The Poverty of Moral Theory in Literary Discourse:
A Plea for Recognizing the Multiplicity of Value Frameworks (5,478)

But can philosophy become literature and still know itself.
(Stanley Cavell CR 496)

Man, a manifold, mendacious, artificial, and opaque animal, uncanny to the other animals less because of his strength than because of his cunning and shrewdness, has invented the good consciousness to enjoy his soul for once as simple; and the whole of morality is a long undismayed forgery which alone makes it possible to enjoy the sight of the soul. From this point of view much more may belong in the concept of “art” than is generally believed.
(Nietzsche BGE sec 291)

I

I am fascinated by how art and moral philosophy seem closely entwined and yet most intensely take on their own distinctive powers when they have to resist the threat of this entwined condition collapsing into an identification one with the other. This may be a time when such a collapse is imminent. For there are significant signs that much of the literary threatens to collapse into the long love affair of philosophy with its own capacities to project the moral life as the ultimate measure of lives worth living. So it seems necessary to remind us of the costs of this emerging domination— in our capacity to appreciate the complexities of literary experience (especially in the appeal of affective states that counter morally sanctioned states of mind), and in our ability to identify with the range of value experiences which resist the models of judgment moral thinking imposes.

I assume that I do not have to give evidence for the rather sudden domination of moral philosophy over literary studies—from Cavell and Nussbaum to J. Hillis Miller and what seem at least half of the graduate students in my own program. Were I the suspicious type, I would suggest that only an increase of anxiety over our own morality or over the irrelevance of literary study could produce this kind of generalized self-absolution. But I am less interested in explaining this phenomenon than in countering it by elaborating Nietzsche’s critique that overt commitments to moral reading simplify the soul and force the arts to play good citizens, thereby virtually eliminating their capacity to challenge the entire enterprise of establishing the pleasures of good conscience. I wish I could identify myself with a rhetoric of crisis and potential revolution, but straightforward anger and despair will have to do for the affective register of this talk.
We can set the general stage by assuming that Cavell puts his finger on a basic recurrent problem in philosophy: the more it opens itself to other disciplines, not just to literature, the more it risks no longer be able to know itself as a distinctive enterprise. I invoke this now because I think that those philosophers and critics who treat literary experience as the grounds for a new more open and flexible attitude toward morality are playing a complicated game. They can flirt with the seductive danger of having philosophy appear in a new light, but at the same time they can use the language of morality to stand back from the brink and assure themselves and their audiences that philosophy remains coherent and can know itself as it emerges in this wondrously more flexible attention to the affective dimensions of experience. Literary examples provide means of showing how affects supplement moral judgment—practically by enlarging our models of moral agency and theoretically by attuning us to structures of affects arguably fundamental to our grammatical competence in dealing with the world. So philosophy need not fear that the affinities with literature make it difficult to reassert its traditional identity. Instead philosophy can teach literature what power its texts have to provide nascent versions of rationality that only philosophy can fully articulate.i

However then it seems that literature cannot know itself because it requires philosophy to tell it what its truth is and what its uses are in the practical world. We lose the force of those literary examples that produce tension between any sense of moral well-being and the ways texts idealize character traits—Swann’s understanding of jealousy is one case in point; another is Shakespeare’s fascination with giving up reflection to live in accord with principles like “ripeness is all.” Far better I think to have a conceptual framework capable of turning from how literary experiences can be shown to align with moral values to how experiences challenge any sense that the soul is simple enough to live exclusively in relation to those values. For literary theory, then, asking about the range of values involved may afford one way of lessening the hold of “the ethical” on the literary imagination. ii Even with authors as overtly “moral” as Jane Austen, theory can recall us to an awareness of how thoroughly the interest and vitality in her novels occurs in the presentation of characters enacting their delusions and responding freshly and complexly to those moments in which they adapt what might call the moral path—as when Emma finally hears Darcy’s declaration of love.

I need a philosopher who can help us think our way out of this malaise of the moral. The standard continental types influence by Nietzsche are obvious possibilities, but they are
likely to appeal now only to the already converted. So I will try to develop aspects of Wittgenstein’s work that show a somewhat different way beyond this obsession with the moral because the work entertains the possibility of aesthetics and ethics become something close to one. There is no escaping the importance of moral philosophy. But that makes it the more important that we understand the possible limitations of its powers. For Wittgenstein the major limitation consists in the tendency toward self-congratulation inseparable from making judgments of behavior. This is not merely a flaw that should trouble self-reflection but also an index of the failure to take up a position that can engage questions about how we determine the conditions of agency involved in determining our investments in those moral judgments. I have argued that for Wittgenstein suspicion of abstract moral authority leads him to give display and confession, and not judgment, the role of establishing what is involved for the individual in producing hierarchies among values. And if we analyze how we establish display and confession we are well on our way to appreciating the role aesthetic considerations have to play in any discussion of significant values for individuals.

I insist on this point because a basic ambition in this paper is to resist the contemporary tendency to treat Wittgenstein’s work as a resource for recuperating the place of moral concerns in our cultural grammars. Philosophers like Stanley Cavell and Cora Diamond rely on Wittgenstein because he shows how affective considerations are embedded in the grammar by which we make moral judgments: aspects of affective life are not established by subjects but are mediated by the frameworks by which subjects give intelligibility to the world. Judgments about phenomena like sexual or racial inequality for example do not simply depend on subjective preferences but make us aware of how the culture frames affects connected with moral assessment. Yet in my view Wittgenstein also creates substantial problems for these philosophical projects. The philosophers refuse to look for reasons why Wittgenstein offered no extended reflection on ethics after his “Lecture on Ethics” (1931), even though Wittgenstein was nothing if not obsessive in seeking a language for what he thought philosophical reflection might make available. I will propose that Wittgenstein took questions of religious values for the self too seriously to entertain the weakening of demand that the generality of moral language would produce for individuals as they worked out their own identities. Rightness was not a matter of abstract principle or sensitive particular judgment but rather depended on efforts to manifest states of the will that could not be bound by any discursive categories of judgment.
For Wittgenstein, the defining acts of will to being a certain kind of self seem prior to any efforts at justifying a life or shaping conditions where one experiences happiness or unhappiness. So the moral life is not just something we establish by our argued judgments. Rather we display our version of what might count as the relevant identifications in our concrete actions and beliefs. And these displays afford sufficiently complex versions of agency that we cannot separate what are moral values, what aesthetic, what political. Fleshing out such possibilities is one important domain where the imagination works in an extra-moral sense.

II

Before we can specify what might provide alternatives to how moral philosophy uses literary works to ground, elaborate, and refine its own models of moral agency, I think we have to do an anatomy of the basic moves used to justify these models of morality. Fortunately we can begin work on such an anatomy in relation to Alice Crary’s recent book *Beyond Moral Judgment* because Crary is scrupulously attentive to the foundations for arguing how philosophy can clarify and foster moral values by the study of literary works. So by analyzing six basic moves in this book I hope to create something like a template of philosophical temptation that underlies the promise that philosophy can better recognize its own capacities within the lens provided by literary experience.

1) Perhaps Crary’s most powerful move is to define morality in very general Aristotelian terms: "I speak of a person’s moral outlook in reference to her view of how best to live, or of what matters most in life" (p. 9 fn 1). For she then builds in from the start concerns for ethos and virtue. And she makes inevitable her conclusion that morality is more comprehensive category that moral judgment can encompass.

2) There seem two basic options for developing this expanded view of morality. One can emphasize openness to how subjects develop different constructions of what the moral involves, or one can find means by which questions of how best to live take on some objective dimensions, at least in terms of shareable moral evaluations. Because Crary is not content with the relativism of the first option, she tries to expand what we can mean by objectivity in morals so that it incorporates some of what she calls “problematically subjective” values. Then we can correlate the internal aspect of individual moral judgment by which “we have reason” to do something (11-12) with “how things really—or objectively—are in the world” (11).
Traditional objectivity excludes everything "merely subjective" that can only be described by talking about the mental responses the object elicits (15). "The merely subjective" refers to responses that depend on subjective states—e.g. appearing red or seeming funny. But there is also the category of the "problematically subjective" (15), which is defined as "properties an object can be said to possess insofar as it is the kind of thing that would elicit subjective responses in appropriate circumstances" (15). Crary gives two kinds of examples for these appropriate circumstances—cases where aspects of perception present predicates like "red" that seem suitable for all competent observers despite their subjective construction, and cases where affective properties seem embedded in situations rather than in the imaginations of discrete subjects. We can see responses as appropriate when there is an "internal relation to sensibility or affective propensities that allow it to be essentially practical" (16). Later in her book she elaborates how this kind of objectivity is "accessible only in terms of particular evaluative perspectives" (176) or "intelligible only in terms of certain evaluative perspectives" (165). Judgments about sexual harassment need not be merely subjective interpretations of events but can specify an objective condition in which our evaluative frameworks for such encounters seem violated.

3) Because this way of thinking places subjective life largely within what can be objective shared linguistic capacities, Crary can develop a distinctive notion of rationality. Insofar as moral decisions emerge from those sensitivities, there is warrant for treating them as "rational" because they invoke what become properties "intrinsic" (41) to the acquisition of moral concepts: moral thinking is a matter of "discerning regularities in … a version of the world that is already itself moral" (38). We articulate or adapt "an already moralized image of the world" (39). And because this moralized image is inseparable from our entire sense of how our own affective lives ground us in this practical order, we find ourselves capable of realizing how thoroughly this view "expands the concerns of ethics so that …they encompass … [a person's] entire personality." (47).

4) Crary sees herself as both defining and extending a "set of remarks scattered" through Wittgenstein's later writings "that it seems natural to describe as bearing on ethical topics" (120). Then she offers several versions of this "bearing on"—that Wittgenstein's On Certainty "takes for granted a pragmatic account of language … on which certain acquired sensitivities are internal to our linguistic capacities" (120), that in his later works "Wittgenstein insists that his
own philosophical practice is properly characterized in ethical terms” (121), that these works criticize “approaches to language that presuppose we can survey and assess judgments … without relying on sensitivities we acquired in learning to judge” (121), and that one can treat as “ethical” Wittgenstein’s statements about responsibility involving “‘a kind of work on oneself’ “ since this statement “involves a peculiarly ethical type of ‘difficulty having to do with the will rather than the intellect’ “ (122).vii

5) Crary bases her account of how literature “can teach us about the moral life” (132) on its ability to involve us in the exercise of moral sensibility without demanding that we make moral judgments. She beautifully shows how novels can articulate “patterns in our practical lives that only come into view from the perspective of the particular emotional responses elicited from us” (142). So the novel both develops and trades on an expanded sense of an objective moral field of concern. For example Jane Austen’s *Persuasion* seeks emotional responses “internal to an appreciation of ‘proper persuadability’ “ that “are intended to contribute directly to a genuine, fully rational understanding of these features” (149). Our educated response exemplifies “possible changes in moral outlook” that realize “the novel’s primary moral lesson” (149).

6) Crary’s final point offers a powerful return to her introductory claim about the nature of moral life consisting ultimately in questions about how best to live. Such questions may involve moral judgment but they are certainly not exhausted by judgment. Rather the general values involved suggest that moral thinking need not be exclusively, or even primarily, a matter of making moral judgments” (11). This theme runs through Crary’s book. But it is only in her final chapter that she addresses the major danger that can occur when moral judgment is emphasized. Such judgments often produce a moralistic attitude that occurs “when moral thinking relies on concepts that “subject feelings to the governance of prior moral judgments” (206) and so prove insensitive to personal differences. By virtue of an engaging account of *Effi Briest*, Crary shows how moral judgments become modes of self-protection that justify agents in turning away from engagements with the world that might complicate or challenge their moral beliefs.

III

Let me begin my critique with a very practical fear elicited by this last claim because that provides a good index of the risks we run if we adapt Crary’s way of thinking. Obviously Crary is right about the dangers of moralism. But do these dangers stop with abstract judgment? It
does not take Foucault to point out the disciplinary potential in treating morality not just as a matter of judgment but as a matter of overall sensibility. Suppose we want to improve moral behavior. In the situation developed by Crary we would have to regulate not only certain particular beliefs but every aspect of sensibility that may impinge on action. So the best of intentions regarding education of “the whole personality” seems likely to produce something close to the worst of worlds.

With this possibility in mind, it seems prudent to examine Crary’s moves very carefully.

1) Granted that Crary echoes Aristotle in her argument that the primary concern of ethics is how best to live, or what matters most in life,” we still have to ask if Aristotle was right, or whether his culture’s understanding of what “ethics” implied can be mapped on our own, after the intervention of Christian values. In my view the equation of morality with questions of living well presents two basic problems.

First, defining ethics in terms of living well has the tautological force of treating all significant values as ultimately moral values. Must what might seem valued for aesthetic or social or political reasons be treated in moral terms? Does it matter that in her terms we could not even assign significance to Nietzsche’s discourse about the “extra-moral”? And must Blake’s sense of contraries or Pound’s investments in Dionysius be treated in accord with moral frameworks?

Second, Crary seems to offer a choice of tyrannies when she claims that her view “expands the concerns of ethics so that, far from being limited to a person’s moral judgments, they encompass her entire personality—her interests fears and ambitions, her characteristic gestures and attitudes and her sense of what is humorous, what is offensive and what is profound” (47; see also 195, 208). Either this reduces the personality to moral identity or it reduces morality to something resembling psychology. In my view the moral domain cannot just consist of ever-expanding states of sensibility but must include concrete acts where the subject makes decisions or wills an identity and has to think in terms of exclusions as well as inclusions. Some aspects of the psyche have to be encouraged and some denied, just as some actions have to be affirmed and some denied (unlike the aesthetic state where all the details can be affirmed). Once morality loses demands for the practical justifying of actions it becomes almost entirely a rhetorical construct aimed at self-regard with no clear practical task to perform.
2) I am impressed by Crary’s inventive effort to broaden the scope of the concept of objectivity in relation to moral evaluation. But the intricacy of her argument serves ultimately to help establish by contrast the need for concepts that allow for the public taking of responsibility without the rhetorical appeal to the fundamentally epistemic domain of objectivity. Again I have two worries. First, Crary is importantly right to distinguish different modes of subjectivity that can come into play in any kind of judgment. But she is importantly wrong that one can stabilize two poles of what I think we have to take as a continuum between “the merely subjective” and “the problematically subjective. In fact it is precisely because we have that continuum between what we might call “the internal life” and “the epistemically sanctioned life” that it can be so difficult to specify the kinds of values at stake that involve different kinds of judgments, ranging from practical to moral to aesthetic.

I can illustrate this continuum by introducing my second worry. It seems to me that social life provides a good example of the necessity for a range of levels of agreement, each involving different degrees of subjective involvement. For brevity’s sake let me just assert that policy questions like global warming invite forms of shared judgment not at all like the kinds of judgment that determine one’s overall political values. It seems reasonable to think that we have a common interest in the survival of the planet more or less as know it (although it is not quite outlandish to want to encounter the hybrid beings that might emerge if we accelerate climate change). So there are shared interests that we expect to shape subjects account of their relevant actions. On the other hand, decisions about one’s overall political stance seem less “objective” because there are clearly plausible competing positions. And choices about “how best to live, or of what matters most in life” demand even more latitude, although they are often cast as efforts to bring thought to bear that makes them not “merely subjective.” So while we are not dealing with mere subjectivity, we are dealing with something like an inevitable foregrounded subjective responsibility for deciding what facts count and what tradition one will use to read the facts. Then it becomes much more difficult to claim that any one outcome is rational because it is appropriate. Our practices won’t determine which value is most “appropriate” without circular repetition of one’s own categories for what is appropriate.

3) If we are to carry out Crary’s ambitions both to establish an expanded sense of objectivity and to bring “appropriateness” into the assessment of sensibility, I think we have to balance two basic features of decision-making in Crary’s expanded moral field. There is the
decision about what seems best given the overall social situation and the modes of evaluation embedded in our moral grammars, and there is a decision about what seems best for producing or maintaining a sense of who I am or who I can be. Many times these poles fuse; many times we almost unconsciously work out balances of interests; but many times we feel the difficulties these tensions create and we recognize how whole systems of competing values can be at stake, making any assertion rationality seem wishful thinking. In the second case the agent would treat the situation as a test of what he or she can make of those demands and still find an image of his or her actions that satisfies desires to see the self as developing an identity that is not fundamentally moral or amoral, just different from where morality would position it.

4) I think it is wrong to consider Wittgenstein’s ideas about language as comprising a fundamentally pragmatist position. Meaning is use, but the measure of appropriateness is not empirical success in manipulating the world or in reaching practical agreement. The measure of use is “fit,” and fit is only in part an empirical matter because agreeing that utterances fit situations does not make it so. Rather our understanding of use depends on networks of possible meaning that require our reflecting on how language as a whole hangs together. For example Moore’s intended use of “know” is quite clear, and several people have agreed with him. But still Wittgenstein argues that he misuses the term because he confuses an empiricist model with a grammatical one (and probably because he suffers from the widely shared philosopher’s anxiety to treat as much of the world as possible as a matter of empirical knowings). “Everything descriptive of a language-game is part of logic” (OC 56).

IV

My concern is not primarily with semantics. Instead I want to show that Crary’s treating Wittgenstein as a pragmatist in semantics is of a piece with her undervaluing how the consequence of the logic developed in the *Tractatus* might explain Wittgenstein’s reluctance to speak about ethics in his later work. Throughout his career his driving concerns were how an understanding of fit in language (in propositional logic and then in grammar) could also clarify what could not be said but had to shown. And explaining that reluctance may lead us to see why both art works and ethical concerns require for Wittgenstein modes of expression that cannot be accommodated with practices of negotiating discursive meanings. Instead we must see the crucial role the concept of “display” performs in his later philosophy when the primary concern becomes grammatical fit.
The core of Wittgenstein’s analysis of logic is a distinction between what can be an object of analysis and those elements fundamental to the working of logic whose force can only be displayed rather than described in propositions. That distinction seems to me to persist in his later work in the form of a sharp contrast between descriptions and avowals or aspects of expressive activity. In both cases we must distinguish between assertions that characterize states of affairs from assertions of attitudes that are intensional and so depend not on how the world is but on how agents give color to their worlds. The *Tractatus* makes that distinction by contrasting what can be asserted to be the case in the world and uses of language that must remain only on the margins of that world:

> The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: in it no value exists, and if it did, it would have no value. … What makes it non-accidental cannot lie within the world, since it if it did it would itself be accidental” (6.41).

Values occupy the same marginal status as attitudes because they do not derive from propositions or descriptions, “ethics cannot be put into words”; rather that domain is “transcendental”(6.421). But Wittgenstein does not have a positivist attitude to this marginal status, as the Kantian reference to the transcendental indicates. Hence the fascination with religion that runs through Wittgenstein’s career:

> Understanding oneself properly is difficult, because an action to which one might be prompted by good generous motives is something one also may be doing out of cowardice or indifference. … And only if I were able to submerge myself in religion could these doubts be stilled. Because only religion would have the power to destroy vanity and penetrate all the nooks and crannies. (Culture and Value p. 48)

Wittgenstein’s later work does make scattered remarks that invoke ethical values. But I know of no remark that praises the disciplinary work of ethical philosophy. The primacy of how the religious life stages agency makes it impossible for him to trust either sensibility or any kind of objective rationality as an instrument for understanding personal values:

> I believe that one of the things Christianity says is that sound doctrines are all useless. That you have to change your life. (Or the direction of your life.) It says that wisdom is all cold; and that you can no more use it for setting your life to rights that you can forge iron when it is cold. … Wisdom is passionless. But
faith by contrast is what Kierkegaard calls a Passion. (CV, 53)

So now we have to ask how one’s makes visible a passion so as to take on responsibility for it—in life and in art. This is where we have to recognize the crucial role the concept of “confession” played for Wittgenstein as a figure for display—both in its literal sense of opening oneself to God and in its capacity to provide a model for behavior that exists what can be considered “objective” and so become subject to assessment in terms of our received models of evaluation.\textsuperscript{xi}

If we try to bring such displays of the heart into the secular domain, I think we have to turn to something that is not a matter of rationality but a version of “style.” For style makes demands on our attention in part because it presents a claim to value that is not discursive and cannot be classified as quite ethical or aesthetic. Consider first this seemingly simple contrast from section viii of Part 2 of the Investigations to show how insistent Wittgenstein remained about how persons and values must be seen as occupying the margins between the empirical and the transcendental:

I say “Do this, and you’ll get it”. Can’t there be a doubt here? Mustn't there be one, if it is a feeling that is meant?

This looks so; this tastes so, this feels so. “This” and “so” must be differently explained” (PI p. 186).

The primary point is grammatical. “Feels” in the sense the sentence gives it involves a different language game from the apparent form of description the sentence seems to take at first. Initially we have to interpret “this” is as a demonstrative referring to some observable particular. But the phrase as a whole gives immense force to “so” as the complement of “feels.” Therefore the sentence requires recasting the force of “this.” Only a “this” specified intensionally by the subject’s “model” can flesh out “so” because that task calls not for description but for illustrating how some aspect of the situation dawns on the agent. And once the agent takes on this degree of importance for determining the sense of “so,” there must be doubt that one agent can understand what the other feels. This situation demands display rather than a picture, but the display does not secure lucid communication. There can be only an effort by each individual to clarify what “so” involves.

This concrete situation can become an emblem for Wittgenstein’s understanding of the work style has to do in cases where the language of knowing is inappropriate. We do not know
what the dawning of an aspect involves but we can display it. In most circumstances we can take the expression of this dawning of an aspect as simply the work of an avowal or expression of feeling. But it is also possible that we might ask more of this “so” than an avowal can provide. We might take the “so” as implicating full patterns of how an agent deals with the world. And then we enter conditions where confession or the making of a model must supplement the avowal (PI p. 222) and attempt to give substance to an attitude. In such situations we want not just know more about the agent’s reactions but also about her dispositions and history. This history, though, will be particular and will also not be amenable to observation in crucial aspects: we are interested in what the character chooses as a history rather than stopping with accuracy to the facts.

I think style offers a means of displaying how an agent frames such dawnsings by composing them:

“Le style c'est l'homme”, Le style c'est l'homme meme”. The first expression has cheap epigrammatic brevity. The second, correct version opens up quite a different perspective. It says that a man's style is a picture [Bild] of him. (CV p. 78) The second formulation says that style is a picture of the person because the self-reflexive dimension by which it frames the world makes visible how the language has been worked. One might say that style implies ownership but does not entail discursive self-consciousness about ownership or the possibility of describing the terms of that ownership. Style accomplishes this framing by accepting and displaying the individual’s differences from others and not seeking any normative justification: “You have to accept the faults in your own style. Almost like the blemishes in your own face” (CV p. 76). Therefore while this “feels so” invites further elaboration, it is by no means clear that interpretive words will add more than they subtract from what “so” displays.

Style makes for the recognition of differences—in persons, between persons and audiences, and in the ontology of what becomes stylized and yet still presumes connections to the objective world. The framework of values implicit in performances that rely on style is not an ethics of principle or an exercise in cultivating sensibility capable of better honoring our grammar of evaluations. Rather style cultivates attitudes capable of accepting differences and disciplining the self to attune to those differences by finding what in them can fascinate or instruct despite one’s irreducible discomfort. One can contextualize these first-person
presentations—hence the role of confession—but one cannot successfully provide reasons for
them that are not colored by the very conditions of action and response they propose to explain.
Agents usually can only display who they have become, and perhaps seek friendships that
appreciate such particular orientations. The task for an audience then in responding to style, in
life and in art, is to explore different ways of looking at or playing a situation to test what might
open up as a fuller mode of engagement or better way of at least accepting what remains quite
different from the agent’s own sensibility.

One has to distinguish sharply between an appeal to friendship and the appeal to
community that one asks for recognition as an “ethical” being. The latter requires the giving of
reasons or appeal to moral sensibility because these are our only discursive ways to establish
whatever intimacy can be achieved with a group. One must elaborate one’s decision in terms
that allow the community to include the person within its parameters of concern. Yet the
filtering force of the conventions that form the community make it highly unlikely that it will be
able to acknowledge accurately any decision not already programmed within its concerns. This
is why for Wittgenstein display and confession seek a greater degree of intimacy, and a greater
degree of something like grace, that cannot be demanded or explained. Wittgenstein maps a
continual quest for the possibilities of friendship that can attune to what confession displays
without demanding that the confession be adapted to the normative language of knowing and
djudging. In fact this refusal of the normative may be what drives Wittgenstein toward the
transcendental as the only possible audience for what sits uncomfortably within purported
explanations.\textsuperscript{xv} We have to trust to our capacities to deal with what can be made present in the
mode of display, and that requires us to learn how the concept of grace might be deployed in
secular contexts.

Art offers much more than exercises in style. But because such exercises foreground
the conditions of their own making, this feature might be least problematically considered as
displays or demonstrations of what a sensibility entails, much like what confession establishes
in the social domain. If we treat the arts as practices established for dealing with particular
displays or enactments of situations, clearly some of these displays will invite the kind of
rational understanding that Crary sees moral sensibility achieving. But just as clearly the
established cultural place of these objects is to challenge our reliance on any conceptual
structure that may afford models of rationality. We need training in moral sensibility. But we also need training in the limitations of treating everything as a moral issue rather than a demonstration of what particular affects can involve or what particular agents can aspire to as modes of living and modes of responding to the actions of other people. Hence when Crary stresses the moral dimensions of character traits, she simply bypasses any concern for how the work might contribute to society on its own terms.

Therefore aesthetic experience seems to push against Crary’s efforts to treat the sensibility that resists moral judgments as itself a primarily moral sensibility. If traits are located through the aesthetic and if they enhance the aesthetic, maybe they have to be considered as in part at least distinctive to aesthetic experience. Or, more precisely, those traits seem to complicate any analytic effort to make sharp distinctions between moral and aesthetic values. Perhaps developing powers of discrimination that modify sensibility is less important for how they prepare us for moral rationality than for how they make possible a range of interests that enhance the capacity of sensibilities to attach to concrete situations. Then we are positioned to appreciate the complex interweaving of values that makes life a compelling and fascinating object for consciousness. Even if aesthetics and ethics are not one in most respects, it may be these interweavings that ultimately make it worth attending to those differences.

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1 One other piece of evidence for my hypothesis about the moral as a last ditch way to have expansiveness accompanied by the sense of knowing oneself is that this seems a distinctively American phenomenon, although Levinas complicates this assertion. (Perhaps its popularity is partly because of the promise that literary students need not turn to continental models to engage philosophical aspects of literary texts.) Clearly what Nietzsche began by his speculations about an “extra-moral” sense of value has spawned Sartre’s phenomenological efforts to define imagination, Heidegger’s and Derrida’s very different modes of ontological pursuits that make the desire to know itself as a philosophy the problem rather than the goal, and Lyotard’s focus on the unrepresentable and singular that sublimely resists moral concepts. These theorists still have their American adherents, but such work has been marginalized by the appeal of the moral—a cause for bitter irony since such work is also the best locus for challenges to that very appeal.

2 Several years ago I argued that Anglo-American philosophers were comfortable emphasizing morality in literary criticism because they focused on realist fiction rather than on poetry. See "Lyrical Ethics and Literary Experience." Now I see that such philosophical emphases involve larger questions
because these philosophers tend also to reduce fiction to something close to exercises in describing the world rather than producing lively particular imaginative paths through a variety of possible worlds. So at one pole these philosophers tend to ignore utterly the presence of formal values ranging from the sonic to the elaborately patterning of feelings that we find most clearly in poetry; at the other pole they tend to give reductive realist accounts of affective values like intensity, complexity, the focus of care that may be capable of challenging moral valuations.

iii  “Cavell and Wittgenstein on Morality: The Limits of Acknowledgment.” Forthcoming in a collection on Cavell edited by Richard Eldridge and Bernie Rhie. I should note that some of the statements here go over the same ground as this essay, especially on the concept of style.

iv  After this essay was completed I read Simon Blackburn’s “Wittgenstein’s Irrealism,” which manages to echo Wittgenstein on embedded values and draw expressivist conclusions very different from the philosophers whom I mention. Blackburn argues as I do that “there is no evidence” that Wittgenstein ever changed his view of ethics after his “Lecture on Ethics” because he continued to think that “it is from a different standpoint than that of description that ethics is found” (205). It is not in the spirit of Blackburn’s philosophizing to replace description by another noun like “display.”

v  I have to admit that Crary shares Wittgenstein’s sense of the limitations of discursive language with respect to moral evaluation. Yet, unlike Wittgenstein, this does not prevent her from thinking she knows what morality is and can separate this domain from other domains of value.

vi  Negatively Crary bases her case for this expanded notion of objectivity on the claim that there is no way to stabilize any “abstraction requirement” (21) that will give us a discrete moral world without subjective elements. We have no idea of what regularities would be like to be on view “independently of sensitivities we acquire in mastering the concept” (24). Our eyes being opened to the world requires developing certain practical sensitivities (25). Sensitivity to moral values plays a similar role to “the role played by our perceptual apparatus in a reasonable conception of what it is to be sensitive to color” (31). Then she can make the positive case that once we acknowledge the public role of these sensitivities, the moral question becomes is this “the kind of thing that, in appropriate circumstances, merits certain kinds of approval and disapproval” (31). We can treat the resulting moral judgments as standing in the sort of immediate relation to affect that allows them to be internally related to action and choice” (31).

vii  Crary’s evidence here is Wittgenstein Philosophical Occasions,” p. 161 and Culture and Value, p. 17. Even if her interpretation is right, and I doubt it is, this is not much support for a concern she claims is central to Wittgenstein’s philosophy.

viii  Crary has support for this expansion of morality to cover issues of living well in the careful reasoning of the meaning of life David Wiggins’ impressive “Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life.” But Wiggins interprets the good life as distinctively a question of the meaningfulness of life and so begs a question that also seems to apply to Crary. I think there is a huge distinction between the meaning of life, which seems a cognitive question or “subjectively problematic” one, and the property of meaningfulness for lives, which seems not reducible to the cognitive or the moral. In Wiggins case the argument equates “meaning” with “inner purpose” (137), further obfuscating what can be know with what has to be chosen in complex ways because it seems that several domains of value can compete for what the relevant inner purposes are. And there is no good reason to have morality be the ultimate arbiter. More generally, Wiggins best defense of cognitivism in moral discourse is the drawing of parallels with the cognitivist ideal in science that the objective is the domain where no alternative is feasible and so nothing more can be said (355). Subjectivism in ethics depends on the claim that something else always can be said, if only in the fact that agreement must be asserted because that is not just a mode of recognition; it is a mode of volition.

ix  I don’t know why Crary insists on preserving a concept of “objectivity” then effectively gutting it by offering measures like appropriateness, which must admit of degrees rather than providing completely stable grounds for judgment. And while there is another possible sense of “rational” based on the interests of particular subjects, that is not one that tempts Crary and it would not help her in accounting for the moral power of literary works.
Wittgenstein is careful to indicate where that transcendental domain seems capable of entering the world: If good or bad acts of the will do alter the world, it can only be the limits of the world that they alter, not the facts, and not what can be expressed by means of language. … The world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man” (6.43).

At the Sounding Conference I was asked how I would define “confession.” I am unduly proud of my answer: Confession is the laying out of the soul in such a way that one recognizes that only grace could make another bear the sight of it. I see only now the parallel with Nietzsche’s concern for the visibility of the soul. I find support for this view in CV, 46:

The Christian Faith—as I see it is a man’s refuge in this ultimate torment. Anyone in such torment who has the gift of opening his heart, rather than contracting it, accepts the means of salvation in his heart. Someone who in this way penitently opens his heart to God in confession lays it open for other men too. In doing this he loses the dignity that goes with his personal prestige and becomes like a child. … A man can bare himself before others only out of a particular kind of love. A love which acknowledges as it were, that we are all wicked children. We could also say: Hate between men comes from our cutting ourselves off from each other.

See John Verdi, Fat Wednesday: Wittgenstein on Aspects.

The role of display in late Wittgenstein extends to the claim that agents cannot be expected to be argued into changing values but have to be led to “look at the world in a different way” (OC 92). Notice too how in 1946 he still echoes the motif that ethics is a matter not of explaining the self but of making determinations about the possibility of changing one’s life to accord with the simple fact that the world exists:

I believe that one of the things Christianity says is that sound doctrines are all useless. That you have to change your life. (Or the direction of your life.) It says that wisdom is all cold; and that you can no more use it for setting your life to rights that you can forge iron when it is cold. … Wisdom is passionless. But faith by contrast is what Kierkegaard calls a Passion. (CV, 53)

I also elaborate this view of style in “Style.”

It is important here that one reason Wittgenstein has so little to say about morality is that he is more concerned with being justified before his God than before a community of human beings. My invocation of grace (or luck in relation to the domain of personal relations) allows for this dimension of something close to a misanthropy that by no means has to be confined to theological contexts.

This sense of cutting sensibility free from morality is most striking when Crary tries to contain “intensity” within moral sensibility but making it depend primarily on epistemic complexity. For example intensity becomes a matter of the quantity and quality of the connections it leads her to make.” (160) A glance at Deleuze would clarify why she is so reluctant to specify what goes into those connections.