's philosophical psychology. For Freud's use of "melancholy"—and how and why it necessarily leads to narcissism—see Goodson's "Friendship after Freud: Reflections on the Death of a Friend and the End of a Friendship," in *Journal of Essays on Humanism*, (forthcoming in 2020).

> be the thing intended for our lasting worship. It keeps us from [the] good…; renunciation and despair…are our first step in the direction of the truth.[16]

On my interpretation, this passage represents James coming close to the phrase "difficulty of reality." Finding peace becomes difficult for those with "sick souls"; there is no easy formula to clean up what makes reality or the world so difficult; death, either naturally or at the hand of one's enemies, might be the only escape from the difficulty of reality (as Michel Foucault argues); finally, the difficulty of reality prevents us from achieving goodness or even becoming good. Again, when the college president affirms Elizabeth Costello's "goodness," her response is that he should neither admire nor affirm her goodness because she "wears leather shoes." Even our moral heroes, whether fictional or non-fictional, refuse our affirmation of goodness about them because they maintain a strong awareness of their melancholy, (moral) sickness, and wounded-ness.[17]

Divided Selves Applied to Animal Ethics

In relation to animal ethics: if the sick soul remains *wounded* by animal suffering, then the divided self becomes *haunted* by animal suffering. James, himself, connects what it means to be a "divided self" with the notion of being "haunted." A divided self, James writes,

> is simply a man of sensibility in many directions, who finds more difficulty than is common…, because his feelings and impulses are too keen and too discrepant mutually. In the haunting and insistent ideas, in the irrational impulses, the morbid scruples dreads,

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[16] James, VRE, 143.

[17] In her essay, "Healing the Climate? Christian Ethics and Medical Models for Climate Engineering," Laura M. Hartman suggests how a "sick soul" (she does not use this exact phrase) might be problematic in relation to climate change (so beyond animal ethics): "On the negative side, the medical model…generates defeatist perspectives. If the earth is a sick organism, perhaps the illness is humanity. Seeing humans as a disease or a parasite is not an inaccurate comparison…, but one that may have deleterious effects if it leads to despair and misanthropy" (Hartman, "Healing the Climate? Christian Ethics and Medical Models for Climate Engineering," in *Theological and Ethical Perspectives on Climate Engineering*, ed. Forrest Clingerman & Kevin J. O'Brien, [Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016], 138).

> and inhibitions which beset the psychopathic temperament when it is thoroughly announced.[18]

Finding "more difficulty than is common," having "haunting…ideas," and developing a "psychopathic temperament" are the characteristics of a divided self. How do these "haunting ideas" apply to animal ethics?

In her essay on James's views of animals, Erin McKenna claims that in 1895 James "pointed to the failure of humans to consider the experience of cattle."[19] She infers from this that James seems aware that people "dining on beef rarely think about the experiences of the cattle who have ended up on their plate."[20] On the categories James develops seven years later, people who dine on beef without considering "the experiences of the cattle who have ended up on their plate" would qualify as those who are "healthy-minded"; those who "think about the experiences of the cattle" and refuse to let beef onto their plates are "sick-souls"; and those who "think about the experiences of the cattle" and still allow beef to end "up on their plate" qualify as "divided selves" because they consume that which haunts them. *Divided selves are haunted by the animals they consume*, and they accept this haunting because they have developed a "psychopathic temperament" in relation to the lives of animals. The idea of animal suffering haunts them, and the animal flesh that ends "up on their plate" haunts them. Like James sought

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[18] James, VRE, 145-146.

[19] McKenna, "What Makes the Lives of Livestock Significant?" 63.

[20] McKenna, "What Makes the Lives of Livestock Significant?" 63.

to prove the existence of human ghosts and spirits,[21] the "divided self" consumes both the flesh and spirit of animals.

In the *Varieties of Religious Experience*, James says that a divided self is someone for whom

> [t]he higher and the lower feelings, the useful and the erring impulses, begin by being a comparative chaos within us—they must end by forming a stable system of functions in right subordination. Unhappiness is apt to characterize the period of order-making and struggle. If the individual be of tender conscience and religiously quickened, the unhappiness will take the form of moral remorse and compunction, of feeling inwardly vile and wrong, and of standing in false relations to [God].[22]

If we shift from the philosophy of religion to animal ethics, my claim is that what James calls these "false relations" apply to the relationship between human and non-human animals instead of humans and God. Human animals who eat non-human animals have a "false relations[hip]" with those non-human animals because they consume them while "feeling inwardly vile and wrong" about consuming them. If the sick soul seeks salvation through vegetarianism in order to overcome their own cognitive dissonance, the divided self accepts and embraces the cognitive dissonance that comes with having moral convictions about animal suffering but continuing practices that cause and contribute to animal suffering.

Conclusion

Cora Diamond makes the rash judgment that William James's philosophy of religion remains insufficient for helping us confront the "difficulty of reality" because his

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[21] See Deborah Blum, *Ghost Hunters: William James and the Scientific Search for Life After Death*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2007).

[22] James, VRE, 146.

category of the "sick soul" sustains our thinking on our own sickness and suffering.[23] At the very least, readers need from Diamond more clarity concerning how she can emphasize Elizabeth Costello's wounds but then assert that the problem of William James's category of the "sick soul" is that it sustains our thinking on our own sickness and suffering. In this presentation, I have demonstrated that James's religious categories provide ways to categorize different types of meat-eaters as well as vegetarians with honesty and truthfulness. These categories do not deflect us way from the lives of animals and their suffering but, rather, help us achieve clarity and depth about what is at stake—both morally and psychologically—in the differences between meat-eaters and vegetarians.

When Elizabeth Costello claims that she is vegetarian in order to "save her own soul," this leads us to thinking about vegetarianism as a kind of ethical-religious problem. While Diamond entertains James's category of the "sick soul" for making sense of Costello's claim, she fails to recognize the ways in which James's category helps to better identify what Costello means by "sav[ing] her own soul." The fact that she carries a leather purse and wears leather shoes reminds her of her own (moral) "sickness," and her vegetarianism leads her to thinking that she might be able to save her own soul from this sickness.

Although it may seem pedantic to ask Diamond to linger longer in and with James's arguments, I find such lingering to prove both clarifying and edifying.[24] In

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[23] About the word "difficulty," James writes: "If we admit that evil is an essential part of our being and the key to the interpretation of our life, we load ourselves down with a difficulty that has always proven burdensome" (James, *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, with an "Introduction" by Reinhold Niebuhr, [New York: Simon & Shuster, 1997], 117; hereafter cited as VRE).

[24] On the difference between clarifying and pedantic, see Eugenia Cheng's *The Art of Logic in an Illogical World*, (New York: Basic Books, 2018), 19.

addition to how vegetarians might be vegetarian because of being “sick souls,” James offers two other categories needed within animal ethics: “healthy-mindedness” as applied to those who eat animals with neither concern nor conviction, and “divided selves” as applied to those who eat animals with both concern and conviction. If Diamond allowed herself to linger longer with James’s category of the “sick soul” as applied to Elizabeth Costello, then she might have found additional categories for making sense of the “difficulty of reality” when it comes to those who eat animal flesh with neither concern nor conviction and those who eat animal flesh while acknowledging that eating animals remains bad for the treatment of animals and bad for the overall environment. James’s philosophy of religion does not deflect us away from these problems but, rather, gives us the categories and a helpful language for a better understanding and making sense of the “difficulty of reality” in relation to animal ethics.

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