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## Ordinary Realism in Ethics

Sandra Laugier

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Ethics of Care  
Volume 8

# The Ethics of Care: the State of the Art

Frans Vosman, Andries Baart, Jaco Hoffman (Eds.)



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# Ordinary Realism in Ethics

Sandra Laugier

This chapter sets out to strengthen the connection that I have sought to establish, since the publication of my first writings on the concept of care (Laugier, 2011a, 2013b), namely the connection between the ethics of care and my own philosophical background and field. It comes down to find in Ordinary Language Philosophy (OLP) resources for a reformulation of what to my mind is at stake in feminism: the inclusion and empowerment of women's voices (and that means all women) and expressiveness, and attention to their experiences. This is significant because OLP as represented by Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell, is often considered to be disconnected from gender issues (except through speech-act theory). OLP is a philosophy that focuses attention on ordinary lives by attending to the ordinary details of language and expression, as having moral weight and importance.

I have in my work on Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell tried to open new perspectives on the neglected theme of *the ordinary*. My aim was to show the relevance of OLP in ethical and political issues by developing an ordinary conception of politics to think about civil disobedience and radical democracy (Ogien & Laugier, 2014) as well as an ordinary conception of ethics to think about care and gender inequality. This systematic exploration of the (theoretical and practical) question of the ordinary is anchored in OLP and the "rough ground" of the uses and practices of language. This then leads to a further exploration of the denial or undervaluation of *the ordinary* as a general phenomenon in contemporary thinking.

My thesis is that the ordinary is often and in different ways denied, undervalued, or neglected (not seen, not taken into account) in theoretical thought. Such negligence (*carelessness*) has to do with contempt 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 outcome or consequence of OLP is its general attention to human expressiveness, and my contribution is to specifically elucidate that this attention to expression is to care about human expression as embodied in women's voices.

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 departure point of the ethics of care. In my own work, I have tried to understand the ethics of care as a heterodox ethics that allows us to re-centre moral philosophy on ordinary language and expressiveness. Such features makes it a way to pursue OLP on the ethical ground.

The chapter aims, therefore, to highlight the need for a transformation of ethics. This transformation is driven from the point of view of OLP. OLP thus can be a basis for redefining ethics while focusing on ordinary life and the care for moral expressivity. This reframing of ethics and moral life has been proposed by Cora Diamond (1991). At the same time I further aim to show the remarkable contribution made by the ethics of care to this transformation of ethics and its way to inherit the radicality of OLP. By proposing to place a value on moral principles like caring, attention to others, and solicitude, the ethics of care has contributed to modifying a dominant view or perception of ethics, and has profoundly changed the way we look at ethics. It has introduced ethical stakes into politics and thus weakens theories of justice by critiquing them. But, most significantly, it has given voice to the ordinary. The ethics of care draws our attention to the ordinary, to what is right in front of our eyes and for this very reason, invisible. 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 basic needs. More often than not, these humans are women; and most likely non-white women. Feminism is, at its core, about finding or claiming one's voice.

The “voice” Carol Gilligan ascertains is the ordinary voice of women, and OLP contributes to turning our attention to these voices. Gilligan’s work has been undervalued within feminist theory for its alleged essentialism: its controversial claim that women share a *different* moral sensibility. Beyond the controversy, I want to emphasize the fact that her work marks explicitly, and maybe for the first time, the necessity of bringing women’s voices into ordinary human conversation. To say it with Gilligan (2010) herself: “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 part unspoken or unseen” (p. 35).

### Ordinary Language Philosophy and Its Relevance to the Ethics of Care

The idea of an ethics formulated *in a different voice* and expressed in women’s voices is one, an ordinary conception of ethics, and two, an expressivist conception of ethics. Such an ethics is not founded on universal principles but rather starts from experiences of everyday life and the moral problems of real people in their ordinary lives.

The starting point of my book *Why We Need Ordinary Language Philosophy* (2013) was the idea of a philosophy of language anchored neither in standard analytic philosophy nor in continental philosophy but rather in *attention* to uses of language; to language as it is used; as it is in circulation. This use of OLP can be termed *realistic*: it is an ordinary realism that construes language both as a human practice and as a tool for refining perception and depiction. In OLP, the ideas of adjustment, fitting, and the perception of differences and resemblances account for realistic aspirations, but are inseparable from recognition of the fact that language is part of the world. The meaning of ordinary language philosophy does indeed lie in the recognition that language is used and spoken by a human voice, filled with human breath; we may “come back to earth” (Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 3) and to ordinary conditions of life.

The notion of care is best expressed not in the form of a theory, but as an activity: care as action (taking care, caring for) and as attention,



concern (caring about). Care is an activity necessary to maintaining or supporting persons and connections; it is work carried out both in the private sphere and in the public sphere, and it is sensitivity to the “details” that count. Care is something concrete, embedded in the ordinary details of human life, and it ensures the maintenance, sustainability, and continuity of the human world. It implies a redefinition of ethics, which may be called a paradigm shift: attention to and repossession of ordinary language. The ethics of care thus transforms the very notion of ethics, by enhancing the question of human vulnerability, and by connecting it to the vulnerability of language use.

Such a perspective on the ethics of care – because it focusses attention on our common state of dependence – is politically and ethically inseparable; it develops an analysis of social relations organized around dependence and vulnerability – blind spots in the ethics of justice. Thus, approaches of care target the theory of justice as it has developed and taken the dominant position in both political and moral thinking over the course of the second half of the last century. This is not only because, as the controversies between the partisans of care and those of justice illustrate, these approaches call into question the universality of Rawls’ conception of justice, but also because they transform the very nature of moral questioning and the concept of justice itself – expressing not a mere and hopeless criticism of justice but rather the positive need for “more than justice” (Baier, 1995, pp. 18-32).

The question is no longer one of choosing between care and justice, but of understanding how one can lose both dispositions. Again, Gilligan’s (1995) suggestions may be of use; and her recent writings may clear up some misunderstandings about her “essentialism”:

The potential error in justice reasoning lies in its latent egocentrism, the tendency to confuse one’s perspective with an objective standpoint or truth, the temptation to define others in one’s own terms by putting oneself in their place. The potential error in care reasoning lies in the tendency to forget that one has terms, creating a tendency to enter into another’s perspective and to see oneself as “selfless,” by defining oneself in other’s terms. (p. 43)

It is a matter, then, beyond the justice/care debate, of each individual finding his or her voice, and of hearing and expressing both the voice of justice and that of care, avoiding the following two distortions or deformations: “the equation of human with male, unjust in its omission of women; and the equation of care with self-sacrifice, uncaring in its failure to represent the activity and the agency of care” (Gilligan, 1995, p. 43).

Care then appears as one of the existent paths towards a genuine ethics, one that is concrete, attentive to actual practices and forms of life, and not only normative. It is not a matter of making justice and sensibility compatible, in a sort of moralistic half-measure, nor of introducing a dose of care into the theory of justice. Numerous works in ethics have convincingly argued in favor of this compatibility. It is instead a matter, more radically, of seeing sensibility as a necessary condition of justice.

Tronto notes that the care-justice debate has been essentially “one-sided,” as if it were always the burden of the ethics of care to prove that it is compatible with justice. One can integrate care into a general ethical and political approach that 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. Here we need to give attention to the expressivity of women.

The focus on moral notions such as duty or choice (a result of the influence of Kant and Rawls) leaves out the essential of ordinary moral questioning. As Diamond remarks, someone who is perfectly rigorous and moral may have something petty or stingy about her, and this unlovable feature is something that could, instead of being considered a vague, non-ethical, psychological concept, form an integral part of moral reflection. Annette Baier (1985a) suggests that we focus on a quality such as *gentleness*, which can only be treated in descriptive and normative terms and “resists analysis in terms of rules” (p. 219). Since this quality is a response appropriate to the other, *according to circumstance*, it necessitates an experimental attitude, sensibility to the situation, and the ability to improvise, to “move on to something else” when faced with certain reactions. Baier, like Murdoch (1997),

criticizes the idea that moral philosophy can be reduced to questions of obligation and choice; the idea that since a moral problem can be formulated in these terms, it can also be treated thus. Perhaps the idea of women's voices in ethics sounds controversial, but the fact that moral philosophy is about men's voices may be less controversial. Baier takes up Ian Hacking's observations on moral philosophy's obsession with the model of game theory, calling it a masculine syndrome (a big boy's game, and a pretty silly one too, as she writes). Tronto (1993) says in *Moral Boundaries* that care requires justice and that we think of justice in concrete cases and circumstances, not just as a general set of principles that courts, politicians, or philosophers have to apply.

This transformation in ethics is possible because care is a practice, work, not "only" a moral feeling or disposition. Care is everywhere, and it is such a pervasive part of the human form of life that it is never seen for what it is: a range of activities by which we organize our world so that we can live in it as well as possible. When we get down to the ways in which we actually live our lives, care activities are central and ubiquitous. When we begin to take these activities seriously, "the world will look different if we place care, and its related values and concerns, closer to the center of human life" (Tronto, 2009). The ethics of care draws our attention to the ordinary, to what we are unable to see, though it is right before our eyes. So before claiming a "women's ethics," it claims to give voice an expression to humans (mostly women, and people of color) that are undervalued precisely because they are assigned to activities that have been socially and morally devalued, *denied*, because we (men and women) do not *want to see*, acknowledge, what we depend on. Care is defined by attention to differences ("I'll teach you differences" was a favorite line of Wittgenstein's). A main difficulty of the ethics of care, then, as a way of thinking about the world, is (according to Tronto) that a caring attitude requires us to reconcile the universal needs for care with the circumstances of what seems to be the best form of care in every individual case. What is at stake here is the validity of general moral principles, and hence, the relationship of the general to the

particular. What is the relevance, the importance, of the particular, of individual sensibility? What can the individual *claim*? The subject of care is a sensible, sensitive, receptive subject inasmuch as it is affected, it is caught up in a context of relations, in a social and biological form of life, in relations and hierarchies of power that pervade our lives – what Foucault defines in terms of a *biopolitics*.

The (polemical) importance of the ethics of care is that, like OLP, it subverts well-established intellectual and social hierarchies and attracts attention to a number of phenomena that are overlooked because they are connected to the female. Gilligan (1982) takes as her starting point the idea that the (moral) sentiments and expressions of women are not inferior forms of morality, but are rather moral resources that have been ignored, which, if taken into account, would allow for a profound renewal of moral and social thought. This will only become apparent if we recognize care not only as a sensibility or affectivity but as an ordinary practice, as an ethics defined by the work done for the most part by women, and neglected for that very reason; only if we see care as attention to the ordinary.

Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell propose a new species of realism, which we will call *ordinary realism*. This is a realism based not on a metaphysical link between language and reality, mind, and world; but on our *attention* (another ordinary sense of *mind*) to the practices and life of language. In other words, to language as it is used within a form of life, but also as it is used to create new forms of life. Ordinary realism construes language both as a human practice and as a precision tool for the description of what matters. Fundamental to this vision is the recognition that language is used and spoken by human voices and that language is part of the world. For Austin (1961) and Cavell (1969), language use is a pursuit for the just perception of differences and resemblances, an effort to adjust or fit our expressions to the world and to our positions within it.

To say that language is not only a representation of the real but a part of the real is to say that language affects us, allows us to affect others, and constantly transforms our meanings. This is the fundamental idea in Cavell's book, *Must We Mean What We Say?*.

“Linguistic phenomenology” – the name Austin (1961) gave his philosophy – means paying attention to our words. In return, we get a “sharpened awareness” of words and what they are about.

When we examine what we should say when, what words we should use in which situations, we are looking again not merely at words (or “meanings” whatever they may be) but also at the realities we use the words to talk about: we are using a sharpened awareness of words to sharpen our perception of, though not as the final arbiter of, the phenomena (Austin, 1961, p. 182).

### From OLP to the Importance of Women’s Voices

One essential connection between OLP and care lies in the idea of attention to *importance*: more precisely “the importance of importance” (Cavell, 1981, chap. 3). The conversion required to put aside competing ideas of the important, to destroy our ideas of the important, is the condition of possibility for women’s expression. Attention to ordinary language becomes attention to the voices of women. Attention to human voices and to ordinary life creates a paradigm shift in ethics that is deeply connected with attention to, and repossession of, ordinary language. Attention to the experiences of everyday life and to human textures and expressions makes sense only when women’s expressions are included, and this is the deepest critical feature of OLP, as well as the starting point of its feminist accomplishment. Knowing what we mean and *meaning what we say* is the core of OLP. But it means (at)tending to the ordinary world, and Cavell (1969) – see also Laugier (2011b) – defines that world:

To this extent, they had not known themselves, and not known the world. I mean, of course, the ordinary world. That may not be all there is, but it is important enough: morality is in that world, and so are force and love; so is art and a part of knowledge (the part which is about that world); and so is religion (wherever God is).

OLP takes ordinary use of language as the starting point for philosophical analysis to avoid the “scholastic illusion,” denounced by Austin in the 1950s and later by Bourdieu, of taking “the things of

logic for the logic of things” which often lead to thought becoming sterilized in a vain scholasticism that loses all connection to the problems posed by ordinary life. Thus, OLP is from the outset orientated toward social and everyday matters and focused on the unseen, on the neglected reality. Its primary methodological ambition is thus a conceptual analysis that would make it possible to recognize the importance of context in the practice of language, thought, and perception – that is, in our different ways of engaging with the real – while at the same time defending a form of realism anchored in agents’ practices: their words, expressions, and thoughts. OLP’s ambition is to describe, as precisely as possible, the cognitive, perceptual, linguistic, social, and moral dimensions of our use of language and to analyze all forms of expression – not only descriptive and performative, but also emotive or passionate.

With the Austinian notion of linguistic phenomenology, OLP orientates its reflection on language towards a type of adequacy that is no longer just communication or connection, but rather the adequacy of human adjustment to everyday situations. OLP does not encourage defining the meaning of a term as the set of situations where this term is appropriate or as a list of established uses, but rather advocates examining how meaning is made and improvised through its integration into practice and self-expression. OLP sees language as part of reality and as something that affects us, allows us to affect others, and constantly transforms our meaning. This is the main contributing idea of Cavell’s *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cavell, 1979, p. 30).

The agreement at the heart of linguistic phenomenology and OLP is not the connection between words and things but rather the agreement between ourselves, what we mean, and the reality. This sharpened attention to use 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, political or moral, is not given. The form of one’s acceptance, the limits and scales of one’s agreement, are not known *a priori*, no more than one can *a priori* know the scope of a word; and this is essential to the relevance of

the theme of form of life for ethics, as shown e.g. by Veena Das (2016) in *Boundaries of the "We"* (see also Laugier, 2016).

In this way, OLP arrives at two main lines of thought concerning gender, feminism, and the question of attention to women's voices. First, women's ordinary expressiveness and the ethics of care, which from the beginning has advocated for the recognition of women's voices; that is, the "different voice" of women in ethics, which has been silenced or, more precisely, deadened or neglected, and not taken seriously as an ethical point of view. And second, attention as a moral value, beyond or before ethical concepts such as right, or wrong, or good. *Attention* is part of the meaning of care: one must pay attention to these details of life that we neglect (e.g., who has cleaned and straightened the room in which we are standing?), and to questions we do not *want* to consider. To do this is to pursue the method of OLP, questioning importance and examining ordinary, unseen details.

Cavell's major contribution on this point is to define our relations to our words and our expressions in terms of voice and claim (Cavell, 1979, 1994). This is also one of Austin's insights or contributions: we must not concern ourselves only with analysis of what we 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 ordinary statements in terms of their relevance in relation to ourselves, in various domains and by turning to unexpected sources (literature, art criticism, theatre) that can also provide a space and time for women's voices. The content (objective, semantic, or empirical) of propositions is no longer the question, nor is "nonsense" or "performativity," but rather the fortunes and misfortunes of ordinary humans' vulnerable expression – the search for (or loss of) the right tone or right word.

The feminist approach to ordinary language reiterates an essential and human difficulty in the question of voice and of our agreement in language: that is, the question of *my* capacity to speak, and thus, to conform to shared criteria; as, Cavell (1979) says:

The claim to speak for 'the group' – the question, namely, about how I could have been party to the establishing of criteria if I do not recognize

that I have and do not know what they are . . . to emphasize that the claim is not that one can tell a priori who is implicated by me, because one point of the particular kind of investigation Wittgenstein calls grammatical is exactly to discover who. (p. 22)

One does not have a voice, one's own voice, by nature: it must be *found* so as to speak in the name of others and to let others speak in one's name. This is a central matter of feminism. For if others do not accept my words, I lose more than language: I lose my voice. "The alternative to speaking for myself representatively (for someone else's consent) is not: speaking for myself privately. The alternative is having nothing to say, being voiceless, not even mute" (Cavell, 1979, p. 26).

To not be public is not to be private: it is to be *inexpressive*; this is the very difficulty of philosophy and of reality OLP posits. The question of the universal voice is the question of the voice itself and its arrogation by men – an individual voice claiming to speak in the name of all others. This question only receives a response in Cavell's *Pitch of Philosophy*. The philosopher claims to speak for all, as a man (hence, speaking for women, stealing their voices).

Who is to say whether a man speaks for all men? Why are we so bullied by such a question? Do we imagine that if it has a sound answer the answer must be obvious or immediate? But it is no easier to say who speaks for all men than it is to speak for all men. And why should that be easier than knowing whether a man speaks for me (Cavell, 1969, p. XI)?

This disquiet is expressed constantly in Wittgenstein, and *Claim of Reason* takes it to its limits. OLP is concerned that the human is constantly tempted, or threatened, by inexpressiveness:

So the fantasy of a private language, underlying the wish to deny the publicness of language, turns out, so far, to be a fantasy, or fear, either of inexpressiveness, one in which I am not merely unknown, but in which I am powerless to make myself known; or one in which what I express is beyond my control. (Cavell, 1979, p. 351)

The question here goes beyond including women in the community of speakers: it is the question of any human being able to bear "the (inevitable) extension of the voice, which will always escape me and



will forever find its way back to me.” And thus, the difficulty of philosophy (skepticism) lies not in the inexpressible but in expression: “the terror of being expressive beyond our means” (Cavell, 1979).

OLP is in a way obsessed with the “unhappy” dimension of language, its failures – where words fail, are inadequate, inexpressive or inarticulate – and, with the vulnerability of voice. This failure is an indissolubly aesthetic and moral problem: the difficulty, in women’s voices, of achieving rightness of tone, adequacy of expression, and self-confidence. For Wittgenstein the importance of grammatical investigation is precisely that it destroys everything great and interesting, thus displacing our interests, our hierarchies; it is the condition of possibility for establishing a place for women’s expression in philosophy of language. Note, Cavell aims at that in his work on film, *Pursuits of Happiness* (1981), and symmetrically in *Contesting Tears* (1997). Here, the specific tone identified and expressed early on in Cavell’s reading of the later Wittgenstein may be seen, or heard, as a refusal of a kind of male assertiveness in finding the right words in favor of a more interrogative, or “minor” mode. Cavell achieves an alternative tonality of language that may be looked for in Wittgenstein, and which is one of the stakes of what we call “ordinary language philosophy.”

### **An Ethics of the Ordinary**

Care is a fundamental aspect of human life and it consists, as Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher put it, of “everything we do to continue, repair, and maintain ourselves so that we can live in the world as well as possible” (Tronto & Fisher, 1990). Hence care corresponds to an ordinary reality: people look after one another, take care of one another, and thus 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 whose lives and wellbeing depend on personal, continual, and daily attention: ordinary vulnerable others.

This ethics is based on analysis of the historical conditions that have favored a division of moral labor such that activities of care

have been socially and morally devalued. The assignment of women to the domestic sphere reinforced the exclusion of these activities and preoccupations from the moral domain and the public sphere, reducing them to private sentiments devoid of public moral and political significance. The perspective of care carries a fundamental claim about the importance of care for human life, the relations that organize it, and the social and moral position of caregivers. To recognize this, means recognizing that dependence and vulnerability are aspects of a condition common to all, not just a special category of humans, namely “the vulnerable.” This sort of “ordinary realism” – in the sense of “realistic” proposed by Diamond – see Diamond (1991) and Laugier (2013a) – is absent from the majority of moral theories, which have a tendency to reduce the activities and preoccupations of care to concern for victims and the weak on the part of selfless mothers. Therefore the first tenet of the ethics of care, namely the vulnerability of the human, is a critically important acknowledgment.

Vulnerability defines ordinariness, and OLP helps us to connect the ethics of care to the idea of human vulnerability as it is developed in ethics inspired by Wittgenstein. Cavell (1979) – see also Laugier (2006, pp. 19-38) – Diamond (1991), and the anthropologist Veena Das (2006) connect the idea of the vulnerability of the human to the vulnerability of, if I may say, our life form(s), *Lebensformen*. For Cavell and Das, this idea of a lifeform is connected to Wittgenstein’s anthropological sensitivity or sensibility, and his attention to everyday language forms as being both obvious and alien, foreign. Michel Foucault (2004, pp. 540-541) recognized this kind of attention as crucial to the role of philosophy.

We have long known that the role of philosophy is not to discover what is hidden, but to render visible what precisely is visible – which is to say, to make appear what is so close, so immediate, so intimately linked to ourselves that, as a consequence, we do not perceive it. If we define ethics by such immanent caring, it directs our attention to the moral capacities or competences of ordinary people. Attention to the everyday is an important definition of caring. The complete

definition of care by Tronto and Fisher (1990, p. 40) has here 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, our selves, our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life sustaining web.

Reflection on care can be construed as a consequence of the turn in moral thought illustrated by the work of Diamond against what Wittgenstein in the *Blue Book* (lecture notes published 1958) called “the craving for generality.” It is the attempt to validate, within morality, attention to the particular(s), to the ordinary detail of human life, the aspects of life neglected by philosophy and by us. This descriptive aim transforms morality: care, like OLP, brings our attention back to the basics of the ordinary, to the level of everyday life. It is a practical response to specific needs, which are always those of the singular other (whether close to us or not). It is work carried out just as much in the private sphere as in public; a commitment not to treat anyone as negligible, and it is a sensibility to the details that matter in lived situations.

By giving back a (different) voice to individual sensibility, to the intimate, one ensures the conversation/conservation (maintenance) of a human world. This is obvious in the contexts Das (2006, p. 89) describes in *Life and Words* when violence or catastrophe destroys the everyday and the very sense of life (see also Das, 2016; Lovell, Pandolfo, Das, & Laugier, 2013).

The subject of care is affected, caught in a context of relations or in a form of life that is both social and biological. This idea of *Lebensform* is associated in Cavell and Das 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.” The center of gravity of ethics shifts from the “just” to the “important.” Measuring the importance of care for human life recognizes that dependence and *precarity* (Kittay & Feder, 2002) are not accidents that happen only to “others.” Going against the grain of the ideal of autonomy that drives most moral theories, care reminds us that we need others in

order to satisfy our needs. This often unpleasant reminder may well be at the source of the misleading and inaccurate idea of care, when it is reduced to an empty or condescending version of charity. As Tronto (2005) writes:

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.

By bringing ethics back to the “rough ground of the ordinary,” to the level of everyday life, care aims at a practical response to specific needs, which are always those of singular ordinary others. The first point to be made here is that depicting our ordinary lives does not mean simply describing our practices. Ethics cannot simply be described by reference to our customs, and our practices cannot offer a sole foundation for ethics. Ethics is not empirical in this sense. As argued by Diamond: our practices are exploratory and not merely a given. Our practice is shaped by what we expect from ethics, and ethics is shaped both by what we do and by what we want or imagine. There is, for Diamond, no subject matter specific to ethics. This might seem to make ethics more general. But the second point is that it does just the opposite: Diamond’s aim, drawing on Wittgenstein, is to define an ethics of (attention to) the particular. And this is a perspective shared by the ethics of care: attention to ordinary life.

Realism in ethics, in this regard, consists in *returning to* ordinary language, in examining our words and paying attention to them, in taking care of them (taking care of our words and expressions, and of ordinary others). OLP teaches us that our ethical lives cannot be captured with a half-dozen words like “good,” “right,” “duty,” “fairness,” “justice,” and the like, but rather require exploration of the way our ethical preoccupations are embedded in our language and our life, in clusters of words that extend beyond our ethical vocabulary itself and sustain complex connections with a variety of institutions and practices. In order to describe ethical understanding we

would have to describe all of this, all these particular uses of words, of which a general definition cannot be given. From OLP's perspective, the elements of moral vocabulary have no meaning except within the context of our customs and forms of life. In other words, they come to life against the background that "gives our words their meaning." For Wittgenstein, meaning is not only determined by use or "context" (as many analyses of language have recognized), but is embedded in, and only perceptible against, the background of the practice of language. To redefine ethics from the basis of what is important means paying "attention to particulars." We can look to a whole cluster of terms, a language-game of the particular – attention, care, importance, what matters – that is common to OLP and the ethics of care. Our capacity for attention is the result of developing a perceptive capacity, the ability to see a detached detail or gesture against its background. This focus of attention to detail is the source of the shift of perspective in moral philosophy: from examining general concepts and norms of moral choice to examining particular visions – the examining of individuals' "configurations" of thought.

Ethics of care merges with this sensitivity to words and the "realistic spirit" by drawing attention to the place of ordinary words in the intricacies and details of our lives, and our relationship with or distance from our words. In "Vision and Choice in Morality", Iris Murdoch (1997) writes about the importance of attention (see also Laugier, 2013b). She describes differences in ethics as differences of *Gestalt*: "Here moral differences look less like differences of choice, and more like differences of vision" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 82). Our conceptualizations depend, for their very application, on our vision of – as Murdoch puts it – what is important (what matters) to us (see Laugier, 2011c).

Importance lies in details, and a focus of attention to detail is another obvious feature of OLP that is also central to the ethics of care. The moral philosophy inspired by OLP displaces the field of study and methods of ethics from general principles to the examination of the particular. Individual perspectives draw attention to the

neglected aspects of life, or to invisible human beings – as Iris Murdoch (1997, pp. 80-81) puts it beautifully:

When we apprehend and assess other people we do not consider only their solutions to specifiable practical problems, we consider something more elusive which may be called their total vision of life, as shown in their mode of speech or silence, their assessments of others, their conception of their own lives, what they think attractive or praiseworthy, what they think funny: in short the configurations of their thought which show continually in their reactions and conversation.

For Murdoch, this vision is not a theoretical point of view but rather a sensitivity to the texture of being. This texture is not a matter of moral choices, but of “what matters,” what counts. As Diamond (1991) writes: “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” (p. 375).

The meaning of OLP does indeed lie in the recognition that language is used, spoken, by a human voice, and is our singular expressiveness through which we perpetually reveal and/or betray ourselves. It is clear that the contribution made by the ethics of care is to transform ethics into attention to the human life and to the practices in which language is caught. This notion of human life is also connected to Wittgenstein’s idea of a form of life as *lifeform* (as a form *taken by life*).

The definition of care as a “life-sustaining web” (Tronto & Fisher, 1990, p. 40) has again to be taken into account. The uncanniness of the ordinary, for Cavell, is not resolved in the return to everyday life and words; the ordinary is not a given to be “accepted”; it is defined by the permanent threat of denial of the human. Attention to the everyday, to what Das calls *the everyday life of the human*, is the first step in caring and also the basis of ordinary ethics.

Wittgenstein’s idea of a form of life/lifeform also defines a texture. “Texture” refers to an unstable reality that cannot be fixed by concepts but only by the recognition of gestures, manners, and styles. A form of life can be grasped only by attention to textures or moral patterns, perceived as “morally expressive” in/on the background provided by a form of life. Our capacity for moral expression is rooted in a mutable

form of life, vulnerable to our better and worse use of language. The type of interest, the care that we have for others, the importance that we give them, does not exist except through the possibility of the display or revelation of the self in its moral expression.

### **The Ethics of Care as Philosophy of the Expressiveness of Women**

Attention to ordinary expression and human voice and texture leads to re-considering the question of women's expression, which has been stifled or neglected and which finds its place in film (and, more recently, TV shows). OLP develops itself as an ethics and an aesthetics. Once again, ordinary language is not to be envisioned as having only a descriptive, or even an agentic function, but as a perceptual instrument that allows for refinement and adjustment of perceptions and actions.

I want to highlight Cavell's contribution to the question of what it is to *be* a woman (see Moi, 2005), to carry a woman's voice with his explanation of the concepts of expression and voice – concepts that are most crucial to his development of OLP. The history of feminism begins precisely with the experience of inexpressivity, with which John Stuart Mill (1859/1982) was concerned: situations in which one does not have a voice for making oneself understood because one has lost contact with one's own experience. Cavell has been clearly sensitive to the feminist tone in 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? (p. 6)

This is a description that captures all situations of loss of experience, language, and concepts (those can motivate a desire to exit this situation of loss of voice, to reclaim 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. Care, understood as attention and perception, is to be differentiated from a sort of suffocation of the

self by affect or devotion. It confronts us with our own inabilities and inattentions, but above all, it shows us how these inattentions are then translated into a theory about what matters. To cite Wittgenstein (1953, in paragraph 118): “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.”

Wittgenstein’s point about importance is also that the importance of the grammatical investigation lies precisely in “destroying everything great and interesting,” displacing our interests and our hierarchies. Here the “fervor” as identified and expressed in Cavell’s reading of Wittgenstein, its specificity, may be seen and heard as a refusal of a kind of male (or paternalistic) assertiveness in finding the right words, and the all-too-easy identification of the important with the masculine. The conversion required to put aside competing ideas of the important, to destroy our ideas of the important, is the condition of possibility for a place for women’s expression (accomplished with the emergence of the women’s voice in conversation, which Cavell studied in *Pursuits of Happiness* (1981) and especially in his book on “the melodrama of the unknown woman,” where he focuses on women’s expressivity (1997, p. 158).

Cavell finds in his autobiographical works, *Pitch of Philosophy* (1984a) and *Little Did I Know* (2010), a new attention to women through care for the voice. Attention to the ordinary voice makes OLP a liberating moment for women’s philosophical voices. Baier (1985b), a follower of both Empiricism and OLP, mentions in her paper “What Do Women Want in a Moral Theory” the fact that some moral Wittgensteinian philosophers should be called “honorary women.” Wittgenstein should similarly be acknowledged for “fathering” a long line of women philosophers: Anscombe, Murdoch, Foot, Diamond, Lovibond, Walker, Crary, and others.

In this approach of ordinary ethics there are no univocal moral concepts that have only to be applied to reality; 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 clumsy, awkward, and failed expression). At the center of care is our ability for (our disposition to) moral expression, which, as Cavell (and besides, also Charles Taylor) have 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 life and gives it *form*. The relation to others, the type of interest and care we have for them, the importance we give them, take on their meaning within the context of a possible unveiling (voluntary or not) of oneself.

Care is also specific attention to the invisible importance of things and moments: what Cavell (1984b) calls “the essential dissimulation of importance” which is part of what cinema educates us about. Cavell, in his work on film and in his autobiography (*Little Did I Know*), notes that the importance of film lies in its power to make what matters emerge. Film cultivates in us a specific ability to see the importance of things and moments, and it emphasizes the reviewing of the importance in our ordinary life. For importance is essentially what can be *missed* and may remain unseen until later, or possibly, forever. The structure of expression articulates the concealment *and* revelation of importance. This is the difficulty Cavell (1997) describes when he speaks of the temptation to inexpressiveness and isolation, and shows the essential vulnerability of human experience (another name for skepticism, expressed in the pre-feminist genre of “the melodrama of the unknown woman”). As Cavell says, “missing the evanescence of the subject,” failing to “guess the unseen from the seen,” is constitutive of our ordinary lives – and it is also the ordinary truth of skepticism. Acknowledging this consequence of skepticism, our own vulnerability, is a step toward genuine attention to ordinary life – care.

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 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. Thus, the ethics of care again joins OLP in a subversion of intellectual and ethical hierarchies. This perspective on care then leads us to explore the ways in which we – in *practice and* in theory – treat the demarcation of the spheres of personal relations (familial relations, but also love and friendship) and the so-called impersonal spheres of public relations, with their inevitable hierarchy: the political stakes of the ethics of care consist, again, in the ethical enablement of populations and categories that are assumed to be morally inferior. Tronto (2005) writes:

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. (p. 130)

OLP could lead us to go beyond the purely affective notion of care and, in the line of thought represented by Baier, Das, (and, besides, also Nussbaum), to engage in rephrasing ethics, not on the basis of grand principles, but rather on the basis of the fundamental needs of humans and women. The stakes of an ethics of care end up being epistemological by becoming political: an ethics of care seeks to highlight the connection between our lack of attention to neglected realities and the lack of theorization of these social realities, 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, OLP delves into this renewed and deepened attention to what we depend on, to what makes ordinary life possible (what makes us ordinary).

### Political Outcomes

Here, the usual alternative between justice and care turns out to be deeply misleading. Justice and care are two different tonalities, or

rival voices, existing inside each of us. The ethics of care does not aim at installing pity, compassion, solicitude and benevolence as subsidiary values that would lessen the hardness of an impartial conception of justice based on the primacy of rights attributed to autonomous, rational individuals. Rather, the ethics of care posits the obvious – an individual depends on others in a world that places high value on autonomy in both theory and practice. It even demonstrates that the most autonomous people are actually the most dependent (on all the help and support they get). It aims at the acknowledgment of an entire segment of common life that is systematically ignored in political discourse. Care is what makes our ordinary form of life possible. Tronto and Fisher (1990), in the definition quoted earlier, suggest that care should be defined (at the most general level) as a generic activity comprising all we do in order to perpetuate and repair our “world” so that we can live in it as best possible. Let’s quote them again: “This ‘world’ includes our bodies, our environment, and ourselves” (p. 40). Ethics, then, is not about how to live better or more virtuous or more rational lives, but simply, how to live an ordinary life in the world.

The ethics of care can help us rewrite the narrative about OLP, a strong philosophical tradition that has been neglected since 50 years. OLP challenges the understanding and hierarchy of concepts that shape out the space in which research in ethics is pursued, and dominant. OLP and the ethics of care bring together into question standard approaches in moral and political philosophy, and constitute an actual subversion.

Standard ethics and political analysis, in relation to the social contract, do not inquire as to how a society is made sustainable. It also carefully expel from ethics the world of fundamental care, and more generally speaking, all those actions that make ordinary social relations possible and alive. Neglecting the issue of care in ethics and politics amounts to ignoring the origin of what makes a moral society exist and endure: ignoring what makes our everyday lives, and ordinary language, possible, and alive. The question, again, is what the ordinary does to philosophy: it turns our attention to women. Attention to what we

mean and what we say and “care for our words” defines ordinary language as a resource for feminist thinking.

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