



The Humanity of Animals and the Animality of Humans: A View from Biological Anthropology Inspired by J. M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*

ABSTRACT In his novel *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), J. M. Coetzee's title character espouses philosophical perspectives on cruelty and the human condition in a series of fictionalized lectures. In particular, she takes on the question of human cruelty to animals. As novelist, Coetzee relies on lyrical statements about the nature of cruelty, analogies between the atrocities of fascism and factory farms, and ethical elitism to address these issues. In this article, I use anthropological data to investigate such constructed notions of "human cruelty" and "human nature." I end with a discussion of cross-cultural variation in animal use by humans and of the current animal rights movement. The goal of this article is to engage, anthropologically, perspectives on cruelty in human natures and our relations with other animals. [Keywords: biocultural, cruelty, human–animal relations, physiology]

The comparison I have just drawn between myself and Kafka's ape might be taken as such a lighthearted remark meant to set you at ease, meant to say I am just an ordinary person, neither a god nor a beast.

—Elizabeth Costello (Coetzee 2003)

SO BEGINS A fictionalized lecture on the very real topic of human cruelty and animal suffering. The sentence places the title character of J. M. Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) in the philosophically liminal zone of the human being, neither fully tied to the earth as an animal or beast nor liberated and ephemeral as a deity. This placement reflects a central question about being human: Where do we fit in the panoply of life? Novelists, philosophers, theologians, biologists, and social scientists have variously focused on this Aristotelian trinity (the animal, the human, and the deific) and attempted to understand the relations among them. Because these relations have often been conceived hierarchically in Western thought—with God(s) having power over humans who, in turn, hold sway over animals—questions of appropriate use of such power inevitably arise: Does the hierarchical power relation between humans and animals, for example, exempt us from moral responsibility toward them? Is cruelty to other organisms an essential aspect of human nature?

At the heart of Coetzee's novel is a pair of chapters originally delivered by Coetzee as his Princeton Tanner lec-

tures in 1997–98 and later reprinted in *The Lives of Animals* (1999). In the lectures–chapters, Coetzee takes the podium as the fictionalized novelist Costello to discuss the ethics and philosophies surrounding the rights of other animals and the nature of human behavior toward them. In addition to the reprint of those two chapters, a series of responses to them by a philosopher, a historian, a literature professor, and a primatologist were compiled in *The Lives of Animals* (Gutmann 1999). However, missing from the commentary on Coetzee's text (Gutmann 1999) is a discussion of what it means to be animal or human in a biological sense.

In *The Lives of Animals*, even the primatologist Barbara Smuts (1999) uses a personal experiential discourse to claim a shared personhood rather than focusing on the physiological and biostructural homologies between herself and the baboons she studies. She argues for a shared humanity of animals (or at least a *personhood*), based on shared empathy. This perspective is reminiscent of Donna Haraway's *Companion Species Manifesto* (2003). Although Haraway does introduce a biocultural context by considering the integration of biological and cultural facets of the relationships, her article is a description of two species (dogs and humans) sharing a conjoined history rather than an exploration of their shared biology. Arguing for chimpanzee rights, the primatologist Roger Fouts does emphasize the chimpanzee's evolutionary relationship with humans (Fouts and Mills 1997). However, he also relies on personal experiential discourse

rather than detailed discussions of biological homologies to make his case. In each case, these authors acknowledge that there is a shared biology between humans and other organisms but rely almost exclusively on empathy and personal sensations of “closeness” or a single aspect of evolutionary unity to argue for a personhood for nonhumans. Is this the best mode of inquiry to understand the relationships between humans and other animals? Coetzee himself raises the issue of what discourse best sheds light on such questions (philosophy vs. poetry, in his case). Here, I hope to demonstrate that a discourse that integrates aspects of mammalian biology with human evolutionary histories and cultural perceptions is core to understanding these relationships.

Marjorie Garber, also in *The Lives of Animals*, asks, “Is the comparison of human beings to animals venal? Patronizing? A mode of false consciousness? A blasphemy?” (1999:81). Is Costello succumbing to “the seduction of analogy” in comparing the slaughter of cattle to the holocaust? (1999). I ask, by contrast, can we equate humans with animals (or animals with humans) in more than a metaphoric sense? There are, of course, actual similarities between humans and other animals that are grounded in biological homology, and not just literary analogy or emotional attachment that can illuminate these issues.¹ What do they imply about our actual and ethical relations with other animals? Can we, as Smuts suggests, open ourselves to seeing other animals as “animal persons” (1999)? What can a scientific approach to this question—as opposed to a humanistic one—add to our perception of “animal personhood” and our understanding of how humans treat animals? What are the human–animal homologies that might help us open up a scientific discussion about animal “personhood”? And finally, is cruelty toward other life forms a basal part of humanity?

BEING BATS AND THE PERSONHOOD OF ANIMALS

The character Costello sees humane treatment of—indeed, respect for—animals arising from a sympathetic imagination: thinking ourselves “into the being of another” (Coetzee 2003:80). Costello challenges the philosopher Thomas Nagel’s contention that although we imagine what it would be like to be a bat, we can never truly “be” a bat, just as a bat can never know what it is to be human. We lack the “mind” of the bat as it lacks ours. Costello retorts that we both have souls, have “being,” and that we can “think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to our sympathetic imagination” (Coetzee 2003:80). Perhaps both are true. As mammals we can “be” the bat at the level of shared homologous structures and, thus, to an extent, shared physical experiences. Bats and humans do share substantial parts of their physical selves. We can also “think ourselves into the bat” per Costello because there are few—if any—bounds to human imagination (see Gibson 2005 for a review of neural plasticity). But imagining what it would feel like to be a bat is not the same as the actual experi-

ence of sharing the feeling with another creature, which is what Costello values. From an anthropological view, it is an indicator of human uniqueness that the bat cannot reciprocate. “Being” human implies using human language, symbolic and metaphorical discourse, and a complex and “ratcheted” culture, none of which have true homologues in other organisms (Doniger 1999; Tomasello 1999).² To “be” the bat, we use our own experiences, perceptions, and cultural contexts: We can only “be” a bat anthropomorphically and psychologically. Thus, paradoxically, the very sympathetic imagination that allows us to engage in “bat-beingness” is what prevents us from ever truly knowing what it is to be a bat, because we have this trait but they lack it. Our sympathetic imagination does, however, allow us to extend the notion of “personhood” beyond our species and to use this expanded conception to extend rights to animals or to call for their humane treatment. This thinking seems to be the basis of Smuts’s call to understand animals as persons.

In arguing for the use of the term *person* to refer to other animals, Smuts defines it as “any animal, human or nonhuman, that has the capacity to participate in personal relationships, with one another, with humans, or both” (Smuts 1999:108). But this definition seems to beg the following question: What is a personal relationship?

I suggest a notion of “shared personhood” can be derived from some aspects of human–animal biology and evolutionary history. For example, humans and other animals do share the capability to exhibit complex social interactions and patterns of social tradition (Galef 1992; McGrew 1998; Tomasello 1999). Evidence suggests that primates and other mammals (and some birds) are capable of complex cognitive mapping of their physical and social environment (Pepperberg 1987; Tomasello 1999). They are able to know “what” is “where” in their environments and who (by individual) is in their social groups or social range and who is not. They are able to recognize familiar individuals in their own species (and sometimes in other species) and they exhibit variable social relationships with those individuals. Many gregarious social mammals are able to engage in vertical (dominance–power) and horizontal (affiliation) relationships amongst group members.³ Some can even predict the behavior of conspecifics (and sometimes individuals from other species) via observable and detectable cues and the accumulation of life experiences.

The appearance of social traditions (behaviors that are passed via social facilitation rather than acquired by direct genetic or physiological development) is well documented in nonhuman primates and is referred to by some as *culture* (McGrew 1998; Whiten et al. 1999). These patterns of behavior are said to occur in some other animals as well (Galef 1992). Such patterns of social tradition are examples of both homology and analogy. A case-by-case comparison is needed to understand their relationships with human behavior, but interindividual relationships involved in the transmission of social traditions indicate a commonality with human culture.⁴

The physiology of certain behavioral responses in mammals supports this argument for homologous personhood:

The anatomy of fear includes the dilation of pupils, dilation of bronchioles in the lungs, a spike in blood pressure and heart rate, breakdown of glycogen in the liver, flooding of the bloodstream with adrenalin, contraction of the spleen, preparation to void the bladder and colon, constriction of the capillaries in the stomach and gastrointestinal tract, and the pilo-erection of hair. [Hart and Sussman 2005:78]

This stress response that we call “fear” is a common pattern in all mammals: A stressor inhibits the parasympathetic nervous system through primitive brain structures including the amygdala (Hart and Sussman 2005; Sapolsky 2004, 2005).⁵ This inhibition extends to the digestive, growth, and reproductive hormones; meanwhile, the sympathetic nervous system is stimulated initiating the release of a cascade of glucocorticoids and catecholamine hormones (summarized in Sapolsky 1995, 2004, 2005). The same basic physiological reaction occurs in a zebra when being attacked by a lion, a baboon when surprised by a leopard, and a human when involved in a car accident. Chronic stressors elicit some of the same physiological responses. Although adaptive in an acute stress situation, these responses can be quite deleterious if maintained over long periods of time (Sapolsky 1995, 2004, 2005). Studies of both physical and psychosocial stress show that humans are extremely prone to chronic stressors (see Sapolsky 2004, 2005 for review); furthermore, a variety of health problems, such as cardiovascular disease, can arise as a direct result. Primates and rodents show the same pattern of response and the concomitant increase in cardiac disease and related ailments (Sapolsky 2004, 2005).⁶ However, individuals—both humans and other animals—vary in the extent to which they are affected by chronic stress under similar situations. This variation appears tied to elements of an individual animal’s temperament and personality style (Sapolsky 2005).

Reproductive systems and behavior long thought to be distinct in humans also reflect a variety of homologous components. Social sex detached from reproductive possibility, physiological patterns in physical attraction, and hormonally facilitated behavioral bonding are all aspects of sexual behavior found across various groups of mammals including humans (Carter 2003; Dixson 1998; Zuk 2002). Specific patterns of physiological and behavioral interactions between caretakers (mothers or otherwise) and infants resulting in complex webs of interpersonal social and physical relationships are documented across primates and some other mammals (McKenna et al. 1993). Combined, the various biological systems I have just described facilitate a pattern of interactions that I argue can be described as participation in personal relationships between “persons”—whether animal or human. In other words, I suggest a broad definition of *personhood*, in which the commonality between humans and some other animals arises from similar physiologies and shared sensory modalities.

Personhood, then, is recognition of a shared interpretation of and response to interactions with environmental and social stimuli caused by common physiological and related biological systems.

IS CRUELTY TOWARD OTHER LIFE FORMS AND EACH OTHER A BASAL PART OF HUMANITY?

When organisms that are able to share an interpersonal relationship inflict harm on each other, it can be understood as “cruelty.” Cruelty must be viewed as distinct from general responses to motion or hunger such as in a generalized predator–prey relationship between a frog and a fly or a lion and a zebra. The character Elizabeth Costello believes that much of the food eaten every day in the United States is the product of cruelty; indeed, writers from Upton Sinclair, who wrote *The Jungle* in 1906 (1981), to Eric Schlosser (2001) have discussed the cruelty to both humans and nonhuman animals in the meatpacking and processing plants across the United States. Is this pattern of cruelty part and parcel of our humanity? Discussing Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* with its elegant, rational, horselike vegetarian Houyhnhnms and humanlike, beastly, carnivorous Yahoos, Costello says Swift’s fable suggests that “embracing the status of man has entailed slaughtering and enslaving a race of divine or else divinely created beings and bringing down on ourselves a curse thereby” (Coetzee 2003:103). Such descriptions pervade Western thinking about human–animal interactions. Whether in the thinking of Saint Augustine or Thomas Aquinas, Niccolò Machiavelli or Thomas Hobbes, Charles Darwin or E. O. Wilson, prominent cruelty and competition are frequently seen at the core of being human (Cartmill 1993; Darwin 1871; MacKinnon and Fuentes 2005; Sussman 1999; Wilson 1975). In more recent times, these traits have been assumed even to drive human evolutionary success (Fuentes 2004; Sussman 1999). Writers consistently describe a basal state of “animality” that we as humans can either rise above in our good works or sink into in our cruelty. But is this the case? Is cruelty toward other life forms and each other a basal part of humanity? Several supplementary questions arise from this basic one: Does biological distance from another organism make it easier for humans to treat it cruelly? Is it cruelty if we do not identify with the harmed creature’s sensations? Is it crueler to harm those with whom we do identify?⁷

It is clear that other organisms with physiologies similar to ours can experience what we would recognize as fear and pain. The fact that we share the sensation of fear and a potentially personal relationship with many other animals—especially animals that we regularly use in ways that do cause them harm and distress—has pronounced implications for assessing human cruelty. If we know these organisms suffer at our hands, why do we continue to perform these behaviors?

If cruelty is willfully or knowingly causing pain or distress to others, it is by definition interactive (involving

the interactions of at least one human and one or more humans or other animals) and contextual (happening in some behavioral situational context). Although the potential to act cruelly is a human universal, the actual exhibition of cruelty to ourselves or other animals varies in its form or function and has been explained in significantly different ways: (1) as a manifestation of human bestiality, (2) as the result of adaptation in the human evolutionary past, or (3) as understandable only through cultural contextualization. I propose that cruelty is best understood by exploring the variable natures of being human.

IS CRUELTY AN ASPECT OF HUMAN NATURES?

Although there are general patterns in human behavior and universal elements of human biology, there are also variable human behavioral patterns or natures. Variations on a theme may be the best way of presenting the core of being human, because behavioral variation and multilevel social complexity is our species's hallmark (Erich 2002; MacKinnon and Silverman 2005; Potts 2004).

If we do not have a single general "nature" as humans but, nevertheless, cruelty occurs across the human species, is it then a part of our natures? Did engaging in cruelty toward humans and other animals provide some specific evolutionary benefit such that as a behavior it would, over time, become a significant component of our adaptive toolkit? For example, a major aspect of human cruelty is the exhibition of aggression toward other humans or animals. Are patterns of human aggression derived from an innate cruelty? Richard Wrangham and Dale Peterson (1996) propose that humans (and our close primate relatives, the apes) are characterized by an inherent "demonism" such that the consistent use of aggression can be an evolutionary beneficial strategy. Over time, this would have resulted in the frequent use of aggression in cruel acts toward competing human males and females and toward other animals in the context of hunting, resulting in a universality of cruelty in human beings (Wrangham and Peterson 1996; see also Washburn and Lancaster 1968).⁸ This fits well with long-held theoretical propositions of such philosophers as Hobbes and Herbert Spencer, as well as the hunting-aggression philosophies of the physical anthropologists Raymond Dart and Sherwood Washburn. Their combined premise is that competition amongst individual humans and aggression associated with successful hunting drives the evolution of our behavioral patterns such that cruelty emerges as a salient factor in being human (Cartmill 1993; Sussman 1999).

The ability to exhibit aggression successfully is part of our evolutionary heritage. Functions such as protection of one's own life and those of offspring and group members, access to or protection of territory, access to mates and food, and the establishment of dominance relationships are important venues for aggression in the social living pattern that characterizes primates. However, defining a universal aggression in the primates can be elusive, because diverse types of aggression can achieve similar ends.

Aggression is neither simply defined nor easily quantified (MacKinnon and Fuentes 2005). In addition, recent survey research indicates that primates engage in relatively little aggressive behavior overall. This suggests that the majority of primates' energetic output is in social interactions that are not competitively aggressive in content or context (Sussman and Garber 2004). If this is the case, then hypotheses that rely on a primatewide, apewide, or even a human-and-ape proclivity for aggression (and its concomitant cruelty) are both overly simplistic and without a strong grounding in available data (Fuentes 2004; MacKinnon and Fuentes 2005; Sussman and Garber 2004). So when humans exhibit extreme aggression, especially in the context of cruelty to ourselves and other species, it is unlikely that this behavior is the result of a primate or apewide adaptive pattern.

Among the most salient advances in evolutionary biology and ecology is the role of niche construction. It is becoming increasingly evident that organisms not only have an impact on their immediate environments but also, in part, shape the selection pressures that they face (Laland et al. 2001; Odling-Smee et al. 2003). Humans exhibit more dramatic patterns of niche construction than other organisms in the extent of their overall environmental impact and broad scope of the subsequent changing selective pressures (Odling-Smee et al. 2003). There is widespread evidence that the human niche is characterized by social coordination and cooperation and that this frequently involves the manipulation of structural and biotic aspects of the environment (Fuentes 2004; Knauff 1994; Odling-Smee et al. 2003; Richerson and Boyd 1998; Watanabe and Smuts 2004; Wilson and Sober 1994). Human cooperative social interactions have affected the environments humans inhabited, altering the very structure and pressures within those environments and, in turn, shaping the selection pressures on humans and the other animals sharing the environment. It is likely that what allowed us to successfully construct our niche and evolve with it were the following: (1) the type and complexity of cooperation, on a level beyond that found in other primates and the other hominins, and (2) rapid behavioral plasticity and innovation, both of which were facilitated by cooperation and social coordination (see also Odling-Smee et al. 2003; Richerson and Boyd 1998; Sussman and Chapman 2004; Watanabe and Smuts 2004).

So, although humans have a long-term vested interest in cooperative and affiliative interactions in addition to the ubiquitous aspects of competition that characterize living organisms, we are still left with the problem that modern humans frequently engage in behaviors that willfully or knowingly cause pain or distress to others, possibly even as a component of our adaptive strategies of niche construction. In fact, the scale of suffering that we cause to other organisms (and to ourselves) is unparalleled in other animals. Whether killing and processing of millions of chickens or cows in factory farms, or the wide-scale slaughter of fellow humans in wars and civil conflicts throughout the globe,

we as a species engage daily in acts of cruelty at a level not possible in previous times.

HOW SHOULD WE UNDERSTAND HUMAN CRUELTY TO OTHER ANIMALS?

Just as we humans have no single nature, we also have no one single way of relating to other animals. There is, thus, nothing ubiquitously cruel or clearly consistent in our patterns of exploitation, use, and cohabitation with other species. Ethnographic data present a complicated and contextualized view of human–animal relationships that denies simple description, classification, or label (Fukuda 1997; Mullin 1999; Rothfels 2002; Vialles 1994). Rather than seeing all contemporary humans as Costello's "participants in a crime of stupefying proportions against animals" (Coetzee 2003:114), anthropologists have been able to demonstrate that humans do not engage in a cohesive pattern of cruelty toward other animals.⁹ Instead, our relationships run the gamut from consumption to cohabitation and from pet keeping to hunting and blood sports.

"Pet keeping" is common across many societies, but the patterns and perspectives in which humans engage their "pets" vary cross-culturally. In many Western societies, pets are seen alternately as consumer goods ("my pet"), as means of constructing identities (a pit bull owner vs. a toy poodle owner), or as companions and as members of a family; pets are made the focus of nurturing and caretaking behavior and sometimes given specific funerary rites on death (Desmond 2002; Mullin 1999). In addition, there is usually a distinction made in Western societies between "pet" animals, "consumption" animals, and "wild" animals. However, these labels, which influence the treatment of the animals so designated, are not always assigned to the same species across cultures or static over time (Isenberg 2002; Kete 2002; Mullin 1999). The pattern of pet keeping and inclusion within the family structure extends beyond Western societies as well (Cormier 2003; Descola 1994). For example, Loretta Cormier's (2003) work on the Guaja foragers of the Amazon illustrates the complexity involved in including in one's social realm animals that one also eats.

The Guaja, a Tupi-Guarani speaking group, display a remarkable and intense inclusion of nonhuman primates of many species into their social fabric. Young monkeys whose parents are killed for food will be brought to the village and "adopted." Women will bathe, breastfeed, and "wear" (carry) the monkeys (Cormier 2002, 2003). The Guaja have a complex cosmology that involves ritual cannibalism (of howler monkeys). Although this pattern of carrying and raising monkeys has a considerable cost in terms of energy, movement, and foodstuffs, the returns go beyond the purely social. Young girls (and, to a lesser extent, boys) frequently practice mothering not only with their siblings but also with infant monkeys, with some girls as young as five years old being the primary caretakers of infant monkeys. Boys gain important hunting experience through exposure to monkey movement and behavioral patterns, including

vocalizations (Cormier 2002, 2003). This extreme example of integration between humans and their pets illustrates how one human society can include other animals as partners in the society (personhood) and at the same time consume them. Do the Guaja consider this cruel? The anthropological record is replete with a diverse array of "pet keeping" patterns that defy simple categorization as "causing pain and distress" (cruelty) to animals.

Hunting seen through the anthropological lens also paints a diverse picture of human relations to other animals. In the Eurocentric world, hunting has become a focus for many seeking to identify loci of human cruelty toward other animals and prevent it (Fukuda 1997; Kete 2002; Marvin 2002; Mullin 1999; Noske 1997). Some argue for distinctions between subsistence hunting to satisfy nutritional requirements and "sport" hunting for pleasure or social status, and the classification of animals as symbol versus sustenance (Mullin 1999; Shanklin 1985). In either case, the taking of animals during a hunt can be considered an intentional act of inflicting pain and distress (as the goal of the hunt is generally to trap and kill the quarry). However, again the anthropological lens reveals a diverse array of perspectives from the people doing the hunting and their perceptions of its cruelty.

Molly Mullin (1999) reviews a body of anthropological assessments of hunters and hunting to demonstrate a complexity in hunting patterns and context that is not explicable in purely economic or nutritional terms. Instead, human perceptions of what they do while hunting vary according to the cultural contexts. According to R. A. Brightman (1993), an individual's interpretations of his actions may "preclude stable representations of causality or sociality in hunter-prey relations" (as quoted in Mullin 1999:209).¹⁰ Garry Marvin (2002) emphasizes this perspective in his overview of fox hunting in England with explicit analyses of the roles and contextualized meanings for human and animal participants. Although it is true that during hunting, humans do cause pain and distress to their prey, the meaning and intent in the human endeavor varies across time and space, precluding a simple assessment of hunting—even "sport" hunting—as ubiquitously cruel in the gaze of the human participants (see also Cartmill 1993; Ingold 1994).

Another area of human–animal interactions wherein cruelty is seen as rampant is the so-called "blood sports." In general, these are contexts in which humans use (and generally kill or substantially harm) animals not specifically for consumption but, rather, for social enjoyment, financial gain, status acquisition, or potential stress relief (Kete 2002; Mullin 1999). Such sports include bull fighting, bull baiting, rodeos, cock fighting, and cock throwing. In the majority of these instances, the animals involved are killed or maimed as a result of the "sport." Most anthropological analyses of these "sports" have focused on the participating humans' utilization of the blood sport and the animals involved as "mirrors" or representatives of themselves and their cultural discourse or dissonance (Dundes 1994; Mullin

1999; Pink 1997). Although there is unarguably pain and distress caused to the animal participants in these games, there is debate over the contingent and contested meanings that these practices have for the human participants (Mullin 1999). Do the human participants see these behaviors as “cruel”? The animals in these “sports” experience pain and suffering. However, the human participants may see themselves engaged in socially positive behavior, without cruel intent. The bullfighter may employ a sympathetic imagination to identify with the personhood of the bull at the same time he causes him to suffer.

How are we to explain our use of animals in a diverse array of forms, some cruel some not? Coetzee has Costello provide an appropriate anthropological answer: “We are managers of ecology” (2003:99). This does not imply a utilitarian–creationist perspective that other life on this planet was put here for humans to exploit, or a Spense-rian “might makes right” ideal implying that because we can exploit other life we should. Rather, I suggest that the viewing of the complex array of relationships between humans and other animals is enlightened by an understanding of niche construction as a human adaptive pattern. That is, part of our evolutionary success is tied to manipulation of the environment and the organisms in it, with a greater degree of impact than other animals. As technology ratchets up and populations increase in size, our patterns of interactions with other animals, especially in the context of exploitation, increase in scale. However, as evident from this brief review, different cultures and contexts produce diverse representations of relationships between humans and animals. We share a personhood with some animals, but what that means in a human evolutionary and cultural context varies across place, time, and technology.

“BUT ARE THEY COETZEE’S ARGUMENTS?”

I have chosen in this article to highlight two aspects that I see as emerging from Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello* regarding the humanity of animals and the animality of humans. Both (1) the issues of animal personhood and (2) the issues of human cruelty are complex questions, the answers to which can be in part informed through biological anthropology. But Coetzee also takes up the question of animal rights. What do anthropologists have to add to this discussion?

Barbara Noske (1993, 1997) criticizes anthropologists for not taking the animals’ perspectives in our approaches to understanding human–animal relationships and for a general ignoring of animal welfare in such relationships. Molly Mullin (1999) suggests that animal rights activists are likely to find the relevant anthropological and historical studies of human–animal relationships (such as those reviewed here) “at least partly unsatisfying” (Mullin 1999:217). But rights (or just claims, or titles, whether legal, prescriptive, or moral) are human interpretations of the roles and values that we and other organisms have within our cultures. Animal rights (and human rights), by definition, are granted

by human conceptualizations and agreements and are not equally or uniformly distributed across human cultures.

Substantial historical and anthropological analyses suggest that the animal rights movement is itself an important arena for examining the complex and multiple perspectives that humans have in regards to their relations with other animals and with themselves (Kete 2002; Mullin 1999; Stibbe 2005). The philosopher Peter Singer, well-known pioneer in the U.S. animal rights movement and one of Coetzee’s interlocutors in *The Lives of Animals* (1999), argues for a radical egalitarianism between humans and animals. Singer opines that the Jeffersonian principle of equality—the taking in of the interests of the being, whatever those interests must be—should apply to all organisms whether human or non-human (Singer 1985, 1990).

Singer explicitly ties the quest for animals’ rights to the Enlightenment project of human rights (Kete 2002). In a review of the history of animal rights movements, Kathleen Kete has argued, by contrast, that in a large sense the modern animal welfare movement emerged in the context of complex socioeconomic and political ecologies of Western Europe in the 1800s where “the kindness to animals came to stand high in the index of civilization. It formed a part of the project of civilization. The barbarian others—the urban working classes, the continental peasants, southern Europeans, Irish Catholics, Russians, Asians, and Turks—were defined in part by their brutality to beasts” (Kete 2002:26). In examining dog–human relationships and Western perspectives on dogs, Donna Haraway demonstrates that these relationships are products of cultural histories and biological manipulation–coevolution between the species producing a cultural context of “significant otherness” between them (Haraway 2003). These examples support the contention that our perceptions of other animals are inextricably intertwined with our cultural contexts and interpretations of biological histories. There is not a biologically determined path of interaction between humans and animals. Rather, a complex set of biological and cultural contexts and histories intertwine to produce people’s visions of these relationships and what they might imply about humans’ and animals’ rights.

Anthropological approaches introduce a biological and ethnographic complexity into the philosophical argument posited by the fictional Costello, Singer, and others. The incorporation of evolutionary perspectives, including niche construction and adaptation, and the ethnographic examples of pet keeping, hunting and other relationships between humans and animals defy unilateral moralizing perspectives. The current morality–equality argument takes place largely amongst Western elites wherein the use and interaction with animals is frequently in a context of luxury. Human cultures rarely employ the simple dualism of human–animal and there is not a uniform or ubiquitous cross-cultural concept of “cruelty” toward animals. In fact, one might argue that there is no uniform or ubiquitous cross cultural concept of “cruelty” toward humans either. The movement toward globally sanctioned human rights

may be a necessary prequel to serious discussions and implementations of animal rights.¹¹

Aspects of modern human demography and technology may facilitate the appearance of novel or increasingly violent venues for inflicting pain and distress on other organisms (and each other). Such relatively modern innovations as factory farms, biomedical testing facilities, drag-net fishing, and sport hunting are contexts in which modern humans exploit and engage their surroundings. These technological contexts for multilevel environmental impact and their concomitant alterations of selective pressures on ourselves and other organisms were not available in the recent past. These facets are not delimited by, or directly emergent from, any specific underlying cruelty but instead may be one of the many expressions of our habit for extreme ecological management through extensive niche construction. We are not inherently cruel, but we do have the tools and capabilities to be extremely cruel (Erlach 2002). This distinction is important as it places the responsibility for human behavior in human hands. It also forces the recognition that the patterns and interpretation of our relationship with other animals changes over time and place. To best understand those changes, we must employ a diverse anthropological toolkit.

CONCLUSION

I want to say at the outset that that was not how my remark—the remark that I felt like Red Peter (Kafka's ape)—was intended. I did not intend it ironically. It meant what it says. [Coetzee 2003:62]

Here Coetzee's Costello clarifies the quotation used at the beginning of this article. She means that when she states that she feels like the ape, she truly feels like the ape. I agree and often also feel like an ape. The first portion of this article is an attempt to illustrate the overlap between humans and animals, the shared aspects of personhood. There is humanity in animals, but even more essentially there is animality in humans: We are animals, specifically mammals. We can feel like an ape because we are apes (the name for the taxonomic group of primates we belong to is the Hominoidea). However, we are not chimpanzee apes (as Red Peter was). Rather we are human apes, a particular kind of ape that manipulates ecosystems across this planet and is capable of intense cruelty and amazing compassion via symbol, language, niche construction, and interaction with other animals and ourselves. The second portion of this article attempts to clarify the perspective that we, as humans, have natures rather than a single nature, and that although not cruel in our core, we are quite capable of intense cruelty. Our relationships with other animals are complex and culturally contingent and contextual. Therefore, no uniform or simple perspectives—whether ethical, ecological, ethnological, or literary—can effectively categorize them.

The anthropological gaze is one of our most important tools for achieving an understanding of being human and

for relating to other animals. Part of being human involves niche construction and a dramatic and intimate engagement with and alteration of our environment. However, as “managers of ecology” (to use Costello's phrasing), we also have an important responsibility. Given our history of success as a species based on modification of the environment, we are tasked with the consequences that come with this endeavor. We are in a time of rapidly changing demographic and technological contexts, and we need to be all the more conscious of the fact that our actions have an impact on one another and on other animals. It is my hope that public decisions and discourse on these issues will begin to draw more substantially from anthropological approaches, in addition to literary and philosophical influences.

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NOTES

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1. A simple example of biological homology would be the arm bones of a human and a bat (similar because of their shared mammalian ancestry); an example of biological analogy would be the wings of a bat and a butterfly (similar because of their function: flight).
2. Tomasello (1999) reviews the “ratcheting” concept in culture as a mechanism for distinguishing human culture from cultural patterns in other organisms. This concept suggests that humans are distinct in their ability to pool cognitive resources contemporaneously and to build on each other's cognitive inventions over time, patterns not yet effectively documented in any other organisms.
3. These terms were co-opted from Tomasello 1999.
4. For overviews and discussions of this debate, see McGrew 1998; Tomasello 1999.
5. Here, I use *primitive* as a synonym for *ancestral*—that is, found in the common ancestor and most or all descendants. There is no value associated with this term; rather, it is an evolutionary statement about the structure-trait in question.
6. However, the cultural and psychological ways in which humans experience fear (beyond the physiology and basic social modifiers) is arguably distinct from other animals.
7. A logical question to pose at this point is “are nonhuman animals cruel”? Because of space constraints, in this article both my definition and examination of *cruelty* revolve solely around human interpretations. However, the answer to that question (which, I think, is mainly philosophical) has received both experimental and theoretical attention in the animal behavior literature (Dugatkin 1999).
8. These assumptions hold for males more than females, because females have evolved counterstrategies to deal with the preponderance of male aggression—cruelty (Wrangham and Peterson 1996).
9. However, one can make an argument that current market economies do favor corporate entities that engage in massive cruelty toward food animals. This is a socioeconomic argument, not a biological or evolutionary one.

10. Brightman is specifically referring to Rock Cree hunters in Northern Manitoba, but Mullin uses the passage to exemplify her point regarding complexity and variability of people's ideas about animals.

11. I am not arguing against the potential for universal human rights, or even universal animal rights per se, however I do argue that there is no biological basis that acts to guarantee any such rights or system of rights. However, as managers–users–inhabitants of our environment, there may be an ecological need to protect and ethically coexist with other organisms.

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