

1 **Human-Animal Relationships and Animal Ethics in Crisis: A New Way Out? “*Animal***
2 ***Crisis: A New Critical Theory*” by Alice Crary and Lori Gruen**

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9 In *Animal Crisis: A New Critical Theory* (2021), Alice Crary and Lori Gruen put forward an
10 innovative solution to the acute human-animal crisis. This crisis manifests itself in various
11 ways: the destruction of habitats, pest epidemics, and immense animal suffering in and pollution
12 through animal husbandry. According to Crary and Gruen, presiding philosophical approaches
13 do not offer workable solutions to these problems. Their core criticism is, then, aimed at:

- 14 1. practices that disregard animals and their moral status, and
15 2. prominent philosophical views in animal ethics (like those of utilitarian Peter Singer
16 [e.g. 2009/1975]).

17 Contemporary animal ethicists (like Singer) often rely on abstract and rationalistic arguments.
18 Crary and Gruen promise to offer a practical alternative by developing a “new *critical animal*
19 *theory*” (2021, p. 4; italics in the original). They make great strides in doing so. However, some
20 important issues remain unresolved. These will become evident later in my review.

21 Crary and Gruen’s basic premise is that liberalizing animals from their systematic oppression
22 will not succeed unless the marginalization of people in the same contexts is brought into focus
23 (2022, p. 4). Other victims of the ideological and oppressive apparatus of advanced capitalism
24 are slaughterhouse workers and those in kindred roles and occupations. Thus, animal liberation
25 and social and political critique are intimately connected for Crary and Gruen. The authors want
26 to understand and address systemic forces that enable the disadvantaging of many for the ad-
27 vantage of few. They emphasize, for example, the vulnerability of workers—often immigrants
28 and non-whites—to disease in slaughterhouses; the same place where thousands of pigs suffer
29 emotional trauma and death (Crary & Gruen, 2021, p. 17). For Crary and Gruen, achieving this
30 goal does not rely on abstract inquiry. Rather, it relies on corporeal investigations into the *ex-*
31 *periences* of animals. Such investigations serve to surmount the problem that, “in discussions
32 in animal ethics and politics, animals remain abstractions”. The same is true, *mutatis mutandis*,

1 of vulnerable people. In seven chapters, Crary and Gruen discuss key philosophical concepts,
2 such as suffering (chapter 3), mind (chapter 4), and dignity (chapter 5). They do so by way of
3 concrete case studies. This involves approaching ethical issues from the perspectives of rats,
4 parrots, and slaughterhouse workers. As such, the ethical issues become both tangible and evoc-
5 ative of the reader’s imagination and compassion.

6 The authors identify a core feature of the human-animal crisis. Using the example of pig farm-
7 ing, they show how humans systematically alienate themselves from the suffering of these an-
8 imals. Borrowing from Carol J. Adams (2010), the pigs become “absent referents”. They are
9 both:

- 10 1. *spatially distant*: they are invisible to the public, inconspicuous in their feedlots and
11 slaughterhouses, and
- 12 2. *linguistically distant* because they are usually not referred to as “dead animals” or
13 “corpses”, but rather as “meat”.

14 Crary and Gruen do not stop their ethical investigations here. Drawing from Timothy Pachirat’s
15 (2011) field work in slaughterhouses, they show how both the animals and the slaughterhouse
16 workers are victims of systematic exploitation. Slaughterhouse workers often carry out their
17 jobs under duress, under adverse and psychologically challenging conditions.

18 Crary and Gruen do not think that this exploitation and alienation has been adequately addressed
19 by mainstream ethicists. Utilitarianism, for example, advocates for principles that abstract away
20 from historical and cultural contexts in favor of an ethereal principle of equality. As such, util-
21 itarians inadequately address the structures that result in animal exploitation. The authors iden-
22 tify advanced capitalism as the source of such structures within the context of the animal crisis.
23 A suitable alternative is what Crary and Gruen call an “ethics and politics of sight”. This allows
24 us to understand animals as others who (like us) have a face and have idiosyncratic individual
25 lives. These others are proper addressees of empathy (Crary & Gruen, 2022, pp. 117–118).
26 Traditional animal ethicists often abstract from actual experiences, contexts and relations,
27 which results in making humans and animals simply entities with certain evaluable character-
28 istics. This comes with the cost of reducing moral inquiry to a few principles like the abstract
29 principle of equality. Crary and Gruen, however, wish to provide a broader perspective: It is
30 not just about cows who suffer in animal husbandry, but also about mothers who lose their
31 children and farmers who do not relent (2021, chap. 3). By their methodology—providing case
32 studies of animals in concrete situations—Crary and Gruen avoid the reductionism of many
33 traditional theories in animal ethics.

1 Crary and Gruen aim to provide an, what the authors call, “ideological critique”, one that “can
2 help us focus on the actual experiences of other animals, in their particular contexts” (2022, p.
3 32). Despite outward appearances, views like utilitarianism, in fact, create moral hierarchies,
4 placing human interests above those of other animals (Crary & Gruen, 2022, pp. 46–49). While
5 hierarchies may seem inevitable in certain situations—e.g., when rats as pests threaten human
6 well-being and must thereby be exterminated—such hierarchies distort the view that animals
7 have a dignity of their own and are thus not merely disposable (Crary & Gruen, 2022, chap. 5).
8 Utilitarianism is also:

9 congenial and unthreatening to major existing social institutions and political formations
10 in advanced capitalism – institutions and formations that [...] contribute centrally to the
11 violent destruction of animal life (Crary & Gruen, 2022, p. 43).

12 Political and social structures are, therefore, primary targets of criticism in the book. Crary and
13 Gruen’s critical animal theory aspires to be holistic. It aspires to encompass all relevant struc-
14 tures of exploitation and all relevant perspectives and contexts. It is not detached and reduc-
15 tionistic in the way that presiding views in animal ethics often are.

16 Crary’s and Gruen’s theory is inspired by ecofeminist thought. It uncovers:

17 the kinds of values in human and animal lives that capitalist and political formations
18 distort. The project of uncovering these values involves listening to voices of women,
19 marginalized humans, and domestic and subsistence workers, as well as developing
20 ways to listen to animals themselves (Crary & Gruen, 2022, p. 135).

21 I commend Crary and Gruen for revealing the detachment and reductionism in prevailing ani-
22 mal ethics theories. As mentioned, utilitarianism makes the mistake of abstracting from con-
23 crete and contextualized perspectives in favor of abstruse logic. But, this criticism is not new.
24 Several critical disability scholars (e.g., Kittay, 2009; Taylor, 2017) have pointed to the abstract
25 way in which ethicists often approach animal suffering and thus attack moral significance in
26 human life. The reductionistic ethicists, whom Crary and Gruen target, also often distort or
27 obfuscate the perspectives of marginalized groups, such as those of disabled people. The “ar-
28 gument from marginal cases” that Singer (and others) advocate for maintains that criteria com-
29 monly used to exclude nonhuman animals from moral consideration cannot draw a line between
30 humans and other animals. This is because there are humans—disabled people—who do not
31 meet the requisite criteria.

32 Eva Feder Kittay (2009) has criticized the argument from marginal cases for excluding the
33 experiences of mentally disabled people (and those who care for them) in favor of detached

1 evaluations of individual psychological capacities. Thus, Singer (and those who hold similar
2 views) both:

- 3 1. attack the dignity of people with disabilities, stating that people with disabilities have
4 lives that are less worth living than “normal” people, and
- 5 2. distort the importance of caring relationships on a personal, philosophical, and political
6 level, as they advocate for a kind of ableism that frames the experiences of disabled
7 people as less valuable. They thereby fail to acknowledge and appreciate that the expe-
8 riences of those caring for them might be rich and valuable (Kittay, 2009, pp. 621–625).

9 Sunaura Taylor’s book *Beasts of Burden* (2017) is another important critique of this sort. Taylor
10 shows how ethicists like Singer do not reach their goal of elevating the moral status of animals.
11 Instead, they end up attacking the experiences and lives of disabled people. They lower disabled
12 people’s moral status because disabled people do not match their ableist (abled-bodied or able-
13 minded) definition of personhood. What this shows is that theories like Singer’s fail to capture
14 the experiences of those involved. Indeed, it is not just about the experiences of diverse ani-
15 mals—such as octopuses, mice, and cows—but those who are exploited, like slaughterhouse
16 workers.

17 At first glance, the above criticisms seem on point. But, consider the above mentioned “ethics
18 and politics of sight”. This encompasses a kind of empathetic entanglement with others. How
19 would critical disability theorists regard Crary and Gruen’s espousal of this view? Might it not
20 be an ableist notion? Commenting on Gruen’s *Entangled Empathy* (2015), Remy Debes states
21 that “full” empathy can only be reached if the addressee of empathy can verify the empathizer’s
22 perspective, “that is, if she can *confirm* our interpretation about the significance her experiences
23 have *for her*—from her point of view” (2017, p. 435; italics in the original). The problem is that
24 our interpretations of others are “saturated in human concepts, theory, and ideology” (Debes,
25 2017, p. 435). Speciesism and ableism are instances of this.

26 We might approach others and their perspectives with prejudices that we are not even be aware
27 of. It would be unfair to say that Crary and Gruen are not aware of this problem (e.g., Crary
28 2016, chap. 4), but they do not deal with this problem in this book. As Kittay and Taylor point
29 out, it is easy to fall into ableist interpretations of the perspectives of the addressees of empa-
30 thy—and it is questionable if this will ever fully succeed—we do not know what it is to be a
31 bat (Nagel, 1974). Prejudices and ideological pictures are pervasive in ordinary moral thought.
32 Surely, this is what Crary and Gruen want to avoid. It would have been nice if they had devoted
33 more space in the book to discussing the problem of ableism and its impact on empathy for the

1 “non-able”. This is particularly so given that Crary and Gruen criticize the argument from mar-
2 ginal cases and its unsavory conclusions.

3 Another problem arises when Crary and Gruen discuss the social and political structures that
4 must be overcome to end animal exploitation. Crary and Gruen are right in pointing out that it
5 is not only our thinking and theories that is at fault. Institutionalized power structures reinforce
6 animal suffering and exploitation. But, do philosophers like Singer really fail to adequately
7 address political and social structures?

8 Undoubtedly, Singer’s *Animal Liberation* (2009/1975) has had an impact on both philosophical
9 discourse and social and political structures. Its publication is often considered to be a milestone
10 for transforming deadlocked ways of thinking about animals, and it inspired a generation of
11 activists to fight for animal rights. Singer’s view is certainly not meant to promote the status
12 quo. Crary and Gruen are naturally aware of *Animal Liberation*’s impact. Nonetheless, their
13 criticism of Singer’s view is only partly correct. Yes, Singer’s view does not adequately ac-
14 commodate the experiences of others. But, he is not supporting capitalism and the exploitation
15 that derives from it.

16 In sum, the book impresses with its clear language and argumentation. There are also case stud-
17 ies at the beginning of each chapter that help to clarify the relevant ethical problems. Crary and
18 Gruen highlight the most important ethical problems of human-animal relationships through
19 excellently selected examples. This makes the book especially suitable as an introduction—
20 with a certain feminist, post-modern slant—to issues in animal ethics and practical problems
21 related to human-animal relationships. For the most part, they also effectively criticize presid-
22 ing approaches to animal ethics. Crary’s and Gruen’s negative view is convincing but it is hard
23 to tell what their practical, empathetic, and contextual alternative amounts to. Certainly, they
24 want to extend their critique on animal suffering by bringing in other perspectives (e.g., slaugh-
25 terhouse workers), and by providing concrete examples (like caged parrots and their experi-
26 ences [Crary & Gruen, 2021, chap. 6]). Besides this, it is quite difficult to see what their alter-
27 native entails.

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