The Gaze of the Other:
Reconstructing ‘Human’ Ethicality in Margaret Atwood’s Surfacing

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A blue heron lifts from a bay where it’s been fishing and flaps overhead, neck and beak craning forward and long legs stretched back, winged snake. It notes us with a rasping pterodactyl croak and rises higher, heading southeast, there was a colony of them, it must still be there. But now I have to pay more attention to David. The copper line slants down, cutting the water, vibrating slightly. (Atwood 60)

As the notably nameless narrator of Margaret Atwood’s novel *Surfacing* momentarily watches a blue heron take flight above its natural habitat, her readers are left to contemplate their relation and responsibility to this wild animal. The heron’s pterodactyl-like call identifies it as a prehistoric creature—one with ancestry that predates any sign of human civilization. Yet the role of this ancient and autonomous animal is now one of momentary distraction and fleeting consideration by a society that prioritizes human interests and desires. This assertion of human dominion has on occasion been disrupted by individual thinkers—ranging from Montaigne to Gandhi—who have questioned the violent subjugation of animals. In the late twentieth century, such voices gathered to create a united movement that called for a revaluation of animal identity and a reconsideration of the resulting “rights” that humans have denied or allocated these beings.

Despite the pragmatic limitations of radically altering the foundation of modern ethics, the contemporary animal rights movement has provided numerous theoretical vocabularies through which such reconsiderations of animals and their role in human society might be articulated. In these new anti-speciesest discourses, Atwood’s heron is no longer confined to Descartes’ oversimplified definition of a complex machine; rather, there are now admitted questions regarding the complexity of the creature’s desires and the acceptability of its suffering. A modern utilitarian approach, for example, would ask whether the heron’s needs are being given “equal consideration” vis-à-vis the humans’ who are recreationally competing with its fishing territory. The utilitarian perspective views the heron as a being whose suffering is justifiable only if it contributes to, or at least is less than, the overall optimization of pleasure and
utility. However, animal rights thinkers who adopt a deontological or “obligation”-based ethics would view the heron as the subject-of-a-life that is invested in the pursuit if its own interests and desires, aims deserving respect and protection precisely for being properties of an intentional being like ourselves. Even more radical thinkers may see the heron as indefinable—an inaccessible consciousness that holds endless potential without regard to any place or parallel in human experience. The heron may perceive and judge its surroundings—including the humans that occupy this space—in a manner to which man will never be privy. Yet more often than not, humans will choose not to consider the heron at all. Individuals spend years, even lifetimes, briefly glancing up at the heron before promptly returning to their sport. However, those who do take time to stop and question this complex creature will find themselves bewildered by a sense of unknowing. The productivity of this confusion depends on an individual’s ability to step outside the comfortable, unexamined, and assumedly inviolable sphere of human logic.

This process of transgressing established notions of ‘animal’ identity begins with a willingness to interrogate: “The question is not, Can they reason? nor Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?” (Bentham 311). When Jeremy Bentham posed this question in 1789 he initiated a fundamental revaluation of how humans view their treatment of animals. Almost two hundred years later, in his 1975 manifesto Animal Liberation, Peter Singer used Bentham’s question to frame the core principle of his argument that suffering gives animals the right to equal consideration. According to Singer, thanks to post-Darwinian ethology the day has long passed in which we can argue alongside Descartes that animals are not subject to pain or suffering (Descartes 36). Singer argues that the capacity for suffering and enjoyment are “necessary but also sufficient for us to say that a being has interests” (8). Human and animal interests vary in complexity, Singer acknowledges; however, he believes this variation should in no way diminish animals’ claim upon our moral regard. For Singer, “equality does not require equal or identical
treatment; it requires equal consideration” (2). For example, he explains that recognizing the interests of children “would require that we teach them to read; concern for the well-being of the pigs may require no more than that we leave them with other pigs in a place where there is adequate food and room to run freely” (5). Similarly, consideration of the heron’s needs may be limited to the preservation of a safe natural environment while the humans who share its hunting territory may require elaborate infrastructure to live comfortably.

Singer asserts that the challenge facing the principle of equal consideration for animals is the ingrained “speciesism” among humans (69). When confronting animals, Singer argues, humans have chosen to ignore the principles of equality that require “suffering [to] be counted equally with the like suffering of any other being” (8). What makes this last violation of inequality so widely accepted? Singer describes a process known as “conditioned ethical blindness,” which takes place when humans are habituated by reward to ignore unethical treatment (71). Humans benefit from using animals in food production, labor, entertainment, and research. Thus incentivized to gain from animal suffering, they have become conditioned to ignore the unethical and unequal treatment of other species. For instance, when partaking in recreational fishing, humans value their own enjoyment over the consideration that they may be depleting a natural food source for predators such as the heron.

The solution to this speciesism, Singer suggests, is “bring[ing] nonhuman animals within our sphere of moral concern” (20). By acknowledging and giving value to the indubitable fact that animals suffer, Singer challenges man’s exclusion of nonhuman beings from their realm of consideration. In other words, Singer argues that this shared capacity to suffer demands that humans contract the distance we have established between man and animal and apply the same general ethical logic to the experience of all species. Singer’s Bentham-inspired theory makes clear his utilitarian approach to animal rights, the underlying aim of which is to minimize
suffering and maximize pleasure regardless of species. He explains that speciesism prevents us from evaluating life based on its capacity for meaningful existence and instead allows us to make decisions that are influenced by our belief in the "sanctity of human life" (18). For Singer, concern for animal interests should not be a calculus solely on human benefits but should acknowledge that animals "warrant consideration for their own sake" (244).

Asserting that humans should bring animals into their sphere of moral concern, Singer makes the crucial move of challenging the system of human exceptionalism that facilitates and perpetuates violence toward animals. It is only by denying animals the capacity to suffer that man is able to comfortably exclude nonhuman species from ethical consideration. Singer thereby disrupts this system of exclusion upon which "humanist" idealism is founded. While his attack on man's exclusivity promotes a radical revaluation of animal rights and provides a pragmatic approach to bettering the treatment of animals, Singer's argument faces significant limitations as a program for realizing animals' "liberation" within, or into, a fully developed animal ethics. In the effort to bring animals into our human sphere of consideration, Singer suppresses animal otherness. His demand for their ethical consideration is founded on an animal's ability to suffer in the same manner as a human, and thus to be assimilable to a common calculus of pleasure-pain. By emphasizing this shared ability, Singer creates sameness between man and animal, justifying the need for animal rights on a newly acknowledged humanness in animals. Instead of valuing the potentiality lodged within the otherness of animal consciousness, Singer suggests that animals deserve equal consideration because they are not altogether other from humans. This argument, effective though it is in freeing animals from utter objectification, is limited by anthropocentric privileging of human characteristics as the measure of valuable and defensible capacities. While Singer's utilitarian approach does better the human treatment of animals, it
continues to engage in a dialectic centered on the validity and prioritization of human-based ideas of “rights.”

Tom Regan’s 1983 book, *The Case for Animal Rights*, offers an alternative logic to Singer’s. Regan argues that it is not simply an animal’s ability to suffer that warrants its protection under the aegis of “rights”; rather, it is the fact that animals are invested in the pursuit of individual interests that establishes their status as subjects of ethical concern. Applying Kantian vocabulary to post-Darwinian awareness of animal cognition and emotion, Regan illustrates that animals have desires and preferences that they intentionally act on in order to achieve a satisfactory life. For Regan, animals are first and foremost subjects of their own life and as a result should not be reduced to a means-to-an-end for human use. In accordance with Regan’s vocabulary, the heron should be thought of as an individual with an interest in security and fellow feeling, not as an inedible bird who serves as a target for recreational hunting.

Similar to Singer, Regan does not demand complete equality between humans and animals, for he recognizes that there is variation among and between the desires of animals and humans. He acknowledges that “the more complicated a conscious animal organism is (that is, the greater the number and sophistication of its desires and goals), the more complex must be the notion of its living well” (89). Regan thus acknowledges the notion that humans have a more complicated set of desires than animals; however, he proceeds to diminish the importance of this disparity by arguing that less complexity “shows not that their welfare is in all essential respects unlike ours but that some of the things we have an interest in (e.g., arts and sciences) are, so far as we know, peculiar to us” (93). There need not be complete homology between the desires of men and animals in order to respect the common pursuit of life that is shared by all. This remolds and transposes a “human rights” perspective for the animal sphere, evoking the way
significant variations in human preferences and interests do not undermine the principle that all humans share a basic desire and right to pursue—within legal limits—individual satisfaction.

An essential component of Regan’s stance is his appreciation of the unknown at play in his argument. He neither makes claims about the complexity of animal intelligence nor constructs an argument that defines or limits animal consciousness. Instead, Regan respects the potentially of an animal’s otherness. He draws attention to the differences between man and animal yet illustrates how these variations do not impede a theory of animal ethics that is founded on the common, generalized pursuit of a satisfactory life. It does not matter what an animal’s desires or interests entail; it is simply their creaturely existence that marks a life of value. Thus Regan offers us a broadly defined theory that sheds dependence on the principle of explicit likeness that Singer establishes between man and animal. Regan observes that animals have desires and interests, and that they are subject to harm and suffering; however, he leaves these experiences in their most unprocessed definitions of biological, emotional, and social desire, never claiming that humans fully understand animal consciousness. By establishing such a broad scope, Regan’s theory leaves room for the contemplation of and appreciation for an animal’s incomprehensible alterity.

Regan’s affordance of animal otherness challenges Singer’s anthropocentric formulation of “animal liberation”; however, it is not until Stephen Clark that an animal rights theory begins to directly challenge the current dialectic of human dominion. While Singer and Regan demand a revaluation of the manner in which humans treat animals, neither confronts the origin of human justification for violence against other creatures. In The Moral Status of Animals, Clark works to dismantle the very manner in which humans have presumptuously defined animal consciousness. In Clark’s analysis, humans justify the subordination of animals by asserting that man’s intelligence far surpasses that of non-human beings. This presumed superior consciousness
grants us the right to use animals in whatever manner we—as the beings of reason and
intelligence—see fit. Clark offers an irony-laced attack on the ignorance of this assumption,
explaining:

We think them stupid because they do things differently... We think them stupid because
they take time to find their way around, particularly in places and problems we have set
them from superior knowledge and in accordance with our way of seeing things. We
think them stupid for normal failures of lateral thinking, which we rarely surpass. We
think them stupid because we are ill-informed. (37)

Implicitly evoking the French “bête” (meaning both “beast” and “stupid”), Clark’s anaphoric
juxtapositions of human “thinking” and animal “stupidity” illustrate that man’s assumed mental
superiority is based on a biased form of evaluation. We demand that animals be able to solve
human problems and conform to our nature of reasoning while failing to acknowledge man’s
inability to achieve the equivalent in an animal realm. He argues that humans are “half blind, half
deaf, and with no sense of smell,” yet man continues to claim superior emotional and physical
capabilities over that of a highly sensitive dog or cat (42). In other words, Clark disrupts man’s
assumed superiority over animals by exposing the anthropocentric blind spot in our system of
evaluation. He argues that just as animals don’t fully understand us, so we most certainly don’t
understand them, quoting Montaigne who (originating the punning critique of bête) states, “By
the same reason may they as well esteem us beasts, as we them” (95).

Not only does Clark challenge the assumption that humans have a higher mental capacity
than animals, but he also explores why this superiority has been an integral facet of human

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1 In the philosophical novel The Lives of Animals, J.M. Coetzee’s protagonist Elizabeth Costello discusses an
experiment carried out by psychologist Wolfgang Kohler on an ape named Sultan. After several days of
starvation, Sultan was asked to reason through the use of large crates in order to reach bananas suspended
above him. Costello argues that the experiment limits Sultan to the most elementary of thoughts. The “right
thought” is not a complicated emotional question such as “Why is he starving me?”; rather, it is the
rudimentary question, “How does one use the crates to reach the bananas” (28). Through this discussion of
Sultan, Coetzee illustrates that experiments of this type do not further our understanding of animal capacity but
instead give us an insight into “how the man’s mind works” (28). The question becomes, why does man
continue to confine Sultan to the less interesting thought, the thought limited to an exercise of “instrumental
reason” rather than consider the full context of his personal and social engagement.
identity. Clark notes that in addition to deeming themselves superior beings, humans have also defined themselves in *opposition* to animals. Each time an animal encroaches on a human trait, that trait is quickly redefined as that which animals lack. When it comes to language Clark explains, "It is not that we have discovered them to lack a language but rather that we define, and redefine, what language is by discovering what beasts do not have" (96). He argues further that this exclusionary reading of animal capacity is rooted in the human desire to be *master*. This need for mastery stems from the "wish to create a world where... such sad reminders of our real defenselessness as wild nature are kept firmly in their place" (133). It is in this discussion of human fear (of limitation, of fragility, and ultimately of mortality) that Clark expands his argument past the scope of both Singer's and Regan's. Rather than simply arguing in defense of animal rights, Clark allows *otherness* to stand in all its differences, forcing us to ask why *humans* are currently facing an ethical dilemma for which the animal rights debate serves as symptom.

By identifying a human origin for systemic oppression of other sentient beings, Clark shifts the focus of the "animal rights" conversation to a revaluation of 'human' as opposed to 'animal.' It is only by understanding *why* humans require the subjugation of animals that society can move past incremental improvements of treatment and confront the foundation of an ethical crisis: in this way, Clark paves the way toward an ethical *theory* of animal being and not just a pragmatic code for ameliorating animal cruelty. His theory is based on the interconnected commonalities of our ecosystem, suggesting that parallel acts of being are dependent on one another for successful preservation. Clark explains, "Our long term interests, as a species, will be best served by a present tenderness to other life—a tenderness that we do in fact feel, though it is over-laid and ridiculed by our philosophies" (161-162). Following the logic or "philosophy" that human desires are privileged and exceptional, "we continue to grab at everything we can get," disregarding our depredation of sustainable coexistence. To the contrary, Clark illustrates that
animal ethics relies on an acknowledgment and appreciation of the **otherness** in animals that creates a diverse and maintainable ecosystem. The heron should not be evaluated based on its inability to use language; instead, it should be seen as an essential component of the "cooperative endeavor" that is life on earth (162).

Clark's analysis highlights a need to reconsider what questions are guiding the conversation surrounding "animal rights." It is not enough to question man's understanding of animal identity or capacities; it is crucial to interrogate the foundation of these anthropocentric understandings and recognize that our 'human' identity is at stake in that of the 'animal.' Jacques Derrida illustrates the radically unsettling, yet productive, effect of questioning human identity and action in the face of animal being. In his lecture, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Derrida demonstrates the extent to which humans have constructed their identity in opposition to that of animals. Specifically, Derrida posits the moment of a shared gaze between himself and a cat to enact the disruption of *self* that accompanies reevaluating an animal's identity. He describes how "at the moment when, caught naked, in silence, by the gaze of an animal, for example, the eyes of a cat, I have trouble, yes, a bad time overcoming my embarrassment" (3-4). Upon seeing the cat *see* him, Derrida must confront the unsettling reality that the cat has the potential to judge and name him. In taking on the role of *seer*, the cat strips Derrida "naked" of his well-established human identity because he can no longer be certain what form or definition he takes in the consciousness of this *other* being. More precisely, he can no longer rely on the definition of 'human' as a privileged species with an exclusive power to see, judge, and define *others*. The disruptive nature of this gaze causes Derrida to retrace the history of human thought and question the logic that now confines both 'man' and 'animal' to their respective niches within a fixed, hierarchical structure of identities. He recognizes that man is responsible for making "the animal a theorem, something seen and not seeing" (14). Adam's first act of naming the 'animal'—of
conscribing it to an arbitrary denotation—did not establish truth; rather, it corralled all non-human beings into a single concept: *the animal*. An animal lost autonomy and individuality when it became that *which was named by man*.

Thus, in seeing the cat *see* him, Derrida undergoes a fundamental disruption of man’s animal “theorem.” He comes to realize that he knows very little about the nature of the cat that gazes at him. In line with Derrida’s realization, Thomas Nagel explores the limitation of man’s ability to understand the consciousness of an *other* being. In his seminal essay “What is it like to be a bat?,” Nagel concludes that humans are fundamentally limited in their ability to understand and explain what it is to be something else. He argues that each conscious organism experiences the world in a manner that is unique to its being and as a result “there is something that it is to *be* that organism” (166). Nagel explains that because human experience establishes the horizon of man’s imagination, attempting to understand the consciousness of an animal is limited to imagining what it would be like for a human to *behave* as that animal does. By illustrating how animal consciousness remains permanently inaccessible to man as long as he experiences life as a human, Nagel helps expose the frivolity of man’s identity as *namer*. How can humans take on the identity of a superior, empowered, and privileged being when little is understood about the *otherness* of other beings?

In exposing the false foundation of human-posited animal identity, the cat’s gaze performs the function of Nagel’s bat by interrupting Derrida’s understanding of his ‘human’ self. As the cat reverses the human gaze, so in effect does Derrida invert Nagel’s question, asking: “What is it like to be human?” Derrida illustrates that this shift in questioning marks a radical, yet essential, approach to animal ethics, observing that the current state of the animal rights movement is “a war being waged between, on the one hand, those who violate not only animal life but even and also this sentiment of compassion, and, on the other hand, those who appeal for
an irrefutable testimony to this pity" (28-29). The animal rights conversation orbits a battle for pity, a struggle between those with compassion and those who are marked as selfish and cruel. However, by interrupting this debate with the question of human identity, Derrida changes the course of this conversation. He explains, “To think the war we find ourselves waging is not only a duty, a responsibility, an obligation, it is also a necessity, a constraint that, like it or not, directly or indirectly, no one can escape” (29). Derrida’s reference to ‘thinking the war’ illustrates a need to contemplate what is at stake in this conversation. The war is more than a fight to establish an ethically responsible human being; it is a fight to establish a sound human identity—a stable being founded on authentic self-recognition as opposed to contrived exclusionary logic, and thus a being capable of formulating a philosophically sustainable animal ethics.

Derrida’s interrogation of human identity creates an opportunity to dismantle the structure of human dominion, starting with the disruption of man’s privileged identity. As Derrida suggests, “The animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps begins there” (29). By questioning why it is that man becomes vulnerable and “naked” in the knowing gaze of an animal, Derrida illustrates that in order to critically “think” about and revalue animal ethics, man must first strip himself of preconceived coordinates of self-understanding. For Derrida, the heron flying overhead represents a moment of disruptive recognition—one in which the narrator turns away with a new acknowledgement of the mobility and elusiveness of the heron. She may not be completely altered by this singular moment yet it initiates a revaluation of both other and self. It is this initial disruption—the sensation of being bare and lacking the protection of a privileged identity—that is crucial to constructing an ethics that does not engage in the pre-existing dialectic of human dominion. Yet while Derrida initiates this shift in the conversation, he does not explore what such a shift would entail or produce. What does it look
like to completely strip oneself of a ‘human’ identity and how does this ‘laying bare’ translate into a transvaluation of animal ethics?

In her novel *Surfacing*, Margaret Atwood presents a narrator who undergoes just such a radical interrogation of her human identity. Upon returning to her family’s isolated cabin in the Canadian wilderness with three traveling companions (her lover, Joe, and their married friends, David and Anna), the narrator finds herself questioning both her personal interactions with animals and the prevailing acceptance of human violence against these creatures. Atwood picks up where Derrida leaves off in that she constructs a working example of a character who attempts to strip herself of all ‘human’ characteristics. As with Derrida’s encounter with the cat, the narrator’s decision to reject (or, we shall see, abject) her human traits stems from unsettling interactions with both live and deceased animals. These encounters interrupt the narrator’s sense of human exceptionalism, making her question the foundation on which her very identity is built. Not only does Atwood illustrate how one comes to this critical point of self-reckoning, but she provides a vivid portrait of what it looks like to follow through with this shedding of identity. While Atwood’s character struggles with the pragmatic consequences of living as a ‘non-human’ being, she is left with a profoundly revised ethical understanding of her relation to both man and animal. Atwood thereby suggests that even when faced with the societal constraints of deeply engrained anthropocentrism, it is possible to alter one’s ethical vision of the human-animal relation. Yet such radical self-alteration requires a willingness to rebuild from a place of ‘nakedness’ and vulnerability. It requires that one be able to sacrifice a preexisting sense of self for a new understanding of what it is to be, precisely, an ethical being.

While Atwood’s novel is predominantly read and critiqued through the lens of gender politics, postcolonial critique, and environmentalism, we will see that in reading *Surfacing* with a focus on animal ethics it is possible to interrogate the substructure of these intra-species
tensions. In this essay I do not attempt an extensive application of each animal rights theory; rather, I look to strategically distill these varied approaches in an effort to define the fundamental presuppositions of an ethical being. This paper works to establish a form of ethical existence derived from the disruption of both ‘human’ and ‘animal’ identity as products of anthropocentric logic. By first asking the question of what produces ‘humanness,’ it is possible to identify ‘animality’ as the cornerstone of man’s constructed, privileged identity. We will see that a movement toward the ethical treatment of animals does not begin with a revaluation of this ‘animality’; rather, it demands that we interrogate the logic that allowed for such an identity construct to exist. By examining Atwood’s narrator and the progression of her self-alteration, we will establish sacrificial logic as a process of repeated exclusion that satisfies man’s need to master—and ultimately put to death—the animal. It is a logic that generates and perpetuates human exceptionalism, producing the ‘human’ construct that currently defines our being as that which can kill, and the ‘animal’ as that which can be killed with impunity. In a transformative process of disrupting this concept of ‘human,’ Atwood’s narrator illustrates that it is possible to reconstruct an ethical existence that does not rely on guilt, pity, or an instrumental sense of responsibility. Through the narrator’s struggle to reconstruct a sound identity, we will see how a change in perspective can radically alter our ethical existence. In simply recognizing the otherness within her self, the narrator becomes aware of her coexistence with animal others. She recognizes the animal as an elemental aspect of her being, identifying an ontological necessity in respecting the autonomy of these creatures. Much like Derrida’s approach to animal ethics, it is a

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2 For gender-focused interpretations see Howells, Somacorrera, Tolan, and Wilson; for (post)colonial readings see Hogan, Kapuscinsky, and Staels; and for environmental approaches see Hengen, Howells, and Tolan. Donna Haraway’s assertion in The Companion Species Manifesto, “feminist inquiry is about understanding how things work, who is in the action, what might be possible, and how worldly actors might somehow be accountable to and love each other less violently” (7), illuminates how (for example) a feminist interrogation of Surfacing can, in its fundamental aims, converge with an animal ethics reading, for they equally focus on the origin and workings of human dominion.
change in the way we think and see the otherness in and around us that dictates the nature of our being. It is only with this changed perspective that we can challenge our assumed right to kill non-human animals and the systematic violence generated from this assumption.

II

Atwood initiates this contemplation of how and why humans have assumed the right to kill animals when her narrator bears witness to a violently slain heron:

It was behind me, I smelled it before I saw it; then I heard the flies. The smell was like decaying fish. I turned around and it was hanging upside down by a thick blue nylon rope tied round its feet and looped over a tree branch, its wings fallen open. It looked at me with its mashed eye...

I saw a beetle on it, blue-black and oval; when the camera whirred it burrowed in under the feathers. Carrion beetle, death beetle. Why had they strung it up like a lynch victim, why didn’t they just throw it away like the trash? To prove they could do it, they had the power to kill. Otherwise it was valueless; beautiful from a distance but it couldn’t be tamed or cooked or trained to talk, the only relation they could have to a thing like that was to destroy it. Food, slave or corpse, limited choices; horned and fanged heads sawed off and mounted on the billiard room wall, stuffed fish, trophies. It must have been the Americans; they were in there now, we would meet them. (116-118)

When the narrator turns toward the heron, she sees what is normally a poised, majestic animal hanging wretchedly from a tree. The bird is strung up with a blue nylon rope, its wings fallen open to create the shape of a cross. The dangling and exposed body presents a complex contradictory image that merges the physicality of both a lynching and a crucifixion. Just as a lynch victim is publicly displayed after his violent murder, so the heron’s killers deliberately hang the bird in a clearing where it is visible to passers-by. The dead heron could have been “throw away like the trash,” but instead its killers make a conscious decision to exhibit its brutalized body. Not only is the debased corpse on display, but also the men hang the bird in such a manner that its wings—normally kept tightly folded or in a state of rhythmic beating—fall open to resemble the outstretched arms of Christ.
By juxtaposing images of lynching and crucifixion, Atwood draws attention to the complex manner and purpose of the bird's death. On the one hand, evoking the act of lynching illustrates the killers’ desire to devalue the life and body of the heron; it is a violent form of murder that not only seeks to inflict pain, but also aims to assert dominance over a community that must bear witness to the reduction of life to inert flesh. Contrarily, the crucifixion of Christ is explicitly an act of sacrifice through which the sanctified body is elevated, endowed with the highest value and status. Worshipped by the surrounding community, Christ’s sacrificed body is not a source of fear; rather, His followers respect and honor the suffering he endured in the name of their own survival and salvation. Painfully working through the seeming contradiction in this image of the suspended heron, the narrator gradually exposes the shared foundation of all human interactions with animals. Ultimately, while lynching and crucifixion seem conceptually contradictory, the narrator illustrates their common foundation in the sacrificial logic that satisfies the human need to master the animal through a process of repeated exclusion.

Upon interrogating the heron’s murder, the narrator speculates that its killers wanted to "prove they could do it, they had the power to kill." She suggests that without this exertion of power, the heron “was valueless, beautiful from a distance but it couldn’t be tamed or cooked or trained to talk, the only relation they could have to a thing like that was to destroy it.” Immediately, Atwood introduces the question of “distance” and its implication in the display of power. As an inedible wild animal that lives at a distance, the heron is not regularly brought under human jurisdiction through the act of domestication or consumption. The narrator observes that when granted the space to live as an autonomous being and in accordance with its own desires, the heron becomes incomprehensible and “valueless” to the men. To remedy this incomprehensibility, they quickly act to control the bird through sheer force—the only method of domination left at their disposal. While physical debasement appears contrary to the elevation of
a being’s value, the narrator observes how the *closeness* of killing allows the men to recuperate meaning from the heron’s corpse. Through an act of pure violence the men are able to destroy the heron’s distant autonomy and reduce its physical body to one that can be strung-up, displayed and manipulated under their jurisdiction. The narrator further validates this logic by presenting the example of taxidermy in which “horned and fanged heads [are] sawed off and mounted on the billiard room wall” like “trophies.” Similar to the heron’s lynching, in this act of physical domination men first reduce an animal’s existence to that of a corpse and then proceed to endow it with new meaning. There is a complete erasure of distance as men bring the corpses into their homes, the proximity allowing them to transform the animals into testaments of human power.

In addition to observing that humans can only relate to animals when they are physically within man’s jurisdiction, the narrator recognizes that humans *act upon* animals in an effort to satisfy their need to demonstrate and embody a privileged and empowered identity. In referring to the heron as a “thing,” the narrator illustrates that human dominion has transformed animals into objects of use that exist as man’s entertainment, sustenance, or tool. Within this relationship they are not entitled to interests or desires of their own but are assigned value as commodities that satisfy man. In the context of animal commodification, Atwood’s juxtaposed images of the heron’s lynching and crucifixion come into focus as an illustration of the bird’s role as a *service* to man. This servitude can be more specifically described as a sacrificial logic in which the animal life is lost for the benefit of man. Initially this logic does not reflect conventional understandings of ritual sacrifice in which a sacrificial figure is “surrendered to God or a deity, for the purpose of propitiation or homage” (OED). The brutality of the heron’s murder makes it clear that the bird’s killers were not engaging in a religious ritual or surrendering an offering to God. Nevertheless, the heron represents a death that was carried out to satisfy the desires of a
‘superior power.’ The bird’s desecration acts as a movement of substitution, one in which the animal’s life is destroyed in exchange for the establishment of human power and privilege.

In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Giorgio Agamben explores a definition of the ‘sacred life’ that helps to interrogate the less conventional sacrificial logic at play in Atwood’s scene. Agamben explains that the Roman figure of the *homo sacer*, or “sacred man,” is distinct from the figure of religious ritual. The *homo sacer* is, like the sacrificed victim of mythic or spiritual slaughter, indeed exceptional, but he is set apart by his role as a cursed man who “may be killed but not sacrificed” (83). According to Agamben, the *homo sacer* has “separated [him]self from other men in a sphere beyond both divine and human law” (86). This double exception acts as a double exclusion that makes the *homo sacer* vulnerable to being killed without punishment while simultaneously denying him the right to be celebrated as a sacrifice. Agamben’s definition of the ‘sacred life’ exposes a sphere of inconsequential killing—a space comparable to that which the heron occupies. The men view the bird as, by definition, an expendable life, one they can destroy without fear of consequence. Furthermore, the men do not intend for the heron to be seen as a hallowed religious sacrifice. Their violent attack, in which the sacral value of the crucifixion is cancelled by the debasing image of lynching, illustrates a blatant lack of consideration for spiritual value. Lacking the status of a religious sacrifice, the heron is redolent of Agamben’s definition of the *homo sacer*. It is a being that “may be killed by anyone—an object of a violence that exceeds the sphere both of law and sacrifice” (86).

While Agamben’s *homo sacer* is denied the right to protection in life and value in death, he illustrates its crucial societal function as a figure of double exclusion. By transgressing normative human behavior, the *homo sacer* threatens the structuring priorities of human identity and must therefore be cast out of the sphere of qualified life. In turn he becomes a symbol of what Agamben terms *bare life*—one that exists as a living being but is not included in or privy to
the rights of the political order. The *homo sacer* is not in possession of *bios*, “which indicate[s] the form or way of living proper to an individual or group,” but merely a subject of *zoë*, the “simple fact of living common to all living beings” (1). This existence as a subject of *zoë* is essential when Agamben argues that “there is politics because man is the living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in a inclusive exclusion” (8). Humans become political beings\(^3\) who are defined by their claim to a qualified life. Furthermore, humans construct and produce this identity by placing themselves in opposition to beings that putatively lack *bios*—beings such as the *homo sacer*.

What is key about this logic is the “inclusive exclusion” that inevitably results from it. Even though man is acting to exclude the *homo sacer*, the figure itself must be included as a component of the system if it is to be excluded at all. Agamben explains, the *homo sacer* becomes excluded through the “process by which the exception everywhere becomes the rule” (9). In other words, as the exclusion of the *homo sacer* becomes a necessity, a rule, it follows that its existence as *that which is excluded* constitutively and structurally be included in the system.

As Agamben explains:

> [bare life] gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoë*, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction. At once excluding bare life from and capturing it within the political order, the state of exception actually constituted, in its very separateness, the hidden foundation on which the entire political system rested. (9)

Agamben illustrates that the identity of man as a political being rests on a foundation that requires proximity in order to forge distance. The *homo sacer* must be included within the political system so that his *bare life* can be set in opposition to man’s *qualified life*. This system

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\(^1\) In Book I of *The Politics*, Aristotle asserts that man is “by nature a political animal” (3). It is only by living as a member of a state that man exists in his fully developed nature. One who is “without a state, is either a bad man or above humanity” (3).
of inclusive exclusion does not merely depend upon but indeed *produces* the political body because it allows *bios* to exist simultaneously in relation and in opposition to *zoe*.

Atwood’s heron is subject to the same inclusive exclusion as Agamben’s *homo sacer*. By killing the heron, the men radically diminish physical distance and include the bird in their sphere of jurisdiction. However, even as a subject of this politicized sphere, the heron is denied all rights as a political body and can be killed with impunity. Just as the Roman state violently asserted itself against the *homo sacer*, so the men assert their political control over the heron while simultaneously marking it as *bare life*. Glossed by the fate of Agamben’s *homo sacer*, it follows that the heron, despite being cast out of our sphere, dies in order to forge—in other cases restore—human identity. The heron is set apart because man understands it as inherently lacking and transgressing the law of human exceptionality. However, as Agamben illustrates, it is this sphere of *otherness* that enables man to define and *produce* his own qualified life. If man were unable to kill the heron and prove its identity as inconsequential, there would be nothing over against which a qualified human life could come into existence. It is thus that the relationship between man and animal is founded on the logic of sacrifice. Despite the absence of ritual or religion, killing animals and denying them rights as political bodies maintains their status as bare life, which in turn maintains the qualified life of their killer. Thus, animals serve as scapegoats selected and destroyed by humans in order to establish and preserve their identity as ‘man.’

While Atwood’s initial juxtaposition of lynching and crucifixion establishes the heron as a sacrificial figure who nonetheless cannot be made ritually sacral, it is not until later in the novel that the narrator explicitly refers to the bird’s sacrifice. When looking back on the heron’s death, the narrator recalls:

> The shape of the heron flying above us the first evening we fished, legs and neck stretched, wings outspread, a blue-gray cross, and the other heron or was it the same one, hanging wrecked from the tree. Whether it died willingly, consented,
whether Christ died willingly, anything that suffers and dies instead of us is Christ; if they didn’t kill birds and fish they would have killed us. (141)

Once again Atwood juxtaposes the acts of lynching and crucifixion in an effort to show a moment of illuminating intersection between the forms of communal violence. The two images of the heron are strikingly different in that one describes a moment within a narrative of freedom and transcendence while the other depicts a dominated corpse. However, the two herons merge into one as the narrator illustrates the common thread of sacrifice that connects the differing moments of being. Whether acting on its own accord or hanging lifeless from a tree, the heron is a Christ-like “blue-gray cross” that cannot escape man’s classification as killable. In merging these two images of the heron, the narrator distills what it means to be a sacrificed. She uses Christ as an embellished example of sacrifice, stripping it down to a common foundation. The narrator argues that “anything that suffers and dies instead of us is Christ,” thereby presenting a definition of sacrifice that equates the body of the heron to that of Christ. This distillation of sacrifice is defined by the exchange of one being’s suffering in place of another’s. It does not deny or endow value based on the presence of ritual, the variation of species, or the justification of consent. The definition simply and clearly identifies sacrifice as an exchange of suffering.

By pinpointing in sacrifice its key element of forced subjugation and identifying suffering as its irreducible attribute, Atwood implicates and illuminates animals’ countless sacrificial roles in society as food, clothing, entertainment, and scientific tools. However, in order to understand how broadly applicable this definition of sacrifice is, it is important to explore the meaning of “suffering.” According to Tom Regan, suffering is not simply the result of pain. It extends past physical harm into the realm of deprivation. Regan explains:

4 As discussed in Coetzee’s The Lives of Animals, “there is something attractive about [ritual] at an ethical level” (52). Ritual takes an act of killing and endows it with honor, gratitude, and even the illusion of consent. For example, this ‘respect’ for the dead has the power to transform a bullfight into a celebration of strength and bravery. It is capable of masking violence with the simply act of ‘giving thanks.’
Death is sometimes seen as morally ok if no suffering is inflicted; however, that argument is deficient because it does not take into account the fact that death is a deprivation of a fundamental and irreversible kind. Once dead the individual who had preferences no longer has any chance of finding satisfaction. Death is the ultimate harm because it is the ultimate loss. (98)

On Regan’s account, suffering is the dispossession of the capacity to pursue interests and find satisfaction. It may not be accompanied by physical pain, yet it nevertheless harms the interests of the individual. Regan’s Kantian emphasis on the denial of a life of interests evokes Agamben’s focus on sacrifice as the exchange of an animal’s bare life for the production of human identity. In the case of the heron, the animal’s suffering exemplifies both physical pain and the “ultimate loss” of potentiality through the privation of death. However, an exchange of suffering is not immediately apparent because it is not clear what harm would have arisen for the men from their refusal to kill the bird. If suffering is defined as the inability to pursue one’s interests, it follows that humans are inherently interested in establishing a comfortable, safe, and secure living environment. By killing the heron, the men establish themselves as subjects of an empowered and privileged life. In turn, this establishment is essential to the stability of human identity and thus to the comfort of human life. Without the production of a secure identity, man would be left vulnerable and insecure—subject to a life of suffering.

The production of human identity is not the only exchange at play in the heron’s destruction. The narrator alludes to more literal exchanges of physical life when she argues that if the men hadn’t killed “birds and fish they would have killed us” (141). As Rene Girard suggests in Violence and the Sacred, “society is seeking to deflect upon a relatively indifferent victim, a ‘sacrificeable’ victim, the violence that would otherwise be vented on its own members, the people it most desires to protect” (4). Girard argues that human violence finds a “surrogate victim” in an effort to protect its own members from harm. Similarly, the narrator points out that if the hunters had not killed the heron, they would have taken their aggression and violence out
on other humans. Thus the heron’s sacrifice can be interpreted as a direct exchange of one life for another. An extension of this literal exchange comes in the form of consuming animal flesh: the narrator argues that meat consumption takes on an additional form of sacrificial logic because animals suffer for the purpose of providing humans physical sustenance. Evoking a parodistic sacrament she explains, “we eat them, out of cans or otherwise; we are eaters of death, dead Christ-flesh resurrecting inside us, granting us life” (141). An animal’s death at a slaughterhouse is far from ritualized or consensual; nevertheless, it involves an exchange of suffering for life.

Whether one interprets the killing of animals as suffering for the sake of man’s identity or man’s physical body, it is clear that the heron’s death represents a larger construct from which many possible sacrificial roles emerge. However, no matter an animal’s specific place within sacrificial logic, man is thankless for its suffering. In a religious ritual, the sacrificed animal is accorded respect and shown gratitude for its role as an offering. The narrator argues that this practice does not accompany the daily killing of animals for human use: “But we refuse to worship; the body worships with blood and muscle but the thing in the knob head will not, wills not to, the head is greedy, it consumes but does not give thanks” (141). In confronting the lack of acknowledgement surrounding this suffering, the narrator illustrates how humans deny animals the identity of a sacrifice of being, thus denying the existence of the sacrificial logic that so clearly defines our relationship with animals. The narrator suggests that man is not innocently unobservant; rather he actively “wills not to” acknowledge animal sacrifice, pointing to a larger denial of all animal suffering. Thankfulness stems from an acknowledgment that one has received the favor or services of another (OED). It was an acknowledgement of the denial of such an observance that made Bentham utter his anti-Cartesian declaration, “The question is not, Can they reason? nor Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?” This question forces man to confront directly the essential feature of sacrifice—suffering. In dismissing the importance of reasoning
and language as the touchstone of human exceptionalism, Bentham illustrates that the question of suffering lies at the root of our misunderstanding of animal consciousness. It is only by acknowledging an animal’s ability to suffer that we can begin to appreciate and interrogate the sacrificial logic at play in human-animal relationships.

But to understand this project, we must return to Bentham differently than Peter Singer’s utilitarian lens in *Animal Liberation*, which only looked to alleviate the symptoms of human violence towards animals as opposed to exploring its origins. While Atwood’s narrator first establishes an understanding of animal sacrifice, she then proceeds to interrogate aspects of human nature that justify and perpetuate this systematic and systemic mechanism of animal oppression. The narrator’s initial encounter with the lynched and crucified heron is essential to her understanding of sacrificial logic as the foundation of all human-animal interaction. That said, it is only when the narrator takes a closer look at the heron that she begins to move past the limitations of Singer’s argument and interrogate the foundation of this man-made system.

While the heron’s physical display is the first aspect of the scene to profoundly unsettle the narrator, smaller details prove crucial to her analysis of human behavior. Atwood’s chapter abruptly ends with the narrator’s claim, “It looked at me with its mashed eye.” This shared, if asymmetrical, gaze between human and animal can be compared to the gaze that inspires Derrida in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Let us return to the moment when Derrida sees the cat seeing him and particularly to the striking affective consequence of this inversion of roles. With the reversal of looks, Derrida is “no longer sure before whom I am so numbed with shame” (9). Questioning the consciousness and identity of this other being creates “trouble, yes, a bad time” because it demands a reconsideration of accepted knowledge regarding the very nature of Derrida’s being (4). It is this exposure that elicits an overwhelming sense of shame that results from being “in a situation that offends one’s sense of modesty or decency” (OED). This “sense
of modesty” is a space of understood values and expectations that are established by the shared views of a community. In feeling shame, Derrida confesses that he has transgressed this space of communal understanding, entering a situation that in some way contradicts or offends the established norm. In other words, the reversal of the gaze produces a feeling of shame because it fundamentally alters Derrida’s inclusion within an established system of identification.

In reversing the gaze, Derrida questions what the cat sees when s/he looks at man, jeopardizing the delineations defining and governing human identity. As Derrida explains, “the gaze called ‘animal’ offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human... the bordercrossing from which vantage man dares to announce himself to himself, thereby calling himself by the names that he believes he gives himself” (12). In other words, this disruptive gaze passing between Derrida and the cat makes him question the foundation of his own identity as man that has been so defined by man. Derrida identifies a man-made “bordercrossing” that defines who is within and who is without. Men are (presumably) in possession of their ‘human’ attributes and thus exist within the border while animals are without possession of these attributes and thus stand outside the circle of ‘human’ being. However, Derrida illustrates how the “abyssal limit of the human” renders useless this system of demarcated identity, making the ‘human’ vertiginously ‘unfathomable.’ Man “names” and “announce[s] himself” as an individual in possession of reason, language, and self-awareness, yet disregards the possibility that other seers follow a different system of identification and valuation. In recognizing the reversal of the gaze, Derrida acknowledges that there may be endless ways to define a ‘human.’ In turn, he fundamentally disrupts the meticulously constructed borders of exclusion that regulate the hierarchized relation of animal and human, thus jeopardizing the entire system of identification by which we define ourselves. Derrida’s feeling of shame during this moment of ocular disruption is the salient index
of how he has transgressed established borders, forcing himself to entertain a nontraditional understanding of human ‘being.’

Although Atwood’s heron is not physically alive, even in death the bird’s gaze through a “mashed eye” continues to carry evidence of a being that once saw and judged man’s violence. As in Derrida’s encounter with his cat, the potential knowledge and understanding in the heron’s gaze evokes a feeling of shame in the narrator. She becomes deeply troubled by the scene and thereafter questions the motive and rationale behind the killing. At the end of her analysis, she declares, “it must have been the Americans; they were in there now, we would meet them” (118). The Canadian narrator attempts to shift the blame for the animal’s brutalization onto a dissimilar community, the “Americans,” because she is disconcerted by the heron’s newly realized potential. This type of anxiety and shame differs slightly from Derrida’s because the narrator is uncomfortable being within the “sense of modesty” as opposed to being exiled from it. While Derrida’s shame stems from transgressing accepted norms of human identity, the narrator is ashamed because she partakes of a mode of being that denies the suffering of animals, thus condoning violence towards them. The heron’s gaze thus acts to fundamentally disturb the narrator’s complacency within this system of existential valuation. By interrogating assumptions underlying what is required to be human, the narrator moves past Singer’s discussion of animal

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5 Critics have offered various interpretations of Atwood’s image of the “mashed eye”; however, few have considered its disruptive effect on the narrator. Instead, readers such as Sharon Wilson focus on the larger role of the gazing eye as symbol of human dominion within the frameworks of gender and neocolonial subjugation. As Wilson argues, “Eyes in Surfacing are initially oppositional, those of the gazers and the objects of the commodifying patriarchal and colonial Gaze” (180). She suggests that the heron’s smashed eye “symbolizes nature” (181) that has been destroyed, denied the role of seer upon coming into contact with humans—the “commodifying patriarchal gazers.”

6 Postcolonial readings of Surfacing interpret this re-evaluation of blame as Atwood’s representation of the ‘Canadian victim complex.’ Kiley Kapuscinski, for example, argues that “Atwood invites a radical shift in the perception of Canada’s collective consciousness... in order to reveal both the capacity of Canadians to do harm to others and the violence that exists unremarked at the heart of the Canadian signature” (95).
rights, with its presumption of human priority, and begins to contemplate the validity of a human identity that can violently dictate a system of animal sacrifice.

The function of the heron’s gaze as a disruption of the ‘human’ becomes clearer when brought into conversation with the system of opposition that Agamben introduces and Derrida begins to unsettle. Human identity, as defined by man, is dependent on deeming humans as in possession of and animals as lacking certain attributes. Derrida illustrates that granting an animal the role of seer fundamentally transgresses our constructed borders of exclusion because it allows animals to transgress into our realm of possession. Although this system of opposition varies in its manifestation, it remains integral to the production of human identity. When oppositional constructs are jeopardized, human identity enters an indeterminate space where it is no longer definitive or decidable. Just as the cat’s disquieting gaze makes Derrida acutely aware of his nudity, so the disruption of this system of opposition strips human identity bare of the definitions that protect and secure its existence. 7

It is upon confronting her past that the narrator fully understands the extent to which sacrificial logic has allowed her to justify the normative act of killing animals. In the final section of the book Atwood reveals that the narrator had an abortion that left her traumatized, plunging her into denial of her own implication in the violent suppression of life. This experience resurfaces when the narrator dives into the lake in pursuit of the stone drawings for which her father had been searching. Upon diving down along the cliff, the narrator describes:

It was there but it wasn’t a painting, it wasn’t on the rock. It was below me, drifting towards me from the furthest level where there was no life, a dark oval trailing limbs. It was blurred but it had eyes, they were open, it was something I knew about, a dead thing, it was dead.

7 In Italian Agamben’s bare life is expressed as “la vita nuda” or “the nude life.” This locution explicitly evokes the feeling of nudity brought about by the cat’s gaze—a disruption and forced acknowledgement of man’s bare life.
I turned, fear gushed out of my mouth in silver, panic closing my throat, the scream kept in and choking me. (143)

Following this traumatic experience in the lake, the narrator gives further context to the "dead thing" that she recognizes. She explains, "Whatever it is, part of myself or a separate creature, I killed it. It wasn't a child but it could have been one, I didn't allow it" (144). The narrator’s encounter with the corpse of her aborted child can be effectively glossed by Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection as expounded in Powers of Horror. Kristeva argues that man’s terror at the sight of a corpse arises from the threatened erasure of the boundary between self and other. While signified death, such as a flat encephalograph, is undisturbing in its lucid finality, encountering a corpse forces us to confront the graphic and raw materiality of our own mortality.

The corpse represents “death infecting life” (4) because it shows “me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live” (3). By entering into the space of the living, as opposed to remaining buried or destroyed, the corpse, Kristeva asserts, exposes an aspect of human existence that is normally strictly denied. Its defiance of this exclusionary border causes a shift in which “it is no longer I who expel, ‘I’ is expelled” (4). The corpse is kept abject and cast out of the human sphere in order to preserve a semblance of separation between man and the inevitability of his own death. This separation is what allows humans to live in a comforting denial of a connection to the bare physicality of their life or the vulnerability associated with their mortality. However, the corpse’s presence defies this separation, terrorizing man through the destabilization of his well-protected illusion of privileged invulnerability. Kristeva exposes this disruption when she asks, “How can I be without border?” (4) When the separation of the abject breaks down, Kristeva finds that it is no longer possible to uphold the assumed stability and totality of the self because the corpse “is now here, jetted, abjected, into ‘my’ world” (4). Without a functional border that ensures the exclusion of the abject, we are unable to preserve our defining opposition
to beings of *otherness*. It follows that the *abject* undermines the functioning of man’s system of exclusion, jeopardizing the foundation of human identity. As such, the abject corpse serves to interrupt the very sacrificial structure through which the dead heron had come into view.

Per Kristeva’s theory of abjection, the narrator’s encounter with her aborted child evokes terror and dread because it forces her to confront the shared mortality that connects her and the fetus. After being overcome by fear and panic in the lake, the narrator acknowledges, “I could have said *No* but I didn’t; that made me one of them too, a killer” (146). She recognizes her role in the killing because the logic of her denial has begun to break down. While the *abject* is meant to clearly distinguish between self and other—between that which is *included* in and *excluded* from the human sphere—the fetus’s physical presence transgresses these boundaries of abjection, causing the distinction to collapse. The narrator can no longer compartmentalize the fetus or exclude it from her sphere of concern; rather, its physical embodiment of death exposes the mortality shared by all life. As the narrator later realizes, “logic is a wall, I built it, on the other side is terror” (179). Just as Kristeva argues, the narrator’s terror upon seeing the fetus arises in direct response to a disruption of conventional logic. Her denial of the fetus’s life was made possible by the sacrificial logic that separates humans and subjects of *bare life*. The fetus’s disruption of this separating “wall” dismantles man’s exclusive identity. The narrator finds herself terrorized by the understanding that she is now without the “logic” that once justified and condoned her actions—a recognition linked to her evolving confrontation with the animal’s ethical claim.  

1 Additionally, the narrator’s recognition of the animal’s ethical claim strengthens as she confronts her past passivity and participation in her brother’s cruelty toward animals. The narrator describes how her brother kept frogs, snakes, and other small animals in jars and tin cans, starving them out of forgetfulness. She was afraid of letting them out for fear that “they were killed. I didn’t want there to be wars and death, I wanted them not to exist” (132). In the process of preserving her own comfort by refusing to acknowledge the cruelty taking place at the hands of her relative, the narrator became complacent, an implicit accomplice to her brother’s cruel acts.
While the encounter is one of pain and fear, Atwood has the narrator quickly come to terms with the implications of this disrupted logic. She reveals, "He said it wasn’t a person, only an animal; I should have seen that was no different, it was hiding in me as if in a burrow and instead of granting it sanctuary I let them catch it" (145-6). The narrator had been convinced that the other’s animality was an excuse to kill it. She believed that if the fetus were an animal—the subject of a bare life—then she did not need to recognize or protect its rights as a qualified creaturely life. However, upon facing the proof of a shared mortality, the narrator realizes that these spheres of life are far from exclusive. She admits that being an animal, or in this case a fetus, "was no different" from being a person. While the narrator does not argue that there is complete sameness between human and animal, she acknowledges a common pursuit of life and a shared fear of death. Reminiscent of Regan’s argument that animals have interests, desires, and preferences that they act on intentionally, the narrator recognizes a shared desire among all beings to avoid death and "burrow" into a safe space. Just as she has hidden from fear in the pursuit of comfort, so every subject of life desires a sanctuary. But while Regan uses this common pursuit to bring nonhuman beings into the realm of ‘human’ consideration, the narrator’s revelation serves to confute the syllogism of exclusivity that defines this human sphere. Rather than expand parameters of human value to include animals, the narrator’s traumatic recognition shatters the fundamental assumptions of ‘human’ exceptionalism.

III

The most immediate implications of this disruption are apparent in the narrator’s complete rejection of the sacrificial logic that has hitherto defined her interaction with animals. After encountering the heron, the narrator finds that she can no longer participate in actions that previously seemed justifiable. Upon catching a fish, the narrator describes how she cannot bring herself to kill it:
Thud of metal on fishbone, skull, neckless headbody, the fish is whole, I couldn’t anymore, I had no right to. We didn’t need it, our proper food was tin cans. We were committing this act, violation, for sport or amusement or pleasure, recreation they called it, these were no longer the right reasons. That’s an explanation but no excuse my father used to say, a favorite maxim. (121)

Earlier in the novel the narrator comments on the problematic existence of the neck, explaining that it “creates the illusion that [head and body] are separate”(75). As a result, men “look down at their bodies” as if they are “robots or puppets,” failing to recognize the interdependent nature of the mind and its physical being (75). The narrator’s observation of the fish’s “necklessness” is not simply physical but touches on the implications of man’s fragmentation. As a being that values the mind and disregards the body, man uses “explanations” to justify his actions no matter the bodily destruction that comes of them. The narrator challenges this separation of body and mind by describing the “neckless” fish as a “whole.” Lacking a neck, the fish becomes a complete being that stands in contrast to man’s self-division. It represents a being that is able to merge both reason and materiality, bios and zoë, into one integrated existence.

Upon perceiving the fish as a “whole” being, the narrator dramatically alters her behavior. No being able to kill “anymore” illustrates how the narrator is actively responding to her disruptive encounter with both the heron and her fetus. She does not remain idle in the face of an indeterminate identity but begins to assess the actions upon which a now faltering definition of ‘human’ relies. Specifically, the narrator challenges the use of logic as a form of and justification for human violence. The narrator proclaims that the “explanations” humans use to rationalize their actions no longer serve as “excuse[s]” for their unethical behavior. The ethical import of this collapse of logic emerges when she proclaims that she now has “no right” to kill the fish. The narrator recognizes that her status as a political being with rights is no longer valid because the sacrificial force that produced that being has lost its authority. Unmoored from the logical foundation of her identity, the narrator begins to distance herself from human jurisdiction.
Having begun to reject specific human acts, the narrator realizes that the interruption of her identity has implications that extend far past the killing of animals. Initially, the (Canadian) narrator takes solace in the knowledge that the heron’s killers are Americans. She does not deny the need to change her behavior, yet by placing blame on a foreign community she is able to distance herself from the extreme brutality of the heron’s murder. However, this self-protective separation collapses when the men reveal that they too are Canadian natives. Upon this discovery, the narrator explains, “I was furious with them, they’d disguised themselves” (129). She doesn’t yield her claim easily and continues to argue that their actions speak to an “American” identity. The narrator reasons, “But they’d killed the heron anyways. It doesn’t matter what country they’re from, my head said, they’re still Americans” (130), basing this argument on the notion that “If you look like them and talk like them and think like them then you are them... you speak their language, a language is everything you do” (130). However, “talking like them” can be broadly interpreted as sharing the use of a formal system of signs, or it can be specifically interpreted as speaking in the same language with the same locally derived accent. Similarly, a shared thought process could be interpreted as simply complying with the same social structure, or it could mean engaging in the same extreme act of murder.

The narrator quickly realizes that these broadly ambiguous definitions make it impossible for her to deny participation in the human “language” of dominion. The sacrificial structure that justifies her consumption of animal flesh is foundationally cognate with the thought process that spurs the debasement of the heron. The bird’s gaze does not disrupt a specific definition of

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* In line with the prevailing feminist interpretive lens, Carol Ann Howells argues that the language of human dominion is gendered. According to Howells, the narrator is engaged in a “gendered quest for a new language,” one over which she can feel ownership as a woman (44). Howells interprets the narrator’s ‘trapped’ feeling as an indication of her confinement within an androcentric vocabulary. This gendering of human dominion as specifically male dominion is a prevalent interpretive approach taken by critiques of the novel, including that of Pilar Somacarrera. Somacarrera describes *Surfacing* as a “war of the sexes” in which the dialectic or language of human dominion is interrogated through a narrative of gendered Darwinian survival.
murder; rather, it unsettles the foundation of all animal sacrifice, ranging from brutal murder to fishing for sport. In the face of this foundational similarity, the narrator’s use of “language” quickly expands from a mode of communication to a representation of all human speech, thought, and action. The narrator’s growing understanding of this collective human ideology emerges when she contemplates how man came to exist as a destructive being. The narrator questions, “But how did they evolve, where did the first one come from, they weren’t an invasion from another planet, they were terrestrial. How did we get bad” (130). It is at this moment that the narrator shifts from a contemplation of “they” to an interrogation of “we.” She no longer allows herself to be dissociated from the killer’s thought process, but instead begins to question a broader and all-encompassing human identity in which she, too, is implicated.

What, then, becomes of the narrator’s use of language when she comes to see it as a crucial contributor to the sacrificial structure that she is now working to reject? As Walter Burkert explains in *Homo Necans: An Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth*, language “determines who belongs to the group; indeed, the special peculiarities of grammar and phonetics almost seem made to keep the circle of members small. In many cases, that which is said seems less important in everyday life than that something is in fact said” (29). Burkert’s identification of shared language as an essential community marker parallels Clark’s explanation of how humans constantly redefine “language” to connote that which is lacking in animals. The content of the words is not important; rather, it is the possession of an exclusively human skill that remains essential. Just as Burkert argues that grammar and phonetics separate different communities of people, so language as a formal system of signs separates putatively the community of man from that of animal. Whether on an inter or intra-species level, Burkert illustrates how an ideology of language works to create and perpetuate the exceptionalist construct that directly enables the systematic killing of animals.
In recognizing the exclusivity of human language, the narrator begins to interrogate its influence on her very self-conception. When Joe discovers the narrator after her imaginative encounter with the aborted fetus, she describes, "I touched him on the arm with my hand. My hand touched his arm. Hand touched arm. Language divides us into fragments, I wanted to be whole" (147). Once again the narrator returns to the fragmentation of body and mind. Just as the neck allows humans to dissociate mind and body, so language divides the body itself as well as tactility from understanding. Through the manipulation of signs and words, language makes it possible for a mindless hand to touch a mindless arm: the functioning of a noun allows for an arm to act without the necessary association with or appreciation of the mind that is controlling it. Language thus creates a human sphere that allows for actions that have no actors, a space in which ownership is not a necessary component of intentionality. It is a fragmenting system that facilitates both the separation of man from animal as well as the separation of human action from self-possession.

Starting thus with a rejection of language, the narrator begins to rebuild an identity that is "whole," one that does not allow for a complete separation of mind and body or agency and will. Initially her distancing from language is subtle: for instance, the narrator "had to concentrate in order to talk" to David because "the English words seemed imported, foreign" (151). As language becomes harder to use, she recognizes that it is altogether unnecessary. The narrator describes "sight flowing ahead of me over the ground, eyes filtering the shapes, the names of things fading but their forms and uses remaining, the animals learned what to eat without nouns" (151). In her movement away from language as the motive and medium of human decisions, the narrator experiences a dramatic shift in perspective. She does not lose the capacity to absorb and process her environment; rather, she sees the purpose and meaning of objects without the need to define them through substitutive gestures or symbols. The narrator describes her sight as
“flowing” and “filtering” the objects around her as if they are fluid and unbound. This description points to a new form of perception that absorbs a continuous whole as opposed to registering objects as strictly delineated fragments of a larger image. Its holistic nature can be directly compared to the narrator’s appreciation of the “neckless” and “whole” fish. The fish’s ability to know “what to eat without nouns” is founded in the interconnectedness of its mind and body. The animal is not fragmented by the border making of logic or the boundary marking of language, and thus perceives its surroundings in terms of the larger interconnected purpose of each object and being. The narrator thusly heals the fracture of mind and body, de-metaphorizing and closing the gap between word and object, self and world: “I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning... I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place” (187). This fluid and constantly changing identity illustrates how the narrator has begun to develop meaning in a holistic form that binds ‘animal’ materiality and ‘human’ concept. Her new perception ensures that no object is registered without a broader understanding of the being(s) it is composed of or the role it plays within an interdependent community.

Rejecting language proves to be the first step in the narrator’s self-exile from the human sphere, allowing her to dismantle the exclusionary distinctions that produce and de-limit her identity. This transgression of delineated borders becomes even more explicit when the narrator no longer identifies with her given name. Upon hearing her companions Joe and Anna call out to her, the narrator explains, “It’s too late, I no longer have a name. I tried for all those years to be civilized but I’m not and I’m through pretending” (173). For the narrator, repudiation of a “civilized” identity directly coincides with the moment in which she no longer performs or feigns the exclusionary logic of the ‘human.’ The narrator’s crucial rejection of naming evokes the story of Genesis, in which God gives Adam the task of naming each animal on earth. This linguistic empowerment creates classificatory discriminations that form the foundation of man’s
privileged identity. As Derrida explains, “The animal is a word, it is an appellation that men have instituted, a name they have given themselves the right and authority to give to the living other” (23). Starting with Adam, humans have used the arbitrary categorizing force of language to literally dictate animal identity. Language allows man to assume the right of *namer*, thus lending him the power to ensure that animal identity is defined as *other* to that of humans’. With no possible protest from the muted animals, man’s onomastic authority allows him to demarcate those who belong within the sphere of “rights” and those who are classified as outside the sanctioned realm of “civilized.”

The process of naming thus forms the foundation of the fragmenting effect that the narrator recognizes and rejects in language. The assignment of a classificatory noun to each object and being creates boundaries between man and every “living other.” Moreover, the narrator’s new holistic perception illustrates that these very demarcations prevent man’s appreciation of his own place within an interconnected nature. It thus becomes imperative for the narrator to explicitly separate herself from any form of naming. This rejection not only solidifies the narrator’s place within a holistic biosphere, but also marks the beginning of her attempt to ‘unwrite’ the foundation of “dominion” in the form of a built environment. Beginning with *Genesis*, the narrator unravels that which defines her as a civilized human. After rejecting the use of naming, and thus the system of sacrificial classification that allows for an exclusionary human identity, the narrator finds that she can no longer look at her *self* in the mirror: “I looked for the last time at my distorted glass face: eyes light blue in dark-red skin, hair standing tangled out from my head, reflection intruding between my eyes and vision. Not to see myself but to see” (180). The narrator identifies the reflection as an intrusion into her new form of perception. Her recognition of self within this image represents ties to a human identity from which she seeks to dissociate herself. The mirror is proof of man’s constant necessity to know, control, and conform
to his defined identity, and to confirm that identity by forcing the world to reflect it back to him unimpaired. Literally turning the mirror away, the narrator ceases to see and understand her surroundings as a “thing” in itself, a world of un-named and liberated otherness.

Following her last glance in the mirror, the narrator deems every manmade object illicit. She burns all her books, pictures, painting supplies and even jewelry before proceeding to smash her dishes (bearers of carnivorous food) and slash her clothes (animal-derived coverings of her animal body). In a moment that repeats and possibly redeems her traumatic memory of the abortion, the narrator “dip[s] my head beneath the water, washing my eyes... When I am clean I come up out of the lake, leaving my false body floating on the surface, a cloth decoy; it jiggles in the waves I make, nudges gently against the dock” (183). Once again the narrator evokes sight to illustrate the manner in which her perception is changing. By “washing [her] eyes” the narrator cleanses herself not only of the image of her human identity in the mirror but also of the view through which she has been identifying living others. The narrator’s final act of stripping away her clothing in order to leave a “false body floating on the surface” represents her completed transgression of human identity. She now stands naked and exposed—a being that is no longer concealed, protected, or defined by ideological obfuscations of bare life. While Derrida’s nakedness before his cat is accidental, Atwood’s narrator deliberately chooses to strip down and expose herself as spurning “proper” human (self) presentation. It is not a momentary disruption of identity; rather, the narrator enters a state of complete transgression in which she feels no shame concerning her unraveled identity.

The narrator does not take on the identity of an animal; however, she does become other to ‘humanness.’ In a literal reversal of Derrida’s gaze, the narrator finds herself hiding in the forest, watching as Joe and David return in search of her. Upon hearing the boat approach, the narrator describes, “I scramble on hands and knees out of my den, blanket over me, brown plaid
camouflage, and run stooping further back among trees and flatten, worming into a thicket, hazel bushes, where I can see.” In this moment of being hunted, the narrator takes on the role of other. She momentarily exists as a being that elusively watches and responds to human action yet is not acknowledged for her own capacity to see. The narrator is aware of this otherness and explains with fear, “They’ll mistake me for a human being, a naked woman wrapped in a blanket... But if they guess my true form, identity, they will shoot me or bludgeon in my skull and hang me up by the feet from a tree” (189-190). While the narrator may retain the physical appearance of a woman, she recognizes that her identity has transgressed that of ‘human.’ By stripping away the protective layers of well-established human norms and traits, she is now acutely aware that her “true form”—that which lies underneath her ‘clothing’—is composed of aspects of otherness, making her vulnerable to the same sacrificial logic and violence to which the heron was subjected.

The narrator’s initial withdrawal from ‘human’ norms causes her to adamantly reject the idea of returning to a “civilized” society. She detaches herself from coordinates of her prior existence, even claiming that “soon [she] will be able to go without food altogether” (192). Her refusal to take part in the most basic acts of survival marks a radical moment in the narrator’s rejection of her delineated identity. While she soon recognizes the hyperbolic, indeed unrealistic nature of this behavior, the narrator’s crucial move back to pragmatism is not a regression but rather a return to human society that is heavily marked by her previous withdrawal. She declares, “The rules are over. I can go anywhere now, into the cabin, into the garden, I can walk on the paths” (194). The narrator is no longer concerned with strictly rejecting the delineated human realm; rather, she comes to the decision “to prefer life,” thus reclaiming her right to the protection, comfort, and sustenance that accompanies man-made and inhabited spaces. The final step in the narrator’s repossessing of ‘humanness’ is marked by the act of re-clothing herself. She
describes, "I dress, clumsily, unfamiliar with buttons; I reenter my own time" (197). This act of dressing is crucial, for it signifies the narrator’s pronounced return to a form of human existence. While the reader is still unsure of what this form precisely foreshadows, the re-clothing illustrates that the narrator is no longer fully naked, exposed, or vulnerable. She has regained a sense of identity that allows her to “reenter [her] own time” as a participant in modern society. With that said, Atwood reminds us that the narrator has undergone a profound transformation. Her actions are clumsy and “unfamiliar,” demonstrating how she is reentering the human sphere as a changed individual—one who is (re)adjusting to a new and altered existence, rather like a child who is learning to be human by performing habitual acts of adornment.

Despite the narrator’s return to the human sphere of bios and cultural supplementation, she has not reverted to her previous identity; rather, she has reentered modern society with a changed perception and an understanding of the otherness within her. In a pivotal scene near the end of the novel, Atwood dramatizes the narrator’s radically altered understanding of the non-human beings that surround her:

From the lake a fish jumps.
An idea of a fish jumps.
A fish jumps, carved wooden fish with dots painted on the sides, no, antlered fish thing drawn in red on cliffstone, protected spirit. It hangs in the air suspended, flesh turned to icon, he has changed again, returned to the water. How many shapes can he take.
I watch it for an hour or so; then it drops and softens, the circles widen, it becomes an ordinary fish again. (193)

This moment of watching the fish metamorphose before her encapsulates the narrator’s changed perception of human and animal identity. She has come to recognize the animal as more than the pure perception of a fish jumping: as evidence of a complex concept. While others may view the fish as a thing that jumps—a body that is caught, fileted, and consumed—the narrator has come to recognize and reorient the fish as a subject of human meaning. During this temporally
suspended moment of observation, the narrator is able to move the jumping fish through some of the many changing roles that it inhabits in human society. It takes the form of a painted statue, immobilized and accessible to man in a form that is stripped of the unsettling capacity to respond or suffer. It is seen through a historical lens as the subject of ancient cliffstone drawings—an idol constructed to provide protection for human worshippers. Finally, it returns to flesh and once again is under threat of the taunting fishing line. At the end of this transformation, the narrator states, "How many shapes can he take" (193). Atwood does not pose this as a question but rather presents it as a statement, the syntactical oddity forcing the reader to grasp that the fish's agency exists in relation to the nature of human perception. The fish, as manipulated by human culture and desire, takes on countless shapes, forms, and roles. In each of these guises, the animal is used to appease, protect, or sustain 'human' life. Even the act of viewing the animal as merely the perception of a jumping fish contributes to this subjugation, for it ignores how humans hold and confine the animal to their own forms of meaning. The narrator's altered perception prohibits her from mistaking the 'fish' for an autonomous being in our current treatment of animals, for the very comprehensive nature with which the narrator now sees her surroundings illustrates a new and constant awareness of the animal's limitations. In other words, the narrator cannot observe the fish's actions without an inherent recognition of the animal's role in producing and maintaining 'human' perception and its accompanying identity.

This transformed perception, marked as it is by a comprehensive and honest understanding of the fish's existence, allows the narrator to build a more truthful mode of being. She reenters her civilized society with a newly formed understanding of her own existence as a woman and as member of the human species. The narrator explains, "I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone. A lie which was always more disastrous than the truth would have been." (197) Here Atwood focuses
the power of disruptive recognition: dismantling the exclusionary foundation of sacrificial logic, the narrator is able to transgress human identity to the effect of gaining a generative vantage on human violence toward animals. Her brief experience in ‘being’ a nameless, species-less being allows the narrator to recognize her power to choose and her ability to see. By embracing the vulnerability that accompanies divesting oneself of assumed forms of ‘proper’ selfhood, the narrator proves that it is possible to exist outside of a protected, normative sphere. This revelation gives her the confidence to take possession of her power to reject the “lie” that supports and suffers human identity, even as she acknowledges her inescapable participation in that identity as a subject of modern existence. She no longer lives in denial of her participation in the destructive logic of animal sacrifice; instead, she recognizes that she can begin to grapple with a normative human identity structure that depends on this logic by first seeing, naming, and taking responsibility for it.

The narrator’s transformation is not simply a question of changed perception but an illustration of how viewing the world differently correlates with existing in the world differently. As the jumping fish returns to the water, the narrator explains, “I watch it for an hour or so; then it drops and softens, the circles widen, it becomes an ordinary fish again” (193). In letting the fish return to its natural habitat and regain an “ordinary” identity, Atwood demonstrates how the narrator does not hold the fish within a human sphere but allows it to return, untouched, to its original state of autonomy, its elusive otherness.  

Her ever-evolving perception acknowledges all the forms in which the fish contributes to and composes part of human identity, yet the narrator returns the animal to its element. This recognition and respect for the fish’s autonomy

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10 Alternative readings of the jumping fish suggest that its return to water represents the reestablishment of clarity and sanity. Howells describes it as a “crucial moment of recovery” in which the narrator “undergoes a series of radical shifts in perception till her vision settles back into a frame of normalcy” (48). This reading asserts that the narrator has reverted to a normalized ‘human’ perception as opposed to having undergone a fundamental alteration in her nature—or, rather, in the perception and ethical implication of her ‘nature.’
stems from a newly formed understanding of the value of otherness. Returning to the moment in which the narrator conceals herself in the woods, gazing out as the hunted other, it is clear that her changed perception now recognizes an unknowable existence, an incomprehensible ‘animality’ that is intrinsic to all living beings, including herself. A movement toward this comprehension begins during the narrator’s disruptive encounter with her aborted fetus in which she must grapple with the fact that her physical body is home to an other being. While it remains unclear whether the fetus is “part of myself or a separate creature,” the narrator comes to recognize the otherness in her self. She fantasizes about angrily knocking the aborted corpse off the surgical table, describing, “my life on the floor, glass egg and shattered blood, nothing could be done” (144). Despite the fetus’s creaturely otherness, its confinement to the identity of “only an animal” (144) and exclusion from the protections of human rights, the narrator is beginning to recognize its otherness as a part of her own “life.”

IV

This process of recognizing otherness in self can be further understood when read alongside Judith Butler’s urgent query, what makes a grievable life. In her book, Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence, Butler suggests that mourning requires us to undergo a “transformation” (21), during which “something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us” (22). In explaining these interconnected bonds, Butler establishes an irreducible principle: I cannot exist without you when “the attachment to “you” is part of what composes who “I” am” (22). When someone grieves the loss of an other it is because they no longer know who they are without that piece, when, in Kristeva’s terms, that otherness has been utterly abjected. Therefore, the process of grieving is one in which one must transform the abject
into an acknowledged element of self while learning to adapt to a new identity without the
material existence of that specific other.

The moments of disruption caused by the narrator’s encounters with her aborted fetus and
the slain heron initiate a process of grieving that helps her recognize the interconnected nature of
her identity and that of the other. Both encounters are traumatic in that they disrupt the human
logic that so carefully controls and confines her guilt, sadness, and terror. What is essential about
the process of grieving that accompanies these moments of trauma is that it does not hide, deny,
or exclude the deceased. The grief allows the narrator to move forward once she has recognized
the philosophical and ethical incorporation of the other in herself. Just as Butler explains, in
grieving the loss of both her fetus and the heron, the narrator must acknowledge that she is
changed by their absence, that the presence of their otherness was in some form tied to her own
existence. In the context of sacrificial logic, the otherness of the animal—that which warrants its
exclusion from the human realm of consideration—produces human identity in that it allows
man to exist as an exceptional, singular being. The narrator’s new perspective illustrates a shift
in her understanding of man’s dependence on ‘animality.’ The otherness is no longer that which
produces the ‘human’; rather it is within the human, elemental to, as opposed to catalytic of, her
existence.

In allowing the fish to return, untouched, to the water, the narrator illustrates that her
changed perception is one in which it is possible to acknowledge the animal’s essential role in
our human existence while simultaneously respecting its autonomy. With this new
understanding, the narrator enters into a state of complex coexistence with the animal. Her
transformed identity is one whose integrity no longer requires the perpetuation of sacrificial
logic, for its existence is founded on the otherness within the ‘human.’ Rather than being
exceptional and exclusionary—a species separate from all others—as seen by the narrator’s
transformed perception man, too, is composed of otherness. We are but animals among animals, relying on an elaborate coexistence that at times is beyond our comprehension. Her transformed understanding of what it means to be ‘human’ makes it possible to exist without the necessity to act upon, dominate, and ultimately kill the ‘animal.’ Not only are these acts of sacrifice unnecessary, they are detrimental to the coexistence that so clearly composes our ‘human’ being. As a result, the narrator’s new perception grants the animal autonomy not simply out of a constricted sense of responsibility or self-ennobling feeling of pity but—as Derrida suggests—out of necessity if she is to exist in her “true form” as an ethical being.

*Surfacing* thereby presents a narrative argument that a pragmatic ethical existence can emerge from a reconsideration of what it means to be ‘human.’ Given the incomprehensibility of animal consciousness, it is illogical to define human existence in opposition to supposedly inferior or less capable animal identity. While recalibrating these definitions of ‘animality’ helps ameliorate some of our most brutal practices, such incremental revisions of speciesism do not challenge the underlying foundation of our capacity for violence against animals. At the close of Atwood’s novel, the narrator proclaims that the child she is currently bearing will be “the first true human; it must be born, allowed” (198). Atwood makes it explicit that the current identity of man is not the “true” existence of the human. Just as importantly, she demonstrates that we are positioned at a threshold of choice and opportunity, capable at any time of rebuilding an ethical existence. It is only by changing our perception, as the narrator has done, that we can lead ourselves and others into a form of life that acknowledges and places value on all modes of otherness, including those that compose us. Perhaps it is time that we disrupt, dismantle, and discard our current ‘humanness’ in order to reconstruct an inherently ethical being. It is only then that we can live in peaceful coexistence with our fellow animals.
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