Introduction

J. M. Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals* dramatizes a unique challenge raised by the fact of moral disagreement. Such disagreement presents a range of challenges to moral understanding. Some philosophers have appealed to the fact of moral disagreement to challenge the possibility of moral knowledge, and so to argue for a form of moral relativism. However, Coetzee’s stories identify a different challenge: Moral disagreement threatens the integrity of the self. Coetzee’s work presents a unique and important failure of recognition, arising in situations where shared participation in moral discourse does not generate moral agreement.

Initially delivered as the 1997 Tanner lectures, and published along with a set of replies, Coetzee’s two stories, subtitled “The Philosophers and the Animals” and “The Poets and the Animals,” were subsequently included in the 2003 novel *Elizabeth Costello*. In Coetzee’s stories, the titular character, Elizabeth Costello, an aging Australian novelist, has been invited to the fictional Appleton College, where her son is a professor of physics, to deliver an invited lecture in honor of her achievements on a topic of her choosing. In her lecture, Costello raises a series of challenges to predominant modes of treatment of and thinking about nonhuman animals.

That Costello takes her topic of concern to be one of moral significance is indubitable. She identifies the human treatment of animals, in

---

1 Coetzee 1999.
2 There is some debate about what the primary issue of significance is in Coetzee’s text. Cora Diamond juxtaposes two approaches to *The Lives of Animals*. The first approach sees the story’s primary aim as being to advance “arguments which are meant to support one way of resolving” the ethical issue of how human beings should treat animals.” Diamond 2003, 4. The second approach, which Diamond endorses, sees the story as primarily presenting “a woman haunted by what we do to animals,” or “as presenting a kind of woundedness or hauntedness, a terrible rawness of nerves.” 2, 3. So for Diamond the core question is whether the story aims primarily to narrativize a moral argument, or to portray a woman wounded by the human treatment of animals, grappling with “the difficulty of
Introduction

The industrial production, harvest, and slaughter of animals, as "an enterprise of degradation, cruelty, and killing." However, her mode of responding to this moral problem eschews some prominent philosophical models.

First, in her skeptical attitude toward the role of reason in moral practice, Costello denies the centrality of argument and rational insight to responding to moral challenges. Costello challenges the claim that reason and shared reasoning might contribute to the resolution of moral disagreements. She claims that others have often appealed to the possession of reason – or its absence – to justify the maltreatment of nonanimals, establishing that reason and reasoning can exacerbate moral failures. And she points instead to sympathy, the capacity "to share at times the being of another" through imagination and thinking, and whose "seat" lies instead in the "heart," as a more reliable guide with respect to the moral failures that we find in the Holocaust and in our treatment of nonhuman animals – Costello does not shy away from claiming a deep similarity between these failings.

Second, Costello rejects the suggestion that her actions and concerns are best understood to be the effects or expressions of “moral conviction”:

"But your own vegetarianism, Mrs. Costello," says President Garrard, pouring oil on troubled waters: "it comes out of moral conviction, does it not?"

"No, I don’t think so," says his mother [Costello]. "It comes out of a desire to save my soul."

Instead of understanding her actions simply to be the expressions of convictions or beliefs – convictions or beliefs that she could possibly have or not, and still remain the same person – Costello identifies the roots of her concern in something more fundamental, her “soul,” where the fate of that soul – its possible salvation – depends on what she does in response to the challenge of our treatment of animals. One way of putting this suggestion would be to say that, for Costello, these concerns are constitutive of her very selfhood. To be sure, she no doubt has what we would acknowledge as moral convictions and beliefs. Her point, however, seems to be that her

---

Coetzee 2004, 65.
Coetzee 2004, 112.
Coetzee 2004, 78–79.
Coetzee 2004, 88–89.
Introduction

actions are themselves ultimately rooted in – they “come[…] out of” – something more fundamental, which she identifies as herself.

Given her rejection of certain forms of moral discourse, namely those that rest on reason and reasoning, and her identification of the sources of moral concern with her very self, we might expect Costello not to devote significant care to the intersubjective dimensions of moral practice. One might imagine an alternative Costello who, certain of the depth and importance of her concerns, and dismissive of the need to argue those concerns to others, is confident in her moral pursuits, and indifferent to the competing claims of others, or the need to reach an agreement with them. However, Coetzee’s Costello is far from this sort of moral individualist. The very fact that Costello feels the need to engage with others suggests that the theory of recognition might provide the appropriate lens through which to consider her distinctive struggle.

Of course, it might seem far-fetched to claim that the specific failure at issue in “The Lives of Animals” is a failure of recognition, in particular in the absence of some clarification about the nature of that relation. To be sure, Coetzee’s stories highlight at least two senses in which Costello is recognized. The prominence of the human mistreatment of nonhuman animals in the stories highlights a first sense in which Costello is not denied recognition, namely that her rights – be they legal or moral – are in no way violated. She is not subject to violent attack or threat. She is not prevented from speaking publicly regarding her convictions, and nor is she subject to persecution for holding and expressing them. The general situation that Coetzee portrays in the stories highlights a second sense in which Costello is the object of appropriate recognition: She has been invited to Appleton College to deliver a talk as an honor, a form of recognition for her distinctive achievements as a novelist. There are, then, at least two important senses in which Costello is recognized in Coetzee’s stories. Based on the theory of recognition that Stephen Darwall defends, these seem to be the only two forms that recognition can take: the ascription of authority to another as a being possessing dignity (recognition respect), and the ascription of value to a person in virtue of their distinctive nonmoral achievements (honor respect).

On recognition respect, see Darwall 2006. For the distinction between recognition respect and honor respect, see Darwall 2013. Of course, Darwall also thinks we can distinguish a third form of respect, moral esteem, from these others. See Darwall 1977. But unlike recognition respect and honor respect, he does not identify esteem as a kind of recognition. The ground for this distinction seems to be that esteem is merely an “attitude,” not “something we broadly do,” while, presumably, the other forms of recognition are things that “we broadly do.” Darwall 2013, 17.
However, the specific failure of recognition that the stories dramatize is rather one of a distinctive sort of moral recognition that Darwall does not countenance, the failure to achieve a unique standing as a participant in moral discourse. Of course, there are many different ways in which individuals can be denied recognition as participants in the practice of moral discourse. One would be when individuals are excluded generally from participation in moral discourse, for example when they are deemed not competent to make claims and engage with others in moral discussion. Darwall might account for this failure as the failure to ascribe appropriate moral authority to another participant in discourse, and so as a failure of what he calls recognition respect. However, this failure is not the one that we find in Coetzee’s story: Costello is not only welcomed as a participant in moral discourse, she is given a particularly prominent role within that discourse.

Instead, Coetzee’s story dramatizes and makes one of its primary objects the meaning of moral disagreement. And actual moral disagreement is possible only if the others with whom we disagree actually admit us into the practice of moral discourse. Indeed, we ought to read Coetzee’s story as exploring the importance of moral discourse to moral practice more generally. In so doing, we can draw on a helpful distinction that Cheshire Calhoun sets out between two sorts of moral failure. On her account, morality is driven by two “ideals.” According to the first ideal, the aim of moral thinking is to “get things right,” to articulate the standards for appropriate action. According to the second, the aim of morality is to make possible participation in a shared scheme of social cooperation. On the basis of this latter ideal, morality consists of a kind of social practice whose aim is the achievement of a likemindedness with others that enables us to live together. Calhoun dwells on the example of moral revolutionaries to identify cases where these two ideals conflict: In arguing that the predominant standards for “getting it right” are morally flawed, the moral revolutionary undermines the possibility of realizing the second ideal, since they appeal to standards for action that others fail to acknowledge. In Calhoun’s picture, success in “getting things right” morally can itself produce a (second) kind of moral failure, since it can undermine our ability to achieve a condition of likemindedness with others.

We might understand Costello’s evident concern with engaging in moral discourse – even if that discourse eschews the norms of reason and rationality – to be an expression of her attachment to this second ideal.

9 Calhoun 2016.
Introduction

Indeed, it is evident throughout Coetzee’s story that Costello experiences the interpersonal tensions that arise when others do not share our moral concerns, or criticize or dismiss them. Moreover, her case presents a powerful claim about the source of the need for achieved likemindedness with others. That is, for Costello, that likemindedness does not seem to be important primarily for consequentialist reasons, connected to the benefits of or instrumental necessity for cooperation. Instead, that likemindedness derives its importance from its contribution to the integrity of the self.

For Costello, the issue is not simply the experience of a harmony between her own convictions and those of others. Instead, the challenge stems from the significance of others’ failure to acknowledge and value appropriately what she takes to be objects of moral importance. She expresses the sense of disorientation that such disagreement can generate to her son as follows:

“It’s that I no longer know where I am. I seem to move around perfectly easily among people, to have perfectly normal relations with them. Is it possible, I ask myself, that all of them are participants in a crime of stupefying proportions? Am I fantasizing it all? I must be mad! Yet every day I see the evidences. The very people I suspect produce the evidence, exhibit it, offer it to me. Corpses. Fragments of corpses that they have bought for money.”

“It is as if I were to visit friends, and to make some polite remark about the lamp in their living room, and they were to say, ‘Yes, it’s nice, isn’t it? Polish-Jewish skin it’s made of, we find that’s best, the skins of young Polish-Jewish virgins.’ And then I go to the bathroom and the soap wrapper says, ‘Treblinka – 100% human stearate.’ Am I dreaming, I say to myself? What kind of house is this?”

“Yet I’m not dreaming. I look into your eyes, into Norma’s, into the children’s, and I see only kindness, human kindness. Calm down, I tell myself, you are making a mountain out of a molehill. This is life. Everyone comes to terms with it, why can’t you? Why can’t you?”

So for Costello, this experience of disagreement does not simply prompt an attitude of accusation against others for failing to see the moral truth as she does. Instead, it undermines the possibility of a coherent experience of her own self. The challenge that she issues to herself – “Why can’t you?” – indicates the persistence of this experience of a contradiction within herself: It is directed to herself (“Why can’t you?”), but the fact that the challenge expresses her failure to “come to terms with it” (“Why can’t you?”), indicates her inability to separate herself from the objects of her moral concern, even in the face of such disagreement.

This specific failure that Coetzee’s stories dramatize – one in which the failure to achieve likemindedness with others threatens the integrity of the self – can therefore be understood as a failure to achieve recognition. Recognition is a relation between subjects that shapes, or in some cases, even constitutes, the selfhood of one or more of them. And when others fail to recognize me, that failure can itself threaten or undermine the integrity of my selfhood. Coetzee’s stories point to the distinctiveness of what we can call moral recognition, the sort of recognition that is afforded to us as full participants in moral discourse, in distinction from the perhaps more-familiar forms of recognition that we enjoy as the bearers of rights or as the recipients of honor. Situations of moral disagreement of the kind that Coetzee portrays, in which this recognition is lacking, highlight its significance and importance for securing the selfhood of its recipients.

We have in view, at this point, at least two significant questions: What is the self if it can be undermined by the absence of moral recognition, and that it can be secured through it? And what are the conditions in which moral recognition is actually possible? One worry that we might have in linking moral recognition and selfhood in this way is that we seem to undermine the possibility of a consistent experience of selfhood. Given the persistence and ubiquity of moral disagreement, and if recognition requires actual agreement on moral questions, it seems we would rob individuals of the basis for a coherent self in linking it to recognition in this way.

Of course, it may very well be that such coherence and consistency is a rare achievement; perhaps the typical reality of being a self is the one that Coetzee’s stories present in the figure of Costello. But even if such coherence is not as common as we might be inclined to expect, it still need not be the case that moral recognition – and so selfhood – depend on actual moral agreement. That is, there may be forms of moral discourse that secure relations of reciprocal recognition, but that do not require full agreement.

Among the core commitments of the following study is that these issues – the distinctively moral shape of recognition and its contribution to selfhood – are at the heart of G. W. F. Hegel’s 1807 Phenomenology of Spirit. And, I shall argue, Hegel directly faces the challenge that moral disagreement poses to this achievement. On his account, some forms of moral disagreement will prove intractable. However, instead of identifying complete moral agreement as necessary for moral recognition, Hegel explores forms of moral discourse in which agents can be participants who can nonetheless achieve shared understanding, even if that shared
understanding of themselves and one another falls short of complete agreement on moral questions.

In considering the significance of moral recognition, Hegel also emphasizes the vulnerability of the self to others. Coetzee’s stories explore the threat to selfhood that profound moral disagreement poses, and Hegel’s text provides us with a framework for understanding that threat, a framework provided by the concept of recognition. Arguably, Coetzee’s stories present us with no ultimate resolution to this challenge. But they do point, in a negative way, to such a resolution: Through the recognition of others, we become ourselves.

Through the recognition of others, we become ourselves. This statement has the air of paradox about it, and it is, by itself, ambiguous. How might “we” “become ourselves”? Aren’t “we,” in an important if not fundamental sense, already “ourselves”? Of course, I – presumably I count among this “we” – have depended on others in myriad ways to become who I am now. But why highlight recognition as the unique relation to others that is so important for this coming to be? “Recognition of others” itself bears a deep ambiguity. Especially if we think of human development, we might be inclined to think that it is being recognized by others that is essential to becoming ourselves. But that thought often obscures the importance of recognizing others. Consider an analogy with love: Being loved is no doubt essential to upbringing, but coming to be able to love another is, while deeply different, arguably just as important to human development. Likewise, being recognized by others is important to becoming ourselves. But equally important are the sorts of relations that we develop when we learn to recognize others.

We find these same ambiguities in one of the core claims of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit: “Self-consciousness is in and for itself when and because it is in and for itself for an other; that is, it is only as something recognized [ein Anerkanntes].” What is “self-consciousness” that it can exist “in and for itself” only when it is recognized? Why highlight recognition as the distinctive relation that is necessary for this self-consciousness? Even if this passage points to the importance of being recognized for the achievement of self-consciousness, it bears noting that throughout the text, Hegel identifies the relevant relation as the act of “recognizing” (Anerkennen). (By contrast, contemporary scholarship focuses much more on the condition

\[PhG\] 109/¶178
of “recognition” [Anerkennung], a term that actually appears only once in Hegel’s text, and not in the famous account of “Self-Consciousness.”)\(^1\)

The following study aims to resolve these ambiguities through a close reading of Hegel’s Phenomenology. I say more about the method that I follow in presenting that reading in what follows. But I can set out in broad strokes the main argument that I take Hegel to be advancing in the text.

For Hegel, recognizing and being recognized are essential to self-knowledge. Considered from the side of activity – recognizing – I can only recognize another when my act is guided by an accurate understanding of that other. And likewise, considered from the side of the condition – being-recognized – I can be recognized by another only when they recognize me, which in turn presupposes an accurate understanding on their part of what I am. In the terms that Hegel introduces in Phenomenology, recognition requires a true conception of “the self” (das Selbst), a term that Hegel first introduces around the work’s mid-point, and a concept that structures much of his account of “spirit.”\(^2\)

What sort of idea is the idea of “the self” and what sort of knowledge is self-knowledge? The idea of the self has what we can identify as two essential poles in Hegel’s account. On the one hand, I am always “this self,” a singular individual, with my own “particular thoughts, sensations, perceptual experiences, physical properties, and actions,” and indeed my own desires, interests, tastes, and convictions. One dimension of self-knowledge is the project of coming to understand these aspects of my constitution. On the other, I also know that there are other selves, so that selfhood is a status that is universal, that I share with you and others. There is another dimension of self-knowledge that will be concerned with understanding “the kind of thing that we are.”\(^3\) And both of these dimensions of selfhood will be significant for my efforts to recognize you, which will succeed only to the extent that they acknowledge both of these poles.\(^4\)

\(^1\) PhG 248/¶456
\(^2\) Beyond the Preface (which Hegel wrote only after completing the rest of the work) we find the first explicit mention of the self in the treatment of phrenology. (PhG 191/¶144) From the conclusion of the discussion of reason to the end of the text, the expression becomes ubiquitous.
\(^3\) On the two poles of selfhood – being “this self” and a “universal” self – see, e.g., PhG 286/¶525, 351/¶652. The distinction between knowledge of “the kind of things we are” and “particular self-knowledge” is from Cassam 1994, 1.
\(^4\) The question of what the self is is therefore distinct from the question of personal identity, at least in one of its formulations. The latter question often focuses narrowly on the persistence conditions of my existence – how I can remain the same being over time – and need not concern itself with the question of what makes me the particular individual I am, or the more general question of the sorts of beings we all are.
Of course, even if we grant that recognition will succeed only if it is guided by a true conception of the other whom we recognize, a true conception of “the self,” why is this recognition necessary for me to know myself? Why isn’t it possible for me to begin with an accurate conception of what I am, and then simply apply that to others in my acts of recognition? Why does selfhood depend on others in this way?

A significant part of Hegel’s argument about “the self” in Phenomenology is negative or skeptical, directed against the claim that I can be conscious of myself as I am of objects outside of me, or that I can intuit myself directly through immediate reflection, or that I can know myself through passive observation. While I shall consider some of these skeptical arguments in what follows, Hegel ultimately holds that my inability to know myself in separation from distinctive relations to others lies in part in my distinctive nature as a self-conscious being. In Hegel’s phrase, the “essence of self-consciousness” consists of “absolute negativity, pure being-for-self,” “pure universal movement, absolute becoming-fluid of every continuing existence.” Absent determinate relations to others, I am unable to know myself because, as a self-conscious being, my “essence” is nothing positive, but rather this “absolute negativity,” my not-being any determinate object, but instead the capacity to dissolve any fixed characteristic or relation through self-conscious activity. The problem with individualistic models of self-knowledge is not simply epistemic, but rather ontological: the purported object of self-knowledge is, by itself, something negative, and not a positive being that might be given to these sorts of knowledge (immediate awareness, reflection, observation).

We might be inclined to think that, given these robust claims about the essence of self-consciousness, it is unreasonable to expect that relations of recognition will provide much help in arriving at self-knowledge. However, Hegel argues instead that the project of self-knowledge is itself guided by the same dialectical movement that animates the series of forms of consciousness that the text as a whole tracks. The negativity of self-consciousness need not simply be the empty abstraction of nothingness, whose “movement” is a “mere negative movement.” Instead, the negativity that belongs to the essence of self-consciousness is better understood as a negativity that gives rise to content, a “determinate negation.” And it is at this point that the activity and condition of recognizing and being recognized are significant for the issue of self-knowledge. Even if immediate

16 PhG 114/¶194.
17 PhG 57/¶79.
awareness, reflection, or passive observation will not yield knowledge of what I am, the activity of taking others to be selves and of others so taking me can yield a stable self-relation that amounts to self-knowledge.

We can appreciate what is distinctive in Hegel’s appeal to recognition in this connection by contrasting it with Cavell’s well-known idea of “acknowledgment.” For Cavell, the demand for acknowledgment arises in response to a skeptical worry about our capacity to know others’ minds. In the absence of that knowledge, Cavell proposes that acknowledgment should take the place of knowledge in establishing appropriate relations with others.\textsuperscript{18} By contrast, for Hegel, the epistemic challenge that recognition addresses is not simply that of knowing others, but rather self-knowledge. And recognition does not take the place of that knowledge. Instead, the activity of recognizing is itself partially constitutive of self-knowledge, a specific intentional relation to others whose ultimate aim is the achievement of a specific cognitive relation to myself.

A determinate idea of the self is necessary because it structures relations among self-conscious beings so that those are relations of recognition. For Hegel, the concept of the self is a determination of “spirit” (\textit{Geist}). This means that conceptions of the self are essentially social.\textsuperscript{19} Instead of understanding the self, for example, as a simple substance that exists independent of relations to others and to the world, conceptions of the self are complex, comprised of a constellation of constituent concepts: namely self-conscious agents and the shared worlds that guide their actions and that they sustain through their activity.\textsuperscript{20} In addition to being social and complex, conceptions of the self are, for Hegel, normative. That is, I exist as a self only when I participate in specific shared social practices. And I succeed in satisfying the criteria that are constitutive of the self when my activities fulfill a set of norms that are themselves complex. Different conceptions of the self involve different criteria that identify different features of the agent as significant, mandate different understandings of the relation between the agent and their deeds...