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A Vegan Form of Life

Robert McKay, University of Sheffield

This is, more or less, an autobiographical essay and it will begin by describing a seemingly minor personal experience. In what I confess is an exercise of overreading, though, I find it to be a good example of a profound anxiety within normative Western human culture as it confronts vegan practice. In doing the work of interpreting this experience I will open with some theoretical comments which, perhaps surprisingly, return us to terms of debate within feminism and queer theory which were current in the mid-to-late 1990s (the time, in fact, when the incident took place, and when I was first starting to think philosophically about animals). By throwing us into this timewarp, I suppose I am drawing attention one significant failure in the development of the intellectual inquiry that calls itself ‘animal studies’ over the past twenty years or so. This is that it has largely overlooked, even in its most avowedly ‘posthumanist’ guise, quite fundamental difficulties in knowing just what exactly its object of analysis is, or might be thought to be, and about just who (or what) it is that is doing the analysis.¹ Such difficulties (about knowing just what your object of analysis is, and who you are in relation to it) were and continue to be addressed by work in feminism and beyond which theorises sexed bodies; and, as this essay I hope shows, animal studies has much to learn from such work.² By way of working through these difficulties, I will go on to consider being vegan as a ‘form of life’, a concept whose Wittgensteinian lineage, in part as it runs through the work of the philosophers Stanley Cavell and Cora Diamond, has been shown by Cary Wolfe to have great potential for understanding humans’ ethical relations to animals.³

¹ There are exceptions to this, of course—see for example Tom Tyler, *Ciferae: A Bestiary in Five Fingers* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Anat Pick, *Creaturely Poetics: Animality and Vulnerability in Literature and Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); and *The Animal Catalyst: Towards Ahuman Theory* ed. by Patricia MacCormack (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

² Two important examples here are the issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 2.2 (2015) ‘Tranimalities’, ed. by Eva Hayward and Jami Weinstein, and ‘tranimacies: intimate links between animal and trans* studies’, *Angelaki*, 22.2 (2017) ed. by Eliza Steinbock, Marianna Szczygielska and Anthony Wagner.

³ For a book-length discussion of Wittgenstein’s elaboration of the term ‘form of life’, principally through a number of sometimes cryptic uses in his *Philosophical Investigations*, see David Kishik, *Wittgenstein’s Form of Life* (London: Continuum, 2008). My understanding of the term draws on

My reflections here draw much from Wolfe’s discussion of the humanism he finds persisting in Cavell and Diamond, but my aims are somewhat different to his. His approach offers a critique which reveals that the logic of anthropocentrism, rather than the possession of any specific capacity or facet of being, is the principle guarantor of being human. I am instead looking for a positive articulation of the different forms of life that such a critical description of the human makes visible—even, perhaps, produces.

That said, let me set out what I have to offer quite plainly: I want to think about vegan lives as necessarily problematising any belief in the integrity of human-being, and indeed as problematising the very reality of species difference. I would like to say: *I am vegan, not human*. As I will explain later, the conditional phrasing is important here. It is not that these words can enact of themselves some kind of transubstantiation; the context in which they uttered matters profoundly in terms of the sense they make, whatever sense I might want them to have. Nevertheless, as a quick way of framing the delineation of veganism I am trying to realise in the words of this essay, they will suffice. So, to start, let’s turn to the profound anxiety within that ‘normative humanity’ that I read in the anecdote with which I will now properly begin.⁴

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There is a close member of my family to whose home I would often be invited for meals. Knowing that I do not eat meat, he would prepare something different for me (in fact it was almost always *ratatouille*) as he and family satisfied their

discussions with Tom Tyler and with Wolfe’s engagement with the term via his reading of Cavell, most compactly expressed in ‘Cavell’s “forms of life” and biopolitics’, *Contemporary Political Theory*, 11 (2012), 411-416. See also his *Animal Writes: American Culture, The Discourse of Species and Posthumanist Theory* (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2003), pp. 44–54, and ‘Exposures’, in Cavell et al, *Philosophy and Animal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press), pp. 1-41. I do not have space to engage with Giorgio Agamben’s important rearticulation of the term, see his ‘Form-of-Life’, in *Radical Politics in Italy: A Potential Politics*, ed. by Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1996).

⁴ I use ‘normative humanity’ as a paraphrase of its parallel—normative heterosexuality—in Judith Butler’s *Bodies That Matter* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993). Tom Tyler has coined a similar term, anthroponormativity, to describe ‘a theme of anthropocentric thought, which characterises humanity as the norm’ see ‘The Exception and the Norm’, presented at *Reading Animals*, University of Sheffield, July 2014; see also his ‘New Tricks’, *Angelaki*, 18 (2013), 65-82 (p.66).

carnivorous tastes. Bringing my plate to the table, he would proclaim: ‘Here we are Robert, your lesbian food’! In fact, this happened several times. He would use this phrase to invite me to eat, always saying it, I felt, with the strained laughter of someone who does not quite know what else to say.

What might this scene be saying about the relationship between the carnivore and the vegan? Principally, of course, we might note a link, within dominant attitudes, between the oppression of homosexuality (in this case lesbianism) and of veganism.⁵ By equating two such apparently non-congruous categories, my host foregrounds the conceptual level on which he regards them as similar—they are weird, socially unintelligible—and, for a moment at least, he essentialises their meaning as such.

But what is he really getting out of describing a plate of *ratatouille* as ‘lesbian food’? What cultural work is this designation doing for him?⁶ I can see that, in his hegemonic position as a male heterosexual in a culture that is structured by normative heterosexuality, lesbian identification is for him a troublingly unintelligible subjectivity, and that he wants to make sure it remains that way. But what anxiety about *his* subjectivity motivates both his parallel

⁵ Obviously it is not only these two oppressions, on which I concentrate here for reasons of my own, that are linked. For a detailed analysis of the intersectional politics of food, see Carol Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (London: Continuum, 1990) and more recently Claire Jean Kim, *Dangerous Crossings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁶ As viewers of the 2007 Disney-Pixar production *Ratatouille*, directed by Brad Bird, will know, *ratatouille* can be made to off substantial cultural therapy. In that film, via the antagonist—the significantly named food critic Anton Ego, who remembers in flashback his mother feeding *ratatouille* to him as a boy—the food nostalgically epitomises a sort of pre-oedipal peasant-sensibility, a kind of perfect pleasure which has been repressed in achieving the discriminating critical taste of the urbane gastronome. At the end, Ego’s complete satisfaction with the reinterpretation of this dish by the film’s unique chef-rat, Remi, in his haute-bourgeois restaurant enacts and underscores the film’s fantasy of meritocratic egalitarianism; this offers to resolve the various social antagonisms that drive the plot, epitomised in the story of the (species-) upwardly mobile rat. It is a fantasy of a comfortable rapprochement between critic and artist, discipline and jouissance, elite and underclass, native and immigrant, and most fantastically of all, human and animal. We are reminded, though, that however well it functions as an allegory for social division, the human/vermin opposition is not just one of many social divisions; it is, if you like, a more fundamental (biopolitical) form of ‘us and them’ that functions all the more powerfully when its selective breaching allows the kinds of division within the human realm to be resolved. At the film’s resolution, the restaurant as utopian space is predicated on the integration *but as second class citizens* of the mass of other rats, Remi’s friends and family, who may eat, but only separately and out of sight on a terrace. Even in an anthropomorphic animal tale, where one special rat is the chef, people can’t have *rats* in their restaurant. A similar diminution of the radical potential of veganism often obtains, I think, when vegan food is commodified and offered as now-and-then-when-you-can solution to the endemic injustices of 21st Century capital’s foodways.

abjecting of veganism by calling it ‘lesbian food’ and the nervous laughter that accompanies it? What position is in danger when it is confronted by veganism?

As I read this situation, it is the normality—read centrality—of my acquaintance’s *very humanity* that is endangered by what is (to him) an unintelligible identification with non-humans, inherent in veganism. These last points—a) that implicit in vegan practices is some kind of identification with non-human animals, and b) that this form of identification is culturally unintelligible—are those which I would ask you to bear in mind as we go on.

*

Taking into account the parallels I have been tracing in this dinner-time discursive moment, it would seem likely that, for normative humanity, vegan lives possess different yet analogous dangers to those that lesbian lives pose for normative heterosexuality. If you will trust me that I realise that analogy is not the same as equivalence, and that the kind of similarity explained by an analogy should not be extrapolated too far, this is a possibility I would now like to explore further. To do this I will draw on the early 1990s work of Judith Butler, whose analysis of how culture is structured by what she called the discourse of ‘normative heterosexuality’ remains for me a vital conceptual tool for thinking well about being vegan.⁷

Theorising subjectivity, Butler argues that

The subject is [...] never coherent and never self-identical precisely because it is founded and, indeed, continually refounded, through a set of defining foreclosures and repetitions that constitute the discontinuity and incompleteness of the subject. [Therefore,] any theory of the discursive

⁷ For a full discussion see my “‘Identifying with the Animals’: Language, Subjectivity and the Animal Politics of Atwood’s *Surfacing*”, in *Figuring Animals: Essays on Animal Images in Art, Literature, Philosophy and Popular Culture*, ed. by Mary Pollock and Catherine Rainwater (New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2005), pp. 207-29. James Stanescu discusses vegan practice in relation to Butler’s more recent work in ‘Species Trouble: Judith Butler, Mourning, and the Precarious Lives of Animals’, *Hypatia*, 27 (2012), 567-82.

constitution of the subject must take into account the domain of foreclosure, of what must be repudiated for the subject to emerge.

To put this otherwise: any coherent sense of selfhood comes into being through the repeated negotiation of a matrix of exclusions, necessarily thereby producing identity positions which are not of the self. For the (human) subject to retain this sense of coherent selfhood, these other identity positions are excluded by the repeated mechanism of cultural foreclosure. Parsing this in a Derridean register more familiar to animal studies, this moment reveals the extent to which subjectivity *per se* is ‘carnophallogocentric’: conceived as a form of self-building that holds together dominance over animal life through meat eating and control of language in a fantasy of empowerment.⁸ Thus, for example, when my carnivorous host names veganism ‘lesbian’ he is citing the heterosexist designation of lesbianism as ‘not fully human’ and reapplying it in order to abject vegan identity; this in turn reassures his own humanity (and indeed sexuality). It is an act (one could say, paraphrasing Eve Sedgwick) that expresses species panic via homosexual panic, and vice versa.⁹ Sadly, I cannot pursue that homosexual panic to its fullest here, a reading that would necessarily navigate the queer undercurrent of Derrida’s neologism that imagines a subjectivity predicated on the alignment of consuming meat with consuming the phallus.¹⁰

Butler argues that the mechanism of foreclosure is a necessary part of subjectification, but that the pattern of exclusions—that is, which particular identity positions are abjected—is by no means fixed. Instead, the pattern is both motivated by and helps to reproduce hegemonic relations of power. The paradox in this causal logic—which is that the discursive power immanent to subjectivity is at once constituted by and secured by the exclusion of other identities through an ongoing iterative process—always leaves open the possibility for that power to misfire, as it were. And this misfiring allows for the possibility of lives which are

⁸ See “‘Eating Well’, or the Calculation of the Subject’, trans. by Peter Conner and Avital Ronnel, in *Points: Interviews 1974–1994*, by Jacques Derrida, ed. by Elizabeth Weber, trans. by Peggy Kamuf and others (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995) pp. 255–87. See also Carol J. Adams and Matthew Calarco, ‘Derrida and The Sexual Politics of Meat’, in *Meat Culture*, ed. by Annie Potts (Leiden: Brill, 2016), pp. 31–53.

⁹ See *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 187

¹⁰ I am grateful to Sam Ladkin for showing me the extent to which my vegan over-reading as also a queer under-reading of the thoroughgoing erotophobia of the joke, which betrays a heteronormative and misogynist attitude to oral sexuality.

unintelligible to hegemonic positions and are excluded from their notion of ‘full’ subjectivity. Famously, and controversially, Butler’s example of this extremely complex working of discursive power is the category of biological sex. She writes that

[biological] sex is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialised through time. It is not a simple fact or static condition of the body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialise ‘sex’ and achieve this materialisation through a forcible reiteration of those norms. [...] ‘Sex’ is, thus, not simply what one has, or a static description of what one is: it will be one of the norms by which ‘one’ becomes visible at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility.¹¹

Following the subjection-by-exclusion schema I described a moment ago, it becomes clear that a subject’s necessary and repeated ‘adoption’ of a fixed position in relation to the identity category ‘sex’—in which one is always positioning, and therefore repeatedly reifying, oneself in terms of the categories male or female every time one speaks or acts—undergirds the status quo of identity-by-genital-difference. This, Butler notes, is ‘the discursive means by which the heterosexual imperative enables certain sexed identifications and forecloses and/or disavows other identifications’ (*Bodies*, p. 3). And yet because, as she insists, such foreclosures do not occur once-and-for-all there is always space for enactments of identity positions that work contrary to this heterosexual imperative.

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Having briefly rehearsed Butler’s theory of sexual identity-formation, I want to turn back to my own example to look for what normative conditions of subjectivity and what type of identity positions are being indicated by my acquaintance’s oppressive, yet at the same time nervous, conflation of lesbianism and veganism.

¹¹ Butler, pp. 1-2.

One could argue that he is attempting to foreclose a *dietary* identity, veganism, that calls into question the unique and necessary status of his carnivorousness. This would certainly be far from wrong. But it does make the bare practice of food choice fundamental in the realisation of subjectivity. Of course I think food choice *per se* is important but it is important—I want to suggest—as a particularly visible practice of something different. Focusing only on food choice obscures what I regard as the reality of veganism as a profound identification (and identification of course always also means misidentification) with what we call animals. The kinds of psychic investment here are of a quite different order.

My sense of being vegan is of existing with ‘animals’ not simply in defiance of speciesism but *contra-* or (better) *a-specifically*. Being vegan, to enact yet another blatant act of terminological pastiche of queer studies, is, for me, a form of species dissidence.¹² Just so, we can regard the concept of species—the purported humanness of humanity—much as Butler regards the concept ‘biological sex’. It is what she calls a ‘regulatory ideal’, whereby each and all in a notional set of beings, in order to assume full subjectivity and to ensure the continued coherence of that set, are compelled to become specifically ‘human’ beings. This process involves the abjection from normative society not quite of ‘nonhuman’ animals—the usual point made by pro-animal theory and practice; my claims here would suggest that the use of ‘nonhuman’ in this context is effectively pleonastic. The point I am making, in line with Butler’s deconstruction of the sex/gender distinction, is that we cannot finally distinguish the idea of species as a biological category from the rhetorical manipulation of human-animal difference that Wolfe calls the ‘discourse of species’. As such, they work together to reproduce anthropocentric human exceptionalism in the institution of speciesism. Species, as a regulatory ideal, forecloses all those practices of the self, practices of any self (and *selves*, of course, are not human), that are not predicated on species boundaries as they are conventionally drawn—which means also to say, practices that draw boundaries differently. As I will explain later, we might

¹² For the usage I am copying, see Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991). The regular exclusion of vegans from normative human commensal life is caught only too ironically in the etymology of dissidence in the Latin for ‘sitting apart’.

think here about the different kinds of poetics of life offered by Anat Pick under the rubric of the creaturely; we might think, too, of those moments of ~~cross-species~~ friendship that circulate virally online now and again, as they no doubt did in print and oral cultures before that.¹³ I am saying here that, for me, veganism is another such rubric. Such ways of convening life are foreclosed and excluded as unintelligible by the fundamentally false assumption that humanity is a singular community based on some discrete and real kind of existence. An appropriate term for this iniquitous delusion is: *compulsory humanity*. The first and foundational expression of compulsory humanity is to hoodwink us into believing that we must be human instead of vegan.

It is in this sense that I use ‘vegan’ as a signifier to designate a form of life that extends far beyond simple dietary choice. It lives, for me, quite in excess of reasoned or reasonable expression and in excess of the articulation of ethical propositions about animals, or food or whatever. The modes of affection and of expression that shape a vegan life are, strictly speaking, limitless. And so, just as one of the lessons of queer theory is to reveal how heteronormativity extends across the field of social life and is not confined to sexual practice, so vegan theory might reveal that compulsory humanity structures relations right across the social field (even if it is now extended to include what we call animals), and is not confined to what we think of, so troublesomely, as ‘human-animal relations’.

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It is at this juncture, then, that Ludwig Wittgenstein’s notion of ‘forms of life’ is particularly helpful, precisely for the purchase it offers to describe an organisation of life that is not predicated on immutable biological categorisations, but on drawing thought, communication and behaviour together into a practice of existence. It is not my intention here, in what is ultimately an essay in speculative autobiography, to engage in a full discussion of Wittgenstein’s later thought, but it will be helpful to remind ourselves of its lineaments. Put most concisely, these elaborate his idea that very often ‘the meaning of a word is its use in the

¹³ See Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*.

language'.¹⁴ Rather than thinking of meaning as existing outside words and being represented by them, meaning is revealed in specific instances of use to work 'grammatically', with sense-making functionally undergirded by criteria that are shared amongst users of a language. This idea—that meaning's basis lies nowhere but in shared criteria that are enacted in the use of language—is known as Wittgenstein's conventionalism. Most famously, in explaining the interpenetration of language and action, a notion he develops in the term 'language-games', Wittgenstein writes: 'to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life' (§19). He also puts it this way: 'The word "language-game" is used here to emphasize the fact that the *speaking* of a language is part of an activity, or a form of life' (§23).

The stakes are high here. As Stanley Cavell writes of these ideas:

The coincidence of soul and body, and of mind (language) and world *überhaupt*, are the issues to which Wittgenstein's notion of grammar and criteria are meant to speak. [...] In Wittgenstein's view, the gap between mind and the world is closed, or the distortion between them straightened, in the appreciation and acceptance of particular human forms of life, human 'convention'.¹⁵

It is just this linking of Wittgenstein's conventionalism to the notion of the human that most offends Wolfe in Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein, not least because it renders anthropocentric something that is for Wolfe much more radical. He writes:

Wittgenstein's conventionalism appears to more or less permanently unsettle the ontological difference between human and animal, a difference expressed in the philosophical tradition by the capacity for language: first, by holding that that ontological difference is itself constituted by a language that cannot ground and master a world of contingency via 'universals', and

¹⁴ *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, rev. 4th ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), §43.

¹⁵ Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), p. 109.

second, by showing that language does not answer the question, What's the difference between human and animal?¹⁶

For Wolfe, Wittgenstein's understanding of language implies instead that differences between participants in a language-game and those (human) non-participants who do not share that conventional 'form of life' may be no less significant than differences between humans and animals. This opens up, for Wolfe, 'a conventionalist understanding of the shared dynamics of a world building that need not, in principle, be tied to species distinctions *at all*'.¹⁷ Here, I hope, the connection between Wittgensteinian thought and the interpretation of species I offered with Butler starts to become clear.

I have a reading of Wittgenstein that stresses his idea that 'life' is known through its particular forms or 'activities'. That is to say, life takes its form in what is done, or can be done; communication and thought are parts of such activity, not external to it. And that 'or can be done' is important, too: if forms of life are indeed activities, then it stands to reason that they are both allowed for and are constrained by environments, by material and social conditions. A form of life, in other words, is an unbroken field of constraint and possibility that combines, indistinguishably, physical, semiotic and historical being.¹⁸ That a 'form of life' understood this way cannot strictly speaking *be* human is revealed clearly enough by items in the list of language-games that Wittgenstein offers to exemplify activities he means by that term, from 'giving orders, and acting on them' to 'forming and testing a hypothesis' to 'making up a story; and reading one' (p. 15e). These are activities—think of the order: 'charge!', of the regulated use of experimental science to produce medicines, or of the Judeo-Christian origin story—whose linguistic existence in so many real contexts would not be possible without compendia of technologies, materials and disparate living beings. So, if we want to use the term in a properly Wittgensteinian sense, we should not talk about '*the* human form of life': the definite article tethers a notion, which is by necessity varying and embedded in context, to a single, quasi-biological, metaphysical concept. For exactly the same reason, we should also neither say

¹⁶ Wolfe, *Animal Writes*, p. 47.

¹⁷ Wolfe, *Animal Writes*, p. 47.

¹⁸ For a different expression of this point, see Wolfe's argument that forms of life might be helpfully thought of in biopolitical terms as dispositifs, 'Cavell's "forms of life"', p. 414.

‘the chimpanzee form of life’, nor even ‘nonhuman forms of life’; for the many lives we call ‘nonhuman’, embedded as they are in different contexts, thus also take different forms.¹⁹ Instead, we should say, more minimally: all beings enact ‘forms of life’, with and through others, in the sense that a form of life is a practice of existence.

There is a striking moment in Wittgenstein’s discussion of the sensation of pain, a discussion that tests out the full extent of the conventionalism expressed in his idea that ‘What is true or false is what human beings *say*; and it is in their *language* that human beings agree. This is agreement not in opinions, but rather in form of life’ (§241).

Look at a stone and imagine it having sensations. — One says to oneself: How could one so much as get the idea of ascribing a *sensation* to a *thing*? One might as well ascribe it to a number! — And now look at a wriggling fly, and at once these difficulties vanish, and pain seems able to get a foothold here, where before everything was, so to speak, too *smooth* for it. (§284)

The claim here that I want to focus on is that it is part of the conventional use of the word ‘pain’, it is a criterion of using that word, that sensation words are not used of things; and part of that criterion is the notion that ‘things’ do not experience, or, as we say, ‘have’, such things as sensations. If it does seem to make sense to use the concept ‘having pain’ of a wriggling fly, with inability to think of the fly’s pain vanishing at once, then that is because such a creature is not taken to *be* a thing, but rather, by implication, to *have* such things as sensations. I take this point (with its more-than-human grammar of being and having) to be Wittgenstein’s complication and refinement of a claim directly proceeding it which has a distinctly anthropocentric ring: ‘Only of what behaves like a human being can one say that it *has* pains’ (§283). And yet, in the light of the example of the fly, it seems to me impossible to go on taking from these words anything more species-determinate than this: we can talk of the pain other beings that behave, as do humans. Put another way, Wittgenstein’s larger point is that it is part of the

¹⁹ Indeed, Wolfe is sometimes prone to use the term more loosely in various formulations: see the discussion in chapter seven of his *Before the Law: Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2013), especially pp. 78 and 82-85.

form of life of engaging empathically that a criterion of doing so is, *not* species per se, but the kind of behaviour that allows one to imagine another having sensations, whether or not this is conventionally recognised by analogy to human behaviour (and I will return to this point).

Responding to Wittgenstein's ideas and words here, in passages that Wolfe has read critically more than once, Cavell writes:

There are not human criteria which apprise me, or which make any move toward telling me why I take it, among all the things I encounter on the surface of the earth or in its waters or its sky, that some of them have feeling; that some of them 'resemble' or 'behave like' human beings or human bodies; or that some exhibit (forms of) life—unless the *fact that* human beings apply psychological concepts to certain things and not to others is such a criterion.²⁰

It is quite true, as it was with Wittgenstein, that a rhetorical recurrence of the primacy of the human is at play here; and, reading it in the context of Cavell's other work, Wolfe treats this as exemplary of a 'shift from human to *humanist*' in his determination to insinuate an ontological (biological) distinction between human and nonhuman life.²¹ This is certainly gestured towards by Cavell's seeming argument here that the very act of 'taking it' that some things and not others 'behave like' humans is not underpinned by 'human criteria', if we understand that to mean that such a perception relies not on criteria but on some faculty had by virtue of being human. However, with that last qualifying clause, Cavell is surely less circumscribing and privileging human sentience than reiterating the Wittgensteinian notion that such concepts as 'having feeling' make sense only in the practice of their repeated and necessarily differential application. And, indeed, lurking in the background of the first clause is the understanding that this is also precisely how we go about recognising 'the human' anyway; Cavell

²⁰ Cavell, *Claim*, p. 83.

²¹ *Animal Writes*, p. 51. Here, as in 'Cavell's "forms of life"' (pp. 412-414), Wolfe interprets Cavell's argument in *The Claim of Reason* (1979) in the light of more strident arguments about the relation between biological and cultural forms of life made by Cavell in the later work *This New Yet Unapproachable America* (1989). I do not dispute his reading of them, but critique on the ground of those more strident claims deflects from the particular issue I want to discuss in Cavell's earlier thought.

does not quite say it, but doing this must be an application of criteria that are themselves, precisely, not human.

What this all means, for Cavell, is that certain refusals of empathic community with *at least some* of the creatures of the earth, waters or sky (to stress the lyrical evocation of the more-than-human that Wolfe elides in both his readings of the passage) are tantamount to a form of self-erasure:

To withhold, or hedge, our concepts of psychological states from a given creature, on the ground that our criteria cannot reach to the inner life of the creature, is specifically to withhold the source of my idea that living beings are things that feel; it is to withhold myself, to reject my response to anything as a living being; to blank so much as my idea of anything as *having a body*. (p. 83)

‘The source of my idea’ here means, then, not some biological being, the human, that has x, y or z kind of feeling, but the conventional grammar of a language-game in which the *idea* of human being serves as the paradigm for recognising a creature to ‘have’ an inner life, or indeed ‘have’ a body. Reflecting on this, Cavell himself ultimately arrives at finding the minimal criterion of ‘having’ not in humanity *per se* but in behaviour, as in my earlier reading of Wittgenstein: ‘There is nothing to read from that body, nothing the body is of. It does not go beyond itself, it expresses nothing; *it does not so much as behave*’.²² True, the persistence of the rhetoric of the human through these passages reveals that for Cavell such a ‘blinking’ of the idea of having a body means foreclosing oneself from the community of sense because it is part and parcel of recognising each other as humans. And yet, as he puts it in a sort of gnostic back-handed compliment that nevertheless quietly reveals the implicit posthumanism of this whole discussion: ‘even dogs speak more effectively’ (p. 84).

If there is a problem with Cavell’s position, then, as Wolfe rightly intuits there is, it is not quite that ‘the way other beings experience the world is forced into the Procrustean bed of our way’—at least, not in the sense that Wolfe means.²³ Cavell is not quite comparing ‘humans’ and ‘other beings’ experience

²² Cavell, *Claim*, p. 84, second emphasis mine.

²³ Wolfe, ‘Cavell’s “forms of life”’, p. 413.

in ontological terms here: for that would be to transport his discussion out of the realm of Wittgensteinian forms of life and into ‘reality’, to biologise the ‘form of life’; and, as my discussion of the ‘form of life’ showed, there is no such thing as ‘our’ way in this sense. The problem, rather, is precisely with the rhetorical and, in turn, imaginative primacy, even necessity, that is granted to ‘the human’ in Cavell’s description of the language-game of empathy, as opposed to a much more minimally criterial ‘thing that feels’. To put this another way: if ‘even’ dogs speak with effect in that language-game, surely the field of the imagination on which it is played is infinitely more diversely populated?

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Cora Diamond is the thinker of the Wittgensteinian heritage who has most directly explored the moral implications of what she calls ‘the importance of being human’ in just this imaginative as opposed to biological sense.²⁴ She has also elaborated her own account of the morality of eating and more generally living with animals—not to mention the fundamental importance of thinking imaginatively about them—within the broad frame of this argument, so it will be helpful to develop my notion of a vegan form of life in dialogue with it.²⁵

Diamond is explicit that her interest in the notion of the human as a criterion of morality takes the term in an imaginative rather than biological sense.²⁶ For her, moral recognition (whether of humans or nonhumans) cannot be grounded in this or that biological element.²⁷ Nor, conversely, does she make the Kantian kind of claim that what is important is the capacity of humans to imagine, and this is a

²⁴ See, principally, ‘The Importance of Being Human’, *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*, 29 (1991), 35-62.

²⁵ See her ‘Eating Meat and Eating People’, *Philosophy*, 53 (1978), 465-79. In a later essay, ‘Injustice and Animals’, the anthroponormative framework is less prevalent, but she firmly persists in the view that perceiving injustice in the treatment of animals is ‘grounded’ in ‘human moral thinking’ about ‘the subjection of others to our will’ who are human in the first instance. She does, however, conclude with the intriguing irony that the world of respect for the dignity of humans that this points towards comes at the expense of animals’ persistent oppression, and so we can thereby recognise the latter as injustice, in *Slow Cures and Bad Philosophies: Essays on Wittgenstein, Medicine and Bioethics*, ed. by Carl Elliott (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), pp. 118-148 (p. 142).

²⁶ Diamond, ‘Importance’, p. 60.

²⁷ Diamond, ‘Importance’, pp. 44-45.

shibboleth allowing passage to moral status (p. 47); for this would, in effect, render imagination itself biological, as ‘human’. Rather, she explains her sense of the imaginative value of the human by way of a conviction, established by human convention, about what she sees as the relation between human and animal life:

One of the features of human life that has been a great centre for the imagination, one of the things worked over, elaborated, made something of, by imagination is that in the world, in our lives, there is us (that is, people) and animals. We are mysteriously like them, mysteriously unlike them. We are—people have always been—deeply interested in that queer relation.²⁸

The ‘imaginative elaboration of what it is to have a human life’, she goes on to say, ‘is a characteristic human activity’ (p. 48). Her interest, then, is in how morality is made possible by the imaginative articulation of human *contradistinction* from animals (even if her idiomatic description of that relation as ‘queer’ perhaps only too neatly sets up the critique I will offer). ‘The language of contrast comes from our sense of what is mysterious about human life; [this] is important in moral thought because of its capacity to enter what we do and say and feel and think’ (p. 45). This is as rich an articulation as any of how ‘the human’ functions in an anthropocentric delineation of moral thought in a Wittgensteinian mode.

In Diamond’s animal ethics, this logic has a specific implication, a kind of doubling down on Wittgenstein’s interest in what ‘resembles’ or ‘behaves like’ a human being: moral feeling for animals can only appear as an extension or rearticulation of moral feeling for humans. As she puts it most stridently in ‘Eating Meat and Eating People’:

The moral expectations of other human beings demand something of me as other than an animal; and we do something like imaginatively read into animals something like such expectations when we think of vegetarianism as enabling us to meet a cow’s eyes. There is nothing wrong with that; there *is* something wrong with trying to keep that response and deny its foundation. (p. 478)

²⁸ Diamond, ‘Importance’, p. 44.

Discussing this passage, Wolfe finds that ‘Diamond’s picture of the human in relation to ethics [...] reontologises the split between the human and the animal, across which the human reaches, as it were, in an act of benevolence towards an other that we “imagine” is enough like us to warrant attention’.²⁹ I think that here, as in the case of his reading of Cavell, Wolfe hits the wrong target by too quickly assuming that Diamond relinquishes conventionalism in favour of a stable species ontology that humans reach out from and use as a standard to compare animals against. Rather, I would say that her notion of ‘reading into’ remains a good enough description of just what happens in the language-game of pity. Her formulation of the issue, however, begs the question of what anthropocentric work is being done by her contrasting this ‘reading into’ with other human beings’ ‘demanding’. This produces the notion that, rather than being the effect of such a game, moral expectations have foundations and these lie somewhere *in* those ‘other human beings’, rather than being, themselves, ‘readings into’ Diamond, which she is in turn reading into those others in her essay. I am not disputing, then, that Diamond is resolute in her belief that ‘moral expectations’ are in themselves products of the imagination: that pity, as she puts it, depends on, ‘a *sense* of human life and loss’ rather than that life and loss as such.³⁰ I am only remarking that the expression of such faith in the imaginative value of ‘the human’ has its own conventional grammar, of which a criterion is the solid ground of human-animal difference.

Wolfe’s critical moves in response to this humanism of Diamond’s and Cavell’s thought are first to point out its residual faith in an ideal concept (the human), and then to insist that this concept is empirically, morally, philosophically defunct: we just do not need to and should not draw lines between, for example, humans, animals and machines, and cannot rigorously do so anyway. The grounds of dispute shift from conventionalism to a residual biologism, which is then critiqued. Drawing on Derrida, Wolfe argues that it is not only ‘our flesh and blood’ but more significantly ‘our *relation* to flesh and blood’ that ‘is fatefully constituted by a technicity with which it is prosthetically entwined, a diacritical, semiotic machine of language, in the broadest sense that

²⁹ ‘Exposures’, p. 24.

³⁰ Diamond, ‘Eating’, p. 478 (my emphasis).

exceeds any and all presence, including our own' (p. 30).³¹ And the principal reason for insisting on this deconstruction is biopolitical: 'leaving intact the juridical distinction between higher and lower, human and non-human, makes that distinction permanently available for use against whatever body falls outside of our ken when the 'scales' are sliced finely enough'.³²

In the legacy of pro-animal thought, we can find a different response to Wolfe's abjuring of the value of the human: this is to commit to a fundamental reimagining of the way in which 'human' behaviour is conceived, so that the operations of the language-games of ethics that make sense when you act with anthropocentric human exceptionalism no longer do (that is, no longer work as reasonable moves in the game). An example here would be the idea that humans are those beings that can with impunity kill non-humans. Consider the shades of thought that have run through animal welfare and animal rights from thinking that the unnecessary slaughter of animals is inhumane, or thinking that the unnecessary suffering of animals in slaughter is inhumane, to thinking that the slaughter of animals is inhumane, or thinking that any suffering or killing of animals in the whole food system is inhumane. We might characterise such shifts, in a loosely Wittgensteinian way, as speaking to a kind of plasticity in form of life that open up notions of community across species lines so that 'the human' community is not established by sacrificing animals. Diamond is indeed hopeful of the possibility of such a change in form of life, and she sees this as coming work for the imagination:

What a life is like in which I recognize such relationships [in which I attend to others' suffering and enjoyment] with at any rate some animals, and how it is different from those in which no such relationships are recognized, or different ones, and how far it is possible to say that some such lives are less hypocritical or richer or better than those in which animals are for us mere things would then remain to be described.³³

The ironies and weaknesses of this way of thinking can be found, however, when Diamond discusses the kinds of behaviour that are compatible with treating

³¹ See also *Animal Writes*, p. 52 and 'Cavell's forms of life', p. 413.

³² 'Cavell's "forms of life"', p. 414.

³³ 'Eating Meat, p. 471.

of an animal as what she calls a ‘fellow creature’. This notion is important for her (again it is imaginative rather than biological and its foreshadowing of Cavell’s use of the word ‘creature’ should be well noted); it articulates that the imaginative resource for moral thinking about animals is the groundswell of ‘fellow feeling’ in humans’ moral thinking about other humans.³⁴ Diamond is arguing that we recognise in animals some parts, *but not others*, of the sense of fellowship that begins and has its richest expression in ‘human’ fellowship. She writes:

It does normally, or very often, go with the idea of a fellow creature, that we do eat them. But then it characteristically goes with the idea that they must be hunted fairly or raised without bad usage. The treatment of an animal as a stage (the self-moving stage) in the production of a meat product is not part of this mode of thinking.

The key danger of this kind of pro-animal thought, figured in terms of the human, then (and this is part of Wolfe’s critique of it), is that the ground on which animals are recognizable as subjects of moral thought is foisted upon them; this can license whatever treatment of them that suits, such as when the avoidance of inhumane animal suffering pushes towards developing technologies for faster and more efficient, humane killing.³⁵

A different move would be to take Diamond’s Wittgensteinian post-metaphysics at its word, her commitment to the role of the imagination, criteria and grammar in our sense of what it is to be a fellow creature, but show that ‘human’ is just one term for a form of life that might be thought in common.³⁶ Two writers on whom Diamond relies for this notion of ‘human’ fellowship, Joseph Conrad and George Orwell, in fact rely heavily on the word creature.³⁷ She

³⁴ ‘Eating Meat, pp. 474-75.

³⁵ See my ‘James Agee’s “A Mother’s Tale” and the Biopolitics of Animal Life and Death in Post-war America’, in *Against Life*, ed. by Alastair Hunt and Stephanie Youngblood (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015), pp. 143-160 for a fuller discussion of this point.

³⁶ This of course is what Pick’s concept of the creaturely does. Matthew Calarco works in a similar direction in his discussion of ‘flesh’ and embodiment as a ‘zone of indistinction’ in which we ‘notice and attend to the fact that what our culture takes to be “mere” animals are capable of entering into modes of relation and ways of life that can never be fully anticipated’, ‘Identity, Difference, Indistinction’, *The Centennial Review*, 11.2 (2012), 41-60 (p. 58).

³⁷ In ‘Importance’ (pp. 49-50) Diamond’s signal example of how an imaginative conception of the human conjoins the human community comes in Joseph Conrad’s notion that fiction speaks to ‘that feeling of unavoidable solidarity [...] which binds men to each other and all mankind to the visible world’. She does not address the complexity of that last clause, however, or what Conrad

offers Orwell's example of being unwilling to shoot a Francoist soldier running across a parapet holding his trousers up, because, in this moment, he is not a 'Fascist'—that is, an 'enemy', the symbol or epitome of a militarized political ideology—but a 'fellow-creature'.³⁸ Characteristic of Orwell's critical humanism here is his response to the moral demand of the other not because of beliefs about language or the mind, rational or otherwise; quite the contrary. Rather, there is the sense of finding fellowship in shared subjection to abject shamefulness—the desperate attempt to stop the trousers falling down, which trousers inevitably must, exposing creaturely embodiment, both genital and anal—that infects and debases the grandiose practices of human endeavour (here, something like 'fighting for what one believes in').³⁹ I find that in that abject sense of shame there is no hope of a recovery of human exceptionalism; rather, a recognition, in their embodiment and attendant suffering, made cognitive as shame or otherwise, of the inevitable creatureliness that *aligns* humans with nonhuman animals. Diamond, on the contrary, sees the fellow-creatureliness at play in Orwell's example as having little or nothing to do with animals or with animality. She further insists that 'images of fellow creatures are naturally much less compelling ones than images of "fellow human beings" can be'.⁴⁰ Seemingly, here, she means fellow creatures who are not humans, even though Orwell's fellow explicitly is, so her point is rather vexed. Creatures, 'human' or otherwise, come together in creaturely fellowship in ways Diamond will not quite acknowledge.

So this brings us, finally, to a recognition of the ways in which imaginative thought about humans, stories of human life in 'queer relation' to animals as the narrative grammar of 'the human form of life, cannot offer the kind of moral assurance Diamond wishes. This is because they collapse over and over into more indiscriminate and indeed stranger kinds of story about forms of life and the

calls in the same Preface 'the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation', which it speaks to, 'Preface to the Nigger of the Narcissus', <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/17731/17731.txt>.

³⁸ Quoted in Diamond, p. 477.

³⁹ In passing, I cannot help but remark the inherent masculinity of the notion of 'fellows' and the kind of fellowship at work here: see Steven Connor, 'The Shame of Being a Man', *Textual Practice*, 15 (2001), 211-30.

⁴⁰ Diamond, 'Eating Meat', p. 477. The quotation marks indicate that she is discussing an imaginative notion of the human recognised in their fullness that distinguishes it from ideas like 'enemy'.

conventions that delineate them. It is my suggestion that this failure is suggestive for making sense of vegan lives.

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Reflecting on how forms of life can or might be open to change, Cavell makes a point very like Butler's notion of iterability (the fact that gender [here, read *species*] has to be continuously performed anew, and exists only in that citational chain of gendered practices). Also like Butler, he makes it quite clear that it is not that conventions 'may as well be changed or not, depending on some individual's taste or decision'.⁴¹ Nevertheless, he notes:

It is worth saying that conventions can be changed because it is essential to a convention that it be in the service of some project, and you do not know a priori which set of procedures is better than others for that project. That is, it is internal to convention to be open to change *in convention*, in the convening of those subject to it, in whose behaviour it lives. (p. 120)

This kind of change can happen, he continues, when, 'I bring my own language and life into imagination [in] a convening of my culture's criteria, in order to confront them with my words and life as I pursue them and as I may imagine them' (p. 125). For Cavell, an exemplary prompt to this kind of shift is 'if the child, little or big, asks me: "Why do we eat animals?" [and] I find my answers thin'. He suggests that at such a moment 'I may feel I run out of reasons without being willing to say "This is what I do" (what I say, what I sense, what I know) and honor that'. The result? 'I may feel that my foregone conclusions were never conclusions *I* had arrived at, but were merely imbibed by me, merely conventional' (p. 125). This sounds very much like a narrative of veg*n conversion to me.

Wolfe takes Cavell to task for the recalcitrant individualism of this kind of point, insisting instead on the larger material forces (of which the institution of speciesism is surely the greatest) which finally condition this kind of 'drama [of]

⁴¹ Cavell, *Claim*, p. 120.

personal responsibility'.⁴² He is right, but stressing this point too far leaves us only a depressing world fated to anthropocentrism, with little visible way to evade the speciesism that institutionalises it. Against *that* background, Cavell's attempt to think through at least the possibility of change in convention is surely worth considering. He does this, returning us to the source of much of this discussion in Wittgenstein, by reflecting again on pain. Taking the 'foregone-ness' of conclusions as synonymous with conventionality in form of life, he writes:

No conclusion is more foregone for me than that *that* is human suffering [...] *What* I take as a matter of course is not in itself a matter of course. It is a matter of history, a matter of what arrives at and departs from a present human interest. I cannot decide what I take as a matter of course, any more than I can *decide* what interests me; I have to find out. (p. 122)

This ongoing process of finding out, then, taking place in and amongst individuals, is how the culture convenes and how it reconvenes its forms of life.

The point at which I diverge from Cavell here seems almost nothing but is, I think, everything: I have simply lost faith in the concept of the human to shape such a reconvention; or, better, since I think the retained faith is Cavell's (as it is Diamond's) and my own position is apostate, the term has lost its grammatical function for me in language-games of behaviour, morality, existence, futurity or whatever else. Cavell, considering Wittgenstein as a philosopher of culture, is describing the constituents of a form of life, of a *human* form of life, and of the possibility of change in it. There remains something deeply anthropocentric in the political liberalism here, in his fundamental assumption that only the human is 'in' history enough to have projects that are served by conventions, which might thus be open to change. My suggestion, on the contrary, is that the logic of Wittgensteinian thought—the basis of language-games in a grammar that rests on criteria that are by necessity conventional—necessarily undermines the force of such determining or existential claims about the human. Rather than anthropocentric, forms of life are better thought of as *anthropofugal*.

I am suggesting that a vegan form of life is a kind of 'finding out'—just as Cavell says, rather than a 'deciding'—in which what is found out, what changes

⁴² 'Cavell's "forms of life"', pp. 414-15.

as a matter of course, is the notion that suffering is human, or, even more profoundly, that *interests* are human. This means finding out that what we call ‘the human’ lives nowhere but in this kind of reserving of interests or granting of the capacity for world-building ‘projects’. (Another way of saying this: the idea that there are ‘present interests’ that ‘are’ human is part of a grammar of the human.)

Finding *this* out, losing that faith, I no longer take it as a matter of course is that I am human. This is not done alone of course: I do not ‘decide’ that I am not human; it is not a metaphysical claim but a grammatical one. Rather, I find or work this out, ‘perform’ it in Butler’s terms, in a community of species dissidence that grants the idea sense. It is surely a change in form of life in which the criteria that govern the grammar of the term human have opened to a change in convention. In the process of such a change, what I with other vegans take to be a matter of course (and much of this taking is expressed through actions rather than in thought or word) is that it is not possible to consume of any animals. And, yes, this shift in form of life is a shift that re-forms life (what we call human life *and* what we call animal life) against a notion of species that links the biological and the metaphysical and instead around communities of the inedible. Such a shift is determinedly in history, which is to say political, or biopolitical. Because, as conventions, human, animal, and so any idea or practice of ‘human-animal relations’, are themselves in history.

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Let me bring my thoughts to a close by reflecting that the initial prompt for this essay was the editors asking for a ‘position paper’ that would speak to a theory of veganism. I felt that this was an impossible task. Being asked to theorise my position on veganism is, I think, somewhat akin to being asked to theorise my position on love or on desire, on being a friend or indeed on speaking. Being vegan strikes me as a form of life at a similar level of psychological and affective richness as all these (not least because it is lived in and through them). Like them, veganism is an infinitely compound way of being in the world, lived through a

forging in the individual of the most multiform actions and reactions; these are catalysed by attitudes, impressions, encounters and demands that are each impossible to categorise or fully measure; and these interactions never stop happening, in new ways every time, in a crucible of social relations which itself determines their conditions of possibility and shapes their manner and scope. Indeed, when I think about it, the closest analogy I can find to theorising and taking a position on why I don't eat *animals* was to being asked to reflect on my adolescence and theorise my position on *family*. Well, I guess they often do things that astonish or delight you, you aren't in any doubt that you love them, and you couldn't bear them to come to any harm; but if it can be hard enough to prove just why you love them, it's sometimes even harder to articulate *precisely* why you shouldn't kill them.

Of course, I'm being facetious. But I think we do well to remember, troubling though this might be, that being vegan is an example of the kind of practical, ethical and emotional-dynamic conflation that real lives are made of. I say this, sharply cognizant of the fact that I did and still do love and respect that man who called my vegan food 'lesbian'. Indeed, if vegan forms of life are to continue ever more fully to take shape in the world, as I sincerely hope, then they will surely only do so as such complex lives rather than as realisations of a clear-cut position.