

Alice Crary

*Inside Ethics: On the Demands of Moral Thought*

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*Inside Ethics* raises a sweeping challenge to several widely shared orthodoxies in metaphysics and moral philosophy. The central project of this multifaceted work is to make a proper place for nonhuman animals (hereafter "animals") in moral thought. Crary takes issue with very basic methodological assumptions that shape most approaches to the treatment of animals in moral philosophy. Specifically, she targets the widely shared view that reflection on animals must begin with value-neutral empirical facts about them. On such a view, values enter the picture only as we apply moral principles to neutral facts to generate prescriptions about what is to be done. Many mainstream moral philosophers with divergent normative outlooks rely on such an approach. Yet Crary contends that it is deeply distorting inasmuch as it prevents us from directly appreciating animals as possessing "observable moral characteristics." In Crary's terminology, to take humans and animals to possess observable moral characteristics is to take them to be "inside ethics" (12). A fully objective view of humans and animals must take them to be inside ethics, she argues. On the contrary view, taking animals to be "outside ethics," actions based on purported observable moral characteristics appear instead to be based on subjective values projected onto a neutral reality, and therefore are not a response to reality. So the project of the book is to defend the claim that humans and animals indeed possess observable moral properties. The path to this robust moral realism is by no means direct, and Crary does not shy from the many thorny and difficult philosophical issues that lie along it. Among the theses that Crary propounds in service of her ultimate goal are: there are observable and essentially practical moral properties, objectively describing humans and animals requires an ethical sensitivity to those moral properties, being a human and being an animal are *by themselves* morally significant properties, and literature is an irreplaceable vehicle of moral reflection for grasping the moral significance of humans and other animals.

The first positive step on Crary's path to situating humans and animals inside ethics consists of an argument for the importance of ethics to understanding human and animal minds. Crary calls this position *ethical externalism*: "in order to capture the psychological significance of an individual's behavior, we invariably need a reference to some sort of specifically ethical conception" (68). She pairs this view with what she calls *commonsense realism about the mind*: the view that the psychological states exhibited in expressive behavior are objectively authoritative and do not need to be subsumed under a natural-scientific theory to earn that authority (44). This pair of doctrines is defended by

appealing to some arguments made by Wittgenstein, as interpreted along lines suggested by John McDowell. Take the famous rule-following case of continuing a series of even natural numbers up to 1000: what makes it the case that, after 1000, the counter *should* continue at 1002 rather than 1004? Not bare behavior—there was nothing about the counting behavior up to 1000 that wouldn't be consistent with the latter interpretation of the rule she is following. On Crary's reading of Wittgenstein, he is trying to get us to renounce what she calls the *abstraction requirement*, which is the idea that in order to get a clear view of reality, we must abstract from reliance on any subjective endowments. Since that requirement rules out reference to our subjective grasp of an abstract rule in justifying how to proceed in the series, and there is not a sufficient purely behavioral specification of the rule, it follows that continuing this simple arithmetical series cannot be explained in terms that satisfy the abstraction requirement. Since we very evidently do know how to continue such a series, we should reject the abstraction requirement. Wittgenstein, on Crary's reading, demonstrates that there are basic ways in which we traffic with objective matters that require reference to our subjective capacities. Another argument that Crary calls on to support this is Wittgenstein's famous treatment of aspect-seeing (as involved in the famous the duck-rabbit image). On Crary's view, Wittgenstein's point is to support a conceptualist view of perception as having noninferentially available content: an aspect of the duck-rabbit just strikes us, without having to arrive at it via inference, and that is because perception presents us with something already conceptually articulated (52). Along with some additional arguments, Crary takes us on a trajectory that leads us to what she calls a "wider conception of objectivity," a conception that allows us to include as part of our conception of reality aspects of our experience that depend ineliminably on our subjective endowments. Such a conception of objectivity allows Crary to argue for commonsense realism about the mind. This is the view that there is an objective matter about the mental states of others, through observable expressive behavior. Grasping the significance of that behavior requires reliance on a sense of what matters to a creature of the sort we are observing; thus it requires a reliance on an ethically charged conception of the life of creatures of that kind. Hence, on Crary's view, commonsense realism about the mind is intimately linked to ethical externalism. And these theses together, she believes, support robust realism about moral properties:

Our ability to recognize creatures as possessing [mental] characteristics presupposes that we have already at least imaginatively adopted an attitude toward them as beings who are caught up in such lives and who, accordingly, in appropriate circumstances, merit specific modes of concern and attention. It is in this respect, insofar as they are aspects of lives of creatures who call for particular forms of response, that the mental characteristics of human beings and animals are essentially practical. Given that they are thus both objective and essentially practical, it is fair to say that these characteristics present us with objective moral values. (88)

So, there are features of humans and animals that we grasp through having certain developed subjective capacities; when we employ them, and grasp another creature's state, those states may register with us in a way that calls for action. Having rejected the abstraction requirement, we need not relegate the call for action raised by our grasp of

others' states to the category of the merely subjective. There are objective, action-guiding features of the world, on Crary's argument.

Crary acknowledges that even if one accepts ethical externalism, one could take various philosophical stances on it that don't lead to her conclusions. One of these stances would be eliminative materialism; an eliminative materialist could acknowledge that mental language is tied to ethical considerations, but reject the whole package as grounded on a folk psychology that should be rejected in favor of views with greater scientific credentials. Crary thinks that her attack on the narrow conception of objectivity undermines the motivation for such a view (81), but it is not clear to me that this is correct. That is to say, it is not clear that the Wittgensteinian arguments go deep enough to unseat such thoroughgoing materialist conceptions; the Wittgensteinian arguments suppose that there is some content to the series rule that is to be carried out, correctly or incorrectly, and perhaps all of this is a matter of folk concepts better left aside. Perhaps there is only a matter of prediction that a suitably developed eliminative materialism would better equip us to handle. Hence, the tangle with the narrow conception of objectivity seems to raise deeper issues than the Wittgensteinian arguments address, so I imagine that some readers may be left unconvinced that they should leave behind the narrow conception of objectivity and the metaphysical commitments that it motivates.

Further, the argument concerning ethical externalism seems to have a significant gap that does not hinge on refuting alternative metaphysical or epistemological commitments. It may be true that our grasp on mental states depends on having a sense of what matters in the life of a creature, but that even with such a sense, one's attitude to what matters in the life of that creature could be quite varied, from hostility to indifference. One can understand that a certain creature, being social, will suffer in the absence of companionship, but do I really fail to understand the creature if this fact does not prompt me to befriend the creature or to seek for it the relevant sort of companionship? Perhaps not. That is, the subjective endowments that enable one to grasp what matters in the life of a creature may not be virtue, as Crary seems to suppose. If so, then the case that mental states of creatures are moral properties seems to fade as well: although they may be morally relevant properties, it seems plausible that they can be grasped without virtue and so fail to prompt moral responses.

The next positive step in Crary's argument is to argue for the thesis that all humans and animals are proper objects of moral concern. This is in part an argument against the opposing thesis, *moral individualism*, which is the view that how an individual may be treated is a function of its intrinsic or relational properties (124). This view has been invoked by utilitarians to argue against speciesism in the so-called *argument from marginal cases*. A severely cognitively disabled human being, on that view, has no greater moral standing than a dog or primate with equal cognitive abilities. Crary turns first to arguments made in disability studies to challenge this idea. For example, she takes up from Eva Kittay the idea that affronts to someone's dignity as a human being do not require the capacity to register that affront (130), which suggests that one need only be human in order to possess a claim to equal respect for one's dignity. Similarly, in the case of animals, there is something wrong, Crary thinks, with the workers in a California

factory farm who pushed sick cattle around with a forklift. They were "betraying a type of callousness to the creatures that wasn't merely a function of causing pain and suffering" (132). Crary next turns to literature to help make her case against moral individualism. First, she turns to Daniel Keyes's *Flowers for Algernon*, a novel in which a cognitively disabled youth is given experimental surgery that causes a sudden leap in his cognitive abilities. The novel presents to us the protagonist's awakening to his previous mistreatment at the hands of his coworkers and family. Through his eyes we encounter his pre-surgical life from within, and therefore the novel helps us to develop a fuller, and, Crary thinks, veridical sense of the lives of cognitively disabled human beings. Crary does admit that intellectual responsibility demands that we ensure that we are not merely projecting meanings onto the world that aren't there. But she thinks that this is not a case of projecting significance, and this is shown by the fact that the ethical perspective of the novel helps us to make sense of aspects of our world that would otherwise be confusing, such as the example from Kittay of the indignity that can be inflicted on someone without the capacity to understand the indignity. Crary appeals to a memoir by Jessica Pierce to make the parallel point about animals. Pierce's memoir concerns an aging dog who is suffering from cancer and is partly demented. The account conveys that this dog is still a full-fledged dog, morally speaking, and deserving of respect, and not to be callously disposed of. As with Keyes's novel, Pierce's memoir is to be credited as revealing something of the reality of dog life through its explanatory power. It enables us to make sense of the fact that it can be deeply satisfying to take care of a senescent dog, despite its difficulty.

There are several other literary studies in the book, discussing writings by Raymond Carver, J. M. Coetzee, Leo Tolstoy, and W. G. Sebald. These studies each illustrate a nonneutral, ethically informed empirical method that Crary believes to be able to inform an objective understanding of humans and animals. These narratives are not a source for premises that can be fed into a standard form of argument; rather, on Crary's view, literature can be a crucial vehicle of moral reflection in that it can bring about the appropriate feeling that is part of sound moral thought (here Crary draws on Cora Diamond's writings on literature and morality). Hence, Crary argues for a wider conception of rationality to parallel the wider conception of objectivity. This wider conception of rationality addresses our affective responses as part of what needs to be transformed in coming to a more accurate conception of the world.

We see here that the argument of the book as a whole depends heavily on establishing the wider conception of objectivity, about which I raised some concerns above. There also seem to me to be questions about the nonneutral, ethically informed empirical method, at least as it is employed here. The explanatory power of a view or perspective surely depends on its having some distance from the explanandum. But in the literary cases described above, it appears that the ethical perspectives articulated in the narratives are not independent of the practices that Crary claims they explain. If instead of finding it deeply satisfying to take care of a senescent dog, I find it an irrational waste of time and resources, Pierce's memoir may not strike me as an especially illuminating explanation of some set of facts, but rather a sentimental screed attempting to rationalize a practice better rejected. What is to be done in the face of such a serious conflict of perspectives?

A final concern about this work is that it seems at times to fail to call on allies who could support and enrich its argument. One line of support for the argument presented here would come from feminist epistemology, which has long argued that the putative value-free objectivity claimed by the natural sciences is in fact saturated with values, including values that support patriarchy; I am thinking here especially of Donna Haraway's classic "Situated Knowledges." This body of literature could enable Crary to pose the question of whether the narrow conception of objectivity is serving an ideological purpose in support of a restrictive ethical regime that continues to marginalize certain categories of vulnerable creatures. Another significant missed connection here is with contemporary virtue ethics, which has been arguing over the past few decades for the importance of developed subjective capacities in order to properly engage with the world. Some virtue ethicists have begun to take up the issue of our treatment of animals, but much work remains to be done; given the broadening uptake of virtue ethics in moral philosophy, it is a shame that the insights and limitations of that literature and Crary's possible contributions to it were not more deeply explored in this work.

Despite these missed engagements and some concerns I have about the argument, Crary's book provides a much needed counterpoint to the dominant post-Enlightenment story about moral progress. On that account, inasmuch as we have made progress, it is through expanding the moral circle by getting at the right criterion for moral consideration: for example, rationality, sentience, or being the subject of a life. Crary shows us the limitations of this overarching moral perspective: through it we lose touch with our moral responses to cases that fall outside the standard of whatever it deems rational. She proposes what I would call a post-Romantic perspective that takes our possibilities for moral response to be equally affective and rational. Crary encourages us to take more seriously the moral thought of those engaged with the most vulnerable humans and animals. This seems to me of the highest importance and part of an expansive program for moral thought that demands further philosophical exploration.