



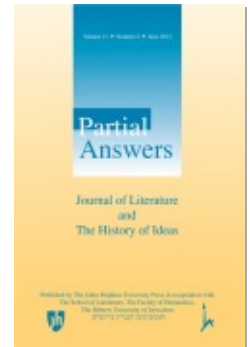
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The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy

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I am concerned in this paper with a range of phenomena, which, in the first four sections of the paper, I shall suggest by some examples. In the last three sections, I try to connect the topic thus indicated with the thought of Stanley Cavell.

A Single Exposure

First example: a poem of Ted Hughes's, from the mid-50s, called "Six Young Men." The speaker in the poem looks at a photo of six smiling young men, seated in a familiar spot. He knows the bank covered with bilberries, the tree and the old wall in the photo; the six men in the picture would have heard the valley below them sounding with rushing water, just as it still does. Four decades have faded the photo; it comes from 1914. The men are profoundly, fully alive, one bashfully lowering his eyes, one chewing a piece of grass, one "is ridiculous with cocky pride" (l. 6). Within six months of the picture's having been taken, all six were dead. In the photograph, then, there is thinkable, there is seeable, the death of the men. See it, and see the worst "flash and rending" (l. 35) of war falling onto these smiles now forty years rotted and gone.

Here is the last stanza:

* This paper was presented at a symposium, "Accounting for Literary Language," at the University of East Anglia in September 2002, and at the Hannah Arendt/Reiner Schürmann Memorial Symposium, on Stanley Cavell, held at the New School in New York, in October 2002. I am very grateful for the comments of the audience on both occasions. I was helped to think about the issues by Anat Matar's reply to my paper at the conference in East Anglia. I am also very glad to have had comments and suggestions from Alice Cray, Tony Wozzley and Talbot Brewer.

That man's not more alive whom you confront
 And shake by the hand, see hale, hear speak loud,
 Than any of these six celluloid smiles are,
 Nor prehistoric or fabulous beast more dead;
 No thought so vivid as their smoking blood:
 To regard this photograph might well dement,
 Such contradictory permanent horrors here
 Smile from the single exposure and shoulder out
 One's own body from its instant and heat. (1957: 55, ll. 37–45)

What interests me there is the experience of the mind's not being able to encompass something which it encounters. It is capable of making one go mad to try, to bring together in thought what cannot be thought: the impossibility of anyone's being more alive than these smiling men, nothing's being more dead. (No one is more alive than is the person looking at the photo; no one is more alive than you are, reading the poem. In Part VI, I turn back to the "contradictory permanent horrors" (l. 43) of the imagination of death.)

Now it is plainly possible to describe the photo so it does not seem boggling at all. It is a photo of men who died young, not long after the picture was taken. Where is the contradiction? – Taking the picture that way, there is no problem about our concepts being adequate to describe it. Again, one might think of how one would teach a child who had been shown a photo and told it was a photo of her grandfather, whom she knows to be dead. If she asks "Why is he smiling if he's dead?", she might be told that he was smiling when the picture was taken, because he was not dead then, and that he died later. The child is being taught the language-game, being shown how her problem disappears as she comes to see how things are spoken of in the game. The point of view from which she sees a problem is not yet in the game; while that from which the horrible contradiction impresses itself on the poet-speaker is that of someone who can no longer speak within the game. Language is shouldered out from the game, as the body from its instant and heat.

What Hughes gives us is a case of what I want to call the difficulty of reality. That is a phrase of John Updike's,¹ which I want to pick up for the phenomena with which I am concerned, 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

¹ I believe I read it in a *New Yorker* essay of his in the 1980s, but cannot trace it.

perhaps awesome and astonishing in its inexplicability. *We take things so*. And the things we take so may simply not, to others, present the kind of difficulty – of being hard or impossible or agonizing to get one’s mind round.

II. A Wounded Animal

Few of us are not in some way infirm, or even diseased; and our very infirmities help us unexpectedly.

William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*

Second example. The example is complex: part of it is the set of lectures delivered by the South African novelist J. M. Coetzee as his Tanner Lectures. These lectures were published under the title *The Lives of Animals*, together with an introduction by Amy Gutmann and comments by several other people; the introduction and comments also form part of the example as I want to understand it. Coetzee’s lectures themselves take the form of a story. In the story, an elderly woman novelist, Elizabeth Costello, has been invited to give an endowed lecture at Appleton College. She is a woman haunted by the horror of what we do to animals. We see her as wounded by this knowledge, this horror, and by the knowledge of how unhaunted others are. The wound marks her and isolates her. The imagery of the Holocaust figures centrally in the way she is haunted, and in her isolation. For thinking this horror with the imagery of the Holocaust is or can be felt to be profoundly offensive.²

² The description of her as “haunted” has, for me in this context, two particular sources. One is Ruth Klüger’s discussion of Sylvia Plath and of Plath’s use of Holocaust imagery in her poetry, her defense of Plath against those who object to her taking over what has happened to us, to the Jews, in expressing a private despair. (She was writing about Alvin Rosenfeld in particular, but had in mind others who shared his view and who felt as he did that there was an “unforgivable disproportion” in Plath’s expression of her own anguish in language drawing on the Holocaust; Klüger 1985, especially 184–85.) Klüger speaks of how “others” (other than we who ask the world to remember what happened to us) may be “haunted by what has happened to the Jews and claim it as their own out of human kinship, as part of their private terrors and visions of death.” The second source is Coetzee’s story, in which Elizabeth Costello mentions Camus and the haunting imprint on his memory made by the death-cry of a hen, which, as a little boy, he had fetched for his grandmother, who then beheaded it (1999: 63).

I want to describe Coetzee's lectures, then, as presenting a kind of woundedness or hauntedness, a terrible rawness of nerves. What wounds this woman, what haunts her mind,³ is what we do to animals. This, in all its horror, is there, in our world. How is it possible to live in the face of it? And in the face of the fact that, for nearly everyone, it is as nothing, as the mere accepted background of life? Elizabeth Costello gives a lecture, but it is a lecture that distances itself in various ways from the expectations of a lecture audience. She describes herself as an animal exhibiting but not exhibiting, to a gathering of scholars, a wound which her clothes cover up, but which is touched on in every word she speaks (1999: 26). So the life of this speaking and wounded and clothed animal is one of the "lives of animals" that the story is about; if it is true that we generally remain unaware of the lives of other animals, it is also true that, as readers of this story, we may remain unaware, as her audience does, of the life of the speaking animal at its center.

I say that that is how I want to describe Coetzee's lectures; but it is not how the commentators on the lectures describe them. Amy Gutmann, in her introductory essay, sees Coetzee as confronting the ethical issue how human beings should treat animals, and as presenting, within a fictional frame, arguments which are meant to support one way of resolving that issue. Peter Singer also reads Coetzee as having been engaged in the presenting of arguments within the frame of a fiction, arguments for a kind of "radical egalitarianism" (1999: 91) as the appropriate way to organize our relations to animals. He thinks the arguments in Coetzee's lectures are not really very good ones, since they fail to make clear the source of the moral significance of the lives of animals.⁴ The fact that the arguments are those of a character in a

³ I use the word "mind" here with some hesitation, since (within the context of discussion of animals and ourselves) it may be taken to suggest a contrast with bodily life. Conceptions of mind are at stake within the lectures. In particular, there is involved a critical stance towards the idea that, if one were to imagine what it is like to be a bat or other animal, or to be another human being, one would need to imagine what is going on "in its mind," rather than to imagine its fullness of being (see, e.g., Coetzee 1999: 33, 51, 65). So, to speak of Elizabeth Costello as having a haunted mind in a sense of "mind" which takes that understanding of embodiment seriously is to speak of how her life is felt.

⁴ "Fail to make clear" is my way of putting the criticism; see Singer 1999: 87–90. Singer's response does not take on Elizabeth Costello's rejection of the form of argument that Singer thinks is appropriate, argument which responds to the *therefore*-arguments of

story he sees as simply making it possible for Coetzee to distance himself to some degree from them and to avoid taking full intellectual responsibility for them. Another one of the commentators, Wendy Doniger, takes the lectures to be deeply moving, but begins her response by attempting to identify the ideas implicit in the lectures. She reads the implicit idea as an argument from the appropriate emotions towards animals and emotional bonds with them to conclusions about appropriate actions towards them. And Barbara Smuts, a primatologist, describes the Coetzee lectures as a text containing a “discourse on animal rights” (1999: 108).

For this kind of reading, the wounded woman, the woman with the haunted mind and the raw nerves, has no significance except as a device for putting forward (in an imaginatively stirring way) ideas about the resolution of a range of ethical issues, ideas which can then be abstracted and examined. For none of the commentators does the title of the story have any particular significance in relation to the wounded animal that the story has as its central character. For none of the commentators does the title of the story have any significance in how we might understand the story in relation to our own lives, the lives of the animals we are.

So we have then two quite different ways of seeing the lectures: as centrally concerned with the presenting of a wounded woman, and as centrally concerned with the presenting of a position on the issue how we should treat animals. The difference between the two readings comes out especially sharply if we consider the references to the Holocaust, references which are of immense significance in Coetzee’s lectures. Gutmann treats them as a use by Coetzee of an argument from analogy.⁵ Singer also treats the Holocaust imagery as playing a role in

those who justify treating animals as we do by their own different *therefore*-arguments. She comments on such arguments after one of the other characters in the fiction speaks of the “vacuum of consciousness” within which animals live (44). We say such things as that they have no consciousness, but what she minds is, she says, what comes next: “They have no consciousness *therefore*. Therefore what?” Against those who say that therefore we may treat them as we like, she does not reply that animals are conscious, *therefore* we may not eat them, or that they have other relevant properties, *therefore* we should recognize their rights, etc. See also note 11 below.

⁵ See “Introduction” (1999: 8). When she describes Coetzee as arguing by analogy, Gutmann is actually speaking about Marjorie Garber’s discussion, in the same volume, of Coetzee’s use of the Holocaust; but interestingly Garber herself, although she has quite a

the argumentative structure that he reads in the lectures. He sees the references to the Holocaust as part of the argument by Elizabeth Costello for her brand of radical egalitarianism. There would, he believes, be nothing illegitimate in arguing that both the behavior of the Nazis towards the Jews and the world's response, or failure of response, to it have some points of resemblance to our treatment of animals and our failures to attend to what we do to animals. But the problem he sees with Elizabeth Costello's argument is that she equates the cases, which ignores the differences in moral significance between killing human beings and killing animals.⁶

Gutmann and Singer, then, take the Holocaust imagery in the lectures as constituting part of an argument. That there is a woman haunted by the Holocaust as it seems to be replaying itself in our lives with animals, that there is a wounded woman exhibiting herself as wounded through talk of the Holocaust that she knows will offend and not be understood – this drops totally away in Singer's reading and almost totally in Gutmann's. Gutmann does consider the presence in the text of a character, Abraham Stern, who takes Elizabeth Costello's use of the Holocaust to verge on blasphemy; Gutmann sees the presence of Stern as enabling Coetzee to represent the difficulties we may have in understanding each other's perspectives. But "perspective" is too general and bland a term for the rawness of nerves we have in both Stern and Costello, in contrast with the unjangled, unraw nerves of the other characters. The contrast is made sharply present through Costello's own allusion to one of the most searing poems about the Holocaust, with its image of the human being in the ash in the air, as part of her portrayal of how we protect ourselves with a dullness or deadness of soul.⁷ (Gutmann describes Stern as Costello's "academic equal" but

long discussion of the use of analogies by Coetzee and others, never refers to the cases in question as the presentation of a kind of argument. While I would disagree with Garber's reading, she does at any rate, unlike all the other commentators, begin by taking for granted that we have in front of us something to be thought about in literary terms, and that this matters.

⁶ I do not in this essay try to judge, or even to examine what would be involved in trying to judge, Elizabeth Costello's use of the imagery of the Holocaust. Later in the present section I do, though, discuss how the effort to take in one difficulty of reality may block us from seeing another.

⁷ Cf. Paul Celan's "Todesfuge." I am indebted to Ruth Klüger for pointing out to me that Nelly Sachs makes use of that image too ("Dein Leib im Rauch durch die Luft").

they are better seen as equals rather in the way their rawnervedness propels them towards or beyond the borders of academic decorum.)

The difference between the two contrasting types of readings concerns also the question whether Coetzee's lectures can simply be taken to be concerned with a moral or ethical issue. Or, rather, this is not a question at all for one of the two kinds of readings: neither Gutmann nor Singer considers whether there is any problem in taking the lectures that way, which is the way they themselves understand discourse about animal rights.⁸ Of course, Coetzee's lectures might indeed be intended to grapple with that ethical issue; but since he has a character in the story that he tells, for whom it is as problematic to treat this supposed "issue" as an "ethical issue" for serious discussion as it is problematic to treat Holocaust denial as an issue for serious discussion, one can hardly, I think, take for granted that the lectures can be read as concerned with that "issue," and as providing arguments bearing on it. If we see in the lectures a wounded woman, one thing that wounds her is precisely the common and taken-for-granted mode of thought that "how we should treat animals" is an "ethical issue," and the knowledge that she will be taken to be contributing, or intending to contribute, to discussion of it. But what kind of beings are we for whom this is an "issue"? (It is important here that the lectures bring us to the writings of Jonathan Swift and to questions about reading Swift, while none of the commentators except Garber even mentions Swift, or takes the pages devoted to Swift to be significant in their reconstruction of what Coetzee is concerned to do.⁹)

Elizabeth Costello says that she does not want to be taken to be joining in the tradition of argumentation. She is letting us see her as what she is. She is someone immensely conscious of the limits of thinking, the limits of understanding, in the face of all that she is painfully aware of (45). So what then is the role of the argument-fragments which are contained in the Coetzee lectures? My comments

⁸ See especially the opening paragraph of Gutmann's introduction, intended to help fix the terms of our reading of the rest of the book: the lectures, she says, focus on an important ethical issue – the way human beings treat animals; cf. also the following page, where that description is repeated.

⁹ I cannot here go into the discussion of Swift in Coetzee's lectures. It is important for various reasons, among which is that it takes up the question where we might get if we push Swift's tales further than we usually do, and suggests the perspective of an "ex-colonial" on what, thus pushed, the tales might say about the kind of being we are.

on this are inconclusive, but are meant to reflect the idea that we cannot understand their role in Coetzee's lectures without first taking seriously how argument is treated within the story, by Elizabeth Costello. She does not engage with others in argument, in the sense in which philosophers do. Her responses to arguments from others move out from the kind of engagement in argument that might have been expected. She comments on the arguments put to her, but goes on from them in directions that suggest her own very different mode of approach. She does not take seriously the conventions of argumentation of a philosophy text, as comes out in her image of the dead hen speaking in the writings of Camus on the guillotine. (This is clearly, from the point of view of the conventions of argumentation, no way to respond to the argumentative point that animals cannot speak for themselves and claim rights for themselves as we can. The image itself is reminiscent of Wittgenstein's image of the rose having teeth in the mouth of the cow that chews up its food and dungs the rose; see 1958: IIxi, 221.) Elizabeth Costello's responses to arguments can be read as *replies* in the philosophical sense only by ignoring important features of the story, in particular the kind of weight that such responses have in Costello's thought. In the life of the animal she is, argument does not have the weight we may take it to have in the life of the kind of animal we think of ourselves as being. She sees our reliance on argumentation as a way we may make unavailable to ourselves our own sense of what it is to be a living animal.¹⁰ And she sees poetry, rather than philosophy,

¹⁰ There is an issue here that I can merely indicate. I have found, in teaching undergraduates how utilitarians discuss the killing of babies, that my students react very strongly indeed to claims that killing a baby does not wrong the baby, that it does not interfere with what the baby might be taken to want for itself, since the baby is not as yet capable of grasping such a choice. Killing an older child might (on this view) go against what it wants, but that is possible only because the older child can understand what it is to go on living, and can therefore want to do so. – In response to that sort of argument, the students say that you are wronging the baby; that the baby is attached to life: in the struggle of a baby or animal whom someone is trying to kill, you can see that it is clinging to life. They reject the idea that there is no interference with what a baby or animal might be said to want. Their rejection of the utilitarian argument is connected with their rejection of the kind of argumentative discourse in which the utilitarian wants the issue cast, a form of discourse in which one's imaginative sense of what might be one's own bodily struggle for life, one's imaginative sense of an animal's struggle for life, cannot be given the role they want it to have. It is as if they felt a kind of evisceration of the meaning of "wanting to go on living."

as having the capacity to return us to such a sense of what animal life is.¹¹ (Another way of trying to confront the issues here: to think of Coetzee's lectures as contributing to the "debate" on how to treat animals is to fail to see how "debate" as we understand it may have built into it a distancing of ourselves from our sense of our own bodily life and our capacity to respond to and to imagine the bodily life of others.)

I am not sure how helpful it is to say "Coetzee's lectures have to be read first of all as literature," because it is not clear what is meant by reading them as literature. But what is meant not to be done is at least somewhat clear: not pulling out ideas and arguments as if they had been simply clothed in fictional form as a way of putting them before us. [This is perhaps particularly clear in connection with the use of Holocaust imagery, where the desire to see the point being made by Coetzee by using the imagery leads to various formulations of the point in general terms: Coetzee is making clear the question whether there is any way of resolving ethical conflicts in cases in which people's sensibilities are far apart (Gutmann); or he is engaged in presenting an argument, which he himself may or may not accept, for radical egalitarianism (Singer). Elizabeth Costello asks herself, at the end of the story, whether she is making a mountain out of a molehill.

¹¹ Gutmann in fact does recognize some of the features of the lectures which I have just described, but takes Elizabeth Costello's responses to argument as showing that she is after all willing to engage in argument at least to a limited degree. She speaks of Costello as employing philosophy in demonstrating the weakness of arguments opposed to her own view, but Gutmann's treatment of the argument-fragments which the story contains is shaped by her basic reading of the story as a way of presenting a stance on an ethical issue. My reading of the arguments in the Coetzee lectures would go in a different direction, and would focus on some of the specific cases, in particular Elizabeth Costello's rejection of the *therefore*-arguments that go from characteristics of animals to its therefore being permissible to treat them this or that way, as we do. Earlier I mentioned Singer's response to such arguments with contrasting *therefore*-arguments; a very different response that in some ways resembles Elizabeth Costello's is that of Rush Rhees, in "Humans and Animals: a Confused Christian Conception" (1999) which is not an essay but two sets of exploratory notes and a letter to a friend. A theme in the notes and in the letter is the unexamined use of *therefore*-arguments the conclusion of which is the supposed greater importance of human life; in fact a criticism of the *therefore* is the starting point of the first set of those notes, which characterize such arguments as reflecting "the illusion of a *reason* which justifies one in treating animals with less respect or less consideration than human beings" (189). So a question for Rhees in these informal notes is how to think his own response to what he takes to be illusion.

The mind does, though, have mountains; has frightful no-man-fathomed cliffs: “Hold them cheap may who ne’er hung there.” What is it like to hang there? What comfort is offered by her son? “There, there. It will soon be over”? (69) “Here! creep, wretch, under a comfort serves in a whirlwind: all life death does end and each day dies with sleep.” If we do not see how the Holocaust imagery gives a sense of what it is to hang on these cliffs, what it is to have nothing but the comfort of sleep and death in the face of what it is to hang on those cliffs, it seems to me we have not begun really to read the lectures. But it equally seems we may be driven, or take ourselves to be driven, to such a reading by philosophy, as we hear it pressing on us the insistent point that that portrayal is simply the portrayal, however moving it may be, of a subjective response, the significance of which needs to be examined.]

If we take as central in our reading the view Coetzee gives us of a profound disturbance of the soul, it may seem natural to go on to suggest something like this:

We can learn from the “sick soul” how to see reality, as William James said in his Gifford Lectures.¹² The “sick soul” in the Coetzee lectures 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 our blotting it out of consciousness.

The trouble with that view of what we may learn from the lectures is that it is fixed entirely on Elizabeth Costello’s view, and implicitly identifies it as Coetzee’s. But he shows us also that her understanding of our relation to animals seems to throw into shadow the full horror of what we do to each other, as if we could not keep in focus the Holocaust as an image for what we do to animals without losing our ability to see *it*, and to see what it fully shows us of ourselves. So there is a part of the difficulty of reality here that is not seen by Costello: so far as we keep one sort of difficulty in view we seem blocked from seeing another. And there is also a further important theme of the lectures that we cannot get into view so long as we stay entirely with her understanding, the difficulty of attempting to bring a difficulty of reality into focus, in that any such attempt is inextricably intertwined with relations of power between people. Elizabeth Costello responds

¹² See James 1960: “The Sick Soul,” Lectures VI and VII, 137–71.

to the allegations that dietary restrictions, and arguments in favor of them, are a way of allowing some group of people to claim superiority over others; but the lectures themselves leave us with a picture of complex dynamics within her family, in which her grandchildren's responsiveness to animals and to eating baby animals cannot be pulled apart from the mutual resentment between her and her daughter-in-law.

Elizabeth Costello, talking about Ted Hughes, says that writers teach us more than they are aware of; writing about Wolfgang Koehler, she says that the book we read is not the book he thought he was writing. Garber says that we can take both remarks to be about Coetzee, but she then more or less drops the point. I would pick it up and use it this way: Coetzee gives us a view of a profound disturbance of soul, and puts that view into a complex context. What is done by doing so he cannot tell us, he does not know. What response we may have to the difficulties of the lectures, the difficulties of reality, is not something the lectures themselves are meant to settle. This itself expresses a mode of understanding of the kind of animal we are, and indeed of the moral life of this kind of animal.

III. Deflection

I have suggested that Coetzee's lectures present a mode of understanding of the kind of animal we are, where that understanding can be present in poetry, in a broad sense of the term. There is also the idea that an understanding of the kind of animal we are is present only in a diminished and distorted way in philosophical argumentation. Philosophy characteristically misrepresents both our own reality and that of others, in particular those "others" who are animals. What we then see in the response to Coetzee's lectures by Gutmann and Singer (and to a lesser degree by Doniger and Smuts) is that the lectures are put into the context of argumentative discourse on moral issues. I want a term for what is going on here, which I shall take from Cavell, from "Knowing and Acknowledging." Cavell writes about the philosopher who begins (we imagine) from an appreciation of something appalling: that I may be suffering, and my suffering be utterly unknown or uncared about, "and that others may be suffering and I not know" (1969b: 247). But the philosopher's understanding is *deflected*; the issue becomes deflected, as the philosopher thinks it or rethinks it in

the language of philosophical skepticism. And philosophical responses to that skepticism, for example, demonstrations that it is confused, further deflect from the truth here (260). I shall return to Cavell's ideas; here I simply want the notion of deflection, for describing what happens when we are moved from the appreciation, or attempt at appreciation, of a difficulty of reality to a philosophical or moral problem apparently in the vicinity.

Let me go back briefly to my first example, the poem from Ted Hughes. What is expressed there is the sense of a difficulty that pushes us beyond what we can think. To attempt to think it is to feel one's thinking come unhinged. Our concepts, our ordinary life with our concepts, pass by this difficulty as if it were not there; the difficulty, if we try to see it, shoulders us out of life, is deadly chilling. How then can we describe the philosophical deflection from a difficulty of reality, as we see it in Gutmann and Singer? I have in mind centrally their taking Coetzee as contributing to the discussion of a moral issue: how we should treat animals. Should we eat them, should we grant them rights? And so on. Philosophy knows how to do this. It is hard, all right, but that is what university philosophy departments are for, to enable us to learn how to discuss hard problems, what constitutes a good argument, what is distorted by emotion, when we are making assertions without backing them up. What I have meant to suggest by picking up Cavell's use of the term "deflection" is that the hardness there, in philosophical argumentation, is not the hardness of appreciating or trying to appreciate a difficulty of reality. In the latter case, the difficulty lies in the apparent resistance by reality to one's ordinary mode of life, including one's ordinary modes of thinking: to appreciate the difficulty is to feel oneself being shouldered out of how one thinks, how one is apparently supposed to think, or to have a sense of the inability of thought to encompass what it is attempting to reach. Such appreciation may involve the profound isolation felt by someone like Costello. Recall here her reference to her body as wounded: her isolation is felt in the body, as the speaker in Hughes's poem feels a bodily thrownness from the photograph. Coetzee's lectures ask us to inhabit a body.¹³ But, just as, in considering what death is to an animal, we may reject our own capacity to inhabit its body in imagination,¹⁴ so we may, in reading the

¹³ See Coetzee 1999: 51; here I am taking a remark of Costello's as deeply Coetzee's.

¹⁴ Central to the lectures: see 1999: 65, also 32. I return to this region of Coetzee's thought in Part VI.

lectures, reject our own capacity to inhabit in imagination the body of the woman confronting, trying to confront, the difficulty of what we do to animals. The deflection into discussion of a moral issue is a deflection which makes our own bodies 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 (as our sentience, for example, might be taken to be relevant to our having “moral status”). So here I am inviting you to think of what it would be not to be deflected as an inhabiting of a body (one’s own, or an imagined other’s) in the appreciating of a difficulty of reality. This may make it sound as if philosophy is inevitably deflected from appreciation of the kind of difficulty I mean, if (that is) philosophy does not know how to inhabit a body (does not know how to treat a wounded body as anything but a fact). I shall return to that question later, and also to Coetzee on imagining one’s own death, on having a genuinely embodied knowledge of being extinguished. For that is another important point in the lectures, not mentioned by any of the commentators.

IV. Beauty and Goodness, and Spikiness

I said at the beginning that I was concerned with a range of phenomena; and so far I have had only two examples, which cannot by themselves adequately suggest the range. I want briefly to mention some other examples to go a part of the way to remedying that.

My first example involved a poem about life and death; the second example involved the horror of what we do to animals. But I would include in what I call the difficulty of reality some things that are entirely different. Instances of goodness or of beauty can throw us. I mean that they can give us the sense that *this* should not be, that we cannot fit it into the understanding we have of what the world is like. It is wholly inexplicable that it should be; and yet it is. That is what Czeslaw Milosz writes about beauty: “It should not exist. There is not only no reason for it, but an argument against. Yet undoubtedly it is...” (1988: 407). And he writes of the mystery that may seem to be present in the architecture of a tree, the slimness of a column crowned with green, or in the voices of birds outside the window greeting the morning. How can this be? – In the case of our relationship with animals, a sense of the difficulty of reality may involve not only the kind of horror felt

by Elizabeth Costello in Coetzee's lectures, but also and equally a sense of astonishment and incomprehension that there should be beings so like us, so unlike us, so astonishingly capable of being companions of ours and so unfathomably distant. A sense of its being impossible that we should go and *eat* them may go with feeling how powerfully strange it is that they and we should share as much as we do, and yet also not share; that they should be capable of incomparable beauty and delicacy and terrible ferocity; that some among them should be so mind-bogglingly weird or repulsive in their forms or in their lives. Later I will come to Cavell's remarks about human separateness as turned equally toward splendor and toward horror, mixing beauty and ugliness, but those words, which he calls on to help give the felt character of human separateness, are very like words we might call on to express the extraordinary felt character of animal life in relation to our own.

Ruth Klüger, in her memoir *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered*, describes her own astonishment and awe at the act of the young woman at Auschwitz who first encouraged a terrified child, Ruth at 12, to tell a lie that might help save her life, and who then stood up for her, got her through a selection. Klüger says that she tells the story in wonder, that she has never ceased to wonder at that girl's doing, the "incomparable and inexplicable" goodness that touched her that day (2001: 103–109). In discussing Hughes's poem, I mentioned that the photograph and what it shows would not be taken to boggle the mind by everyone. The men were alive, and now are dead; what's the problem? Klüger says that when she tells her story in wonder, "people wonder at my wonder. They say, okay, some persons are altruistic. We understand that; it doesn't surprise us. The girl who helped you was one of those who liked to help" (108).

Here, as in the case of the Hughes poem, what is capable of astonishing one in its incomprehensibility, its not being fittable in with the world as one understands it, may be seen by others as unsurprising. Klüger asks her readers not just to look at the scene but to listen to her and not take apart what happened, to "absorb it" as she tells it (108–109). She asks for a kind of imagination that can inhabit her own continued astonishment. The "taking apart" that she asks us to eschew would be a distancing from the story, a fitting of what went on into this or that way of handling things, a deflecting from the truth.

(In a discussion of concepts of the miraculous, R. F. Holland sets out one such concept as that of the occurrence of something which is at one

and the same time empirically certain and conceptually impossible. The story in the New Testament of water having been turned into wine is “the story of something that could have been known empirically to have occurred, and it is also the story of the occurrence of something which is conceptually impossible.” To be the miracle story it is, Holland says, it has to be both; the sort of occurrence he means is one which, for us, is impossible to think, and yet it is there. Klüger, in introducing the story of what happened to her, describes it as an act of grace, and I do not want to suggest that that is the same as seeing it as a miracle, in Holland’s sense. But I do want to connect the astonishment and awe that Klüger expresses as related to the astonishment and awe that one would feel at a miracle in Holland’s sense, and indeed to the astonishment Milosz expresses at the existence of beauty.)

Mary Mann’s story, “Little Brother,” is described by A. S. Byatt (in her introductory essay for the *Oxford Book of English Short Stories*) as “plain, and brief, and clear and terrible.” Mann’s telling of the story is “spiky with morals and the inadequacy of morals” (1998: xix–xx). Byatt says no more than that; and it is therefore not entirely obvious what she means by the telling being spiky with the inadequacy of morals, and how that is related to the terribleness of what is related. (What is related is the playing of two poor children, who have no toys, with the corpse of their newborn, stillborn brother. His stiff little body is the only doll they have had. The narrator had told the mother what she thought of the desecration; the last word is given to the mother.) The telling, fully felt, shoulders us from a familiar sense of moral life, from a sense of being able to take in and think a moral world. Moral thought gets no grip here. The terribleness of what is going on and the terribleness of the felt resistance of the narrated reality to moral thought are inseparable. (A story that seems to me comparable in its “spikiness” with morals and the inadequacy of morals is Leonard Woolf’s “Pearls and Swine.” On one level, the story is a criticism of racism and colonialism; but it is also a telling of the kind of terribleness that, fully felt, shoulders one from one’s familiar sense of moral life.) Again here I should want to note that the sense of this or another narrated reality as resisting our modes of moral thought is not something everyone would recognize.

V. Turned to Stone

Hughes's poem again: the contradictory permanent horrors shoulder out one's body from its instant and heat. To look is to experience death, to be turned to stone. Losing one's instant and heat, being turned to something permanent and hard and cold, is a central image in Cavell's discussion of skepticism and knowledge in *The Winter's Tale* and *Othello* (1979: 481–96). He says of *Winter's Tale* that Hermione's fate of being turned to stone can be understood as her undergoing what is in a sense the fate of Leontes. Leontes's failure or inability to recognize her makes her as stone; "hence," Cavell says, that is what it does to him. "One can see this as the projection of his own sense of numbness, of living death"; and Cavell then asks why that was Leontes's fate (481). Cavell links the two plays with a play on words: in both plays, "the consequence for the man's refusal of knowledge of his other is an imagination of stone": stone as what is imagined and stoniness as what has befallen the imagination. Othello imagines Desdemona's skin as having the smoothness of alabaster (481–82). He imagines her as stone, says that she stones her heart. It is Othello, though, who "will give her a stone heart for her stone body"; his "words of stone" transfer to her what he himself has undergone, a heart turned to stone (492). What does this to Othello is the intolerableness to him of Desdemona's existence, her separateness. About the possibility of that separateness Cavell says that it is precisely what tortures Othello: "The content of his torture is the premonition of the existence of another, hence of his own, his own as dependent, as partial" (493). Separateness can be felt as horror;¹⁵ such a response is what puts Othello "beyond aid."

Cavell has in many of his writings traced connections and relations between on the one hand the multifarious forms in which we take in or try to take in or resist taking in that difficulty of reality that he refers to most often as separateness and on the other hand skepticism: skepticism as itself both a presence in our lives and as, intellectualized, a central part of our philosophical tradition. The early direction his thoughts took on these issues can be seen in his statement of one form of the

¹⁵ Cavell says that human separateness is "turned equally toward splendor and toward horror, mixing beauty and ugliness; turned toward before and after; toward flesh and blood" (1979: 492). My discussion is partial at this point, emphasizing as it does horror over splendor. But see also 494–96.

“conclusion” towards which he took those thoughts to be heading, that “skepticism concerning other minds is not skepticism but is tragedy.”¹⁶ Earlier still, he had been particularly concerned, in “Knowing and Acknowledging” (1969b), with what he took to be inadequate in the Wittgensteinian response to skepticism: I mean the response of such Wittgensteinians as Norman Malcolm and John Cook, not that of Wittgenstein. Malcolm and Cook had taken the skeptic about other minds to be confused about what can be said in the language game in which we speak about our own sensations and those of others, in which we express our own feelings and in which we may speak of what we know of the feelings of others, what we doubt or are certain of. Thus Cook (1965) had criticized the idea that it is some sort of limitation on us that we cannot actually feel what another person feels, cannot have that very feeling; such an idea reflects (he thinks) one’s taking the inaccessibility of the feeling as like the inaccessibility of a flower in a garden on the far side of a wall over which one cannot see. What Cook was criticizing was the idea I may have of the position that I cannot be in with respect to the pain of the other person, the position that that person himself is in, the decisive position. His argument was an attempt to show that the skeptic takes to be a kind of inability what is really a matter of the difference between two language games: in the language-game with pain, there is no such thing as the position in which one has *that which* the other person has. We are not *unable* to be there if there is no *there* where we are unable to be. Cook’s account was thus meant to enable us to see the confusion in the skeptic’s view. Cavell’s response was astonishing. He places Cook’s argument in the situation from which the skeptic speaks; leads us to imagine that situation and to recognize the pressures on words; shows us what may happen with our experience of distance from what others undergo. When we put, or try to put, that experience in words, the words fail us, the words do not do what we are trying to get them to do. The words make it look as if I am simply unable to see over a wall that happens to separate me from

¹⁶ Foreword to *Claim of Reason* (1979: xix). What Cavell says is more complex than my quotation: He says that he knew (in 1973 and 1974) the direction that the conclusion of his work in progress was “hauling itself toward,” and that that conclusion had to do with the connection of “Knowing and Acknowledging” and “The Avoidance of Love,” “the reciprocation between the ideas of acknowledgment and of avoidance, for example as the thought that skepticism concerning other minds is not skepticism but is tragedy” (xviii–xix).

something I want very much to see. But the fact that the words are apparently too weak to do what I am demanding from them does not mean that the experience here of *powerlessness* has been shown to involve a kind of grammatical error. But why, then, since words seem not to be able to do what I want, did I call on them? Why, in particular, does the experience appear to be an experience of not being able to know what is there in the other because I cannot have what he has? Cavell says: “I am filled with this feeling – of our separateness, let us say – and I want you to have it too. So I give voice to it. And then my powerlessness presents itself as ignorance – a metaphysical finitude as an intellectual lack” (1969b: 263). His criticism of Cook, then, takes the form of allowing us to hear Cook’s own voice differently. When Cook, in repudiating the skeptic’s idea, speaks of it as “inherently confused” (1965: 291), Cavell lets us hear his voice as responding with “correctness” to the voice of philosophical skepticism.¹⁷ When I spoke of Cavell’s response as astonishing, I meant his teaching us a way of hearing both Cook and the skeptic whom he is criticizing, a way of hearing these voices that puts them back into the situation within which the humanness of the other seems out of reach, and thereby shows us where and how philosophy has to start. – This takes us back to the subject of deflection.

In Part III, I quoted Cavell’s description of how we may be filled with a sense of the facts, the ineluctable facts of our capacity to miss the suffering of others and of the possibility of our own suffering being unknown and uncared about; we may be filled with a sense of these facts, of our distance from each other, and our appreciation be deflected, the problem itself be deflected, into one or another of the forms it is given in philosophical skepticism. I quoted also Cavell’s remark about the anti-skeptical response as a further deflection, a deflection that ignores the fundamental insight of the skeptic (1969b: 258–60), the sense the skeptic has of the other’s position with respect to his own pain, and the light in which it casts his position in relation to that other. The image of deflection is implicit also later on in Cavell’s writings, when he describes the difficulty of philosophy as that of not being able to find and stay on a path (“Declining Decline,” 1989: 37); for we can here see deflection as deflection from a path we need to find and stay

¹⁷ “Knowing and Acknowledging” (1969b: 259–60); the term “voice of correctness” comes from Cavell’s “Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy” (1969a: 71).

on; but it is also deflection from seeing, deflection from taking in, the tormenting possibility central to the experience of the skeptic. What he sees of the human condition, what unseats his reason, is converted into and treated as an intellectual difficulty (1979: 493). I shall come back to this, but first I want to make further connections with Coetzee's lectures and Hughes's poem.

VI. Correctness and Exposure

There is in Coetzee's second lecture a response by a fictional philosopher, Thomas O'Hearne, to Elizabeth Costello's ideas (1999: 59–65). It is implicitly a response also to some of the arguments in favor of animal rights put forward by philosophers like Singer and Tom Regan. But here I want to consider a response by a real philosopher, Michael Leahy, a response which has some resemblances to O'Hearne's but which will more easily enable us to see the connections with Cavell's thought. Leahy's argument has two parts. He first tries to establish what the language-game is within which we speak of animals and their pains and desires and so on.¹⁸ His argument is that animal liberationists characteristically fail to recognize that the language-game in which we speak of the mental life of animals, of a dog fearing this or a chimpanzee believing that, is "vitally different" from the language-game in which we use such terms of human beings (138–39). Leahy relies on that point when he goes on to argue that the practices within which we use animals in various ways (as pets, food, experimental subjects, sources of fur and so on) "dictate the criteria for our judging what constitutes needless suffering" (198), and that is the second part of the overall argument. The two parts of his argument together are thus meant to undercut the case made for animal rights. Leahy's response to the liberationists is not unlike Cook's response to skepticism about other minds: like Cook, he takes the failure to recognize the difference between distinct language-games to be the ultimate source of the confusion he wants to diagnose. There are various questions that might be raised about how the two parts of his argument are connected,

¹⁸ All of chapter 5 of *Against Liberation* (1991) is relevant, but p. 126 is particularly helpful in making clear Leahy's method and aims.

about whether the recognition of the differences between the language-games has the practical implications that Leahy thinks it has.¹⁹ But that is not my concern here. I am interested rather in Leahy's voice, and its relation to the anti-skeptical voice exemplified for Cavell in "Knowing and Acknowledging" by the voices of Malcolm and Cook. The Coetzee case is not an exact parallel to Cavell's; and the philosophical debates about animals cannot be treated as more than partially parallel to the debate about skepticism.²⁰ But we are concerned in both cases with a repudiation of the everyday; with a sense of being shouldered out from our ways of thinking and speaking by a torment of reality. In both cases, the repudiation may be heard as expressing such-and-such position in an intellectualized debate; in both cases, the opposite sides in the debate may have more in common than they realize. In the voices we hear in the debate about animal rights, those of people like Singer on the one hand and those of Leahy and the fictional O'Hearne on the other, there is shared a desire for a "because": because animals are this kind of being, or because they are that kind of being, thus-and-such is their standing for our moral thought. If we listen to these voices in the way Cavell has taught us to, can we hear in them a form of skepticism?

¹⁹ There are also questions about the first part of the argument, the attempt to establish the differences between the language-game in which we speak about the thoughts, feelings and intentions of animals and that in which we speak about our own. One question would concern the idea of there being just the two language-games he describes. The question is particularly acute in connection with the writings of Vicki Hearne, which Leahy discusses and criticizes at various points in the book. One way of putting her understanding of what is involved in talking about animals is that talking about animals in connection with their "work" (in her sense of that term) is itself a distinctive language-game. This language-game she takes to be inseparable from the trainer's activity; the activity itself is carried on through such talk, and the talk gets its sense through what it achieves in the shared "work." See, in addition to *Adam's Task* (Hearne 1986, the target of Leahy's criticism), her essay "A Taxonomy of Knowing: Animals Captive, Free-Ranging, and at Liberty" (1995: 441–56).

²⁰ For one thing, I do not want to suggest that Leahy's use of the concept of criteria in his argument is an appeal to criteria in Cavell's sense. But more important than that, there is a significant difference between the two cases in the conceptions of knowledge at play. The sort of knowledge to which Costello appeals when she discusses the attachment of animals to life can be contrasted with that which Othello takes himself to want. See, on knowledge and forms of perception in *Othello*, and on Othello's desire for proof, Naomi Scheman's "Othello's Doubt/Desdemona's Death: The Engendering of Skepticism," in *Pursuits of Reason*. Scheman's essay itself helps to bring out also a connection between the issues I have been discussing and issues concerning gender, both within Coetzee's lectures and more generally.

That is, a form of skepticism in the desire for something better than what we are condemned to (as the kind of animal we are)? But what might we be thought to be “condemned to”? Cavell, in *The Claim of Reason*, uses the word “exposure” in discussing our situation: being exposed, as I am in the case of “my concept of the other,” means that my assurance in applying the concept is not provided for me. “The other can present me with no mark or feature on the basis of which I can *settle* my attitude” (433). He says that to accept my exposure, in the case of my knowledge of others, “seems to imply an acceptance of the possibility that my knowledge of others may be overthrown, even that it ought to be”; it implies acceptance of not being in what I may take to be the ideal position, what I want or take myself to want (439; see also 454). Our “exposure” in the case of animals lies in there being nothing but our own responsibility, our own making the best of it. We are not, here too, in what we might take to be the “ideal” position. We want to be able to see that, given what animals are, and given also our properties, what we are like (given our “marks and features” and theirs), there are general principles that establish the moral significance of their suffering compared to ours, of their needs compared to ours, and we could then see what treatment of them was and what was not morally justified. We would be *given* the presence or absence of moral community (or thus-and-such degree or kind of moral community) with animals. But we are exposed – that is, we are thrown into finding something we can live with, and it may at best be a kind of bitter-tasting compromise. There is here only what we make of our exposure, and it leaves us endless room for double-dealing and deceit. The exposure is most plain in the Coetzee lectures at the point at which Elizabeth Costello is asked whether her vegetarianism comes out of moral conviction, and replies that it does not; “It comes out of a desire to save my soul,” and she adds that she is wearing leather shoes, and carrying a leather purse.²¹

The title of this essay is “The difficulty of reality and the difficulty of philosophy,” but a word I would want to add to the title is: *exposure*. Ted Hughes’s poem is about *a single exposure*, but the single exposure is *our* exposure, as we find for ourselves, or are meant to find, in a

²¹ To forestall misunderstanding here, I want to note that I am not (in this section or anywhere else) denying a role, indeed a large and deeply significant role, to *because* in moral thinking, and indeed to argument. I am suggesting we look with some serious puzzlement at attempts to establish moral community, or to show it to be absent, through attention to “marks and features.”

shuddering awareness of death and life together. In the background is perhaps a reference to Wilfred Owen's "Exposure," in which the sense of war as not making sense, the sense of loss of sense, is tied to death literally by exposure, exposure to cold that transforms the men to iced solidity. – I have not more than scratched the surface of Cavell's use of the idea of exposure; but there is also more to the idea in Coetzee's lectures. Elizabeth Costello, in Coetzee's first lecture, speaks of her own knowledge of death, in a passage which (in the present context) takes us to the "contradictory permanent horrors" spoken of in Hughes's poem. "For an instant at a time," she says, "I know what it is like to be a corpse. The knowledge repels me. It fills me with terror; I shy away from it, refuse to entertain it." She goes on to say that we all have such moments, and that the knowledge we then have is not abstract but embodied. "For a moment we *are* that knowledge. We live the impossible: we live beyond our death, look back on it, yet look back as only a dead self can." She goes on, making the contradiction explicit: "What I know is what a corpse cannot know: that it is extinct, that it knows nothing and will never know anything anymore. For an instant, before my whole structure of knowledge collapses in panic, I am alive inside that contradiction, dead and alive at the same time" (32). The awareness we each have of being a living body, being "alive to the world," carries with it exposure to the bodily sense of vulnerability to death, sheer animal vulnerability, the vulnerability we share with them. This vulnerability is capable of panicking us. To be able to acknowledge it at all, let alone as shared, is wounding; but acknowledging it as shared with other animals, in the presence of what we do to them, is capable not only of panicking one but also of isolating one, as Elizabeth Costello is isolated. Is there any difficulty in seeing why we should not prefer to return to moral debate, in which the livingness and death of animals enter as facts that we treat as relevant in this or that way, not as presences that may unseat our reason?

VII. The Difficulty of Philosophy

Can there be such a thing as philosophy that is not deflected from such realities?²² This is a great question for Simone Weil. She wrote:

²² Alice Crary has pointed out to me that my descriptions, earlier in this essay, of how

Human thought is unable to acknowledge the reality of affliction. To acknowledge the reality of affliction means saying to oneself: "I may lose at any moment, through the play of circumstances over which I have no control, anything whatsoever that I possess, including those things which are so intimately mine that I consider them as being myself. There is nothing that I might not lose. It could happen at any moment that what I am might be abolished and replaced by anything whatsoever of the filthiest and most contemptible sort."

To be aware of this in the depth of one's soul is to experience non-being. (1986: 70)

Weil's writings show that she saw the difficulty of what she was doing as the difficulty of keeping to such awareness, of not being deflected from it. I give her as an example of a philosopher concerned with deflection from the difficulty of reality, but a philosopher very different from Cavell.

In the concluding two paragraphs of *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell speaks of Othello and Desdemona, lying dead:

A statue, a stone, is something whose existence is fundamentally open to the ocular proof. A human being is not. The two bodies lying together form an emblem of this fact, the truth of skepticism. What this man lacked was not certainty. He knew everything, but he could not yield to what he knew, be commanded by it. He found out too much for his mind, not too little. Their differences from one another – the one everything the other is not – form an emblem of human separation, which can be accepted, and granted, or not. (1979: 496)

Cavell returns to the audience: "we are here, knowing they are 'gone

philosophical argument can deflect us from attention to the difficulty of reality may seem to have implied the answer "No" to my question whether there can be a non-deflecting practice of philosophy. That there can be such a practice, and that argument may have an essential role in it, is not something I would wish to deny. There are here two distinct points: philosophical argument is not in and of itself any indication that attention has been or is being deflected from the difficulty of reality, and (more positively) philosophical argument has an important role to play in bringing to attention such difficulty and in exploring its character, as well as in making clear what the limits or limitations are of philosophical argument, and indeed of other argument. See, for example, Cavell's arguments about the argument that the human embryo is a human being (1979: 372–78).

burning to hell.” He asks: “can philosophy accept them back at the hands of poetry?” and answers, “Certainly not so long as philosophy continues, as it has from the first, to demand the banishment of poetry from its republic. Perhaps it could if it could itself become literature. But can philosophy become literature and still know itself?”

What follows is not meant to answer that last question, but to bear on it.

It may seem as if Cavell is here taking for granted that literature can accept – no problem! – such realities as throw philosophy. I do not think that that is an implication, but I shall not discuss it.²³ I want to look instead at Cavell’s question whether philosophy can accept Othello and Desdemona back, at the hands of poetry. For philosophy to do so would be for philosophy to accept human separateness as “turned equally toward splendor and toward horror, mixing beauty and ugliness; turned toward before and after; toward flesh and blood” (1979: 492); for philosophy not to accept them back is for philosophy not to get near, but to get deflected from, the forms which our exposure to that separateness takes. But if that suggests a conception of the difficulty of philosophy, the difficulty of staying turned toward before and after, toward flesh and blood, towards the life of the animals we are, how is it related to what Cavell says elsewhere about the difficulty of philosophy?

In “Notes and Afterthoughts on the Opening of Wittgenstein’s *Investigations*,” Cavell says that the medium of philosophy, as Wittgenstein understands it, “lies in demonstrating, or say showing, the obvious”; he then asks how the obvious can fail to be obvious. What is the hardness of seeing the obvious? – And he then says that this must bear on what the hardness of philosophizing is (1996: 271–72). This question is present also in his reflections on Wittgenstein’s aim of bringing words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use. What can the difficulty be, then, of bringing or leading words back? What is the everyday, if it is so hard to achieve? It is within the everyday that there lie the forms and varieties of repudiation of our language-games and distance from them, the possibility of being tormented by the hiddenness, the separateness, the otherness of others

²³ The kinds of difficulty which literature may have in the face of a “difficulty of reality” are emphasized by Simone Weil in remarks about the representation of affliction. See “Human Personality” (1986: 72).

(1989 *passim*). As a form of repudiation of the language-game in which there is no contradiction between the young men being profoundly alive and then totally dead may be in the life of the Hughes poem; which is itself not to be thought of as outside life with the words we use for thinking of life and death.

In Part I, when I introduced the phrase “a difficulty of reality,” I said that, in the cases I had in mind, the reality to which we were attending seemed to resist our thinking it. That our thought and reality might fail to meet is itself the content of a family of forms of skepticism, to which one response is that the very idea of such a failure is confused, that what I have spoken of as the content of such forms of skepticism is not a content at all. A language, a form of thought, cannot (we may be told) get things right or wrong, fit or fail to fit reality; it can only be more or less useful. What I want to end with is not exactly a response to that: it is to note how much that coming apart of thought and reality belongs to flesh and blood. I take that, then, to be itself a thought joining Hughes, Coetzee, and Cavell.

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