The Animals We Eat: Between Attention and Ironic Detachment

1 Introduction: eating dogs and eating pigs

A recent photographic report from the Lychee and Dog Meat festival in China portrays a woman in tears, saying goodbye to a dog being sent to slaughter, surrounded by a group of young men who are laughing at her.[1] The woman is holding the dog's head with one hand, her pain-distorted face raised, looking beyond the camera's focus. A group of young men, one holding a metal chain connected to the dog's collar, can be described as smiling, laughing, smirking. One of them is looking directly at the woman, an ironic expression on his face. We don't know, from the photo, where the dog is looking.

This image is arresting, yet at the same time exceedingly familiar. Some of its fundamental elements are to be found in countless situations involving the use of animals for food in many other countries. Two of the elements I am referring to are: a distressed human being (or group of human beings) engaging with animals before they are slaughtered to be turned into food; and another human, or group of humans, responding to the distressed one(s) with irony, annoyance, contempt, or other related attitudes, which exhibit that: i) what the first group is feeling in relation to those animals is in some way inappropriate, out of place; and ii) a form of detachment from both the animals in question and from the other group's reaction.

The familiarity of these elements, for a reader in a Western context, comes from the various occasions in which people (often, but not exclusively, identified as animal rights activists) attempt to disrupt the transportation of animals to slaughter or simply bear witness to the

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1 The image, used by several news articles, can be found here: https://www.shutterstock.com/editorial/image-editorial/yulin-dog-eating-festival-in-yulin-city-guangxi-zhuang-china-jun-2015-4866841ac

animals before they are being killed.[2] Only, the animals in this context are generally pigs, cows, sheep, rabbits, goats, and not, ordinarily, dogs and cats. Much has been said about the relative moral justifications of eating what are considered as "companion animals" as opposed to animals that have traditionally been bred for food, depending on one's geographical and cultural context.[3] Ethical approaches that focus on the capacities or properties of individual animals, such as Singer's (1975) utilitarianism and Regan's (1983) deontological "subject-of-a-life" theory, see the categories of farm and companion animals as entirely irrelevant to the question of whether it is justifiable to kill or hurt animals in order to produce food out their bodies. The Yulin dog meat festival can be both attacked and defended on these bases: if all sentient animals, or all subjects of a life, should not be harmed through confinement, pain, and death, then the festival is as much to be condemned as most instances of animal meat production (pig, cow, horse, sheep…) elsewhere in the world;[4] on the other hand, if it is considered to be acceptable in the West to treat pigs, cows and chickens (traditionally farmed animals) in the ways they are treated to produce meat, dairy and eggs, then the moral outrage raised in North America and Europe in response to eating dogs and cats in China is not justified.[5]

Defenders of the festival, some of whom see the criticism as a form of imposition of Western values, appeal precisely to this type of argument. Quite cogently, Yulin resident Wang Yue says: "Those scenes of bloody dog slaughter that you see online, I want to say that the killing of any animal will be bloody. I hope people can look at this objectively" (Zhou and

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2 As an example, see the famous case of Anita Krajnc, co-founder of Toronto Pig Save, who was involved in activities including giving water to pigs in slaughter trucks. Because of that, Krajnc was charged of criminal mischief in 2015 but found not guilty in 2017 (Krajnc, 2015).
3 For a popular book on the topic, see Joy (2009).
4 With some variations based on the specific amount of harm in each case.
5 See a response flagging the points just made by Newkey-Burden (2018) in The Guardian, in relation to the same issue, but in South Korea. I should flag that the present analysis comes from a Western context. The aim is not to evaluate culture-relative practices of eating animals, but to explore ethical engagements between human and non-human animals, where non-human animals are objects of human consumption in virtually all countries.

Shepherd, 2018). The same “objective look” is provided by the “individualist” theories above. While their conclusion in relation to the “bloody business” of killing is the opposite of what Mr Yue seems to endorse, they both start from identifying morally relevant similarities in the (individual) animals and in the conditions which violate the animals’ morally relevant properties.

Defending the eating of some animals but not others, where the one group of animals is relevantly similar to the second in terms of most accepted morally relevant properties, variously identified as sentience, the capacity to feel emotions, etc., requires a very different approach. One such approach is care ethics. Seeing caring relationships as the foundation of moral obligations, some care ethicists who have written about non-human animals argue that animal treatment needs to be sensitive to context, including social and emotional context. Specifically, this means that quite regardless of the animals’ capacity for pain or responses to social deprivation, two factors ground our responsibility towards them: (a) reciprocity and (b) dependency. Nel Noddings, arguing that the right to live is something we “confer” on animals (2003, p. 153), appeals to both criteria to argue that we can, and should, differentiate between the moral responsibility we have to different animals based on the above criteria rather than on the grounds of any inherent value or of any value-grounding capacity.[6] Yet capacities seem to matter in this theory, when it comes to the sort of relationships they enable. A cat, therefore, cannot enter the same kind of morally serious relationship that a child can because, according to Noddings, a cat lacks the capacity to make projects and question its own life, or the potential to do so. The unclarity as to why these are the capacities needed for a caring relationship, the apparent lack of curiosity in the cat’s life, and the quick conclusion about the cat’s inability to return a meaningful form of care, are internal problems, and have been raised by other feminist

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6 Although, at times, she points out that we should always avoid inflicting pain, even on animals that have no relationship with us, but she admits that if a rat entered her house (uninvited) she would “shoot it cleanly if the opportunity arose” (Noddings, 2003, p. 157).

philosophers (e.g. Josephine Donovan). Yet if care ethics grounds moral responsibility on reciprocal and dependent relationships, the place different species have in a society will matter, so much so that we can eat some animals and look after others, regardless of the similarities. It is important to note that care ethics does not unanimously lead to the acceptance of killing some animals while caring for others, as Carol Adams's and Josephine Donovan's work, among others, show.[7]

Yet the care tradition and Noddings herself raise an important point. They return the focus on the individual other, here the individual animal, and ask us to consider her/him, and do so from the perspective that we have come to inhabit; they present the individual, concrete animal as an object of moral response, rather than, as Singer's theory requires, "a vast group of interchangeable entities" (Noddings, 2003, p. 154). While this point can still give rise to serious problems, it offers an undeniable advantage in terms of its ability to ground moral reflection in actual practices.[8] As Rita Manning has aptly put it, a care ethics approach depends on "carefully listening to the creatures who are with you in that concrete situation" (Manning, 1992, p. 134). What such careful observation amounts to, and how it is done, is part of my concern.

In what follows, I want to defend intuitions and arguments taken from both sides just sketched – care ethics and impersonal, capacity-based theories – while offering a way to think about the animals that we eat which is neither wholly dependent on the relationships that we

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7 See Adams (1990); Donovan (1990); Donovan and Adams (2007). In an important essay, Donovan (1990) sketches a feminist ethics that requires that animals, domesticated or not, are not exploited, killed, or tortured, by appealing to respect for "the process of life" (p. 373), the injustice of "an attitude of dominance over nature", the refusal "to quantify and rank species hierarchically", and respecting 'the "thou" of other creatures" (p. 372). These principles, as Donovan describes them, lead her to the conclusion that "it is clear that the ethic sketched here must reject carnivorism" and other uses of animals e.g. for clothing or entertainment (p. 375).

8 The problems include: that fact that the focus on the individual animal may make us irresponsible towards the other animals that we do not have a relationship with; specifying the forms and responsibilities of such relationships; being able to ensure the relationship is desirable for both parties, and what sorts of obligations it gives rise to.

happen to forge with other animals (which can be overly contingent and problematic in the ways they arise and select their objects, and which may excessively restrict responsibility), yet makes room for the fundamental ethical nature of the encounter with another individual animal (which is a major lack in the impersonal theories of deontology and utilitarianism).[9] That encounter, I am going to argue, is crucial in forming and understanding the ethical relationship, but does not by itself determine or create the value of the animal. Its importance lies in enabling the appreciation of value, in ways that are creative without being a projection, nor make the discovery of value relative to the bond that happens to be forged. I am going to discuss this encounter, what enables it and what follows from it, drawing on Iris Murdoch (who is relevant to care ethics, but not part of the tradition) and other philosophers from a different but still particularity-based tradition, namely a Wittgensteinian one.

If by encounter we mean a mere physical contact and presence, its outcome does not, of course, guarantee the appreciation of value that interests me. Any encounter can be approached through two opposing attitudes, which are the subjects of this paper: attention and ironic detachment. The former, I will suggest, enables an encounter to be value-discovering, while the latter is likely to be value-denying. Both attitudes are strikingly represented in the opening photograph, which serves as both ground and starting point for the more general discussion in this paper. Another reason to use this picture is that the animal at the centre of the gaze is a dog. For many readers, it will be easier to appreciate the attentive attitude in relation to dogs, because many readers will have had the experience of sharing a home, play, physical contact, or other interactions with dogs. Starting from that experience, we can apply its framework, imaginatively or in practice, to our encounter with any other animals: the attentive

9 I write ‘we eat’ to refer to the practice of eating animals, be they dogs or cows, that is still shared by the majority of human beings. The ‘we’ is contingent, historical, and embraces humanity quite broadly. It does not assume that I or the reader also engage in that practice and it accepts the possibility that in future years it will no longer ring true.

relationship, as the ironic detached one, needs to be established and explored, and cannot be delimited before any encounter has taken place.

2 Two kinds of gaze

The two attitudes just mentioned are represented in the photo by two gazes (where the gaze both embodies and constitutes the attitude): the gaze of the woman who is paying attention to the animal (even if she is not, at the time the shot is taken, looking directly at her/him) and the ironic gaze of the young man who is looking directly at the woman and smiling. These two gazes can be generalised. One gives us a helpful picture to think about the concern of those who reject using animals for food (and generally for other purposes such as experiments, clothing, entertainment) not primarily or solely through argument and conviction, but do so through the immediate, affective recognition of those animals as someone to whom those things should not be done. This gaze is directed at the animal, but it is also an expression of the subject. It involves the subject through the willingness to respond and the recognition of kinship.

On the other hand, the detached ironic gaze is representative of an attitude to the consumption of animals which is widespread in cases where such consumption is traditionally accepted. This is a gaze that takes the concern and pain of those who reject killing and harming animals for food as irrelevant, misplaced, or foolish. In turn, that implies that the animals in question do not have the value attributed to them. In discussing attitudes, such denial of the animals' value, again, does not need to be supported by argument or intellectual conviction. It also follows that not all rejections of vegetarianism need to be based on this attitude. The interest of the detached ironic attitude lies precisely in the refusal to engage fully and emotionally with the animal's value, and hence its neat opposition to the attentive attitude.

Looking at the photo, several interesting features of the ironic gaze can be extrapolated: first, it is directed at the woman and, only mediately through her, at the animal; second, and as a consequence, the animal is not an object of attention for this kind of gaze; third, the gaze is ironic, i.e. expressive of a perceived incongruity, here between concern for animals and what animals merit; fourth, the gaze is detached, both from the animal, in avoiding direct attention to it, and from the persons showing concern, in its atypical response to her suffering with laughter, rather than concern, empathy, or even disagreement; overall, then, this kind of gaze represents the attitude to consuming animals which does not take the animals into consideration as significant ethical factors in the practice of eating them. This attitude, I will argue, is one of the main moral psychological factors sustaining the possibility of consuming animals, and explains what the frequent charge of "cognitive dissonance" only describes: the gulf, in the same person, between claiming either that farmed animals have value and should not suffer or that companion animals are worthy of love and respect, and eating animals.[10] I shall unpack these elements of the detached ironic gaze, and their significance for eating animal products, below, after having discussed the attentive gaze to which, I argue, it stands in opposition.

The reader may object, at this point, that a discussion on animal ethics should include the dog's gaze in the picture. I must admit before proceeding that I will only do so implicitly: the crying woman's gaze, as we shall see, would not be what it is if it had not met the dog's gaze; in the woman's gaze, the dog's gaze is present too. Yet in talking about the woman-dog (or human-pig, human-cow, etc.) gaze and the relative attitude, I am mostly going to focus on the human part of it, and thus I may be guilty of the same criticism that Donna Haraway moved to Derrida for not being curious enough about the cat's perspective, not wondering what the

10 On cognitive dissonance and eating animals, see Joy (2009) and Loughnan (2014).

cat must have thought or felt when seeing him naked.[11] I am guilty, but only because my interest is to bring out ways in which we, as humans, engage or fail to engage with animals and with one another. Yet the animal gaze is not here really excluded. It is present in the human one, in fact in both human gazes. Part of what I intend to show, in fact, is precisely that when it comes to the question of eating animals no gaze is innocent, and each gaze will display either a recognition or a distance that is a way of engaging or not with the animal gaze and, at the same time, modifies how one perceives oneself. In the ironic gaze, the animal's gaze is present through its exclusion (where irony is not simply ignoring, but an active exclusionary strategy); in the attentive gaze, it is present because without some kind of mutuality, the attentive gaze would not be able to find something for attention to latch on and deliver the concerned response that it does. So we really have three gazes in the photo, two human, one canine; out of the human gazes, one that is mutual and responsive, and one that is detached. Or superficially so.

3 Attending to animals

If we return to the gaze of the woman in the picture, taken as representative of the gaze of those who oppose, and feel distress at, the killing of animals for human purposes such as food, we can extract two fundamental aspects. First, the gaze is directed entirely towards the animal; even if the woman in the picture is not right now looking at the animal, that is where her attention is focused. She is not concerned, at this moment, with the judgment of others; she is also not concerned with herself and her own interests, and the animal she is attending to is not her companion animal. The gaze is outward, to the other, the animal. Second, her gaze is aimed at

11 Haraway is here referring to Derrida's well-known reflections on the cat looking at him as he comes out of the shower in 'The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)' (Derrida, 2002), which I discuss further below, together with Haraway's objection.

a particular other, here the particular dog. It singles her/him out and embraces her/his particular existence.

These two features are at the heart of the attitude of animal liberation supporters who are distressed at the taking away and killing of animals for food, whatever the species, and wherever this occurs.[12] It is particularly visible in the activists who engage with the individual animals, giving them water or bearing witness, as the animals are being taken to slaughter, like the woman in the photo or Krajnc and members of groups similar to hers. The same two features also lie at the heart of the ethical attitude identified by Iris Murdoch as "attention".[13] Attention encapsulates Murdoch's general understanding of the way in which the individual can make moral progress, through a modification of consciousness in the direction of justice and realism. Attention enables just perception of the other, a discovery in which, according to Murdoch, morality is inherent. Attention, Murdoch writes, is "the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent" (1970, p. 34) and she identifies "selfless attention" with virtue (1970, p. 41).

Although Murdoch considers other people to be the main testing ground of morality, she does not exclude anything from being a potential object of moral consideration, and thus an object of attention: "the view which I suggest… connects morality with attention to individuals, human individuals or individual realities of other kinds" (1970, p. 38). While Murdoch's main concern is other human beings, the morally relevant realities that attention can disclose can include "other things, history, the natural world, the cosmos…" (1992, p. 268). Thus, while Murdoch does not explicitly discuss attention to other animals, there is room for it and, I suggest, need for it: if attention is, as Murdoch writes, a particular way of confronting and

12 I talk about "animal liberation" to include, but not be confined to, "animal rights", which I take to have a more specific intellectual framework.

13 Murdoch takes the concept of attention, with few modifications, from Simone Weil, to whom her whole moral psychology is also heavily indebted.

apprehending (moral) reality (1970, p. 37) one of our tasks today – when by far the greatest number of deaths of individual living beings occurs through killing animals for human consumption – is to attend to the animals and find out what attention to them yields.[14]

How, exactly, can attention shape a moral understanding of other animals? As we saw, attention, for Murdoch, enables just perception and understanding of its object. The word "just" is important. Murdoch draws a distinction between "just" and "accurate" ways of understanding reality, and claims that attention deals with justice, not with correctness (1970, p. 23). While correct understanding can be obtained from a detached, impersonal perspective, a just vision requires that we engage personally and imaginatively in our perception of the other. That is something we do, and fail to do, all the time. Cora Diamond's (1978) well-known proposal that we take a radical shift in our philosophical approaches to vegetarianism, away from views which derive value from impersonally and empirically discoverable capacities, is based on the same idea. Namely, that to discuss the value of others we need to acknowledge that the concepts we use, and the related perceptions we work with, are part of particular practices, and as such already morally charged. Here, Diamond suggests that the concept of "animal" used in animal ethics is not merely an empirical concept, just like the concept "human being" does not merely refer to the cluster of scientifically observable attributes of *homo sapiens*.

Further, the concept of animal, or the more specific concepts of pig and dog, are indivisible from the way we respond to the individuals, be it with fear, compassion, irritation, affection, and so on. This takes us back to the primacy of encounter. Minimally, those reactions show that the animals in question are recognised as beings with a life (a formulation reminiscent of Regan's "subject-of-a-life", but reached quite differently), for whom some things

14 Over 70 billion animals are killed every year, including only land animals and only killing for food, according to FAO: http://www.fao.org/faostat/en/#data/QL

matter, and for whom their own life matters in the way that ours matters to us.[15] In this sense at the very least, they are "fellow creatures" (Diamond, 1978, p. 474). The observation of their biological features cannot yield that concept, nor the (wide range of) responses that are appropriate to that concept. Without this sensitivity to the porous concept of "animal" and its element of fellowship, and without the encounter with individual animals that makes that possible, we can only find bridges from biological characteristics to values, as extensionist theories do. But that begins to appear as a more artificial and complicated route. Even if the starting point of such bridging theories were the human being, it is far from clear—as Wittgenstein among others reminds us—that with other humans the process is qualitatively different.[16]

What needs to be addressed, then, is how those concepts are formed, and whether there are concept-making practices that are more truthful than others. This is what thinking about attention aims to address. Intuitively, attending to something is more likely to reveal its features than failing to attend to it. But, as we have seen, the concept of attention at work in ethics, suggested by Murdoch, does not only concern knowledge vs ignorance. It also concerns the *kind* of knowledge yielded, which requires more than intellectual and perceptual faculties, if these are considered as detached from other faculties. As Diamond writes, seeing animals justly, indeed seeing anything justly, requires not a specific set of isolated faculties, but on the contrary it "depends on our coming to *attend* to the world and what is in it, in a way that will involve the exercise of *all* our faculties".[17] That is why truthful concepts developed through

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15 On the importance of the fact that some things matter to a living being as foundation of value, from a Kantian point of view, see Korsgaard's excellent book (2018).
16 Diamond's remarks on non-human animals are themselves inspired by a Wittgensteinian point regarding other (human) minds, the existence of which is shown by the life we live with other people, how we react to them; it is those reactions that are a testimony of their being minded, and in everyday interactions the question of "having" a mind or not does not even make sense. See the remark on the "attitude toward a soul" (Wittgenstein, 2009, p. 178). See also Crary (2016, Chapter 2) for an extended discussion of this view in the context of both human and animal minds.
17 Diamond (2001, p. 296) emphasis added; see also Blum (1994, p. 47) on "the multiplicity of psychic processes and capacities involved in moral perception and moral judgment".

attention are not "accurate" but "just": an attentive gaze, in the ethical sense, discloses properties that are only available to a particular, specific sensibility: like the beauty of a sunset, or the hidden vulnerability in someone's angry words.

Emotions emerge in this context not as useless distractions, but as epistemically beneficial. Attention requires the emotions for two reasons. First, if attention allows us to understand reality, and that includes other animals, with their needs and their own emotions, attention has to include an element of empathetic understanding, whereby the recognition of the other's mind requires our participation through an affective response.[18] (Compassion is a poignant example in the case of using animals for food, as a response to their suffering; compassion is often required by attention, and sometimes explicitly invoked by Murdoch as an element of attention alongside love (1970, p. 66)). Secondly, emotions are involved in understanding certain situations and in applying certain concepts: as Lawrence Blum suggests, attention involves "concerned responsiveness" (Blum, 1994, p. 12; Blum, 1992, p. 179), which is made possible if the attentive subject, on the one hand, cares about the object of attention and about perceiving them correctly, and on the other, is prepared to respond appropriately to what is presented to her, which includes emotional responses. To respond to an animal in distress being taken to the slaughterhouse without any emotion whatsoever would, in most situations, amount to having missed something important about the animal and her situation at that moment – which indicates a failure of attention, as the ability to perceive such reality.[19]

3.1 Attention as a gaze

18 For an extensive treatment of empathy in animal ethics, see Elisa Aaltola (2018).
19 Cf. Alice Crary (2007), who articulates a "wider conception of rationality", which takes rationality and objectivity to be discernible only from within practices, of which emotional responses are part, so that certain concepts are internally related to particular responses, without which it is unclear that the concept has been correctly understood.

This paper has started from an interaction of gazes. Murdoch sometimes describes attention as a "gaze" —famously, a "just and loving gaze directed toward an individual reality" (1970, p. 34). The gaze is both a particular occurrence of the attitude, and also constitutive of it. First, the visual element of the gaze is both metaphorical and literal, or rather surpasses this distinction. Murdoch indicates the importance of the metaphor of vision with reference to Plato and the myth of the cave, where the soul's progress occurs through increasingly clear visions. Like Plato, Murdoch takes vision to highlight the immediacy of moral knowledge at its best; the fact that, when proper attention is exercised, moral knowledge is not a product of deliberation and reflection, but of immediate apprehension.

Talking of vision also brings to the fore one of Murdoch's main concerns, that of representing morality as not primarily dependent on action, but on perception and cognition. Murdoch argues that values influence the individual's perception of a given situation, because perception is not the immediate conveyance of impressions on a blank slate, but a matter of 'organising' what confronts us through concepts. Hence, as Diamond notes, the model of visual awareness that Murdoch is using is one where vision is itself moralised; where, in other words, the quality and objects of vision depend on the (moral) quality of consciousness of the individual (Diamond 1996, pp. 107–108). Visual awareness is *itself*, for Murdoch, a kind of moral awareness, and "perception is a mode of evaluation" (Murdoch, 1992, p. 315). It then appears that the metaphorical and literal domains cannot be separated. We experience the ambiguity of the word 'seeing' when, in everyday communication, we ask each other: "can't you *see* that … the pig needs help, or that the dog is lonely?" In these cases, it seems as if replacing the visual term with an intellectual one would not do. Seeing a pig or a cow as a being that matters, whose life matters, that needs to be helped or saved or fought for, depends on whether or not we allow certain features of the animals to make an impression on us, and whether we respond to them.

That is, in itself, a moral kind of activity, but one that happens before moral argument and conscious judgment.

3.2 Attention and reciprocity

Although a gaze can manifest itself in the action of gazing, which can occur as a result of decision, it is not something that concerns the subject alone and over which the subject has full control. Inherent in the gaze is the idea of relationship, which involves the one gazing, the one being gazed at – or, better, the other participant in the gaze – and the context, including social significance and power, that enables or shapes that gaze (See Sturken and Cartwright, 2009, p. 94). This latter element is not so obvious in Murdoch's presentation of attention as a loving gaze, and her central example, that of a mother in law who changes her moral understanding of her daughter in law towards greater justice and acceptance, allows for the possibility that the daughter in law is absent or even dead at the time of the process of attention. Of course, imaginative presence is necessary. But reciprocity appears nearly impossible in this context.

But perhaps this is only superficially so. The kind of reciprocity that yields moral understanding to the attentive gaze may not be the returning of the same gaze at the same time, through the same structures and concepts used by the one gazing. That is the reciprocity required, for instance, by Nodding's view of care, which as we have seen poses serious problems to doing justice to animals.[20] The role of reciprocity in attention is different, and two-fold. One the one hand, it requires an engaged, open, and responsive attitude, which means allowing the other to make an impression on us and even change us, or change our understanding of who we are. On the other, it means being curious of the same possibility in the other, and avoiding

20 Noddings expresses doubts about other animals' capacity to offer what humans do in a caring relationship, which puts her idea of reciprocity at risk (Noddings, 1995, p. 10).

as much as possible projecting one's mode of being and thinking on the other, while allowing oneself to be gazed at. These two aspects are indivisible.

The attentive gaze, then, calls into question the individual. In its radical openness, it can even be ontologically demanding, because the discovery can put into question one's being and the boundaries of self and other. When it comes to other animals, this is true in a heightened and specific way. This is part of what Derrida (2002) discovered when stepping out of the shower, naked, and finding the cat staring at him. His own sense of shame indicated that what was before him was an "other", a being with a separate existence and a point of view on the world. That was not shown to him through mere detached observation: it was his own reaction that showed him part of what the cat *was*.[21] The response, on both sides, is what discloses the reality of the animal, to which scientific knowledge of the animal's capacities is not irrelevant but secondary: "The said question of the said animal in its entirety comes down to knowing not whether the animal speaks but whether one can know what *respond* means" (2002, p. 377). Traditional thought about animals, Derrida claims, ignores or chooses to ignore this, and turns animals into "theorems", stripping them of their reality: the opposite of attention.

Did Derrida know what "respond" means, and do we? Donna Haraway picked up the challenge, and criticised Derrida for stopping too soon, for being too interested in his own shame and not interested enough in the cat. His attention, in other words, was limited. A fundamental aspect of the kind of attention I am proposing, drawn from Murdoch, is that it is directed outward, away from the self. That involves the desire to be just to what or who one is attending to, and to remove as far as possible the distorting screens of self-concern such as interests, fear, desire, etc. (I shall return to this below). This also means being genuinely curious

21 Despite the likelihood that the cat herself may not have cared whether Derrida was naked or not, so that the shame may have been a projection of a typically human gaze, or the reflection of a typically human expectation in front of any other, whether misplaced or not. This point was made by Patrizia Setola.

about the other, and that, according to Haraway, is where Derrida falls short, and where many of us do:

> Yet he did not seriously consider an alternative form of engagement either, one that risked knowing something more about cats and *how to look back* … with his cat, Derrida failed a simple obligation of companion species; he did not become curious about what the cat might actually be doing, feeling, thinking, or perhaps making available to him in looking back at him that morning … He came right to the edge of respect, of the move to *respecere.* (Haraway, 2008, p. 20)

Respecere, as Haraway unpacks it, means respect, but also "To hold in regard, to respond, to look back reciprocally, to notice, to pay attention, to have courteous regard for, to esteem" (p. 19). Respect and attention are not only etymologically linked. If attending is able to show the reality of the other—a reality quite independent of our desires and projections—respect, understood as acknowledgement of such reality, follows naturally from it. *Respecere* also means looking back, looking again: the reciprocity that constitutes the encounter with the other, which may not come spontaneously to some of us, and which requires that the animal looks back at us (not necessarily in the visual sense: but that the animal responds). It is no coincidence that in Murdoch's story the mother in law's act of attention beings with one decision: "to look again".

This kind of attention requires, as Murdoch put it, an "individual reality" to attend to. It requires a particular other, just as it requires a particular observer who attends and responds. As Derrida also stresses, encountering the animal means encountering a concrete individual:

> The cat I am talking about is a real cat, truly, believe me, a little cat. It isn't the figure of a cat. It doesn't silently enter the room as an allegory for all the cats on the earth, the felines that traverse myths and religions, literatures and fables. (2002: 374)

Denying the animal its concreteness is one way of avoiding the encounter with her or him. The value of the animal, her or his needs and interests and simply the sheer reality of their separate existence, presents itself individually and concretely. This is the gaze exchanged between the dog and the woman, or the pigs and the other humans. Yet we are not bound to restrict the ethical import of the discovery this kind of encounter yields to the particular individual. The relationship forged needs not be a cage, but a starting point.

This is where the particular, care-based approach and the impersonal, universal one, both converge and clash. The response resulting from the attentive gaze does not require either a structural or long standing relationship, as some articulations of care ethics require, but is possible in any situation, and once it occurs, it can be taken to ground a moral concern for animals one does not, and never will, personally encounter. Once one discovers an animal as a "fellow creature", it is possible and indeed reasonable to respond with a similar moral concern to other animals. Indeed, this is what happens for many who refuse to consume animals and animal products. Sometimes, it starts with domestic animals: attention to rabbits kept as pets, for instance, can lead a family to find it difficult to eat rabbit for dinner. With farmed animals, too, individual instances of attention can lead to moral concern for the group. Without attention to an individual, and through pure intellectual weighing of properties, that is less likely to happen.

The attentive attitude and the related responses make the value of life, as shared by all animals, available, in an existential rather a biological sense, although the latter is not excluded. This is not to claim that, without the response, there would be no value to observe. *Making*

available has the same force as the need to have appropriate organs of sight in order to see trees and leaves. So attention discovers what otherwise may be invisible, in a way which can be completely open ended. We don't know, prior to our attention to other animals, what more we can discover about their lives, their needs, their distinctive ways of being in the world and seeing the world and us. Attention, as Murdoch claimed, is a task, and it goes on all the time.

4. The Ironic Gaze

While attention to animals may require a positive effort, a tension towards the other driven by curiosity or (in a broad sense) love, perhaps even more important is the negative effort to eliminate the obstacles to attention. In the case of other animals, particularly of the animals that we are used to eating and thus rarely encounter as individuals, but only once dead and taken apart, potential obstacles abound. If the obstacles are removed, then we have a prima facie reason to believe that our perception is accurate, or more accurate than before such removal.

Murdoch believed that the primary obstacle to attention, and thus to just perception, is the "fat relentless ego" (1970, p. 52). The ego is self-protective, and therefore naturally untruthful, in its attempts to distort reality and blind itself to it, in order to maintain consoling fantasies about itself and the world it lives in. Murdoch is pessimistic about the possibility of overcoming the illusions that are so spontaneously, consistently, and imperceptibly woven by the self. A natural objection is that sources of illusion can be found outside the self too: social contexts, shared bias, and upbringing can be powerful influences on one's ability to see clearly (see Clarke 2012). Whether or not Murdoch is in fact sufficiently sensitive to this, we will get a fuller picture of the impediments to attention if we combine the self-protective nature of individual selves with the external influences of social groups, and the power of habit. Indeed, Murdoch also writes:

> One may fail to see the individual … because we are ourselves sunk in a social whole which we allow uncritically to determine our reactions, or because we see each other exclusively as so determined. (1999, p. 216)

Yet, the idea that the self is the *main* source of fantasy can be preserved even in combination with the existence of social and cultural distortions, such as stereotypes or conventions, by observing how, for example, their power depends on how deeply they are internalised. In these cases, the self or ego can work ardently to maintain the beliefs acquired, to prevent discomfort, exclusion from the group, or disruption of one's world-view. Social factors would not have the influence they have, and would not so strongly influence perception, if they had not been made part one's own way of thinking, the abandoning of which requires some sacrifice on the part of the ego (admitting one's own mistakes, being open to new interpretations, threatening one's self-image, etc.). The battle is still open for individuals to engage in.

It is easy to see how these thoughts resonate in the case of eating animals and animal products. The habit of eating other animals and the social expectation to do so are powerful, long-standing, deeply ingrained and pervasive. Equally evident is the desire to be shielded from direct knowledge of, and reflection on, both the animals that are killed for food, and the ways in which they live and die. At the opposite end of attention, then, lie the attitude and related gaze of detachment and avoidance. The photograph under scrutiny encapsulates strikingly the key features of this dualism. Besides the woman saying goodbye to the dog is the young man holding the dog's chain, looking at the crying woman and laughing or smiling. Elaborating on the characteristics of this gaze identified at the start, we can now focus on three fundamental features. First, the man is looking only at the woman: he is not entering into joint attention with her; he is not looking in the same direction, nor is he looking at the dog she is hugging, but he

is looking directly at her; the dog is excluded from the gaze. Second, the gaze is far from reciprocal. The man is not being looked at, but he is the spectator of the pain of another human, and indirectly, of another non-human animal. Third, while the dog is not being looked at, the young man's response to the woman's pain is in relation to the dog. He is laughing at her because of her attachment to the dog. The dog is both present and purposively excluded from the gaze.[22]

The gaze can be described as ironic, where irony is the response to a perceived incongruity, here that of the woman's concern for the dog versus what the man might consider an appropriate response to the dog. The previous section argued that attention to an animal and clearer understanding of the animal came with (rather than being followed by) certain responses which showed a recognition of the animal as another creature to whom life matters. While that does not make killing (or contributing to it) impossible, it provides a *prima facie* motivation, and a powerful one, for not doing so. If that is true, in the absence of other significant factors, engaging in the consumption of animals requires an opposite attitude. Ironic detachment, or not taking the question of animal right seriously, instead of engaging with the problem (even through opposition), is widespread in public and private discussions of veganism and vegetarianism.

The concept of irony I employ here, while sharing aspects of the original Greek *eironeia*, meaning "pretence" or "dissimulation", is better defined by the more modern usage of the word "irony", which revolves around the sense of contradiction or incongruity (see Muecke 2020). It is also not merely verbal, but refers to an attitude or a cognitive state. The humour often associated with irony, itself understood as a defence or coping mechanism (see Vaillant 1986), is typical but not essential to irony: although, in the image we have been working with,

22 We can connect this focus on the woman, rather than the dog, to the widespread use of ad hominem fallacies in attacks on vegans in public and private debates (see Habernal et al. 2018, p. 388).

the young man is laughing, the irony that detaches from animals is not necessarily, and not in all instances, a humorous sort of irony. Its key elements are a judgment of incongruity or tension, which may or may not lead to laughter, and detachment from its object, or not being committed to it.

This concept of irony is also partly distinct from both Socratic and Kierkegaardian irony, although they are also, at least temporarily, detached. Socrates's irony has the purpose of dismantling false beliefs by encouraging interlocutors to attempt definitions of difficult concepts, leading to admission of contradictions and difficulties. His irony was meant to lead closer to the truth, even if a negative truth, indicating, for instance, that a definition of "justice" identifying its essential elements could not be found (see Plato's Republic, Books I–II). For Kierkegaard, too, irony was a tool for critical reflection, here self-reflection. It was useful in a context of certainties and beliefs in moral truths, which is, in important ways, alien from our own. Kierkegaard's irony was part of the "art of taking away", because his readers had too much, rather than too little, knowledge (1941, p. 275). In both Socrates and Kierkegaard, irony is a means to an end, it is rhetorical, it is indeed "pretence". The irony I am observing with regard to animals raised for food also "takes away", but for the opposite reason: insufficient knowledge maintains itself through irony. Ironic detachment is not a temporary, consciously used tool, but a way of being. As the Socratic and the Kierkegaardian irony dismantle beliefs and create a space for enquiry, their aim is to get closer to reality and truth; they are places of passage, not resting places. The irony I am considering, by contrast, is static: its detachment is a form of avoidance, a refusal to look.

Here we may return to the mainstream and tempting claim that the opposition between those who refuse to consume animals and reject such practices, and those who find it incongruous that others should be concerned with animal pain, who routinely consume animal products claiming there is no moral issue about it, simply boils down to opposing forms of moral

judgment. The concept of attention presented above opposes this idea. In the case of the ironic gaze and attitude, too, there is more to observe that casts doubt on this interpretation. First, we need to ask whether irony is an appropriate response here (in the witnessing of animal pain and human pain caused by the former) or more generally whether irony is an appropriate response to another's pain. Perhaps in some cases it could be. In the popular 1990s TV show *Mr Bean*, Bean repeatedly loses his teddy bear Teddy, to which he has a strong emotional attachment. The viewer is expected to smile as she watches Bean struggling with his fear of not finding Teddy. The incongruity of Bean's heightened emotional state, and the judgment of what is appropriate regarding a teddy bear, contribute to the irony. Even so, mixed feelings are likely to arise. Yet the situation is: i) fictional, and obviously so; ii) framed comically by the writers; iii) including an object of affection which, despite being valued by Bean, is not attributed any capacity for distress, and it is unclear whether Bean does so; iv) presented with the awareness that Bean will ultimately be fine, that his fear does not cut too deep.

None of the above apply to the situations under scrutiny. Such external reasons for detachment are removed, and other reasons need to be sought. In ordinary circumstances, we do not respond to pain with amusement. Detachment is needed to respond this way. The gaze of the young man in the picture is thrice removed: i) it is detached from the feelings of the person it is observing; ii) it is detached from the object of that person's gaze and feelings (the dog); and finally, iii) it is detached from something in himself, from the feelings that other people's and other animals' pain naturally elicit. Responding to the other's feelings could involve concern, pity, perhaps even puzzlement, frustration or anger; irony denies the validity of such feelings at the same time as it denies the demand to respond to them. This gaze is also not simple detachment stemming from an incapacity to empathise. In some autistic persons, for instance, where ordinary responses to other's emotions are missing through difficulties in occupying the other's perspective, the outcome is simply an absence of shared emotional

response. Here, laughter reveals something different, suggesting recognition and suppression. Rather than a spontaneous or natural response, what this gaze manifests is a form of avoidance or denial, for reasons that may be more or less conscious. The (animal-eating) man is looking at the (animal-gazing) woman and is taking a step back from her response. By denying her response, he is also denying the animal-woman gaze; hence, he is denying that animals are others to be acknowledged.

Coming back to Murdoch, who traces the impediments to attention back to the ego or self-concern, and linking that to the social element that she may not have sufficiently stressed, it is not difficult to imagine many possible reasons for self-protective ironic detachment in the case of the young smirking man, mirroring that of many who are placed in the position of continuing to contribute to animal death for food through consumption:

- First, the irony may be avoiding, covering up, or reacting to, a sense of shame, exactly what Derrida felt when confronted with the gaze of the cat, but for a different reason.
- Second, it may be avoiding guilt at being one of the direct causes of the death of the animal and the pain of the woman, an avoidance that is especially important for self-protection if his job depends on the dog's death.
- Third, it may avoid the pain of thinking: "Maybe this is cruel? Maybe I am cruel? Maybe I live in a world dominated by systematic cruelty and injustice? …" and so on, perhaps leading to the kinds of questions that made Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello wonder about her own sanity at the end of *The Lives of Animals* (1999).
- Fourth, it may be the avoidance of the individual vulnerability that one feels when fully engaging with the gaze of another.[23]

23 See Marina Abramović's staring performance "The Artist is Present", and the intense emotional reactions that simply looking into another's eyes for a prolonged period of time elicited.

- Fifth, in avoiding reciprocity, the ironic gaze also avoids the recognition of a shared world and a shared life, which may lead to the kind of "ontological risk" that Haraway identified in the "intersecting gaze" (2008, p. 21) of the human with the animal, which she claims most of us in the West avoid. The risk, that is, to one's sense of being, which occurs when we offer ourselves up to the gaze of the other, even more so the non-human other, dismantling the observer position and entering into an open-ended relationship which is mutually defining, as discussed above.

These reasons, and perhaps others, may explain a desire for avoidance. At the same time, reflecting on these reasons may help overcome detachment. For, if Murdoch is right, removing obstacles to clear vision is the most important, and sometimes the only, ethical move one can make.

5. Conclusion

My aim in this paper has been to present two paradigmatic gazes, the engaged, attentive, mutual gaze and the detached, ironic gaze, when it comes to nonhuman animals and in particular to their use for food. Through an analysis of attention and ironic detachment in relation to animal consumption, the suggestion is that reflecting on these attitudes can help to re-focus the debate on animal consumption, by examining the attitudes and responses, or lack thereof, that may lie, unawares, at the basis of particular moral positions. At the same time, this focus accounts for and moves beyond both traditional theories' stress on morally relevant properties as well as traditional care ethics' reliance on relationships as constitutive of value.

I have tried to show that the attentive gaze is not only morally desirable, but at the same time epistemically superior, through its recourse to attention, drawing on Iris Murdoch. What is important about Murdoch's idea of attention is that through selflessness and a spirit of love,

which means wanting to do justice to the object, one can place oneself in the best position to see the world truthfully. Attention is not only virtuous, it has strong epistemic value (or rather, part of the reason it is virtuous is its epistemic value). By paying attention, one can see better what the animal is, what is happening to her/him, and the moral features of the situation.

But this kind of gaze can also be intensely painful. It is not difficult to see why Murdoch describes attention as a "task". However, the opposite of it is a gaze which, in order to distance itself from the animal and all that such encounter would imply, needs to distance itself from the human too – not only other humans (here the woman), but from the human who is the subject of that very gaze as well. The avoidance of attention through ironic detachment, and of reciprocity through the direction of the gaze, prevents the subject from engaging in the reality of the situation, and from the possibilities of moral understanding and moral perception that engagement would afford, which include, inextricably: the animal, the other human, oneself, and their relationship to each other. This, I want to suggest, is not an innocent move, but one that also removes the possibility of seeing (something about) others (human and not human) and oneself. Value is here displayed by responding to it, and what is shared only emerges through engagement.

The ironic detached attitude avoids, rather than opposes, value recognition. As such, it can be considered in the context of a larger social trend, heir of post-modernity and lamented by contemporary writers such as David Foster Wallace, who sees the widespread use of irony in American TV series as a sign of disengagement, both personal and political (Wallace, 1993; see also Purdy, 1999). Once a useful disrupting tool, now irony is seen as pervasive non-engagement, stemming out fear, according to Wallace, of being fully human, or of reality itself. Whereas, as Robert Pogue Harrison puts it, "wherever the real imposes itself, it tends to dissipate the fogs of irony" (quoted in Wample, 2012). Christy Wample, writing in the *New York Times*, sees irony as a special mark of the generation of people born in the '80s and '90s,

brought to new heights by the figure of the "hipster", but more generally as a way of escaping responsibility for one's choices, an avoidance of value that is only possible in the "first world", where difficult choices can, at least superficially and apparently, be avoided, and the urgency and starkness of some values does not need to be confronted. In this context, we can re-read the words of Elizabeth Costello, repeating that she wants to take things at face value, that she is too old not to say what she means, in defence of animals.

The broader context may indeed encourage an ironic attitude to animals and to concern for them, but there is something specific, when it comes to encountering, or avoiding the encounter with, other animals, as the possible reasons for such avoidance have flagged. Derrida talks about the fundamental "disavowal" of animals in Western thought, and our duty to remove it.[24] This duty, for him, takes the shape of nothing less than a "war over matters of pity", now unavoidable, between those who respond to animals, and those who don't:

> [A] war being waged, the unequal forces of which could one day be reversed, between those who violate not only animal life but even and also this sentiment of compassion and, on the other hand, those who appeal to an irrefutable testimony to this pity. (2002, p. 397)

This is a conflict, I hope to have shown, not so much between moral positions but first of all between moral attitudes, where attention is a fundamental step. Let us close with a story told by Bryan Van Norden, in an essay which explores the ironic stance as undermining commitment to value in Chinese society, and its historical roots:

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24 "Henceforth we can do little more than turn around this immense disavowal whose logic traverses the whole history of humanity, and not only that of the quasi-epochal configuration I just mentioned" (Derrida, 2002, p. 383).

> One of the most famous stories in the Mengzi is about how King Xuan 宣 of Qi 齊 spared an ox being led to slaughter because he "could not bear its frightened appearance, like an innocent [person] going to the execution ground" (Mengzi 1A7). Mengzi points out to the king that some people thought he spared this ox simply because he was being stingy, since he had a sheep slaughtered in place of the ox. However, Mengzi assured the king that the king's motivation was genuinely benevolent: "Gentlemen cannot bear to see animals die if they have seen them living. If they hear their cries of suffering, they cannot bear to eat their flesh." Then, quoting with approval what appears to be an adage, Mengzi concludes, "Hence, gentlemen keep their distance from the kitchen" (Mengzi 1A7). (Van Norden, 2016, p. 8)

Keeping one's distance comes at a cost. Not only a cost to truth, but a cost to others, and a cost to oneself.[25]

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