

Cavell on Feminism and the Ethics of Care

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This paper sets out to present a connection I have sought to establish since the publication of my first writings on the concept of care¹ between the ethics of care and my own philosophical background and foundation—ordinary language philosophy as represented by Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell—and thus to find in ordinary language philosophy (OLP), often considered to be disconnected from gender issues (except through speech act theory), resources for a reformulation of what for me is at stake in feminism: the inclusion and empowerment of women’s voices and expressiveness and attention to their experiences.

The idea of an ethics formulated in a “different voice”—a woman’s voice—follows from these explorations of OLP, with the further incorporation of Carol Gilligan’s approach.² The ethics of care is defined as a practical response to specific needs (of vulnerable persons) and a sensitivity to the ordinary details of human life that *matter*. Hence, care is a concrete matter that ensures maintenance (e.g., as conversation and conservation) and continuity of the human world and form of life. This is a paradigm shift in ethics, with a reorientation towards vulnerability and a shift from the “just” to the “important.” By proposing to valorize moral values primarily defined as “feminine”—caring, attention to others, solicitude—the ethics of care has contributed to modifying a dominant conception of ethics, and has changed deeply the way we look at ethics, or conceive of what ethics should look like. It has introduced ethical stakes into politics, weakening, through its critique of theories of justice, the seemingly obvious link between an ethics of justice and political liberalism. However, care corresponds to a quite or-

1. See Sandra Laugier, “Care et perception, l’éthique comme attention au particulier,” in *Le Souci des autres: éthique et politique du care* (Paris: Éditions de l’Écoles des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2005) and “The Will to See: Ethics and Moral Perception of Sense,” *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 34, no. 2: 263-82.

2. See Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982) and “Moral Orientation and Development,” in *Justice and Care: Essential Readings in Feminist Ethics*, ed. Virginia Held (Oxford: Westview, 1995).

dinary reality: the fact that people look after one another, take care of one another, and thus are attentive to the functioning (or the commerce) of the world, which depends on this kind of care. The ethics of *care* affirms the importance of care and attention given to others, in particular to those whose lives and wellbeing depend on directed and constant attention. Ethics of care draw our attention to the ordinary, to what we are unable to see precisely because it is right before our eyes. So before being a feminine ethics, it is an ethics that gives a voice to humans who are undervalued precisely because they accomplish unnoticed, invisible tasks, and take care of our basic needs.

These ethics arise in response to historical conditions that have favored a division of moral labor such that activities of care have been socially and morally devalored. The assignment of women to the domestic sphere has reinforced the exclusion of these activities and preoccupations from the moral domain and the public sphere, reducing them to the rank of private sentiments devoid of moral and political import. The perspectives of care carry with them a fundamental claim concerning the importance of care for human life, for the relations that organize it, and the social and moral position of caregivers.³ Recognizing this means recognizing that dependence and vulnerability are traits of a condition common to all humans (not of a special category of the “vulnerable”). This vulnerability of the human life itself is at the core of Cavell’s anthropology. Hence the crucial place of this *attention* to human vulnerability in the constitution of feminism.

I want here to show the relevance of ordinary language philosophy—Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell—to ethical and political issues, by developing an ordinary conception of politics and an ordinary conception of ethics. This systematic exploration of the (theoretical and practical) question of the ordinary is indeed anchored in ordinary language philosophy, the “rough ground” of our uses and practices of language; it leads to further investigating the denial or undervaluation of the ordinary as a general phenomenon in contemporary thinking.

My point, essentially inspired by Cavell, is that the ordinary is variously *denied*, undervalued, or neglected (not seen, not taken into account) in philosophy and theoretical thought. Such negligence (I call it *carelessness*) has to do with contempt

3. See Eva Feder Kittay and Ellen K. Feder, *The Subject of Care: Feminist Perspectives on Dependency* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003).

for ordinary life inasmuch as it is domestic—and female—and it stems from a gendered hierarchy of the objects of intellectual research. One important result of ordinary language philosophy is that it calls our attention to human vulnerability (against the dominant theme of autonomy) and to expressiveness as embodied in women’s voices, a point clearly made by Cavell in *Contesting Tears*.⁴ I want to show that attention to expression is *care*—about human expression. Cavell himself has not connected this expressiveness to the feminist claim to a *different* voice; my goal is to use his work to interpret ordinary language philosophy (OLP) in such a way that it can serve as a basis for re-defining ethics as attention to ordinary life and as care for moral expression.

Making women’s voices heard is the first aim of feminism. Making the human voice heard is the aim of OLP. And it is also the starting point of the ethics of care. I have tried to understand the ethics of care as a heterodox ethics, inspired in part by OLP, that allows us to re-center moral philosophy around ordinary language and expressiveness. My exploration of care and the ordinary thus follows the trajectory of Wittgenstein’s philosophy beyond his analysis of the “grammar” of the first person, the uses of psychological verbs, and the nature of our states of mind. It aims to discover in Cavell’s work an unknown strand, an attention to women’s voices that goes beyond even the extraordinary ambition of *Pursuits of Happiness*⁵ to present a moment in the history of women and the struggle for equality. I will focus on this expressiveness of women in film, and the ways female characters/actresses project moral values and textures perceptible on the perfectionist background of these Hollywood classical movies, and make themselves heard “in a different voice”, and in a different vision of *what matters*.

1. OLP: Linguistic Phenomenology and Attention to Language

Cavell’s *Must We Mean What We Say*⁶ is perhaps the only work of contemporary thought to have so completely carried through the project of ordinary language philo-

4. Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

5. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

6. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

sophy to rediscover ordinary life and to reinvent subjectivity. His renewal of Austin's theory of speech acts as open to vulnerability, and his radical reading of Wittgenstein and of the relation between skepticism, acknowledgement, and tragedy have produced the clearest statement of subjectivity as voice to date. The idea of an ethics formulated in a "different voice"—found in Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*—is contemporary with Cavell's works *The Claim of Reason*⁷ and *Pursuits of Happiness*. The connection between the feminist idea of women's voice and ordinary language philosophy—a philosophy of the ordinary voice—is not obvious, and is never mentioned in the classic works of OLP (Austin, Wittgenstein) or in feminist theories, except for speech act theory.

The starting point of my book *Why We Need Ordinary Language Philosophy*⁸ was the idea of a philosophy of language anchored neither in standard analytic philosophy nor in continental philosophy but rather in *attention* to the uses of language, to language as it is used, circulated. We can call this use of OLP *realistic*, in the sense of an ordinary realism, one which construes language both as a human practice and as a fine, precision tool for describing reality. In OLP the ideas of adjustment, fitting, and the perception of differences and resemblances account for realist aspirations, but these ideas are inseparable from the recognition that language is part of the world, used in everyday life and conversation. The meaning of ordinary language philosophy does indeed lie in this recognition that language is used, spoken, by a human voice and breath. This sense of language is what the later Wittgenstein means by our "form of life": the question is no longer whether language is an image of reality, but how we can "come back to earth" and see the practices in which language is *caught* and which collect around our words. This notion of *human life* is connected to Wittgenstein's idea of a form of life/life form (a form *taken by life*, as Cavell and some anthropologists say), which also defines a texture of human life.

OLP is a minority current in the mainstream of philosophy of language and even in the active and recognized field of pragmatics. The analytic philosophy that emerged from the "linguistic turn," now a dominant strand linked to the cognitive

7. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

8. Laugier, *Why We Need Ordinary Language Philosophy*, trans. Daniela Ginsburg (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

sciences and the so-called “philosophy of mind,” is certainly fertile, but it has systematically neglected important and vibrant contemporary approaches to language that are irreducible to cognitivist models; approaches that are descriptive and attentive to everyday usages of language. OLP takes ordinary uses of language as the starting point for philosophical analysis, considering that doing so is a condition for avoiding the “scholastic illusion” denounced by Austin in the 1950s and later by Bourdieu, which consists in taking “the things of logic for the logic of things”⁹ and which often leads to thought becoming sterilized in a vain scholasticism that loses all connection to the problems posed in ordinary life. Thus, OLP is from the outset oriented toward social matters and attention to an unseen, neglected reality. Its primary methodological ambition is to arrive at a conceptual analysis that makes it possible to recognize the importance of *context* in the practice of language, thought, and perception—that is, in our different ways of engaging in the real—while at the same time defending a form of realism anchored in agents’ actual practices: their words, expressions, and thoughts. It is the inspiration for today’s “contextualist” trend in philosophy of language and epistemology.¹⁰ However, this contextualism, or even “relativism,” has ignored some important aspects and potentialities of OLP: its ambition to describe, as precisely as possible, the cognitive, perceptual, linguistic, social, and moral dimensions of our usages and to analyze all forms of expression—not only descriptive and performative, but also emotive or passionate. The domain of the perlocutionary is in particular a “dark continent,” which, with the exception of Cavell, has not been explored in philosophical literature because it is connected to women’s speech, or disconnected from the “malestream.”

With the Austinian notion of linguistic phenomenology, OLP orients its reflection on language toward a type of adequacy between words and world that is no longer correspondence but rather the fineness of adjustment as a function of the perception of differences. OLP does not encourage defining the meaning of a term as the set of situations where the term is appropriate, or as a pack of established uses (an erroneous understanding of Wittgenstein and his definition of meaning as use), but

9. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 49.

10. See Charles Travis, *The Uses of Sense: Wittgenstein’s Philosophy of Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

rather examining how meaning is made and improvised by virtue of its integration into practice and self-expressivity. OLP sees language as part of the real and as something that affects us, allows us to affect others, and constantly transforms meaning—this is the main idea of Cavell’s first book, *Must We Mean What We Say?*

Linguistic phenomenology means paying attention to our words. In return, we get a “sharpened awareness” (Austin) of words and what they are about. The agreement at the heart of linguistic phenomenology is not a (formal, or term-to-term) correspondence between words and things, but rather the agreement between ourselves, what we *mean*—and reality.

The agreement we act upon Wittgenstein calls “agreement in judgments” (§242), and he speaks of our ability to use language as depending upon agreement in “forms of life” (§241). But forms of life, he says, are exactly what have to be “accepted”; they are “given.”¹¹

It completes the *political* agreement, as Wittgenstein says, *in* language, which is not a consensus. My agreement or my belonging to *this or that* form of life, whether political or moral, is not given. The form of this acceptance, the limits and scales of our agreement, are not knowable *a priori*, “no more than one can *a priori* know the scope or scale of a word,”¹² and this is essential to the relevance of OLP.

In being asked to accept this, or *suffer it*, as given for ourselves, we are not asked to accept, let us say, private property, but separateness; not a particular fact of power, but the fact that I am a man, therefore of this (range or scale of) capacity for work, for pleasure, for endurance, for appeal, for command, for understanding, for wish, for will, for teaching, for suffering.¹³

That we agree in language means that language—our form of life—produces our understanding of one another. Words, says Austin, are ordinary objects, and we are *in*

11. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 30.

12. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Albuquerque, NM: Living Batch Press, 1989), 83.

13. *Ibid.*

touch with them; the tangible relation we have to our words is something that connects OLP to attention to literature and to the general question of sensibility to words. This is how OLP brings us to two main strands of thought involving gender, feminism, and attention to women's voices: women's ordinary expressiveness, and the ethics of care, which was at the outset a claim for the validity of women's voice, a different voice. *Attention* is part of the meaning of care: one must pay attention to the details of life that we neglect (e.g. who has cleaned and straightened this room in which we are standing?), hence pursuing the anthropological relevance of OLP in ethics.

2. Care as an Ethics of the Ordinary: The Different Voice

Cavell's major contribution on this point is to define our relation to *our* words and our expressions in terms of voice and claim. This was one of Austin's intuitions through to the end: we must not concern ourselves only with the analysis of *what* we should say, but with the *we*, the *should*, and the *say*. *Must We Mean What We Say?* was perhaps the first work to ask the question of the relevance of our statements in terms of relevance in relation to ourselves, in various domains and by turning to unexpected resources (literature, art criticism, theater) that make room for women's voices. The content (objective, semantic, or empirical) of propositions is no longer the question, nor are "nonsense" or "performativity", but rather the fortunes and misfortunes of ordinary expressions—the search for (or loss of) the right tone or the right word. An unacknowledged point is the "unhappy" dimension, the dimension of failure in OLP, which is obsessed with cases where our words fail, are inadequate, inexpressive, inarticulate: with the vulnerability of voice (see Austin 1962, and Goffman). It is, in the end, a matter of an indissolubly aesthetic and moral problem: to connect, within women's voices, rightness of tone or adequacy of expression with self-confidence.

Wittgenstein's point is that the importance of grammatical investigations lies precisely in "destroying everything great and interesting," displacing our interests, our hierarchies. Here the specific tone that Cavell early on identified and expressed in

his reading of Wittgenstein may be seen and heard as the refusal of a kind of male assertiveness in finding the right words and the all-too-easy identification of the important with the masculine. The conversion required in putting aside competing ideas of the important, in destroying our ideas of the important, is the condition of possibility of a place for women's expression (accomplished in *Pursuits of Happiness* through the emergence of women's voices in conversation in talking pictures). Cavell thus achieves a non-heterosexual tonality of language that may be sought after in Wittgenstein, and could be at stake in ordinary language philosophy.

Taking women's experience into account in politics and in philosophy is also the aim of feminism. In introducing the ethics of care in France, I meant it as a way of developing a heterodox ethics, inspired by approaches in moral sociology, but also as a way of continuing OLP by other means—by re-centering moral philosophy around ordinary language. Care is a sensitivity to the ordinary details of human life that *matter*. Hence, care is a concrete matter that ensures the maintenance (e.g., as conversation and conservation) and continuity of the human world and form of life. This is nothing less than a paradigm shift in ethics, with a reorientation towards vulnerability and a shift from the “just” to the “important,” exactly as Wittgenstein proposed shifting the meaning of importance by destroying what seemed to be important. Assessing the importance of care for human life means acknowledging the vulnerability of forms of life.

The idea of an ethics formulated *in a different voice* and expressed in a female voice (as exhibited e.g. in literary and cinematographic bodies of work) is 1) an ordinary conception of ethics, 2) an expressivist conception of ethics. This ethics is not founded on universal principles but rather starts from everyday experiences and the moral problems of real people in their ordinary lives. The notion of care is best expressed not as a theory, but as an activity: care as action (taking care, caring for) and as attention, concern (caring about). Care is at once a practical response to specific needs—which are always those of individual, singular others (whether close to us or not)—an activity necessary to maintaining persons and connections, work carried out in both the private and the public sphere, and a sensitivity to the “details” that count. This is a definition of ethics (which may be called a paradigm shift) that is deeply connected to attention to, and repossession of, ordinary language, and that trans-

forms the very notion of ethics, enhancing the question of human vulnerability and connecting it to the vulnerability of language use. In this ordinary conception of ethics, morality is founded not on universal principles but rather starts from the experiences of everyday life.

The (polemical) importance of the ethics of care is that, just like OLP, it subverts well-established intellectual and social hierarchies and draws attention to a number of phenomena that are overlooked because they are connected to women. It is a matter of showing that the (moral) sentiments and expressions of women are not, as Lawrence Kohlberg's analyses have demonstrated, an inferior form of morality, but a moral resource that has been ignored, and which would make it possible to profoundly renew moral and social thought. This is on the condition of seeing care not only as a sensibility or affectivity but as an ordinary practice, an ethics defined by the concrete work done for the most part by women, and neglected for that reason. In fact, taking into consideration the social, moral, and political importance of care makes it necessary to refer to "women," one of the categories to which the work of care has principally been assigned. The ethics of care has been criticized as "essentialist" (we may wonder why that would be a crime anyway), but its critique of the incapacity of the language of justice to take women's ordinary experiences and points of view into account as morally relevant and different¹⁴ actually makes it a universalist political theory. Still, the hypothesis of a "different voice" is indeed that of a moral orientation that identifies and treats moral problems differently than the language of justice and liberal moral philosophy do—by claiming a voice.

The ethics of care has contributed to transforming ethics and the concept of voice. Care is a fundamental aspect of human life and consists, as Joan Tronto proposes, of "everything we do to continue, repair, and maintain ourselves so that we can live in the world as well as possible."¹⁵ Care thus corresponds to an ordinary reality: the fact that people look after one another, take care of one another, and are attentive to the functioning of the world, which depends on this kind of care. The ethics of care affirms the importance of care and attention given to others, in particular to those

14. See Linda Zerilli, "Towards a Feminist Theory of Judgment," *Signs* 34, no. 2 (2009): 295-317.

15. Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto, "Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring," in *Circles of Care: Work and Identity in Women's Lives*, ed. Emily K. Abel and Margaret K. Nelson (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990), 40.

whose lives and wellbeing depend on particularized, continual, and daily attention: ordinary vulnerable others. The ethics of care draws our attention to the ordinary, defined as what we are unable to see but is right before our eyes. It is an ethics that gives voice and attention to humans who are undervalued precisely because they perform unnoticed, invisible tasks, and take care of the basic needs of others.

These ethics are based on an analysis of the historical conditions that have favored a division of moral labor such that activities of care have been socially and morally devalored. The assignment of women to the domestic sphere has reinforced the exclusion of these activities and preoccupations from the moral domain and the public sphere, reducing them to the rank of private sentiments devoid of moral and political import. The perspectives of care carry with them a fundamental claim concerning the importance of care for human life, for the relations that organize it, and the social and moral position of caregivers. To recognize this means recognizing that dependence and vulnerability are traits of a condition common to all, not of a special category, the “vulnerable.” This sort of “ordinary” realism is absent from the majority of moral theories, which have a tendency to reduce the activities and preoccupations of care to a concern for victims and for the weak on the part of selfless mothers. Hence the importance of acknowledging the first tenet of the ethics of care: *the human is vulnerable*.

Vulnerability defines ordinariness, and the development of the concept of vulnerability provides new resources for a reevaluation of the ordinary. OLP helps us connect the ethics of care to the idea of the vulnerability of the human as it is developed in the ethics inspired by Wittgenstein. Cavell, Diamond, and Das connect the idea of the vulnerability of the human to the vulnerability of our life form(s), and of life itself. *Lebensformen*, Cavell stresses, could be translated not by the phrase forms of life, but rather *life forms*. This idea of a life form is connected, for Cavell and Das, to Wittgenstein’s anthropological sensitivity or sensibility: his attention to everyday language forms as being both obvious and strange, foreign.

The intersection of the familiar and the strange is an experience of the uncanny [...]. What I call Wittgenstein’s anthropological perspective is one puzzled

in principle by anything human beings say and do, hence perhaps, at a moment, by nothing.¹⁶

The uncanniness of the ordinary, for Cavell, is not resolved in the return to everyday life or common sense; the human is not a given, for it is defined by the permanent threat of denial of the human, of dehumanization—loss of the sense of life. Paying attention to the everyday, to what Veena Das in *Life and Words* calls *the everyday life of the human*, the *ordinary other*, is the first step in caring: care is defined as attention, and the ethics of care call our attention to phenomena commonly unseen, but right before our eyes. Das mentions a “difference of expression” within the experience of violence: “women tried to contain the poison that could not be put into the world and would violate the very sense of life as human life.”¹⁷ To define ethics in terms of immanent caring and a sense of life also calls our attention to the moral capacities or competences of ordinary people. The definition of care by Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher has to be taken seriously:

In the most general sense, care is a species of activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life sustaining web.¹⁸

Reflection on care can be construed as a consequence of the turn in moral thought illustrated by the work of Stanley Cavell and Cora Diamond: against what Wittgenstein in the *Blue Book* called the “craving for generality,” it is the attempt to valorize, within morality, attention to the particular(s), to the ordinary detail of human life, the neglected aspects.

What is the pertinence of the particular? What can the singular claim? It is by giving back a (different) voice to the individual sensibility, to the intimate, that one ensures the conversation/conservation (*entretien/entertaining*) of a human world.

16. Cavell, “Foreword,” in Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), x.

17. Das, *Life and Words*, 170.

18. Fisher and Tronto, “Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring,” 41.

This is obvious in the human contexts Das's *Life and Words* accounts for, when violence destroys the everyday and the very sense of *life* (Das 2007, 89), and when it appears that this everyday is maintained and *made* by women.

Cavell refers to Das'

Recognition that in the gender-determined division of the work of mourning the results of violence, the role of women is to attend, in a torn world, to the details of everyday life that allow a household to function, collecting supplies, cooking, washing and straightening up, seeing to children, and so on, that allow life to knit itself back into some viable rhythm, pair by pair. Part of her task is to make us ponder how it is that such evidently small things (whose bravery within tumultuous circumstances is, however, not small) are a match for the consequences of unspeakable horror, for which other necessities are not substitutes.¹⁹

The subject of *care* is affected, is *caught* in a context of relations, in a form of life both social and biological. This idea of *Lebensform* is associated in Cavell with attention to the ordinary form of life: to what Cavell calls "the uncanniness of the ordinary" and Das calls "the everyday life of the human." But Das takes Cavell's point about women's role one step further:

However, where I found thought to be residing was in the rhythms of women's actions—making public the harm that had been done by becoming like stone in the still postures they adopted as mourners while simultaneously attending to the ordinary—(provisioning for food, consoling a child, assisting a new mother) that we glimpse care for the world seen as obligation toward the care of the dead as well as attention to the survival of the living.²⁰

Das differentiates violence against the ordinary (the rupture of everyday life, and the work it takes to preserve it) from the *violence of the everyday*, the present condition of our life in unjust societies, defined by wide-spread violence, either of the spectacu-

19. Cavell, "Foreword," xiii-xiv.

20. Das, *Life and Words*, 89.

lar kind that is public (terrorism), or of everyday deprivation and routine violence. The fact that *some* kind of violence becomes ordinary, “normal,” is part of the ordinary—and makes it unacceptable.

One of the issues I want to be attentive to is the violence *against* the everyday and the violence *of* the everyday, so that we do not end with any beatific picture of the redemptive qualities of the everyday.²¹

3. The Importance of Importance

The center of gravity of ethics is then shifted, from the “just” to the “important.” Measuring the importance of care for human life means recognizing that dependence and vulnerability—precarity—are not accidents that happen only to “others.” Going against the grain of the ideal of autonomy animating most moral theories, care reminds us that we need others in order to satisfy our needs. This unpleasant reminder may well be at the source of the misrecognition of care, when it is reduced to a vacuous or condescending version of charity.

In this approach there are no univocal moral concepts that need simply to be applied to reality, but rather, our moral concepts depend in their very application upon the narration or description we give of our existences, of what *counts* for us. This ability to perceive the importance of things, their place in our ordinary life, is not only “affective”: it is the ability for adequate *expression* (or, equally, for a clumsy and awkward, failed expression). At the center of care is our ability for (our disposition to) moral expression, which, as Cavell has shown in various ways, is rooted in ordinary human and other life forms, in the (Wittgensteinian) sense of a simultaneously natural and social aggregate of forms of expression and connection to others. It is the form of life that determines the ethical structure of expression, and this expression, conversely, reworks it and gives it form. Our relation to others, the type of interest and care we have for others, and the importance we give them take on their meaning within the context of a possible unveiling (voluntary or not) of oneself.

²¹. *Ibid.*

Care is also specific attention to the *invisible* importance of things and moments: what Cavell calls “the essential dissimulation of importance”²² which is part of what cinema educates us about. In one of his works on film, *Themes Out of School*, Cavell notes that the importance of film lies in its power to make what matters emerge, “to magnify the sensation and meaning of a moment.”²³ Film cultivates in us a specific ability to see the importance of things and moments, and emphasizes the covering-over of importance in our ordinary life, for importance is essentially what can be *missed*, what remains unseen until later—or possibly forever. The pedagogy of film is that while it amplifies the significance of moments, it also reveals the “inherent concealment of significance.”

If it is part of the grain of film to magnify the feeling and meaning of a moment, it is equally part of it to counter this tendency, and instead to acknowledge the fateful fact of a human life that the significance of its moments is ordinarily not given with the moments as they are lived so that to determine the significant crossroads of a life may be the work of a lifetime.²⁴

The structure of expression connects the concealment *and* the revelation of importance, and such is the texture of life (our life form). This is the difficulty that Cavell describes when he speaks of the temptation of inexpressiveness and of isolation, and shows the essential vulnerability of human experience (another name for skepticism, and expressed in the genre of the “Melodrama of the Unknown Woman”). Acknowledging this is a crucial part of Cavell’s contribution to feminism.

Failure to pay attention to details, to importance, it turns out, is as much a moral failure as it is a cognitive one. We discover importance not only through accurate and refined perception, but mostly through misperception, through our own failures to perceive, for “missing the evanescence of the subject”²⁵ is constitutive of our ordinary lives, in addition to being the truth of skepticism. Acknowledging this consequence of skepticism, our failure to appreciate situations and perceive importance, is a step toward genuine attention to ordinary life and the details we neglect.

22. Cavell, “The Thought of Movies”, in *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 11.

23. *Ibid.*, 11.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*

Redefining morality on the basis of *importance* and the structural vulnerability of the human experience may thus help in rethinking the theoretical stakes of care. The notion of care is inseparable from a cluster of terms, a language game: attention, concern, importance, meaning, mattering. In response to the “original position” Rawls describes, this kind of realism would tend to make the “original condition” (Nel Noddings) of vulnerability the anchor point of moral and political thought. The notion of care points to a specific blindness in contemporary moral and political thought: blindness to the conditions of its own development within the human form of life.

The ethics of care gives a concrete account of this blindness or deafness in its ambition to valorize an ignored, unexpressed dimension of experience. The history of feminism begins precisely with the experience of inexpressiveness; John Stuart Mill was concerned with situations in which one does not have a voice for making oneself understood because one has lost contact with one’s own experience.

Cavell is clearly sensitive to the feminist tone of Mill’s sentence:

Thus the mind itself is bowed to the yoke: even in what people do for pleasure, conformity is the first thing thought of; their human capacities are withered and starved: they become incapable of any strong wishes or native pleasures, and are generally without either opinions or feelings of home growth, or properly their own. Now is this, or is it not, the desirable condition of human nature?²⁶

This description captures all situations of loss of experience, language, and concepts altogether (it can motivate a desire to come out of this situation of loss of voice, to take back possession of one’s ordinary language, and to find a world that would be the adequate context for it.) To regain our contact with experience and to find a voice for its expression: this is the definition of an ordinary ethics. Gilligan writes that a “restructuring of moral perception” should allow for “changing the meaning of moral language, and thus the definition of moral conflict and moral action,”²⁷ but also for an

26. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978), 6.

27. Gilligan, “Moral Orientation and Development,” 43.

undistorted vision of care, one in which care would not be the disappearance or diminution of the self. Care, understood as attention and perception, is to be distinguished from a sort of suffocation of the self by pure affect or devotion. It confronts us with our own inabilities and inattentions but also, and above all, shows us how these inattentions are then translated into theory.

What is at stake in the ethics of care is inseparably ethical and epistemological: it seeks to bring to light the connection between our lack of attention to neglected realities and the lack of theorization of these social realities, rendered invisible, and our blindness to what makes ordinary life possible (e.g. what makes us ordinary). It is also a perfectionist ethics. To regain our contact with experience and to find a voice for its expression: this is the first aim, inseparably perfectionist and political, of ethics.

It remains to articulate this subjective expression with the attention to the particular that is also at the heart of *care*, and thereby to define a *knowledge through care*. The moral knowledge that literature or cinema give us, through an education of our sensibility (sensitivity), cannot be translated into arguments, but is nonetheless knowledge—from here, the ambiguity of Martha C. Nussbaum's title, *Love's Knowledge*,²⁸ comes: not the knowledge of a general object, love, but the particular knowledge that a perception sharpened by love, or a sharpened perception of love, gives us.

The idea of an ethics formulated *in a different voice* and expressed in a female voice is thus a perfectionist point. In this conception of ethics, morality is not founded on universal principles but rather starts from experiences of everyday life and self-reliance conceived as trust in your experience. This definition of ethics is a paradigm shift—it is deeply connected to attention to, and repossession of, the self through ordinary language, and it transforms the notion of ethics, enhancing the question of human vulnerability and our responsiveness and responsibility.

This defines the link between experience and trust in feminism: it is necessary to educate one's experience in order to trust it. The trust in the self is defined by the ordinary and expressive authority one has over one's experience: "Without

28. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

this trust in one's experience, expressed as a willingness to find words for it, [...] one is without authority in one's own experience."²⁹ The trust consists of discovering in oneself the capacity to actually have an experience, to experience what one knows or what one believes one knows, and to express and describe her ordinary experience.

4. Care as a Politics of the Ordinary

The ethics of care, which opens ethics to ordinary voices in their diversity, constitutes a criticism of dominant understanding of ethics, by placing vulnerability at the heart of morality. It joins up with "Wittgensteinian" ethics,³⁰ and with ecofeminism and disability studies, which connect the vulnerability of the human to a vulnerability of the human form of life. Joan Tronto has suggested that the dyadic and affective conception of care to which Carol Gilligan remains attached is too narrow to allow the ensemble of social activities having to do with attentive care for others to be thought. She holds that the philosophical valorization of care must base itself not so much on a particularistic ethics but rather on an enlargement of the concept of action. This obliges us to give up on one part of the ethics of care, the idea of a specifically feminine ethics. Gilligan's position was indissociably from a gendered ethics: for her, the relationship to self and others as expressed in moral judgment takes opposing directions for men and for women. Tronto, on the other hand, proposes an anthropology of human needs in order to found the social dignity of care: not only do certain of our needs call directly for care, but care defines the (political) space in which listening to needs becomes possible, as a veritable, non-affectivist attention to others. Reflection on care seems to set a feminine and a masculine conception of ethics against one another, the first being defined by attention, care for the other, responsibility, and the connections we have to an ensemble of persons; the second by justice and autonomy. There is no need to emphasize the difficulty in contrasting a feminine ethics and a

29. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 19.

30. See Cora Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991); Alice Crary (ed.), *Wittgenstein and the Moral Life: Essays in Honor of Cora Diamond* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007); and Kittay and Feder, *The Subject of Care*.

masculine ethics in such terms, opposing care and justice (for who doesn't love justice?), and the risk one would run of reproducing the very prejudices that the ethics of care as a feminist ethics was aimed at combating. One can, as Tronto does, integrate care into a general ethical, social, and political approach which would not be reserved for women, but would be an aspiration for all, and would thus allow for an amelioration of the concept of justice. Or one can, as others such as Nussbaum, Diamond, Gilligan herself have suggested, redefine care and justice together by redefining ethics on the basis of moral perception, something that has to do with a special expressivity of women.

Are these options incompatible? Is the kind of new attention that care forces upon us to be separated from women's point of view and from the fact that women's voices have been deadened? It is only in passing from ethics to politics that ethics of care can be given their critical power. By calling for a society in which caregivers would have a voice and relevance, and in which the tasks of care would not be structurally invisible or inconspicuous, they bring to light the difficulty of thinking these social realities:

Recognizing the importance of care would thus allow us to revalue the contributions made to human societies by the outcasts, by women, by the humble people who work everyday. Once we commit ourselves to remap the world so that their contributions count, then we are able to change the world.³¹

As Tronto puts it, the valorization of care passes through *politicization* and voice. Truly carrying out the ethics of care would imply both including practices linked to care in the agenda of democratic reflection and empowering those concerned—care givers and receivers. The recognition of the theoretical pertinence of ethics of care necessarily passes through a practical revalorization of activities linked to care and a concomitant modification of intellectual and political agendas, including extending citizenship to those who are bound by relations of care. There can be no ethics of care, then, without politics: in their political articulation, dominant liberal (masculi-

31. Tronto, *Un monde vulnérable. Pour une politique de care* (Paris: La Découverte, 2009), 17.

ne) ethics, as well as some feminist philosophy and ethics, may be the product and expression of a social practice that devalorizes the attitude and work of care.

The world of care, needless to say, has generally been ignored by social and political theorists. The world of care, needless to say, is often inhabited more thoroughly by women, people of lower class and caste status, working people, and other disregarded ethnic, religious, linguistic groups. They are the people most often excluded by politics. Even to bold thinkers who wanted to support the claims for women greater public roles, such as Simone de Beauvoir, the vilification of the “immanent” life continued.³²

So the ethics of care is a subversion of intellectual and ethical hierarchies. The perspective of care then leads us to explore the ways in which we—in practice and in theory—treat the demarcation between the spheres of personal relations (familial relations, as well as love, friendship) and the so-called “impersonal” spheres of public relations, with, of course, a hierarchy involved.

The traditional association of caring with women rested on a social order that excluded women from many parts (or all) of the public sphere. Women (and for that matter slaves, servants, and often working-class people) as well as care activities were relegated outside of public life. One of the great accomplishments of the second wave of feminism was to break the caste barriers that excluded women from the public sphere.³³

Again, the center of gravity of ethics is shifted from the “just” to the “important,” and again this is done by destroying what seemed to be important. OLP can help us to go beyond the affective notion of care and, in keeping with the line of thought represented by Das, to engage in reconceiving ethics not on the basis of grand principles, but rather on the basis of the fundamental needs of humans and women. This ethical move is linked to the definition, developed by Diamond, of ethical competence in

32. Tronto, *Un monde vulnérable*, 15.

33. Tronto, “Care as the Work of Citizens: A Modest Proposal,” in *Women and Citizenship*, ed. Marilyn Friedman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 130.

terms of a refined and active perception, which certainly has not been followed out in all its feminist consequences, and in particular the analysis it provides of differences and inequalities between women (some of which are created by care networks and relations). What is at stake in ethics of care ends up epistemological by becoming political: ethics of care seek to highlight the connection between our lack of attention to neglected realities and the lack of theorization of these social realities rendered “invisible,” and in this way to understand why ethical, and often philosophical and political, thought is blind to certain ordinary realities, those connected with the domain of the private, the domestic, and the female.

Thus, we find the continuation of the project of OLP, and the definition of the ordinary, supplied by Wittgenstein: “What we are supplying are really remarks on the natural history of human beings [...] observations which no one has doubted, but which have escaped remark only because they are always before our eyes.”³⁴

Where does our investigation get its importance from, since it seems to destroy everything interesting, all that is great and important? What we are destroying is nothing but houses of cards [*Luftgebäude*].³⁵

The ethics of care does not aim at installing pity, compassion, solicitude, and benevolence as subsidiary values that would soften the hardness of an impartial conception of justice based on the primacy of rights attributed to autonomous, rational individuals. The ethics of care makes it obvious that we depend on others in a world that values autonomy highly in both theory and practice. It even demonstrates that the most autonomous people are actually the most dependent, because of all the help and support they get. It does not aim to enlist compassion and solicitude. Its goal is the acknowledgment of a whole part of life that is systematically ignored in political discourse and moral philosophy. Care is just what makes ordinary form of life possible. Tronto and Fisher, in the definition quoted earlier, suggest that care should be defined at the most general level as a generic activity including all that we do in order to perpetuate and repair our “world,” so that we can live in it as well as it possible. “This

34. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, rev. 4th edn., trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Malden MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), §415.

35. *Ibid.*, §118.

‘world’ includes our bodies, our environment, and ourselves.” Ethics, then, is not about how to live better or more virtuous or rational lives, but simply how anyone can live an ordinary life in this world; it is about achieving the ordinary and recovering the human. This becomes more important in situations of disaster and total vulnerability and risk—contexts of ordinary life in which humans’ needs, interests, and fragilities are completely exposed and threatened.

These are also situations in which the *value* of human life—or the reality of bare life, as Agamben calls it—appears in a new light:

The world is our home. Human life, we must assume in the first place, is somewhat more important than anything else in human life, except, possibly, what happens to it. It deserves attention, and a seriousness of attention, commensurate with its importance. And since every possibility human life holds, or may be deprived of, of value, of wholeness, of richness, of joy, of dignity, depends all but entirely upon circumstances, the circumstances are proportionately worthy of the serious attention of anyone who dares to think of himself as a civilized human being. A civilization which for any reason puts a human life at a disadvantage; or a civilization which can exist only by putting human life at a disadvantage; is worthy neither of the name nor of continuance. And a human being whose life is nurtured in an advantage which has accrued from the disadvantage of other human beings, and who prefers that this should remain as it is, is a human being by definition only, having much more in common with the bedbug, the tapeworm, the cancer, and the scavengers of the deep sea.³⁶

Standard ethics and political analysis, when they deal with the social contract, do not enquire into the society in question is made sustainable—thus carefully expelling out of ethics the world of care, and more generally speaking, all those actions that make ordinary social and moral relations possible and living. Ignoring the issue of care in ethics and politics amounts to ignoring the origin of what allows a moral society to exist and endure.

36. James Agee, *Cotton Tenants: Three Families* (New York: Melville House Publishing, 2013), 34

This can help us see ethics of care not as “essentialist” but rather as an ethics that gives expression to humans who are undervalued because they perform unnoticed, invisible tasks. When Diamond affirms, in her introduction to *The Realistic Spirit* (1991, 23-24), that moral philosophy has largely become “stupid and insensitive,” she means that it has become insensitive to the very humanity of moral questioning, to ordinary moral life bound up with the vulnerable other.

The ethics of care merges with a sensitivity to words and the “realistic spirit” by drawing our attention to the place of ordinary words in the weave and details of our lives, and our relation to/distance from our words. This connection between care and what counts has been brought out by Harry Frankfurt in *The Importance of What We Care About*,³⁷ and by Cavell with respect to film criticism:

The moral I draw is this: the question what becomes of objects when they are filmed and screened has only one source of data for its answer, namely the appearance and significance of just these objects and people that are in fact to be found in the succession of films, or passages of films, that matter to us. To express their appearances, and define those significances, and articulate the nature of this mattering, are acts that help to constitute what we might call film criticism.³⁸

Importance lies in details, and this particularism of attention to detail is another connection between OLP and care. Feminist moral philosophy displaces its very field of study, its target, from general concepts to the examination of particular visions, individuals’ “configurations” of thought—forms of life, textures of being.

We cannot see the moral interest of literature unless we recognize gestures, manners, habits, turns of speech, turns of thought, styles of face as morally expressive. The intelligent description of such things is part of the intelligent, the sharp-eyed, description of life, of what matters, makes differences, in human lives.³⁹

37. Harry G. Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care about: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

38. Cavell, “What Becomes of Things on Film,” in *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 183.

39. Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*, 375.

6. Cavell and “What It Is to Be a Woman”

I want to insist on Cavell’s contribution to the question of what it is to be a woman, with his elaboration of the concepts of expression and voice, concepts which are, as I have tried to demonstrate, most crucial to Cavell’s OLP. Many commentators have noted Cavell’s relevance, especially his classic work on film—Hollywood remarriage comedies and melodrama—to gender issues and what he calls the history of women. This relevance is based on a conception of voice and expression, and on a conception of language connected to ordinary use and forms of life, and ultimately to the essential vulnerability of meaning and expression—the constant threat of inexpressiveness. This is obvious when one considers the place Cavell gives to Hollywood film in the creation of a woman, and the emergence of a generation of women: the films studied in *Pursuits of Happiness* were written, shot and presented to the public at a historical moment (the 30s-40s) when, after great figures and notable gains culminating in the winning of the vote for women in 1920, it became obvious that women needed—still need—“more than rights” (as Annette Baier says, more than justice): equality of voice, which comes through fuller expression: that is, conversational equality, speech equality in general. The women/actresses in these films (e.g., Katharine Hepburn, Irene Dunne, Barbara Stanwyck) represent a generation of women capable of giving expression to these claims.⁴⁰

Film democratizes the knowledge of the ordinary:

Any of the arts will be drawn to this knowledge, this perception of the poetry of the ordinary, but film democratizes the knowledge, hence at once blesses and curses us with it. It says that the perception of poetry is open to all, regardless as it were of birth or talent, as the ability is to hold a camera on a subject, so that a failure so to perceive, to persist in missing the subject, which may amount to missing the evanescence of the subject, is ascribable only to ourselves, to failures of our character; as if to fail to guess the unseen from the seen, to fail to trace the implications of things—that is, to fail the perception

40. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 18.

that that there *is* something to be guessed and traced, right or wrong—requires that we persistently coarsen and stupefy ourselves.⁴¹

The question of attention to the others' style and textures brings us back to our starting point, the question of women's voice and our own capacity to pay attention to it.

It also shows how Cavell's writing on film can *matter*, not just for philosophy, ethics, anthropology, art and film criticism, but even—at least for now in France—for actual movie directing and writing, especially for a kind of film that displays, empowers, and legitimizes women's voices, expressions, and subjectivities. The fact that it is Cavell's work on melodrama and the Unknown Woman that provides such creative power for present filmmaking, as well as eliciting an increasingly strong response from feminist thought (perhaps more than from film studies), may be a further argument in favor of Cavell's remarkable relevance, and importance, for women's studies.

We can connect this to the permanent concern, in OLP, with felicitous and infelicitous expression and the vulnerability of speech. Cavell shows how film is the privileged medium for vulnerability and exposure, but also for empowerment and assertion—the expressiveness of women as sought by Gilligan. There can be no “care” without the expression of everyone's voice: here lies the *importance* of the different voice.

Bringing women's voices into what was then called the human conversation, would change the voice of that conversation by giving voice to aspects of human experience that were for the most unspoken or unseen.⁴²

Attention to voice is a token of the permanent concern, in Cavell's work, with felicitous and infelicitous expression, and the vulnerability of speech, what he retraces, following the Austinian attention to the failures of language, as a passivity of expression. We have seen how film is the privileged medium for its capacity to put before us vulnerability and exposure, and the specific expressiveness of women. Thus inexpressi-

41. Cavell, *Themes Out of School*, 14.

42. Gilligan, “In a Different Voice: Looking Back to Look Forward,” unpublished lecture, 2010.

veness becomes a gendered matter, something Cavell has studied thoroughly in his work on film. I have stressed Cavell's relevance for the discovery of women's voice in his work on film—on Hollywood remarriage comedy, and melodrama—his attention to women's expressiveness and capacity to hold, the high ground in a conversation, or even a fight (see *Philadelphia Story*). This relevance is grounded on a conception of voice, expression, and what Cavell's work describes as the threat/desire of inexpressiveness.

An essential dimension of Bette Davis's power is its invitation to, and representation of, camp; an arrogation of the rights of banality and affectation and display, of the dangerous wish for perfect personal expressiveness. The wish, in the great stars, is a function not of their beauty, but of their power of privacy, of a knowing unknownness.⁴³

Cavell adds, on a more political note, that "It is a democratic claim for personal freedom," "something Davis shares with the greatest of the histrionic romantic stars". Histrionism is something that is not often claimed by women, and can be claimed only through an expression of privacy. So to understand the human nature of expression would be to understand the possibility of unknownness, privacy, neither as a hidden "thing," but as the privileged object of exposure. In melodrama, the ways female characters/actresses project moral values and textures perceptible on the perfectionist background of these Hollywood classical movies, and make themselves heard "in a different voice", in a different vision of *what matters*.

Cavell demonstrates film's capacity to show us the expressiveness of women. This account of meaning and expression deepens Wittgenstein's and Austin's attention to the powers and failures of language. Cavell's relevance to the discovery of women's voice, his attention to women's expressiveness and capacity to hold the high ground in a conversation or a fight, is based on a conception of voice and on what he describes as the threat of/desire for inexpressiveness—the fear of inexpressiveness, versus the terror of expressiveness, of total exposure (perceptible in the aria of madness in the melodrama, *Gaslight*, *Letter from an Unknown Woman*)—the polarizati-

43. Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, 128.

on of inexpressiveness into two states of voicelessness. This is the concrete and real meaning of the fantasy of private language criticized in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, and of what Cavell's *Claim of Reason* as defined as Skepticism.