

BOOK REVIEWS

Inside Ethics: On the Demands of Moral Thought by Alice Crary

Stina Bäckström

Crary, Alice (2016). *Inside Ethics: On the Demands of Moral Thought*. Harvard University Press.

We treat animals deplorably. Images from inside a chicken factory farm, for instance, are gut-wrenching. What sorts of consideration should be allowed into our calls for change? This is the central concern of *Inside Ethics*. Crary's contention is that the debate about the rights and welfare of animals has been hampered by a widely shared assumption: human beings and other animals do not possess observable moral characteristics. To dislodge this assumption and show by example the reasoning that then becomes available is Crary's main aim.

Inside Ethics is directed both at professional philosophers and others who share the concerns of the book. In this regard, it is exemplary. It brings philosophy to bear on practical issues, while also making contributions to philosophy. There are many controversial points in the book that deserve discussion, but I

will focus on the two perhaps most important claims: 1) humans and non-human animals are equally inside ethics in that they have observable moral characteristics, 2) we should look to disciplines inside ethics, such as literature and the arts, for empirical descriptions of human and animal lives relevant to ethical considerations. (Two terminological notes: Crary uses 'moral' and 'ethical' interchangeably, and she uses 'animal' and not, say, 'non-human animal', to refer to animals of the non-human variety. I will follow her usage.)

Why is it, Crary wonders, that many philosophers and non-philosophers invested in the ethical standing of animals, think that the facts relevant to this debate need to be themselves normatively neutral? The answer, Crary argues, is that there is a widely shared metaphysical assumption according to which

moral values are not features of the objective world. This assumption is supported by a particular conception of what objectivity requires: in order to be objective, empirical descriptions cannot contain references to our responses. On this conception, objectivity needs to live up to an abstraction requirement, according to which what is objective is what is left once we have abstracted from subjectivity. She calls this the ‘narrower conception of objectivity’. Using resources from the later Wittgenstein and John McDowell, Crary argues that the abstraction requirement is a philosophical myth. Strictly thought through, not even the most paradigmatic cases of objective thought (such as arithmetic) stand for it. Thus, she argues, there is no reason to discard the idea of objective, observable, moral properties just because their availability depends on us having the right modes of responsiveness to them. Rather, the right way to ensure objectivity is to ask whether the properties in question can “survive critical scrutiny and establish themselves as authoritative” (82). Something that has survived such critical scrutiny has, as Crary puts it, cognitive authority, and this notion is the core of the wider conception of objectivity that Crary herself espouses.

By turning to philosophy of mind, Crary argues that moral properties are objective in this wider sense. In one of the most interesting sections of the book, Crary defends

the idea that the psychological significance of human and animal behavior comes into view within an ethical conception of the kind of animal in question. By ‘ethical conception’ Crary means a concern for what matters in the life of the animal we’re interested in. Psychological properties are, for Crary, examples of empirical, observable, phenomena that become available given “ethically loaded understandings of the lives of the creatures” to whom psychological concepts apply (62). Psychological thought is thus, for Crary, essentially a kind of ethical thought. Since Crary finds no persuasive argument to the effect that we should discredit the most obvious and unproblematic cases of attributions of mental properties, she argues that such thinking is also cognitively authoritative. Crary’s view “invites us to conceive our categories for thinking about psychological qualities as ethically inflected categories” and at the same time “it asks us to understand these categories as essentially matters of sensitivity to how things really are” (37).

According to Crary, seeing animal life in psychological categories means, for instance, noting that certain things are dangerous for the animal whereas others are desirable; that some things need to be protected and others are to-be-befriended, and so on. This perspective is one from which the world is value-laden. Importantly, the world is given in terms of values not

only for the animals, but also for *us*. Crary says:

Our ability to recognize creatures as possessing [psychological] characteristics presupposes that we have at least imaginatively adopted an attitude towards them as beings who are caught up in such lives [where things are, e.g., dangerous] and who accordingly, in appropriate circumstances, merit specific modes of concern and attention. [...] Despite the general philosophical antipathy to the idea of objective moral values, these values are embedded in pervasive and entirely unmysterious features of animate life. (p. 88)

The step taken in this passage is important, because it is what makes thinking about what matters in the life of an animal a kind of ethical thinking. That is, unless such thinking had immediate bearing on how *we* should treat the animal, we would be left with normative assessments falling short of being *ethical* normative assessments. That is, we would be in a position to say whether individual animals are doing well or badly with respect to what matters in their lives, but such assessments would not speak to what we should do. In taking this last step Crary's account departs from the, in some respects closely related, ethical naturalisms of Philippa Foot and Michael Thompson. (I will come back to this issue.)

Since disciplines inside ethics – disciplines that do not set aside any ethical concerns but allow themselves a full use of moral imagination – are the ones within which ethical objective characteristics are allowed to come most clearly into view, Crary argues that ethics should look to them for empirical guidance. She thinks science legitimately sets aside ethical concerns of the sort she has in mind, and that this makes the empirical descriptions science yields ill-suited for subsequent ethical reflection. In literature and the arts, by contrast, ethical concerns are allowed to inform the accounts and the emanating descriptions are therefore more valuable in ethics.

Thus Crary arrives at the thoughts that human beings and animals have observable moral properties and that we should look to disciplines inside ethics for empirical guidance. Let us begin our reflection on these claims by asking whether there is not a tension between them. In my summary of Crary's argument against the narrower conception of objectivity, I noted that she does not think that this conception is a sensible ideal for any discipline or intellectual endeavor, not even for what is sometimes called the "hard sciences". Moreover, she argues that even such mundane observable phenomena as expressions of joy or anger in dogs, small children, or adult human beings come into view within an ethically inflected mode of seeing. In the light of this, we might wonder why she insists on still placing scientific approaches to human

beings and animals “outside ethics”, and humanistic and literary approaches “inside ethics”. Given that it is an ambition of some branches of science to understand precisely the psychological and social lives of animals, it appears as if Crary’s argument would make it imperative for them to recognize the ethical backdrop against which their data can emerge, rather than allowing them to think that they are outside ethics.

Crary’s own answer to this worry is that moral concerns are legitimately bracketed in scientific practice, whereas in literature the full use of moral imagination is imperative. One example she discusses is the practice of coding expressive behavior in empirical psychology, i.e., the attempt to isolate and correlate discrete physical configurations and behavior. As she herself notes, however, coding is parasitic on and beholden to a conception of the role of different psychological phenomena and expressions in the life of the animal we are interested in. And why should we think that the development of such a conception is something that takes place outside of the science in question?

Consider, for instance, Eileen Crist’s *Images of Animals*, a study of the conceptual resources drawn on in late 19th-early 20th century animal studies – resources radically different from those employed in contemporary ethology and sociobiology. One of Crist’s examples is Darwin’s “Expressions

of Emotion in Man and Animal”, where animals are portrayed as expressive agents, capable of choice and possessing a rich experiential life. Crist relates, for instance, how Darwin describes joy as giving rise to “various purposeless movements” in both humans and animals. Darwin continues, “We see this in our young children, in their loud laughter, clapping of hands, and jumping for joy; in the bounding and barking of a dog when going out to walk with his master; and in the frisking of a horse when turned out into an open field” (Quoted in Crist 2000: 24). It seems clear to me that such depictions exemplify precisely the sort of morally involved perspective that Crary is advocating. But Crist’s analysis does not give us reason to think that Darwin’s perspective stands in conflict with his scientific aims. To the contrary, Crist wants to question precisely this inference. One thing that emerges in Crist’s study is a sense for what, from a scientific standpoint, we lose by condemning this way of approaching animal studies as misguided and unscientific anthropomorphism.

There is no doubt an interesting discussion in this vicinity about whether scientific method and practice *require* a form of objectification of its subject matter, an objectification that stands in tension with the agency and expressiveness of animate life. It is in no way obvious to me that scientifically respectable inquiry into animate life could not also be psychologically rich and morally

imaginative. So my question to Crary remains: once we've removed the need to imagine our practices living up to a narrower conception of objectivity, why think that science is inherently in conflict with the ethically inflected perspective? It seems to me that what Crary's argument rather warrants is a general wariness of letting methodological concerns, regardless of discipline, be governed by the abstraction requirement inherent to the narrower conception of objectivity.

Moreover, the injunction to turn to literature instead of science for empirical guidance is problematic, since it appears to operate with a presumption that literature is cognitively authoritative – a source of objective empirical descriptions. We are entitled to this presumption when approaching scientific accounts; one of the aims of science is to establish empirical facts. (This is meant to be a trivial point: a failure to be true to the empirical facts is straightforwardly a ground for criticism of a scientific account.) But the relation between literature and truth (in particular *empirical* truth) is much more fraught. Its narratives can explore points of view that obscure rather than bring to light features of reality, without thereby being bad literature. Thus whether or not a particular literary depiction is a source of cognitively authoritative facts about animal life, takes special argument to establish. This is something Crary herself acknowledges in her literary discussions. She takes it upon herself to explain why she considers her

particular examples (from Tolstoy, Sebald, and Coetzee) to be cognitively authoritative. But the generality of her methodological suggestion signals a default entitlement to treat literature as a source of empirical facts. I see no basis for such an entitlement, even if I have full sympathy for the idea that literature can be a resource in ethics.

My second worry is more serious, in that it concerns the basic framework within which Crary treats the human-animal relation. Philosophical reflection on the human-animal relation needs to contend with a fundamental tension between closeness and distance. Now, we often drawn to such words also during the course of philosophical reflection on knowing other human beings. Yet we feel that there is something special about the sort of closeness and distance in question when it comes to the human-animal relation, as if there were a shift in key. Animals are alike us in so many respects: they play, they form attachments, they suffer, they communicate. And yet, they are alien, so free of the particular plights of the human condition. (This gap can give rise to wistfulness or pity; animals can prompt fantasies of an existence either in care-free immediacy or in perpetual victimhood.) Crary's position with respect to this tension is to emphasize closeness and continuity. The cost is, I think, the obscuring of difference.

Crary argues that humans and animals are equally inside ethics in

that they (and we?) possess observable moral characteristics. This application of the metaphor of inside/outside muddles things. For when I imagine *us* discovering by observation that an animal of some particular kind has moral characteristics, this creates a picture of what it means for a creature to be inside ethics. More specifically, it yields the idea that by paying attention to a creature, we understand that it is worthy of a certain kind of treatment. But when I try to apply this picture to human beings, I meet resistance. The life of human beings is not something I encounter merely or primarily through observation of human beings going about their business.

To be inside ethics as a human being is to be responsive and vulnerable to ethical considerations, demands, and arguments put forth by others. Animals are not inside ethics in this sense. Animals do not talk back. They do not participate in the practice of articulating what they care about, negotiating the extent of their responsibilities, or explaining the grounds of their actions. They are sometimes the *objects* of ethical considerations, but they do not themselves provide ethical considerations. With respect to animals, *we* articulate what matters in *their* lives, ideally with the aid of a morally imaginative engagement. It seems misleading to the point of distortion to say that moral thinking about human beings is a matter of observing them (us?) through a lens of what matters in their (our?) lives.

When we formulate an ethics for human beings, we are vulnerable to repudiation by the very creatures we are aiming at describing. Ethical thinking is (at least partly) a matter of listening to and negotiating with others – others who are equals in the sense of being equally in a position to articulate what matters in life.

Now, one might argue that we (sometimes) engage with animals by living with them and not by observing them, too. But there still is a sense in which we are limited to what we, from an involved participant's perspective, can *see* when it comes to animals. Whereas with human beings, their own take and understanding of a situation, revealed in what they say, is always a part of what we have to contend with. It is a part of what determines the ethical significance of a situation or action.

Crary points to ways in which we can see continuities between human life and the lives of animals, most prominently continuities in conceptual and other psychological capacities. And perhaps one response to my worry could be that we should see continuity here as well. It is certainly arguable that some animals can participate in a kind of reciprocal understanding of a situation and make a claim on you to adjust your conception, and, also, that it is possible for you to be reproached by an animal when you do it injustice. I am not ruling this out. What I miss in Crary's account, however, is a discussion of the limited relevance of the observable in the human case,

and what implications this might have when we think about animals.

I mentioned above that Crary's view is in some respects congenial to the ethical naturalisms of Foot and Thompson. One thing Crary has in common with Thompson and Foot is the idea that the assessment and appreciation of properties and features of individuals, humans as well as animals, is relative to the life-form of the creature in question. However, for both Foot and Thompson the human case is special, in that it is the human life-form that can serve as a basis for specifically *ethical* assessments. Thompson explicitly ties the specialness to the fact that we know our life-form not only by observation. I can know my life-form partly by "reflection on the logical conditions of particular facts about myself which are themselves not matters of observation" (Thompson 2004: 71). The concept 'human' is, on Thompson's view, not an empirical concept. This is important for Thompson because he wants to argue that his commitment to the idea that ethical judgments are life-form relative does not commit him to thinking that we arrive at ethical judgments by empirical observation. This would, on Thompson's view, be a bad form of naturalism.

Although Crary has a quite extensive critical discussion of Thompson and Foot, she does not touch upon this issue. There might well be problems with Thompson's particular way of understanding the limits of observability in ethics, but

his anti-empiricism is one expression of what I think is a natural and compelling thought, namely that moral knowledge is not (at least not entirely) a matter of observing moral facts. Therefore, Crary should have dug a bit deeper in her engagement with Thompson.

In this connection, it should be noted that Crary mainly discusses examples of animals integrated in human practices, such as dogs, horses, pigs, and chimpanzees raised by humans. With respect to such animals ethical issues are obviously relevant – how we live is a part of the picture from the start. But her claim that animals have observable moral characteristics is meant to be perfectly general, it covers also wild animals. However, when we turn to examples of wild animals, it is not immediately obvious that empirical depictions of the sort that Crary endorses are ethically inflected. Once we consider animals whose lives are not intertwined with ours from the start, it is much less clear that mere descriptions of their lives – even when those descriptions are allowed to be psychologically rich and imaginative – supply us with reasons for action. A Thompsonian naturalist, convinced that ethics is not a matter of responding to empirical moral facts, could argue that this difference between wild and domestic animals shows that it is in fact *our* life-form, known partly non-observationally, that is the real source of ethical responses.

As an illustration of the point that the careful and imaginative

attention to wild animals is not obviously ethically inflected, I will quote a passage from a study of wasps that figures in Crist's book. It occurs in an account by George and Elizabeth Peckham, pioneers in animal studies from the previous turn-of-the-century. The Peckhams are describing a wasp returning to the nest with her prey, a caterpillar. The wasp has just found her way back to the entrance of the nest, laying the caterpillar down to remove two pieces of pellets serving as a covering of the hole to the nest.

The way being thus prepared, she hurries back with her wings quivering and her whole manner betokening joyful triumph at the completion of her task. We, in the mean time, have become as much excited over the matter as she is herself. She picks up the caterpillar, brings it to the mouth of the burrow, and lays it down. Then, backing in herself, she catches it in her mandibles and drags it out of sight, leaving us full of admiration and delight. (Quoted in Crist 2000: 60)

The Peckhams weave together psychologically rich descriptions of the wasp with reports of their own emotional investment in the wasp's project, thereby displaying that close attention to what the wasp is doing is neither evaluatively nor emotionally neutral for them. However, it is not clear that the wasp's leading its life (which includes killing the caterpillar)

gives the Peckhams reason to do anything in particular, except perhaps not to disturb it. Is the ethical dimension in the observation of wild animals and their interactions there in the presence of a commitment not to disturb or interfere with their lives? How, in that case, are we to understand such a commitment, especially given how much suffering their lives can contain?

In sum, even if I see some quite serious problems with the view Cray presents in *Inside Ethics*, I find it highly valuable to think through her claims and locate possible points of resistance. Both Cray's attack on the narrower conception of objectivity and her argument for the idea that psychological ascriptions are ethically inflected are worth serious consideration.

Abo Akademi University
stina.m.backstrom @ gmail.com

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