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The Importance of Being a Dog, or How to Bring Human Beings and Animals Back into Ethics

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Alice Crary, *Inside Ethics: On the Demands of Moral Thought*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press 2016, 283 pages

In her book, Alice Crary addresses some vital confusions of moral thought. These confusions pertain both to the way human beings and animals are being represented in ethics, and to the kind of methods which are purported to be the most plausible to bring about a conversion in someone's moral activity. Crary does not confine herself to the criticism of the contemporary outlook, widely accepted in moral thought, according to which—in order to find grounds for the moral standing of humans and animals—we should turn to normatively neutral methods external to ethics (in particular the methods of natural sciences); this contemporary outlook, she concludes, situates human beings and animals “outside ethics.” Crary unfolds an elaborate argument in support of the claim that human beings and animals possess empirically observable moral characteristics (thus situating human beings and animals “inside ethics”), and on the basis of this argument, she acknowledges human beings and animals as proper objects of moral concern. Accordingly, she does not confine herself to the demonstration of the insufficiencies of some traditional forms of moral thought (in particular those championed by “moral individualists”¹) but, extending her main argument, she presents a series of illustrations of how a non-neutral form of moral thought not only can constitute a sound argumentative strategy, but also can contribute directly to our ability

1 As “moral individualists” Crary depicts these moral thinkers who claim that a human being's or an animal's claim to moral consideration is grounded in the possession of individual mental characteristics.

to grasp genuine features of the world and shape our moral attitudes toward human beings and animals.

The book consists of seven chapters (and an Introduction), which can be divided into two parts. The theoretical part starts with a philosophical reconstruction and critique of two paradigmatic examples of ethical theories—Peter Singer’s non-cognitivist and Christine Korsgaard’s Kantian approach—which Crary regards as problematic because they both situate human beings and animals “outside ethics” (Chapter 1). The unfolding of the book’s main argument for situating human beings and animals “inside ethics,” grounded chiefly in Ludwig Wittgenstein’s later philosophy of mind, is brought about in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 further develops the argument raised in the previous chapter and discusses John McDowell’s conceptualist position, together with a revelatory defense of the conceptualist account of perceptual experience in regard to non-human animals. Chapter 5 provides a closure of the theoretical part of the book; it is dedicated to the juxtaposition of Philippa Foot’s ethical naturalism and Cary Wolfe’s “distinctive animals-oriented posthumanism”² to Crary’s own approach, in order to demonstrate that approach’s distinctiveness.

Although the remaining chapters of the book are not bereft of theoretical inputs, they play a saliently different role in the book’s overall strategy. Insofar as these chapters of the *Inside Ethics* not only present a series of illustrations in the form of ethically saturated descriptions of human beings’ and animals’ lives, but also engage the moral imagination of the reader, they might be referred to as ‘practical.’ As Crary herself formulates it, “[the] book’s illustrations are concerned not only with attempts to do empirical justice in ethics to the lives of human beings and animals but, at the same time, with attempts to call attention to important practical conclusions that the relevant empirical observations equip us to draw.”³ The practical part of the book illustrates how the bare fact of being a human or an animal is ethically significant, and at the same time rebukes moral individualism, emphasizing the horrific implications of its approach to intellectually disabled human beings and animals (Chapter 4). Chapter 6 uses the literary examples taken from Leo Tolstoy, John M. Coetzee, and Winfried G. Sebald to illustrate how the fellowship between human beings and animals can be empirically brought into view in a manner appropriate for ethics. Chapter 7 presents two non-fiction sources concerned with eating animals and experimenting on them—a book by Jonathan

2 A. Crary, *Inside Ethics: On the Demands of Moral Thought*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press 2016, p. 6.

3 A. Crary, op.cit., *Inside Ethics*, p. 91.

Safran Foer and a documentary movie by James Marsh—that serve as illustrations of the kind of moral thought which is relevant to the book’s overall argument. Such a structure of the book which interweaves theoretical and practical parts makes it valuable both for professional philosophers and for general readers not trained in the complexities of philosophical discourse. However, the connection between the practical and the theoretical chapters is much more philosophically sophisticated than a simple relation of the theoretical parts to their illustrations, and I shall shed some light on this issue in the final sections of the review.

The First Chapter of the book is devoted to the critical discussion of those ethical approaches which situate human beings and animals “outside ethics.” Crary introduces the terminology of situating human beings and/or animals outside or inside ethics to direct our attention to a different treatment of observable moral characteristics in ethical thought. The ethical approaches which acknowledge that human beings and animals possess observable moral characteristics are—in Crary’s terminology—“situating human beings and/or animals *inside ethics*.”⁴ In contrast, the approaches to ethics which regard human beings and animals as lacking observable moral characteristics are “situating human beings and/or animals *outside ethics*.”⁵ In this chapter, Crary’s aim is to reconstruct the moral standing of human beings and animals in Peter Singer and Christine Korsgaard, treating them as the representatives of non-cognitivist and Kantian approaches to ethics respectively. Both of these approaches, each of them in its own way, locate human beings and animals outside ethics. What is nonetheless common to both of them—and to other similar approaches (Crary scrutinizes Singer’s and Korsgaard’s approaches as paradigm examples)—is the (more or less) explicit commitment to “a ‘hard’ metaphysic”⁶ (which is another technical term that Crary introduces). A hard metaphysic excludes the possibility of objective moral values. Crary characterizes the hard metaphysic, which—as she observes—shapes our contemporary ethical debates, in a twofold way. First of all, a hard metaphysic recognizes moral judgements as a pivot of moral thought, while restricting the realm of moral judgements merely to these judgements which apply concepts commonly classified as moral, and therefore excluding as morally non-salient these judgments which apply concepts not ordinarily identified as moral. One of Crary’s objectives

4 Ibidem, p. 12.

5 Ibidem, pp. 11–12. The meaning of these pivotal terms, however graphic, may seem slightly abstract and unclear at first. The use that Crary makes of them becomes intelligible only after she unfolds her philosophical argumentation for situating human beings and animals inside ethics.

6 Ibidem, p. 20.

is to substantially broaden the pool of concepts which can be classified as moral.⁷ Secondly, according to a hard metaphysic, the objective world is bereft of moral values and in itself practically inert (i.e. a scientific worldview with an ateleological organisation). For that reason, moral judgements are not essentially concerned with the objective world. What follows is that, in order to obtain an undistorted empirical account which would provide the moral standing of human beings and animals, philosophers do not reach for methods specific to ethics (e.g. moral imagination), but for empirical methods of disciplines external to ethics (Crary refers to this practice humouristically as “the practice of outsourcing”). Therefore, Crary’s discussion of the hard metaphysic aims to demonstrate that when the approaches committed to the hard metaphysic look for grounds for moral standing of humans and animals, they locate humans and animals outside ethics in order to meet the requirements of the hard metaphysic, which are laid down in advance. This chapter challenges the imposition of the metaphysical demands on the ethical thought by showing that, if these demands were to be met, moral considerations of human beings and animals would have to be grounded with the use of non-ethical means, which would result in situating humans and animals outside ethics. For insofar as there are no moral values woven into the objective reality—as the hard metaphysic asserts—empirical characteristics of human beings and animals obtained by ethical methods would be charged with bias. For that reason, it would seem that only by these non-ethical methods can we arrive in moral thought at ethically undistorted and objective images of human beings and animals.⁸

The First Chapter does not make it absolutely clear what is *wrong* with locating human beings and animals outside ethics. As I have already mentioned, Crary claims that one of the consequences of the adoption of the hard metaphysic is the repudiation of the possibility that any moral methods could be used to gain the empirical understanding of humans and animals. As a result, moral thought would

7 One of the consequences of broadening the pool of concepts which can be classified as moral is that some concepts recognized now as moral do not necessarily have to be applied merely in the form of moral *judgements*; i.e. a moral utterance does not necessarily have to have the form of a judgement.

There is a similar intention in Iris Murdoch’s essay *The Idea of Perfection* concerning both the broadening of the pool of moral concepts and—what I shall discuss in the following paragraphs—a wider conception of objectivity. Murdoch writes: “(...) moral terms must be treated as concrete universals (...) On my view it might be said that, *per contra*, the primary general words could be dispensed and all moral work could be done by the secondary specialized words.” I. Murdoch, *The Idea of Perfection*, [in:] *The Sovereignty of Good*, London, Routledge 2001, pp. 29, 40.

8 In this respect, Crary notices a difference between Singer and Korsgaard: the latter employs moral methods, yet the images of human beings and animals she arrives at are practical and non-empirical. Cf. *ibidem*, pp. 29–30.

depend for the acquisition of undistorted empirical understanding of humans and animals on the external, neutral disciplines, such as the natural sciences. Moreover, the refusal of ethical methods would limit the shape of moral thought to nothing except systems and arguments. Being herself a proponent of a different style of moral thought—such which attempts to enlarge our moral imagination and engage our attention⁹—Crary defies the above-described standpoint and argues for the use of ethical methods. However—as I shall discuss at length in a moment—she does not commit herself to delivering a biased understanding of the lives of humans and animals. Before turning to this issue, which belongs to the Second Chapter of the book, I shall first relate the theoretical insights from Chapter 1 with some illustration from the practical parts of the book. This will help me sketch the shape of moral thought preferred by Crary and present the possible dangers and potential losses connected with not applying ethical methods.

First of all, if we agree on grounding the moral standing of humans and animals in some neutrally grasped characteristics or capacities, it would follow that individuals lacking these characteristics or capacities—both humans and animals—merit less moral consideration. In the first section of the Fourth Chapter, Crary discusses these not-always-unwanted implications of the commitment to the hard metaphysic with regard to moral individualists. Moral individualists claim that we can provide moral standing for animals only if we appeal to some higher or lower capacities of mind. The general line of the argument is that if the pertinent capacities are possessed not only by human beings but by some animals as well, then—in order to remain consistent—we are obliged to accord equal moral consideration to all beings who possess these capacities, i.e. to both humans and animals. Yet, this way of recognition of moral significance of animals obliges us also—in order to remain consistent—to recognize human beings who do not possess pertinent capacities of mind because of their intellectual impairments as having a diminished moral significance. Crary contributes to the debate on ‘marginal cases’ (this issue is usually referred to as the argument from marginal cases) by demonstrating that already the plain fact of being a human being or an animal is sufficiently significant to merit moral consideration. Using non-neutral empirical methods for ethics, Crary presents a series of fictional and non-fictional

9 The discussion concerning a different style of moral thought is present in many authors important to Crary, i.a. Ludwig Wittgenstein, G.E.M. Anscombe, Iris Murdoch, Cora Diamond. For a general take on this issue see C. Diamond, *Anything but Argument?*, [in:] *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind*, Cambridge, The MIT Press 1991, pp. 291–308. For a more specific critique of *therefore*-arguments, see C. Diamond, *The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy*, [in:] *Philosophy and Animal Life*, New York, Columbia University Press 2008, pp. 43–90.

illustrations which *direct* our *attention* to what is important in a life of a human or an animal individual. What is revelatory in Crary's approach is that from this perspective not only fully healthy humans and animals, and not only humans and animals with mental disorders merit moral consideration—in this regard Crary refers i.a. to John Bayley's memoir about his marriage to Iris Murdoch who later in her life suffered from Alzheimer's disease, or to Jessica Pierce's memoir about the last year of her life with her severely ill and partly demented companion dog Ody. Crary claims that dead bodies of animal or human individuals merit moral consideration as well—in this regard Crary refers i.a. to Raymond Carver's story *So Much Water So Close to Home* in which—in an ethically informed way—we can see the way a body of a dead woman can be morally salient; after all, a dead body belongs to a person for whom, when that person was alive, there were things that mattered in their life. These recognitions are something that the champions of the hard metaphysic are blind to. Crary argues that the application of non-neutral empirical methods for ethics is the only way in which we are able to recognize lives of human beings and animals as lives in which there are things which have importance for the human and animal individuals in question. Therefore, we avoid—as Cora Diamond formulated it—“fundamental confusions about moral relations between people and people *and* between people and animals,”¹⁰ to which ethical thinkers committed to the hard metaphysic are condemned. Furthermore, by discarding non-neutral empirical methods, these thinkers deprive themselves of sound forms of techniques and strategies for changing someone's moral attitude. Illustrations presented by Crary in all the practical chapters contain examples of a form of moral thought which contributes internally to our moral activity. In Chapter 7, Crary discusses in more detail some techniques and strategies engaged in such a form of moral thought.

In the earlier paragraph, I have raised a doubt whether by undertaking non-neutral empirical methods Crary does not commit herself to smuggling distorted images of human beings and animals into moral thought. The outlook of the hard metaphysic critically displayed by Crary in the First Chapter of the book is the outlook that she resolutely rejects in favour of a view specified as “a commonsense realism about the mind” with “a wider conception of objectivity.” The wider conception of objectivity is a conception “capacious enough to encompass some subjective qualities.”¹¹ Insofar as Crary is committed to the view according

10 C. Diamond, *Eating Meat and Eating People*, [in:] *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind*, Cambridge, The MIT Press 1991, p. 319.

11 A. Crary, *Inside Ethics*, op. cit., p. 34.

to which we can talk of the objective status of at least some qualities that we capture with reference to subjective responses elicited by objects that possess them, the author of *Inside Ethics* jettisons the constraints of the hard metaphysics which excludes the idea of objective moral values. Crary's preferred view of "a commonsense realism about the mind" is a view in which psychological discourse is 1) physically irreducible, 2) metaphysically transparent, 3) has an essentially ethical character. What is therefore at stake is demonstrating that mental phenomena fall within the wider conception of objectivity without being physically reduced and while remaining objectively authoritative. In devising "a commonsense realism about the mind" that satisfies the three above-mentioned stipulations, Crary turns to some remarks from Wittgenstein's later philosophy.

Crary begins her defense of a wider conception of objectivity in the spirit of the "commonsense realism about the mind"¹² by demonstrating that there is neither an ideally abstract image of a thought, nor an unmediated access to the external reality. The possibility of both the former and the latter is a postulate of a narrower conception of objectivity which sets a "requirement to abstract from our subjective endowments"¹³ in order to arrive at an accurate image of reality. Crary draws on the thought of Wittgenstein to demonstrate that neither in a rationalist nor in an empiricist tradition is there something that could meet this "abstraction requirement", as Crary calls it. Apropos of the rationalist tradition which sees arithmetic as promising to satisfy this requirement, Crary refers to the relevant remarks from Wittgenstein's "rule following sections" (§§185–242) of *Philosophical Investigations* and reads them as questioning the idea of the abstraction requirement in mathematics. In regards to the empiricist tradition which sees a perceptual thought as capable of satisfying this requirement, Crary refers to Wittgenstein's remarks on changes of aspect (Part II, § xi) from *Philosophical Investigations* and reads them as questioning the idea of the abstraction requirement in perceptual experience. The conclusion of these sections of *Inside Ethics* is that together with rejecting the abstraction requirement—as there is nothing that could meet it—we should acknowledge that there is nothing that prevents us from recognizing that "our subjective responses contribute internally to our ability to grasp features of the world"¹⁴ and committing ourselves to the preferred wider conception of objectivity. In the next steps of her argument, Crary demonstrates that there are indeed some values that

12 Ibidem, p. 38.

13 Ibidem, p. 44.

14 Ibidem, p. 55.

can be recognized as objective in this sense, i.e. that human beings and animals, qua observable, have moral characteristics.

Crary begins with the issues of physical irreducibility and metaphysical transparency of psychological discourse, and she does it in two steps. In the first step, she turns to the pertinent remarks from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (in particular to his discussion of the sensation of pain but also of understanding and emotions) to demonstrate that expressive behaviour is internal to the aspects of mind. By expressive behaviour Crary understands a continuum ranging from a wholly unlearned behaviour to a fully linguistic one. In this respect, expressive behaviour applies to all minded creatures, i.e. both human beings and animals. The discussion of Wittgenstein helps Crary to connect mental qualities (both *sapience* and *sentience*)—in a narrower conception of objectivity regarded either as subjective or, if physically reducible, as objective—directly with modes of behaviour—in a narrower conception of objectivity regarded as objective—without falling into logical behaviourism and reducing psychological discourse to physical behaviour. In the second step, Crary develops her Wittgensteinian approach to the mind as a form of externalism since this approach “claims that, in order to do justice to the psychological significance of a bit of behaviour, we need to refer to something external to that behaviour.”¹⁵ However, it is a very peculiar form of externalism—and here we approach the issue of the objectivity of values—which Crary labels *ethical externalism*: according to this approach, what is external to a pattern of behaviour is an ethical conception. In this way, not only does Crary establish that in her preferred view of the mind psychological discourse is physically irreducible and metaphysically transparent, but also that there are objective qualities encompassing the subjective ones that in themselves are ethically significant, i.e. that the psychological discourse is ethically saturated. Crary argues for the latter from a pragmatist perspective by claiming that “grasping a human or non-human creature’s expression is impossible apart from reference to a conception of what is important in the life of creatures of its kind.”¹⁶ She claims that it is presupposed by our very ability to pick out a pattern of behaviour as an expression of a given aspect of the mind that we already have a sense of the importance that the given behaviour has in the worldly life of a human or animal individual.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 67.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 68.

Crary's book is unquestionably a valuable contribution to moral thought. However, in spite of being a worthy contribution to *ethics*, it seems to be strikingly bereft of any specifically ethical arguments.¹⁷ The ascertainment that “[h]uman beings and animals have moral qualities that are, in a straightforward empirical sense, open to view”¹⁸ is not a good candidate for such an argument. On the other hand, Crary's book is full of philosophical arguments pertaining to metaphysics, philosophy of mind, philosophy of perception, or philosophy of language. Now I want to recall an observation I have made earlier as it is directly related to the ‘lack’ of anything that could be considered a classical ethical argument in *Inside Ethics*. Previously, I have said that the relationship between the theoretical and the practical parts of the book cannot be reduced to the mere relationship of theoretical argumentation to its empirical and therefore more accessible practical exemplifications. What is philosophically sophisticated and revelatory about the relationship between the theoretical and practical parts of the book is that the theoretical chapters—so to say—make room for an *appropriate* grasp of the moral lives of human beings and animals. Crary begins the Second Chapter of her book with a motto from G. E. M. Anscombe in which the author of *Intention* says that “[i]t is not profitable for us at present to do moral philosophy; that should be laid aside at any rate until we have an adequate philosophy of psychology.”¹⁹ The argumentative work done by Crary (mostly) in the Second Chapter aims to arrive at such a philosophical account in which the claim that “human beings and animals possess observable moral characteristics” will not be some kind of a postulate, but an observation of a state of things.²⁰ Accordingly, the illustrations presented in the practical chapters are plain *descriptions* of worldly lives of human beings and animals, which turn out to be intrinsically *normative descriptions*.

17 The second striking thing may be the very conception of ethics to which Crary is committed throughout her book, which seems to be quite a wide and unorthodox conception of ethics. A good point of reference in this respect would be Diamond's essay *Ethics, Imagination and the Method of Wittgenstein's Tractatus* in which she argues that “just as logic is not, for Wittgenstein, a particular subject, with its own body of truths, but penetrates all thought, so ethics has no particular subject matter; rather, an ethical spirit, an attitude to the world and life, can penetrate any thought or talk.” See C. Diamond, *Ethics, Imagination and the Method of Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, [in:] The New Wittgenstein, eds. A. Crary, R. Read, London, Routledge 2000, p. 153.

18 A. Crary, *Inside Ethics*, op. cit., p. 10.

19 G. E. M. Anscombe, *Modern Moral Philosophy*, in: *Human Life, Action and Ethics: Essays by G. E. M. Anscombe*, eds. M. Geach, L. Gormally, Exeter, Imprint Academic 2005, p. 169. Anscombe's book that “cleaned the room” for moral philosophy is obviously *Intention*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell 1957.

20 It is worth noting that Crary begins her discussion of moral judgments not by asking about the nature of moral judgments, but by “making a couple of *observations* about moral judgments.” See A. Crary, *Inside Ethics*, op. cit. p. 14 [emphasis added]. In this way, she follows Wittgenstein's descriptive (or morphological) approach.

In this review, I have mainly elaborated on two out of four theoretical chapters of Crary's book, trying to bring into view some of the main aspects of what it means to situate human beings and animals outside or inside ethics. I have presented Crary's critique of a hard metaphysic with a narrower conception of objectivity and put forward the main steps of her argument supporting a commonsense realism about the mind with a wider conception of objectivity. In Crary's perspective, aspects of the mind of human beings and animals are not hidden from view, but are observable in interactions with others and world. We attribute concepts of psychological discourse to chosen patterns of expressive behaviour of an individual and in doing so—in our ability to do so—we simultaneously have a grasp of what matters in the life of an individual. Therefore, insofar as the psychological discourse has an essentially ethical character, representing human beings and/or animals as in themselves morally indifferent things is a vital confusion of moral thought. The plain fact of *being* a human or an animal is morally salient. Respectively, the representations of humans and animals are not neutral images or descriptions, but ethically charged images and intrinsically normative descriptions. However, the aim of Crary's elaborate argumentation is not to prove it, but to direct our attention in such a way that we will be able to *acknowledge* it.

I wish to emphasize that Crary's book is essentially richer than that and I cannot refer in this review to all the interesting and often revelatory content of the book. Notwithstanding my overall appreciation, there are some issues which may seem troubling. My main concern pertains to the Third Chapter, in which Crary defends the claim that at least some animals do possess concepts. After convincingly discussing the case of dogs, in the last section of the chapter, she withdraws from this commitment, suggesting that the strength of her main argument does not rely on accepting it. However, what worries me the most is not Crary's caution in this respect but her uncritical acquisition of McDowell's conception of rationality, which influences her views in the entire book and commits her to a linear picture of rationality. According to this conception, there are different stages of rational development and although some animals can reach the lower stages, the highest stage of rational development is reserved exclusively for humans. This outlook of rationality—which is nothing more but a variation on the old idea of the hierarchy of reason—seems philosophically and empirically unwarranted. A postulate of the one and only ideal of rationality—constructed on the basis of human rationality and granted to different species in different degrees—is currently widely

discussed and contrasted with a conception of varieties of rationalities which do not assemble in a linear development of one kind of rationality.²¹

As a concluding remark, I would like to briefly show the relevance of Crary's argument to the subject of the present issue of *ETYKA*. Crary's ethical approach is a naturalistic model of moral thought, viewing both human beings and animals as possessing observable moral characteristics and therefore situating them inside ethics.²² In this respect, this approach concerns all minded creatures and recognizes their expressive behaviour—understood in the light of the ethical conception of what matters in their lives—as internally related to the aspects of mind. A question may be raised—can plants be situated inside ethics as well? Crary does not mention such a possibility, but it seems that her argument does not *a priori* exclude it. Although one of the premises of Crary's argument is that it relates to the *minded* beings, the mindedness of a being is not to be decided—in accordance with Crary's general view—either on the basis of a scientific discovery, or on the basis of some inferences. A minded being is a being to which we are willing to attribute psychological discourse. Thus, in order to answer the question whether plants can be situated inside ethics, we have to consider whether we are willing to attribute psychological discourse to plants in a way different than a merely metaphorical one, or—to use Wittgenstein's term—in a secondary sense.

21 Cf. F. de Waal, *Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are?*, New York, W.W. Norton & Company 2016.

22 In Chapter 5 Crary discusses the differences between her naturalistic approach concerned with what matters in a life of an individual of a pertinent species and Philippa Foot's naturalistic approach focused on natural history. See P. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, New York, Oxford University Press 2001.

