

# The Importance of Being a Dog

*By Vincent Boyer*

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**Do animals have a moral life in the same way as humans do? The philosopher Alice Crary argues that they are visible bearers of moral qualities, as literature suggests. But can values be the object of empirical observation?**

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Reviewed: Alice Crary, *Inside Ethics: On the Demands of Moral Thought*, Harvard University Press, 2016, 304 p.

One evening in the summer of 1967, as he was visiting the Nocturama in the Antwerp Zoo, the narrator of *Austerlitz* saw a raccoon sitting behind his glass window “beside a little stream with a serious expression on its face, washing the same piece of apple over and over again [...]”<sup>1</sup> After leaving the Zoo, the narrator reached Antwerp Centraal Station, where he met for the first time Jacques Austerlitz, the main character of the novel, who was busy frantically writing notes on the building’s architecture in the midst of the crowd. The narrator was struck by the resemblance between the two situations: The raccoon seemed to hope “that all this washing, which went far beyond any reasonable thoroughness, would help it to escape the unreal world in which it had arrived, so to speak, through no fault of its own”<sup>2</sup>; Jacques Austerlitz’s obsession with architecture

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<sup>1</sup> W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, translated by Anthea Bell, New York, Random House, 2001, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

stemmed from his personal history of exile and loss, caused by the Second World War and the Holocaust. Jacques Austerlitz is obviously not a raccoon, nor vice versa, but W.G. Sebald seems to suggest that the narrator might not have *seen* Jacques Austerlitz's distress at all had he not first been sensitive to the raccoon's.

Alice Crary, associate professor at the New School for Social Research, offers a masterly philosophical commentary on the opening of *Austerlitz* in her new book, *Inside Ethics: On the Demands of Moral Thought* (pp. 246-247). In her view, this literary example highlights, on the one hand, the fact that humans and animals are situated “inside ethics,” which is to say that they possess “moral qualities that are, in a straightforward empirical sense, open to view” (p.10). On the other hand, the example shows that by making unusual comparisons, literature helps to better perceive these moral qualities. The distress of the human and the animal thus constitutes, in Crary's vocabulary, a “value” that can be read from their behavior and that fulfills both the criteria of *objectivism*—since this moral distress is a directly observable element of the world—and *internalism*—since consideration of this distress is internally connected to action, in the sense that it provides the agent with a reason to act so as to try and remedy it (page 14 -16). Such a gesture, which brings humans and animals inside ethics, also has normative implications in that it compels us to consider animals differently, by recognizing that they have a “moral life” of their own which must be taken into account.

## From Naturalism to Speciesism?

How can one *see* that a creature, human or not, leads a good (or bad) life? One of the main naturalist theses of *Inside Ethics* is that such a perception is possible only on the condition of appreciating the individual before us in the light of certain important characteristics of its species. As Crary writes:

Grasping a human or non-human creature's expressions is impossible apart from reference to a conception of what is important in the life of creatures of its kind. (p. 68)

Thus, the way in which a human individual is to be considered and treated depends in large part on the fact that he or she is a *human* being—that is, a being born of two human parents for whom it is important to communicate with his or her fellow humans, to preserve bodily integrity, and to enjoy physical freedom, language, memory, etc. (p.135).

Such a conception, which gives moral significance to the fact of belonging to the human species, differs from the position of the most famous of the philosophers who defended animal welfare, Peter Singer. Attributing moral value to the sheer fact of being human was, for Singer, the sign of an unwarranted *speciesism* (p. 128). Indeed, following the psychologist Richard Ryder, he used in the 1970s the term “speciesism,” which he coined on the model of “racism” and “sexism” to describe “a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one’s own species and against those of members of other species.”<sup>3</sup>

According to Singer, if human life has a moral value merely for being human, then it follows that all human lives have an equal moral value, and this equality necessarily implies that any human life is superior and preferable, from the point of view of a human being, to any other form of animal life. However, if we wish to recognize and promote the “interests” of animals in continuing to “live and not suffer,” we must purely and simply abandon the idea that the sheer fact of being human is of particular moral importance. Thus, we must “drop the belief in the equal value of human life, replacing it with a graduated view that applies to animals as well as to humans,”<sup>4</sup> which is all the more justified since many animals surpass, in terms of cognitive ability, some humans who suffer from severe mental retardation.

## Animal Life

One of the main interests of *Inside Ethics* lies in the fact that the author proposes a number of arguments against the thesis of the inequality of human lives, while also retaining the possibility of including animals in the realm of ethics. According to Crary, if Singer arrives at such radical conclusions, which some consider to be even morally repugnant, it is precisely because, like the majority of moral philosophers, he locates humans and animals “outside ethics”: Moral action must be guided in his view only by the impartial—and one might say “species-blind”—consideration of individuals’ interests. Yet, these interests are not, in themselves, observable moral characteristics (pp. 19-35). Conversely, far from pushing animals outside ethics, the naturalistic position adopted by Crary applies to animals as well, because “the sheer fact of being human, or of being an animal of some kind, is morally significant” (p. 122). To emphasize, as the author of *Inside Ethics* does, the species to which the individuals before us belong does not make her a speciesist philosopher whose aim is to discriminate animals; it allows her instead to more finely describe the life of these animals as well as what matters to them.

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*, London, Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1990, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Singer, “Speciesism and Moral Status,” in *Metaphilosophy* 40 (3-4), 2009, p. 567.

Thus, the descriptions of *Inside Ethics* allow us to distance ourselves from the abstract formulas of Singer, for whom any human being or animal is an *ordinary individual* with extremely basic interests—living, not suffering—when in fact we cannot respect those interests if we do not know what living and not suffering entail *for a dog, for a horse, or a for a hen*. As was rightly argued by the American philosopher Cora Diamond, who was Crary’s teacher: “We cannot point and say, ‘This thing (whatever concepts it may fall under) is at any rate capable of *suffering*, so we ought not to make it *suffer*,’”<sup>5</sup> simply because in saying “this thing,” we do not yet know *what it is* exactly that we are talking about.

Applying the program developed by Diamond, Crary presents a lengthy analysis of canine life, in an attempt to show that the sheer fact of being a dog has a value in itself, simply because, for this species, there are important things—for instance, a human companion—the absence of which makes life less good (pp. 150-160). Crary goes even further, claiming that if dogs are inside ethics, then it is possible to evaluate them morally (p. 120), for example by considering that some “dogs may be trustworthy as opposed to merely predictable” (p. 191). To the objection of anthropomorphism that would surely be made against such a remark, we might try to answer that it is not a question of saying that dogs are virtuous or vicious like humans, but simply that a *relationship* of trust can be established between a dog and its master, and that this relationship henceforth matters for this dog and this human being. Yet—and this is our first caveat with regard to the theses defended in this book—if the vocabulary of virtues and vices cannot be used to describe animal behavior, is this not the sign that animals, precisely, are not inside ethics, or at least not in the way humans are?

## The Philosophy of Mind in the Service of Ethics

However, the actual philosophical work of *Inside Ethics* is not yet done, for Crary has still to provide arguments in favor of the idea that humans and animals possess moral qualities that are, “in a straightforward empirical sense, open to view” (p.10). This thesis, upon which the book’s entire argument rests, is not at all self-evident. And this is where things get complicated. The original but sometimes a bit laborious strategy adopted by Crary consists in taking the reader on a long detour via the contemporary philosophy of mind, by defending the thesis that, for example:

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<sup>5</sup> Cora Diamond, “Eating Meat and Eating People,” in *Philosophy* 53 (206) 1978, p. 470. A few lines earlier, Diamond specifies that she wrote this article “as a vegetarian, but one distressed by the obtuseness of the normal arguments, in particular, I should say, the arguments of Singer and Regan” (*ibid.*, p. 468).

If someone is rightly credited with a perception of a dog—a kind of thing—then her perception must have internal to it the thought of connection to other actual or possible representations of dogs and must in this sense have a universal structure. (p. 97)

In other words, according to this “conceptualist” thesis, the content of our perception of the dog is always already conceptual, since we could not perceive this dog without such a concept: What we perceive is never “given” to us without mediation.

According to Crary, not only do we need concepts to perceive living individuals of a certain kind, but these concepts may in some cases be deemed “ethical” (p. 68), especially when it is a question of grasping “the psychological significance of an individual’s behavior” (p.68).<sup>6</sup> Thus, in Crary’s view, if we are to give ourselves the means to correctly explain the behavior of a dog, it is strictly impossible not to attribute to it certain conceptual abilities (pp. 113-118)—for example, that of being able to distinguish, among the individuals it perceives, those who belong to the human species. Yet—and this is the heart of the argument—since it *matters* for the dog to be in a relationship with a human being, then this conception of the dog is “ethical” in Crary’s sense: Something would be missing from our description of its behavior if we renounced such a conception (p. 113).

As a consequence, if it is impossible to understand the behavior of an individual—human or animal—without, on the one hand, using ethical concepts, and without, on the other hand, considering that this individual itself uses ethical concepts, then just as there are empirically visible psychological qualities—such as when a dog is said to be visibly “thinking through a problem”<sup>7</sup>—it is proven that the moral qualities of individuals are empirically perceptible, and that humans and animals are, indeed, inside ethics.

Nevertheless, it is perhaps regrettable that Crary does not take her naturalist argument to its logical conclusion, and that she insists on continuing to speak of objective moral values that might be perceived in the context of the “wider conception of objectivity” (p. 34)—a conception which she makes her own, and which includes emotions, sensations, and values. Indeed, it seems to us perfectly possible to grant moral—though, of course, varying—significance in itself to the sheer fact of being a human, a dog, or a horse, without having to endorse the philosophical position, extremely charged ontologically, that we might perceive values.

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<sup>6</sup> Obviously, Crary is not saying that we need *ethical* concepts to perceive a table or a stone. Ethical externalism only concerns the perception of *living* individuals whose good we can identify because we know their species and observe their behavior.

<sup>7</sup> An example, among many others, of a video in which this is *visible*: “Dog Thinks Through a Problem” [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m\\_CrIu01SnM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m_CrIu01SnM)

## What Is Literature For?

While Crary's philosophical arguments in defense of the idea that humans and animals are inside ethics must be taken with caution, there remain the literary descriptions that support these arguments and that are a central interest of the book. These two aspects of the book are in fact closely linked: If literature has a role to play in ethics, it is precisely because it literally places before our eyes the observable moral characteristics of humans and animals, in a manner more striking than can, on the one hand, our ordinary perception, or, on the other, the scientific understanding of the world.

Crary thus analyzes, with great subtlety, three major literary works whose narrative construction assigns a crucial role to the relationship between humans and animals: Leo Tolstoy's short story *Strider*, J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, and W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (pp. 213-252). In "Strider," Tolstoy compares the fate of an old piebald gelding named Strider with that of one of his former owners, Serpukhovskoy: Both had their hour of glory, and for both that glory has definitively faded. Crary rightly dwells on the end of the short story, where these two fates are put in parallel via a "clothing" detail: A saddle left on the horse's back by neglectful men and a boot carelessly left dangling from Serpukhovskoy's foot as he falls asleep show the equal decrepitude of the two characters—even though men are responsible for Strider's condition, while Serpukhovskoy's is the result of his own failings.<sup>8</sup> In fact, the short story is largely constructed around the narrative, recounted by Strider himself, of his own past—he was once used and "broken" by this rider—which now prevents him from living up to a certain "equine ethics," as one would speak of an "aristocratic ethics" in which force is a central value (p.215).

This, then, is a speaking horse. Crary rightly notes that, "at the level of the narrative there is indeed 'bad anthropomorphism,' [but] this turns out to be part of a literary strategy for bringing the life of an individual horse clearly into focus" (p. 218). Tolstoy makes the horse speak for a mainly *rhetorical* purpose: To get the reader to empathize with his plight. And this is where the use of literature in moral philosophy finds its limits: We never know if it succeeds in providing us with additional *knowledge* about the lives of humans and animals, or if, ultimately, it is a mere persuasion device which plays on our emotions and does away with all argumentation. Crary is obviously aware of this problem, but her answer does not seem quite satisfactory (pp. 204-213) because she makes it depend on what she calls a "wider conception of rationality" (p. 211). The latter itself rests on that "wider conception of objectivity" which considers some values to be visible, and which, as I claimed earlier, is far from self-evident.

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<sup>8</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *Strider: The Story of a Horse*, translated by Louise Maude and Aylmer Maude, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2015.

Thus, in the first place, *Inside Ethics* illustrates both the high relevance and the limitations of literary studies in philosophy—convincing the reader that reading novels can make humans better by making them more attentive to other forms of life. In the second place, it offers extremely interesting and original avenues for departing from anti-speciesist positions, which are all too often left unchallenged in contemporary animal ethics.

### Bibliography

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