The Look of Silence and the Problem of Monstrosity

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Abstract:
In Beyond Moral Judgment, Alice Crary defends a version of moral objectivism which turns on the idea that participation in moral life involves acquired affective proclivities: subjective capacities which nevertheless allow us to be receptive to objective features of the world. In this article, I draw out key aspects and implications of her account with reference to Joshua Oppenheimer's 2014 film The Look of Silence, a companion piece to 2012's The Act of Killing. The film depicts a series of confrontations between optometrist Adi Rukun and warlords and gangsters involved in massacres perpetrated during Indonesia's anti-communist purges. Many of the interviews were carried out under the pretext of conducting eye tests, and the optometric equipment Rukun affixes to the faces of the perpetrators – who often appear quite cavalier about or even proud of their deeds – functions as a stark metaphor for their failures to see the meaning and consequences of their actions. As I work to show, there is something disquieting for philosophy about these men, and the urge to call them monsters. In particular, they cause disquiet by tempting us to say that there are agents who lack the means to see all moral features of the world, or who simply do not feel anything in response to them. As I argue, these explanations are not open to Crary, but that may be a sign not of the weakness of her account but of the glibness of accounts to which they are.

Keywords: Joshua Oppenheimer; Alice Crary; Wittgenstein; The Look of Silence; The Act of Killing; affect; moral philosophy; epistemic impunity.
Joshua Oppenheimer’s 2012 documentary *The Act of Killing* focussed on perpetrators of the murder of a million communists, their families, and alleged supporters in Indonesia between 1965 and 1966. Specifically it turned to a group of gangsters based in Medan who participated in the purges, along with some of their connections in politics, paramilitaries, and the media. Oppenheimer approached the perpetrators and asked them to speak about their actions. Apparently feeling they had not received sufficient recognition for their role in what they and others regard as an important and even glorious moment in Indonesian history, they took the opportunity he offered. Here is how Oppenheimer has described the “pitch” he made to them:

“You have participated in one of the biggest killings in human history,” I would say. “I want to understand what it means to you and your society. You want to show me what you’ve done. So go ahead, in any way you wish. I will also film you and your fellow death-squad veterans discussing what you want to show and, just as importantly, what you want to leave out. In this way, we will be able to document what this means to your society, and what it means to you.” (Oppenheimer, 2014)

Remarkably and disturbingly, Oppenheimer allows them not only to tell their stories in lurid detail, but also to re-enact their exploits for the camera. Further, they often elect to do it in Hollywood genre costume, dressing up as cowboys, detectives, and 1940s gangsters, or in outfits one might expect to see in old time musicals, a bizarre conceit that results in a series of harrowing, fascinating sequences.

For the men in question have a special relationship with American cinema, having cut their teeth as so-called “movie theatre gangsters,” scalping tickets outside the cinema houses that functioned as their bases of operation, whose hatred for communists had been deepened by their boycotts of Hollywood films (boycotts partly motivated by the belief that William Palmer, then head of the American Motion Picture Association of Indonesia, was in fact a CIA agent involved in an America-backed plan to overthrow President Sukarno). “[T]hey loved the movies,” Oppenheimer has said. “And because they were hanging out in them […] they developed a whole culture around the movies, [a] whole kind of youth gang culture around the movies” (Oppenheimer, 2013). They style themselves after movie characters, and dream of becoming stars; they even took some of their methods of killing from Hollywood gangster films. Offering its subjects the chance to actualise what is apparently a deep

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1. For an account of this and its social context in Medan see Anderson (2012).
desire, *The Act of Killing* participates in a strange kind of reflexivity: the men are given the chance to present themselves, and see themselves presented, on screen, and the film shows them presenting and indeed seeing themselves, for example in the scenes in which we see them watching and discussing rushes and outtakes.

As Robert Sinnerbrink has argued, by giving these men leeway to present themselves on film in whatever light they wished, the film effectively functions as “a medium that will expose their underlying fantasies and self-deceptions: the distorted ideological-moral imagination that made possible, sustained, and still celebrates, their brutal acts of violence” (2016, p. 169). Hence Oppenheimer’s apt description of his film as a “documentary of the imagination” (quoted in Bradshaw, 2013, p. 37): by allowing these men to brag performatively like this about their crimes, it allows them to tell the truth, perhaps not about their crimes, but certainly about themselves, and in particular about how they see themselves, and want to be seen. Truths about these men and their society are put on display not through a careful investigation and presentation of the facts but through letting the men put themselves on display, and present their versions of the facts. Truths come out precisely through their exaggerations, biases, distortions, and self-deceptions.

In some ways a more traditional documentary than *The Act of Killing*, 2014’s *The Look of Silence* takes the perspective not of perpetrators of the crimes in question but of survivors of them, and in particular of one family: Adi Rukun and his parents, a very old couple whose son Ramli was killed in the massacres, two years before the birth of Adi. Ramli’s murder is locally famous, thanks to the fact that there were witnesses to it (he managed to escape temporarily from his killers, returning to his village for a few hours badly wounded before being taken away again). Ramli’s name thus became “a kind of synecdoche” (quoted in Bradshaw, 2014) for the massacres, whose very utterance could be taken to be accusatory, a stirring up of the past. The events placed a triple burden on Ramli’s parents: not only has their son been taken from them in such circumstances, but his mother feels terrible guilt for it, because she was at home when he arrived with his stab wounds, where she was unable to stop his killers from taking him again; further, because Ramli’s death is famous, his parents have been unable to continue like the people around them (who have gotten on effectively by pretending nothing happened), living instead through decades of bullying and intimidation. For of course, these are films about crimes barely recognised as such, because the perpetrators and their allies still hold positions of power, having never been brought
to account.\(^2\) The situation is such that it can be dangerous to be known as a family member of a victim, because that might see one pegged as a communist. Both films thus testify to a violence and a terror that were still very current at the time of their making. As Oppenheimer has indicated, they are less films about the past than films about the present (hence the inanity of critical arguments that Oppenheimer’s films do not give an accurate or rounded account of the events of the massacres). These documentaries are studies of the relationship between violence and knowledge, and the function of terror in determining whose testimonies are heard and about which events. They are also studies of impunity: of the social conditions that lead some agents to flaunt their brutality.

Oppenheimer began his investigative work while making *The Globalization Tapes* with Christine Cynn, co-director of *The Act of Killing*. The 2003 film was a participatory documentary about working conditions in North Sumatran palm plantations. As he met and spoke with local workers, Oppenheimer came to realise the profound and continuing effect on their lives of the massacres in 1965 and 1966, when the military effectively destroyed the left wing of the labour movement. As he describes it:

The killings would come up in discussions, planning sessions, and film shoots nearly every day, but always in whispers. Indeed, many of the plantation workers were themselves survivors of the killings. They would discreetly point out the houses of neighbors who had killed their parents, grandparents, aunts, or uncles. The perpetrators were still living in the same village and made up, along with their children and protégés, the local power structure. As outsiders, we could interview these perpetrators – something the plantation workers could not do without fear of violence. (Oppenheimer, 2012)

Oppenheimer met Adi and his parents during initial filming in Sumatra. It emerged that Adi wanted to help Oppenheimer make a film about victims so he could better understand what had happened to his own family, and to counter lies and propaganda about the past. Adi helped Oppenheimer gather survivors to participate, but the army got wind of the meetings through the network it established with American support in Indonesian villages in the 50s and 60s, and coerced them into withdrawing from the project. The survivors suggested instead that Oppenheimer focus on perpetrators. Following their advice, Oppenheimer found and interviewed one, and was immediately struck by the candour

and even pride with which he spoke about his deeds. The perpetrator introduced Oppenheimer to others who spoke with similar frankness. Thus he spent two years working his way up the chain of power, conducting interviews all the way. That is how The Act of Killing came about.

The Look of Silence, then, was the film Oppenheimer initially wanted to make, with The Act of Killing emerging out of a necessary tangent from it. For it was The Act of Killing that ended up making The Look of Silence possible, as it gave Oppenheimer the social capital he needed to carry out the more confrontational interviews of the latter film: because he was known to have developed good relationships with the relatively powerful men he interviewed for The Act of Killing, the less powerful perpetrators featured in The Look of Silence felt they could trust him, and Oppenheimer felt that he could trust them not to respond violently upon being confronted. Shortly after Oppenheimer had embarked on the project, Adi raised the idea of appearing in the film and interviewing the perpetrators himself. Oppenheimer disagreed, saying it would be too dangerous for him to confront these men while they were still in positions of power, but Adi eventually brought him around, convincing him by showing him footage he had taken of his own father, blind and deaf, calling out for Ramli, lost in confusion and horror at the past. Seeing how important it was to Adi, and with contingency plans in place, Oppenheimer took the risk of letting him carry out interviews.

So the film depicts a series of confrontations between Adi and perpetrators involved in the purges, some of whom were responsible for Ramli’s murder. An optometrist by trade, Adi carries out most of his interviews under the pretext of conducting eye tests, and the optometric equipment he affixes to the faces of the killers functions as a stark metaphor for their failures to see the meaning and consequences of their crimes. The images of jumping beans with which the film opens and closes deepen this metaphor by connecting it to a notion of entrapment, as though these men are enclosed in darkness, as perhaps are their victims (if by a darkness of a rather different kind). Maybe the images are also meant to convey a sense of incomplete metamorphosis.

Like The Act of Killing, what makes the film so disturbing is not simply the gravity and brutality of the crimes discussed by the perpetrators. It is also how they discuss them, as they often appear quite cavalier about or even proud of their deeds. Portions of The Look of Silence are taken up by

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3. Hanna Schenkel astutely writes of his senility as undercutting his “ability to contextualise his ingrained fear” (2015, p. 98).
images of Adi watching outtakes from *The Act of Killing*, a formal decision that puts both films into a fascinating kind of dialogue with each other. We watch Adi as he watches perpetrators openly discussing their crimes, seeming to speak with the sense that their audience is going to be impressed by them. Specifically we watch Adi watch Amir Hasan and Inong Sungai Ular—leaders of the death squad who carried out the massacres in Adi’s village, and who claim to have been personally responsible for Ramli’s murder—stand at the shore of Snake River (a translation of *Sungai Ular*) and describe the killings they committed there. They speak with braggadocio, nearly crowing about their exploits. As with *The Act of Killing*, this gives the film an unhinged and indeed unhinging quality: one finds oneself struggling to understand and explain the shamelessness on display, which is sometimes so flagrant that it becomes surreal. If *The Act of Killing* focuses on display, performance, and being seen, however, then *The Look of Silence* takes a deeper interest in what is hidden and unspoken. This provides a powerful demonstration of the difference between the positions of perpetrators and victims, and gives good reason to go along with Oppenheimer when he suggests that we view these works not as two films but as two halves of as single film. For the shamelessness the perpetrators display with Oppenheimer often turns into defensiveness in Adi’s interviews. There is barely any real reckoning, however, as the men will or cannot see what Adi wants them to.

This is the aspect of the film that I want to bring out. In particular, I want to focus on what it has to say and show about what we might find ourselves wanting to call (though the point of this essay is to problematise precisely this temptation) moral monstrosity. For *The Look of Silence* continually tempts us to say that the perpetrators it depicts have forgone their claim, voluntarily given up their claim, or simply never had a claim to be members of the human moral community. As I want to show, there is something troubling for philosophy about these men, and this urge to call them monsters.

In some ways, of course, monstrosity seems to provide a point of clarity for moral thinking: consider how examples about Nazis and baby torturers come up in first year philosophy tutorials, as a kind of baseline on which we might stave off the threat of moral scepticism (“if there are no universal moral laws, then what about X? Surely we can all agree that X is wrong!”). As *The Look of Silence* demonstrates, however, considered without glibness the apparently monstrous can cause a kind of philosophical disquiet. They tempt us to say that there are agents who lack the means to see all moral features of the world, or who simply do not feel anything in response to them. Yet this is a temptation the films will rebuke us for indulging in, even as they invite us to indulge in it.
Indeed, I think these films want to show that what is truly monstrous about so-called “moral monsters” is that there aren't any.

To clarify the philosophical temptation provoked by *The Look of Silence*, and explore how and why we might resist it, I want to bring it to bear on the Wittgensteinian moral philosophy outlined by Alice Crary in *Beyond Moral Judgment* (2007). There is a sense in which I want to pressure her account, but my intention is not to undermine it. Though I do not undertake to defend it in full here, I find the account—which I read as combining compelling aspects of the moral philosophies of John McDowell and Cora Diamond—quite convincing as a picture of moral life and its sources, and very significant for philosophy more generally. Instead my goal is to bring the account to a point at which it faces difficulty. The difficulty shows up a vulnerability: how in moral life we can run up against problems we are not necessarily equipped to overcome. That these problems present genuine difficulty for the account, then, may be a sign not of its defectiveness but of its perceptiveness. To put the point negatively, any moral philosophy for which neat explanatory options are available for dealing with moral monsters—indeed, any moral philosophy which thinks it can resolve moral issues by pointing to categories of monstrosity, amoralism, or sheer moral blindness—is to be regarded with suspicion. Explanatory power is not always a genuine strength.

Crary’s book defends a version of moral objectivism which turns on the idea that participation in moral life involves sensitivities, affective responses, and acquired proclivities: subjective capacities which nevertheless allow us to be receptive to objective features of the world. A useful—but as I will show, somewhat simplifying—way of describing Crary’s position in moral philosophy is to say that she seeks to support an objectivist internalism. Objectivism in meta-ethics is the view that moral features—the kinds of features we might describe with terms like “good” and “bad,” but also on this account terms like “cruel,” “tactless,” “magnanimous,” or “courageous”—are, when those descriptions are accurate, objectively real. Against what non-cognitivists tend to suppose, they are not mere projections of human agents onto objective reality; nor are they mere fictions we invoke when employing moral language, speaking about moral features of the world as if they were really “out there” as a means, say, of articulating moral prescriptions. If you are objectivist, you must reject these kinds of accounts, as Crary does

4. See Ayer (1952) for the foundational account of this.
5. Hare (1965) is foundational here.
in no uncertain terms when she claims that on her picture moral features are “fully objective” (2007, p. 38).

Internalism is the view that moral judgments are intrinsically motivating. On an internalist account, judging that you are morally obliged to do something inclines you to do it. Externalists, on the other hand, usually support the idea that there is a fundamental distinction to draw between moral judgments and the kinds of affects that may accompany them, which are what makes it possible for them to motivate us to act. For an externalist, we can make a moral judgment without being motivated to act in any particular way on that judgment, because it has no necessary connection to the affects at the heart of motivation. For example, you might judge that a particular course of action that is in your immediate interests would be cowardly and selfish, but not find yourself caring enough to decline to pursue it. This is the picture handed down to us by David Hume, perhaps the father of the modern fact/value distinction, for whom “[m]orals excite passions, and produce or prevent actions” while reason is “utterly impotent in this particular” (2007, p. 12). An internalist must reject this “two part” analysis of moral judgments, on which making a moral judgment has no intrinsic connection to moral motivation.

Now there are many arguments for and against both objectivism and internalism, and many different objectivist, anti-objectivist, internalist, and externalist moral theories. What is important for our purposes is Crary’s attempt at undermining the basis of a seemingly quite powerful argument against the idea that objectivism and internalism can coherently be combined. The argument is based on the notion that there is something deeply strange about an objective feature of the world that could be intrinsically motivating, because objective features are there regardless of how we feel about them. And if a feature is independent of how we feel about it, it is difficult to see how it could have any necessary or internal relationship to our motivations, because motivations involve affective propensities (or what Hume calls “passions”): for example, a desire to achieve something, to bring something about (or see it brought about). If this argument is right, moral judgments may sometimes be motivating, but they are only contingently so, which is not enough to keep objectivist internalism afloat.

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6. Mackie’s is the most famous argument to this effect (see Mackie, 1990, pp. 38–42).
7. As John McDowell describes the idea: “Cognition and volition are distinct: the world – the proper sphere of cognitive capacities – is in itself an object of purely theoretical contemplation, capable of moving one to action only in conjunction with an extra factor – a state of will – contributed by oneself” (1998a, p. 57).
Crary’s response begins by showing that this argument gets its teeth from a certain notion of objectivity. As the above indicated, it is one that simply equates it with what is “there anyway,” with features of the world that have no necessary relation to subjects. “This conception,” as she writes, “invites us to understand a property as objective if it excludes everything that counts as subjective” (2007, p.15). On this notion of objectivity, non-objective properties are all those properties “such that no fully satisfactory conception can be formed of what it is for an object to possess them except in terms of mental […] responses the object elicits” (Crary, 2007, p.15). As Crary points out, this set of subjective properties actually includes two types of property. It includes properties that are merely subjective: “properties an object can be said to possess just insofar as it in fact elicits a certain response from some subject” (2007, p.15) (her examples are “appearing red to me” and “seeming funny to me”). As well as this, however, it includes features Crary calls “problematically subjective”: “properties an object can be said to possess insofar as it is the kind of thing that would elicit certain subjective responses in appropriate circumstances” (Crary’s example is “amusing”) (2007, p.15).

The phrase “in appropriate circumstances” marks the distinction. Though they cannot be described without reference to the subjective responses we have to them, problematically subjective properties are more than merely subjective. After all, positing them can invite rational disagreement. I can’t tell you that the car didn’t appear red to you, but I can argue that the car wasn’t red but brown, and only appeared red because of the light it was in – and yet my ascription of the feature “brown” is still based on a subjective response (brown is not “there anyway”). If I say someone’s scathing, ranting review of a film was “highly subjective,” I do not mean to impugn the objectivity of film reviewing as such, but the judgment of that particular reviewer – and yet it is impossible to imagine film criticism going without essential reference to the subjective responses of critics. So the notion of objectivity underwriting the critique of objectivist internalism has a certain sweepingness to it. As Crary shows, accepting it would mean giving up on large swathes of our ordinary linguistic practices, including perhaps the very term “subjective,” which we often use outside philosophical contexts to distinguish the merely subjective from the problematically so (see Crary, 2007, pp. 16–17). Of course, the fact that we make this distinction in ordinary discourse will not ground a valid argument for rejecting the sweeping notion of objectivity that meta-ethicists have often relied upon, because meta-ethicists could always argue – as J. L. Mackie famously does – that our ordinary discourse is in error. But Crary has already achieved
something significant: she has shown that there is a nuance that has been passed over here, and so that a certain assumption has been made.

To substantiate her rejection of it, Crary draws on the so-called paradox of rule-following outlined in Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*. A student seems to a teacher to have mastered what it is to add two to a number; he proceeds to do so until he reaches 1000, at which point he starts adding four (see Wittgenstein, 2001, §185–242). The student appears to have grasped something—we can imagine the teacher noting his progress with satisfaction, taking the student’s initial extension of the series as a sign of his understanding—but eventually he demonstrates he has not—and so that the teacher’s impression of understanding that the student understood was merely an impression. But of course, what if the student had not started manifesting his misunderstanding until he reached 10,000, or 10,000,000? The teacher’s supervision of the student will have to come to an end somewhere, so how will the teacher ever really know that the student has understood? As Crary writes:

The problem has to do with the fact that we are interested in a form of mastery that […] manifests itself in an indefinitely extended display of correct behavior. This is a problem because any stretch of bare behavior that we accept as correct, no matter how prolonged, will be consistent with incorrect behavior, and will accordingly be incapable of supplying anything more than a merely partial and hence inconclusive demonstration of conceptual mastery. (2007, p. 24)

Against traditional sceptical and anti-realist interpretations of Wittgenstein’s discovery, however, Crary argues that he is not asking us to relinquish the notion of objectivity. Contra what the traditional notion of objectivity might lead us to believe, no conceptual practice relies “on the internalization of some sort of algorithm that generates correct behavior independently of features of [our] subjective makeup” (Crary, 2007, p. 23). Naming it an “abstraction requirement,” Crary captures this confused intuition about the nature of conceptual projection with Wittgenstein’s image of a “car gliding along ideally rigid rails” (Crary, 2007, p. 23) extending out to infinity. On this intuition, projecting a concept means applying a rule that must be accessible to us without regard for any subjective responses we may have acquired in mastering that concept (see Crary, 2007, p. 21). According to Crary, this is the

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8. See e.g. Saul Kripke on “the incredible and self-defeating conclusion, that all language is meaningless” (1982, p. 71).
notion that Wittgenstein is urging us to give up: not the idea of objectivity, but the assumption that accessing it requires that we abstract away from our subjective responses. Indeed, Crary argues, it should lead us to see that the very idea of such an “abstraction requirement” is in fact incoherent: it is not that all our conceptual practices are underwritten by rule-following procedures that lack fully rational foundations, but that the very idea of such procedures working independently of our affective propensities only has the appearance of intelligibility.

After all, there is such a thing as conceptual mastery, and such a thing as a correct or incorrect projection of a concept: the student who starts adding four has missed something – something that, with the right kind of teaching, he could (hopefully) be led to see. It’s not that Wittgenstein’s discovery about rule-following shows there’s no such thing as projecting a concept in an objectively correct way, but that such projection could never have been guaranteed by an abstraction requirement in the first place. So Crary argues that taking Wittgenstein’s finding seriously should lead us to expand the notion of objectivity such that it may include problematically subjective properties. Wittgenstein wants us to see that “our concepts […] are resources for thinking about aspects of the world to which our eyes are only open insofar as we develop certain practical sensitivities” (Crary, 2007, p. 25). “Learning to judge,” as Crary writes in a discussion of Wittgenstein’s view of language, “is ultimately a matter of nothing more than cottoning on to, or developing a sense for, what different judgments have in common” (2007, p. 115). The process of cottoning on that underlies all of our conceptual practices draws on our subjective proclivities, but that is no reason for thinking that we cannot apply concepts objectively.9

This is how Crary purports to meet the challenge posed to objectivist internalism: her account of conceptual practices shows that acquired subjective proclivities play a necessary role in making salient some objective features of the world. There is no reason why objective moral features cannot be intrinsically motivating, then, as they do have an essential connection to subjectivity, because picking them out involves subjective proclivities that are acquired and deepened pragmatically in our communal life with language. Crary undermines the barrier between objectivism and internalism by loosening our attachment to the scientific

9. McDowell writes: “Values are not brutely there – not there independently of our sensibility – any more than colours are: though, as with colours, this does not prevent us from supposing that they are there independently of any apparent experience of them” (1998b, p. 146).
metaphysic at the heart of the traditional notion of objectivity, and questioning the “deeply ingrained metaphysical assumption to the effect that there can be no such thing as properties that are both objective in a full-blooded sense and also immediately related to action” (2007, p. 12). On this account, there is no obstacle preventing us from bringing objectivism together with internalism: moral features could indeed be both objectively real and intrinsically motivating.

Consider again the ideas we find ourselves drawing upon when trying to explain, or explain away, the apparently monstrous. One is the notion of “amoralism,” which has found its way into philosophical discussions of problems of meta-ethics, especially in the context of critiques of internalism.10 The idea that some agents have no affective responses to moral features can explain why it is that some agents appear to have no interest in acting morally, or participating more broadly in the game of morality at all. Equipped with such a concept, we do not need to impugn the rationality of the perpetrators who appear in The Look of Silence (and of course, the fact that their participation in the massacres has resulted in wealth, power, and/or respect for many of them might give weight to the idea that they have indeed behaved “rationally,” in a certain sense of the term). Perhaps they are perfectly capable of seeing that what they have done is wrong, or at least that many might regard it as such. Perhaps it’s that they simply do not care. This is the kind of response made possible by externalism, on which there is a fundamental difference between moral cognition and moral motivation, or beliefs and desires, such that one might cognise moral features of the world without having any affective, thus behaviourally salient response to them (perhaps this is roughly what the term “psychopath” is meant to capture, at least in some of its popular usages: consider how psychopaths are often depicted in films and novels as hyper-rational, yet perfectly cold). And of course, this explanation is not available on an internalist account, because it refuses the very idea of splitting moral cognition from affect and so from motivation. Thus an explanatory option that is available to the externalist evaporates on internalist accounts. If these men are truly amoral, that will trouble internalism.

Another option presents itself, however. Taking this path, we might appeal to a notion of moral blindness. Perhaps it is not that these men do not respond affectively to moral features of the world, but rather that they cannot see them; perhaps they simply lack the relevant perceptual apparatus. On this kind of account, perhaps these men would behave

differently if they had the ability to perceive moral features of the world; perhaps they just do not see what is so terrible about their deeds and words. *The Look of Silence* might actually invite such a reading, with its central metaphors of vision, blindness, and darkness (we could read the film’s title in these terms too, as though it figures what it might be like to look without seeing anything). Consider what motivates Adi throughout the film. It is not merely his own desire to understand but also a sense of justice, and his desire to see these crimes acknowledged: he wants these men to see what they’ve done; he wants to confront them with the features of the world they can or will not face (features with which Adi and his family have lived for decades).

Though truer to the film, an explanation that leans on a concept of sheer moral blindness is not really open to Crary either. For it presupposes something that her account precludes: the notion that the world’s features can be neatly sorted into the moral and the non-moral. Indeed, this is perhaps the most significant upshot of her account: it implies that all of our linguistic and conceptual practices are expressive of our moral outlooks (hence it implies that the very idea of an agent affected by sheer or total moral blindness is incoherent). This is subtler than it might sound: Crary’s claim is not that all of our actions are somehow subject to the demands of moral duty, or that all of our judgments are in fact moral judgments, or whatever (hers is a moralised vision of human life, but not a moralistic one). Instead Crary rejects the idea – it is something like the founding presupposition of analytic meta-ethics – that the task of moral philosophy is to give a theoretical account of the moral domain, and in particular of moral judgments: of what the moral concepts are, what it means to apply one, and whether and how such applications can be justified (that, of course, is the significance of the title of her book). While it is not quite incorrect to say that Crary defends an objectivist internalism, then, it is nevertheless somewhat misleading. What she has really done is clear the way for objectivist internalism by demonstrating that there is nothing problematic about objective features whose salience depends on subjective capacities. By clearing the way to objectivist internalism, however, Crary actually gives us good reason to hesitate before embracing it, if that means accepting the idea that doing moral philosophy just means developing a systematic theoretical account of moral concepts and judgments. One of the implications of her argument is that “the moral domain” cannot be delimited, and so that we have no need for a systematic theoretical account of it. As often happens in Wittgensteinian philosophy, once our deep-rooted sense that a certain position is not available to us has dissipated, the position itself looks different. After we remove the
barrier, we no longer have the same hankering to cross the ground it blocked.

On Crary’s Wittgensteinian account of our life with language, learning how to go on is always in part a matter of cottoning on, of becoming attuned to something that will not be codifiable in a rule. Conceptual mastery is indeed cognitive, but cognition cannot be divorced from affect: being a master of a concept means having a feel for how to project it in new circumstances. Because of the variety of the contexts in which we project concepts, learning to do so is irreducibly complex, and involves more than the computation of rules that could function in abstraction from any particular circumstance in which they might be applied. It always draws on the affective proclivities at the heart of a human person. Crary is “rejecting the view that it is possible to grasp what a set of words means independently of a sense of the practical point of using it on a particular occasion” (2007, p. 116). For these reasons, a person’s particular sense of life, of what matters in it, is expressed in all of their conceptual and linguistic practices: not merely in their applications of concepts with obvious moral content, but in how they speak and what they laugh at, in their taste in art and music, in how they respond to confronting films, in whether they prefer to live in the city or the country, and so on and on, there being no boundary that we can draw here. The same idea is at the source of a point Cora Diamond makes in a discussion of the work of Iris Murdoch, when she attacks the assumption that action is the “central notion in defining the sphere of morality” (1983, p. 165). Diamond writes:

This may, [Murdoch] suggests, have as one of its sources a view of the world as in a fundamental sense comprehensible, and of the facts constituting the situations in which we act as straightforwardly describable. Comprehension, description, appreciation of the facts will not be seen as tasks for which moral energy, discipline, imagination, creativity, wit, care, patience, tact, delicacy, […] may be required. (1983, p. 165)

On this account, how someone describes the world, and how someone projects concepts that have no obvious moral content in themselves, cannot but express that person’s sense of life and what matters in it (saying exactly what such things might express on a specific occasion is of course a very difficult matter; the ability to do so felicitously is one of the kinds of things we go to good novelists for).

And of course, the account will show up the ideas of amoralism and sheer moral blindness as something rather like convenient fictions. No user of language or concepts could simply be amoral, for using language and concepts is irreducibly affective, requiring that we draw
upon what matters to us; nor could any user of language and concepts somehow be blind to all the moral things. If Diamond is right that “we need to reject the idea that moral thought is a department of thought, and moral discourse a department of discourse” (1996, p. 104), then we cannot explain away moral monsters so casually—and indeed, the fact that certain traditional meta-ethical theories can do precisely that should perhaps not be seen as a strength but as a sign of their disconnection from human life.

In “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy” (2008) Diamond notes that philosophy can be difficult, but that its difficulty is of a different order to the difficulty of reality, the hardness of which is not a function of the hardness of understanding, articulating, discussing, and judiciously critiquing complex theories and arguments. Encountering what Diamond calls a difficulty of reality means being unable to get one’s mind around something, not because one lacks the training or cognitive powers, but because something about it gives us “the sense that this should not be, that we cannot fit it into the understanding we have of what the world is like” (Diamond, 2008, p. 60). She writes:

In the latter case, the difficulty lies in the apparent resistance by reality to one’s ordinary mode of life, including one’s ordinary modes of thinking: to appreciate the difficulty is to feel oneself being shouldered out of how one thinks, how one is apparently supposed to think, or to have a sense of the inability of thought to encompass what it is attempting to reach. (2008, p. 58)

If these men disquiet philosophy, it may be because the difficulty they present is not the kind of difficulty we tend to encounter in philosophy, and so not the kind of difficulty for which philosophers tend to be prepared. Concepts of amoralism or sheer moral blindness may help us as philosophers to explain apparent moral monsters, and demonstrate the explanatory power of our theories, but perhaps such explanations are actually (or also) deflections. For the realer difficulty is not that these men are monsters, but that they are human beings, and so beings with moral lives (human life just is moral life). That is why the scenes depicting the perpetrators behaving as the moral and affective creatures they obviously are, showing them at home with their families, laughing and playing with their grandchildren—or the moment when Amir Hasan tenderly helps Inong down a hill, or when the two men pause to enjoy the “lovely” aroma of a plant—can unsettle.

The film’s central interview takes place some seven years after Oppenheimer’s original interviews with Inong and Amir Hasan, and comes shortly after we watch Adi watching footage of those very
encounters. The conversation is exemplary of the ones carried out in the
rest of the film, as Adi’s questioning shifts between topics of optometry
and violence: “Look in the distance, is it sharper?” “Are your neighbours
afraid of you?” “Is this clearer? How about this?” “Did you cut your
victims more than once?” “I’ll choose frames that suit you.” “How do you
see these events?” Here as elsewhere, Adi shows himself to be a brilliant
interviewer: he pushes Inong for answers, backing off when he becomes
uncomfortable, then pushes him again, occasionally turning to his
vision as a means of relieving tension, but sometimes exploiting tension
to pressure him for answers. All the while, Inong is wearing test
glasses, which look like a fantastic prop from a Jean-Pierre Jeunet film.
This creates a remarkable set of images that deepen the metaphorical
implications of Adi’s dual lines of questioning. For what emerges over the
course of the interview is not that Inong is flatly unable to see what
Adi sees, nor that he is flatly affectless. On the one hand, Inong appears
quite happy to talk, even venturing bits of information about his crimes
(including, for example, that he drank the blood of his victims) without
prodding from Adi. On the other hand, some of Adi’s questions unnerve
Inong, and eventually (right after Adi reminds him that Islam does not
condone killing) he becomes very angry: “Your questions are too deep.
I don’t like deep questions! You ask much deeper questions than Joshua
ever asked!” Inong’s contradictory emotional display—by turns boastful,
threatening, confused, cowed, enraged, and (perhaps) ashamed—shows
he has a divided relationship to his actions.

To understand what motivates this dividedness we need to do more
than simply inquire into the psychology of Inong the man and the forms
of cognitive dissonance that apparently plague him. Note the unprovoked
remarks he makes about some of his more terrifying exploits, including
regarding blood drinking. While it is not impossible that these are
spontaneous confessions from a man wracked by guilt, they are certainly
not only that. By talking openly about his crimes, Inong—like the men
who boastfully re-enact their exploits in The Act of Killing—is not simply
confessing or even only bragging but also affirming through terror his
power in the present. It is an example of what Benedict Anderson
calls “the smugness of impunity,” in which speaking brazenly about acts
of violence is a means of demonstrating that “there is nothing anyone,
including you, can do to us” (2012, p. 284). So we should examine what
in the world sets these men up as untouchable, giving them the swagger
that shows them to be dangerous, but which also inclines them to ignore,
pass over, deny, or deflect from what is right in front of them.

For of course, the moral and political impunity of which Anderson
speaks shades into what we might call epistemic impunity: a motivated
not-knowing, a complex and self-serving form of semi-ignorance. It is not sheer blindness, but it does involve a kind of unclarity, such that boastfulness can be shot through with shame, confession can become a means of terrorising, and bragging can be an expression not only of power but also of fragility and insecurity (this may be the most significant moral philosophical finding of Oppenheimer’s diptych). The impunity these men enjoy, then, is structurally similar to what Charles W. Mills calls “white ignorance”: a “group-based cognitive handicap” (2007, p. 15), where the interests of the dominant “shape cognition, influencing what and how we see, what we and society choose to remember, whose testimony is solicited and whose is not, and which facts and frameworks are sought out and accepted” (2007, p. 24). As Mills shows, that the dominant tend to be afflicted by certain types of cognitive handicaps is a “straightforward corollary” (2007, p.15) of feminist standpoint epistemology, for which certain oppressed groups have a form of epistemic privilege that allows them to see more clearly some features of social reality (see Hartsock, 1983; see also Crary, 2007, pp. 176–191). After all, the idea that the oppressed are epistemically advantaged (such that, for example, women find it easier to see what is rotten about sexual harassment) implies that oppressors must be relatively disadvantaged (such that men may pass harassment off as joking around). Adi’s interview with Inong is a remarkable demonstration of the divisions, vicissitudes, and complications of knowledge in its social and political situatedness, and of the structuring role that power and domination play in epistemic practices. The imperceptiveness of Inong’s gaze is met head on by the lucidity of Adi’s, but both parties find themselves struggling to see, and see what the other sees. Nothing in that should trouble objectivism: it simply shows how difficult it can be to see what is real (for Inong, the difficulty is that he has a stake in doing otherwise; for Adi, the difficulty is that he is seeking clarity about features of the world in a social context that denies their reality). Nor should it trouble the idea that the epistemic impunity enjoyed by Inong is culpable: after all – and here is another difference between this case and one of sheer moral blindness – this unclarity is interested.

Instead of explaining away the monstrous, this account of human life as moral life is troubled by them. It’s not simply that they do not respond affectively to moral features of the world; nor can it be that they are sheerly blind to them. As users of language and projectors of concepts, these men are moral creatures like the rest of us, so we cannot exclude them from our world, setting them up as radically different from us, and vice versa. Like with the student described by Wittgenstein, responding to men like Inong means accepting that our means of making sense can come
The Look of Silence and the Problem of Monstrosity

up short. But this gives us no licence to think they do not inhabit – and see – the same world as “we” do.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


