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Paradoxes in the Invisibility of Care Work

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ABSTRACT. My paper focuses on the theme of visibility by teasing out some paradoxes of invisibility. In the ordinary social world, what is said to be invisible is generally what is here, right before our eyes, but to which we pay no attention. Care is invisible because it goes on without us seeing it. By suddenly making visible what is ordinarily invisible, the COVID pandemic has been a strange pedagogical moment, making visible the people who take care of "us", and revealing our entire society's ignorance of what allows it to live—whether in the context of everyday life or in the urgency of the risk of death. The grammar of care has thus imposed itself on everyone, because care is never so visible as in those situations where a form of life is shaken. Care work has been revealed as invisible work that keeps everyone going. "Invisible" does not refer to a difficulty in perceiving but rather a refusal to see. A refusal to see something that is not hidden, but which we do not see precisely because it is right before our eyes. Invisibility is thus denial, in both the social and the theoretical realms, especially when care work is envisioned in the terms of the further invisibilization of care work when it is done for the benefit of women as in the "care drain" from poor to rich countries. The asymmetry in the relations between North and South is part of the invisibility of what

1. Translated by Daniela Ginsburg. I am extremely grateful to Matthew Congdon and to Alice Crary for their help in the revision of the draft.
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sustains societies. The invisible chains of care reveal the extent to which the question of service is the fundamental question of social invisibility.

Social struggles are now considered struggles for *visibility*: struggles to make either oppression or those who are oppressed visible. The idea of visibility has been added to that of *voice*: being visible means making oneself heard, managing to have a voice in society. But are the two in the same register? Can the question of the visible be as politically relevant as that of voice, which has always been tied to something concrete, whether it is a matter of a voice being stifled or a political voice being claimed? Does making oneself visible mean making oneself heard? Is to be invisible to disappear?

I would like to focus on this theme of visibility by teasing out some paradoxes of invisibility. In the microscopic world, what is invisible cannot be seen because it is too small. But in the social world, the ordinary world, what is said to be invisible is generally what is here, right before our eyes, but to which we pay no attention, in particular when it is a matter of work, because we have been trained to think that certain activities have no value or interest; we are largely convinced, for example, that sweeping, emptying the trash, or putting up with recalcitrant users/patients/clients takes no particular skill. Care is invisible because it goes on without us seeing it.

Invisibility is a theme in *Lupin*, a French television series that has met with unexpected worldwide success on Netflix. Assane, its Black protagonist and the spiritual successor of the legendary thief Arsène Lupin, constantly points out and mocks the racism of whites. In the first scene of the show, he plays on his invisibility as part of the cleaning staff of the Louvre (who are typically ignored because they belong to racial minorities), and then later, on his visibility, when he appears elegantly dressed at an auction where he purchases the famous "Queen's Necklace." To the seller who awkwardly says to him, after the auction, "I wasn't expecting a buyer like you," Assane responds pointedly, "Like me?" The seller, embarrassed, answers, "Uh . . . so young." In *Lupin*, Assane does not hesitate to attack people head-on for their racism or their colonialism; he does not hesitate to steal the diamonds of a wealthy white woman who initially gains our sympathy—until we realize the origin of these diamonds; she explains they came from "the Belgian Congo" and that her family had profited from resources of which the poor natives were simply ignorant.

Assane plays on the likelihood that the police will conflate him with other Black men when he burgles the Louvre, or when he sneaks into prison and takes the place of another prisoner—counting on the invisibility of Black people in France. At one point, Assane pretends to be an IT specialist in order to access the office of a police commissioner he suspects, and he is stopped by a bureaucrat who questions his "qualifications." Here again, he responds with condescension and self-assurance, and makes the suspicious bureaucrat feel guilty. By alternately invoking the invisible and the visible, the show *Lupin* and the actor who plays him

(Omar Sy, simultaneously discreet and charismatic) *educate* us on the very timely issue of invisibility.

Assane explains his strategy for the burglary of the Louvre to his accomplices in terms of taking advantage of their invisibility as Black and Arab men: "You looked at me, but you didn't see me"; "Those who are at the top don't see us, and that's how we're going to get rich." In his forays into "high society," or when he pretends to be a police officer, Assane is hypervisible. As part of the cleaning crew at the Louvre, he belongs to the invisible—just like his Senegalese father, now deceased, who was the chauffeur, and ultimately the victim, of the very wealthy Pellegrini family, who accused him of stealing, thus leading to his death. When Assane speaks of invisibility, he is also referring to his personal history and to domestic staff and other service professionals, who remain in the background, at the service and disposal of others.

VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE CARE WORK IN THE PANDEMIC

Lupin became the success that it is in the midst of the pandemic crisis. A vague collective guilty conscience emerged beginning in 2020: customers started to greet and thank cashiers to whom they previously would have paid no regard, paying for their groceries while talking on the phone. Before, they did not *see* the cashier; they also did not see the person they were speaking to on the phone, who was distant and invisible but clearly far more important than the visible person right before their eyes.

And then, all of a sudden, when the streets emptied out, we saw *them*—that is, we understood their importance, we grasped their indispensability: women on the front lines—doctors, nurses, cashiers—but also in domestic spaces—caretakers for children and for the infirm, housekeepers, and so on. And at the same time, it has largely been men, who have more flexibility in how they spend their time, who have saturated the public space with commentaries and scientific publications. The work of care, (primarily) done by women, has no doubt momentarily become *more visible*. But, during this crisis, their voices still have not been heard, and perhaps still will not be when it is over: a plurality of voices that are not aligned, that are sometimes dissonant because they are the voices of those who have done risky work, who have ensured the thankless upkeep of everyday life, and who are exhausted and fed up. Visible, but voiceless?

Today, women are mostly absent from the public space of the media and from political reflection and action, as if the crisis, which reveals their role, also keeps them at the edge of the discussion and hence invisible. In contrast, many male experts are speaking out, full of certainty and competence as they propose solutions to this crisis. This is an ongoing reminder of male domination in a world that is sustained by the work of women. It is also a patriarchal reminder of the monopoly of expertise and competence. In the intellectual field, men author the vast majority

of discussions and analyses of the consequences of COVID published in the media. They are publishing more than before, while women are publishing much less, and the number of articles submitted by women is dropping.[2]

To adopt the rhetoric deployed by many leaders, in times of crisis, women serve as a "reserve army" that can be "mobilized." Although there are more men among the sick, women are and will be massively impacted by the financial consequences of the crisis, and are its first victims today. In addition to the fact that they are often part-time workers and have to take material and mental responsibility for domestic tasks, they constitute the vast majority of single-parent family caregivers. Not to mention the overwhelming indifference of policy makers toward the elderly who die by the thousands in institutions; institutionalized old age concerns women above all. And if the publication rates of women academics and intellectuals have dropped precipitously during the pandemic, this tells us something about another aspect of the invisibility of women's work: gender inequalities in domestic labor, in the education of children, and in caring for the elderly and the vulnerable exist across all social classes and milieus.

By suddenly making visible what is ordinarily invisible, the COVID pandemic represents a strange pedagogical moment. The importance of care work and of the people who take care of "us" now appears to everyone, and our entire society's ignorance of what allows it to live—whether in the context of everyday life or in the urgency of the risk of death—is finally obvious. The pandemic has also revealed radical vulnerabilities. The vulnerability of institutions; the vulnerability of the species; the vulnerability of fragile populations who are precisely "on the frontlines"; but also the vulnerability of every individual who must fall back on their own resources and on their own home, without the myriad of people and "services" that usually accompany them: back to housework, tidying up, even schooling—services usually entrusted and outsourced to others.

The *grammar* of care has thus subtly imposed itself on everyone, because care is never so visible as in those situations where a form of life is shaken.[3] The first lesson of COVID is a sudden awareness of a reversal in the hierarchy of values that has been accepted for decades, and which the ethics of care has denounced. Care work has been revealed as invisible work that keeps everyone going—while remaining unacknowledged. What matters most to ordinary and professional life, what makes it possible? The work not only of caregivers, but also cleaners, garbage collectors, cashiers, delivery people, truck drivers—all the tasks that count the least on the scale of values. This sudden visibility is not yet social visibility.

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2. Caroline Kitchener, "Women Academics Seem to Be Submitting Fewer Papers during Coronavirus. 'Never Seen Anything like It,' Says One Editor," 2021, https://www.thelily.com, accessed March 9, 2021, https://www.thelily.com/women-academics-seem-to-be-submitting-fewer-papers-during-coronavirus-never-seen-anything-like-it-says-one-editor/.

3. Anne Lovell et al., *Face aux désastres: une conversation à quatre voix sur le care, la folie et les grandes détresses collectives* (Paris: Ithaque, 2013).

During lockdown, only delivery people, cleaners, and caregivers could be seen in the street—and yet we still do not see them.

In the crisis, women are both hypervisible and invisible. They are present on all fronts, as they are shown to us in the media: at their sewing machines making makeshift masks; holding a broom as they clean hospitals and the stores that are still open; at the bedsides of patients, whose well-being they ensure and whose lives they save; at the cash registers of the businesses that allow many of us to continue a normal life. There is an awareness of care, of the role of women and other "help" in our daily lives. It is the work of care that at the moment ensures the continuity of life. "Society must be defended," certainly. But those who defend it are the invisible ones who, until recently, were taken for granted as the hidden face of society; the "taken for granted" who make our lives possible. The sudden (concrete) *visibility of the invisible* also makes obvious the inversion of values that has long been operative in capitalist societies: what is actually most useful is what is most scorned, least valued.

Joan Tronto's political version of care emphasizes care as an *activity*, rather than limiting it to an affect, to the realm of feeling. As she and Berenice Fisher define it,

> 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. (Fisher and Tronto 1990, 40)

Care is at once a practical response to specific needs and a sensitivity to the ordinary details that matter in human life. Hence, care is something concrete that ensures the maintenance, conversation, conservation, and continuity of the human world and form of life. Care is attention, and the ethics of care calls our attention to phenomena that are commonly unseen although they are right before our eyes. Is "invisible" the right term here?

For the invisibility of care work is not only a matter of the multiple structural injustices that the epidemic has highlighted, the discrepancy between those who are comfortable in their second homes and those who are at work. It has to do with our entire society's lack of knowledge—or rather, active denial—of what keeps it alive in the sense of both what sustains daily life, and what makes it possible to face urgent life-threatening situations. The pandemic acts as a dispositive that makes usually discreet practices visible and raises awareness of the importance of care. What Stanley Cavell defined as two senses of "form of life," the biological and the social,[4] suddenly impose themselves on us: the life that is given

4. See Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), and Stanley Cavell's preface to that work. On forms of life, see Sandra Laugier, "Voice as Form of Life and Life Form," *Nordic Wittgenstein Review* (October 6, 2015): 63–82, and Sandra Laugier, "What Matters: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Importance," in *Stanley Cavell on Aesthetic Understanding*, ed. Garry L. Hagberg (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 167–94.

to us and that we may lose, and the ordinary life that is made possible or assisted by others. The continuum of care activities, so complex to explain in theory, is glaringly visible.

It is people like care assistants and nurses, cashiers and salespeople, who are most involved in the fight against COVID and in maintaining daily life—groups that are always around 80 percent women. Even hospital doctors are now predominantly women, as are general practitioners and pharmacists. The proportion of women continues to rise among retirement home employees and among cleaners. These women are indeed taken into consideration in the media, but only in proportion to the value given to the work of care: they are always described in an anecdotal way, in the "society" section of the newspaper, and their work is seen as secondary to the efforts of doctors and the deliberations of politicians. Women play a crucial role in the production of the domestic sphere and in maintaining the thread of ordinary life, but they are devalued and invisibilized just as ordinary life itself is devalued and invisibilized. We are therefore in an ambiguous situation: this work carried out mainly by women is still, or *even more*, invisible at the very moment when its importance is becoming clear in the eyes of all. The silencing/invisibilizing of women's contributions is (strangely) inseparable from their verbal acknowledgment.

What is at stake is not only recognition of care work or the sudden visibilization of that which was previously invisible. The health crisis is putting social protection (back) at the heart of our shared concerns, after it had been unseated by the drive to maximize financial profits, leading to obvious inequalities. Care has long been the name of precisely that which has been neglected and despised by public policies, and it is indeed the lack of attention (the lack of care) Western democratic governments have given over the last decade to all the sectors responsible for the care and protection of citizens (primarily the health sector, but also education, poverty, old age, and disability) that makes the fight against COVID so difficult.

INVISIBLE IMPORTANCE

Is the visibility of persons a visibility of oppression? As we have said, suddenly, care workers are visible in the public space; they stand out against the backdrop of empty streets under lockdown, just like Assane at his all-white boarding school or his father in the Pellegrini's home. So why "invisible"? Invisible here does not refer to a difficulty in perceiving but rather a refusal to see. A refusal to see something that is not *hidden*, but which we do not see precisely because it is right before our eyes. Invisible because all too visible. Invisibility is thus *denial*, in both the social and the theoretical realms, and this is what makes the subject difficult.

The idea of a public constituted by and for care implies a new form of education in attention, something Foucault had called for: to shift from the constant attempt and temptation to discover invisible stakes within collective and public

representations to a simple will to *see the visible*,[5] to see realities that have escaped remark because they are in fact so close to us.

As Foucault wrote:

> 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.[6]

Even though care is all around us, it tends to be relegated to the sphere of the domestic or the private. We don't see care because it is confined to the spaces of private life: the home, nursing homes, childcare centers—behind the doors that close private life off from normal public life. In *In a Different Voice*, Carol Gilligan showed that the moral dimension that exists within private spaces is devalued and excluded from what has been considered morality, thus contributing to theory's blindness to care. The ethics of care Gilligan called for represents nothing less than a paradigm shift in ethics, a valorization of the domestic and private in relation to the public and a shift from the "just" to the "important." But measuring the importance of care for human life requires first acknowledging the truth that human life forms are fundamentally vulnerable, subject to failure. Seeing care reveals our vulnerability—another reason for denying or obscuring it.

The perspective of care, by calling our attention to our general situation of dependence and by showing us who we count on to compensate for our vulnerabilities, is thus indissociably political and ethical; it develops an analysis of social relations organized around dependence and vulnerability—blind spots of the ethics of justice. Annette Baier has shown that contempt for care activities has made the liberal conception of morality and justice incomplete, for it is doomed to posit a problematic heterogeneity between society in its moral dimension and that which perpetuates it[7] (daily and invisible care; the production of the everyday environment). Thus, the invisibility of care in moral theory condemns a society to ignore the source of its own conservation as a moral society, and therefore reinforces or justifies ordinary indifference to care work in societies.[8]

In response to the "original position" described by Rawls,[9] the perspective of care sets our "original condition" of vulnerability as the anchor point of moral

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5. Sandra Laugier, "The Will to See: Ethics and Moral Perception of Sense," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 34, no. 2 (2013): 263–82; Sandra Laugier, "What Matters: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Importance," in *Stanley Cavell on Aesthetic Understanding*, ed. Garry L. Hagberg (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 167–94.
6. Michel Foucault, "La philosophie analytique de la politique," in *Dits et écrits*, ed. Daniel Defert, vol. 3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 540–41.
7. Annette Baier, "What Do Women Want in a Moral Theory," in *Moral Prejudices: Essays on Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).
8. Sandra Laugier, *Tous vulnérables?: le care, les animaux et l'environnement* (Paris: Editions Payot & Rivages, 2012).
9. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

and political thought. This anchor point is not a position on which to build an ideal theory or base principles, but rather the mere fact of vulnerability, apparent in what Cora Diamond names "the difficulty of reality." This is something that is obvious in the contexts of extreme social suffering that Veena Das's *Life and Words*[10] describes, when violence destroys the everyday and the sense of life itself, and it can also be seen more generally in situations of disaster. By revealing the vulnerability of people—of all humans—the perspective of care conveys an ethical and political ambition: not only active benevolence toward those who are close to us, but also an education in the perception and the valorization of human activities. In the exposure of forms of life that a disaster situation brings about, the truth of our dependencies emerges. Autonomy, so vaunted by philosophers—and by feminists as well—turns out to be an optical illusion: the autonomy of some is made possible by the work of others.

The ethics of care provides a new understanding of human vulnerability. This vulnerability is universal, but it is unequally distributed, as is obvious today in looking at the statistics on COVID.[11] In France, an INSEE study has shown that mortality from COVID is twice as high for people born abroad than for those born in France.[12] Moreover, this vulnerability is denied and is itself invisibilized by care work in everyday life. Care work is rendered invisible as soon as we begin to see it. This is a deeper paradox, and a political one: invisibility is reinforced by new visibility.

Redefining morality on the basis of what matters and its relation to vulnerability constitutes, in a new sense, an ethics of the *particular*, and of *attention* to the particular. Attention to the everyday is the first step in caring. Care is a practice, not a moral feeling or disposition: you *see* the world differently. Gilligan uses the Wittgensteinian duck-rabbit image. Joan Tronto explains that the world will look different:

> Care is everywhere, and it is so pervasive a part of human life that it is never seen for what it is: activities by which we act to organize our world so that we can live in it as well as possible. When we get down to the ways that we actually live our lives, care activities are central and pervasive. How different the world looks 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.[13]

For Iris Murdoch, our ability to care is "unsentimental, detached, unselfish, objective attention."[14] It results from the development of a perceptual capacity: the

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10. Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).
11. See: https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/investigations-discovery/hospitalization-death-by-race-ethnicity.html; https://sitn.hms.harvard.edu/flash/2020/racial-disparities-in-covid-19/.
12. https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/4627049.
13. Joan C. Tronto, Foreword to the French edition of *Moral Boundaries: Un Monde vulnérable: pour une politique du care*, 14.
14. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Routledge, 1970), 64.

ability to see how a detail or a gesture stands out against a background. One can refer to a cluster of words here, the whole language game of care and importance, of what matters, that must be connected to the language game of visibility. It is useless, and even fatal, to make someone or something *visible* without making them or it *matter*. The result would be to make the person or thing more invisible, even definitively invisible. As Murdoch puts it:

> 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.[15]

For Murdoch, this vision is not a "point of view" but rather a sensitivity to the texture of being, which is not a matter of moral choices, but rather of what counts.[16] As Cora Diamond writes, in the same spirit: "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."[17] The relation of the definition of ethics to what matters has been emphasized by Cavell in his discussion of cinema and the movies that *matter* to us:

> 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 those objects and people that are in fact to be found in the succession of films, or passages of films, that matter to us.[18]

Care is a specific attention to the *invisible* importance of things and moments: to what Cavell calls "the essential dissimulation of importance,"[19] which is part of what cinema educates us about. Cavell notes that the importance of film lies in its power to make what matters emerge: "to magnify the feeling and meaning of a moment." Film cultivates in us a specific ability to see the importance of things and moments, and it emphasizes the covering over of importance in our ordinary life. For importance is essentially what can be *missed* and may remain unseen until later, or possibly, forever. The pedagogy of film, while it amplifies the

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15. Iris Murdoch, "Vision and Choice in Morality," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Iris Murdoch and Peter J. Conradi (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997), 80–81.
16. For an understanding of texture, see Veena Das, *Textures of the Ordinary: Doing Anthropology after Wittgenstein* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020).
17. Cora Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 375.
18. Stanley Cavell, "What Becomes of Things on Film?" in *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 182.
19. Stanley Cavell, *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 11.

significance of moments, also reveals to us viewers the "inherent concealment of significance."[20]

> 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.[21]

Failure to pay attention to details, and to what is important in details, is, it turns out, as much a moral failure as a cognitive one. We may discover importance not only through accurate and refined perception, but also through our personal failures to perceive:

> 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 that there is something to be guessed and traced, right or wrong—requires that we persistently coarsen and stupefy ourselves.[22]

As Cavell puts it, "missing the evanescence of the subject," failing to "guess the unseen from the seen," is a lived form of skepticism, constitutive of our ordinary lives. Acknowledging our own vulnerability instead of "persistently stupefying ourselves" is a step toward genuine attention to ordinary life. Film, for Cavell, educates our attention. TV series too. The care that Cavell advocates is specific care for and attention to the invisible importance of things and moments: attention to the systematic concealment of what matters in ordinary life. Film allows us to overcome this concealment. What Cavell notes about the popular culture of the twentieth century is true today of the best TV shows, which call our attention to neglected situations or persons,[23] and also to our own inabilities to see: works such as *Lupin*, *When They See Us* (Ava DuVernay, 2019), and *A Teacher* (Hannah Fidell, 2020) reveal forgotten injustices (without claiming to redeem them) but also put our own blindness (to race or abuse) before our eyes.

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20. Stanley Cavell, "The Thought of Movies," in *Themes out of School: Effects and Causes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 11. See also Sandra Laugier, "What Matters: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Importance," in *Stanley Cavell on Aesthetic Understanding*, ed. Garry L. Hagberg (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 167–94.
21. Cavell, "The Thought of Movies," 11.
22. Cavell, "The Thought of Movies," 14.
23. Sandra Laugier, "The Conception of Film for the Subject of Television: Moral Education of the Public and a Return to an Aesthetics of the Ordinary," in *The Thought of Stanley Cavell and Cinema: Turning Anew to the Ontology of Film a Half-Century after The World Viewed*, ed. David LaRocca (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

Cavell taught us that skepticism is not so much a question of invisibility as of blindness or avoidance.[24] Similarly, the notion of care points to a specific blindness or "coarsening" in contemporary moral and political thought: blindness to the conditions of its own development within the human form of life. 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, but also love and friendship) and the so-called impersonal spheres of public relations. The whole point of the ethics of care is that this hierarchy between the public and the private spheres is gendered: domestic life is seen as inferior, not even subject to ethics or politics—and of course, it is the place where women provide care work for free. Gilligan's "different voice" calls for an acknowledgment of the realm of the private, of ordinary life, as producing ethical relevance.

By calling for a society in which caregivers would have moral relevance, and in which the tasks of care would not be structurally invisible, the ethics of care brings to light the *difficulty* of thinking these social realities. The ethical affirmation of the importance and dignity of care cannot go without a political reflection on the allocation of resources and on the social distribution of tasks defined by this allocation. The very low wages paid to care workers are a constant reminder of male domination in a world that is supported by the invisible work of women and minorities. Without economic acknowledgment and valuation, visibility is merely an empty word.

Caroline Criado Perez, in *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*,[25] explains that 29 million articles were published about Zika and Ebola, but that less than 1 percent of them concerned the gendered impact of those epidemics. Will we do better with COVID?[26] The issue of invisibility is inseparably moral, epistemological, *economic*, and *ecological*. And what is invisibilized today is the sphere of the ordinary environment. The COVID health crisis, as dramatic as it is, is similar to other health and environmental disasters to come. Just as when moral theory ignores care it condemns society to ignorance of the very source of that which perpetuates it as a moral society, any ethics of the environment that ignores the ways in which human beings are critically dependent on their environment will condemn us to ignorance of that which actually sustains humans in their relation to the environment. In contrast to the mainstream idea of sustainable development, which is connected to the imperative to maintain

24. Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

25. Caroline Criado-Perez, *Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men* (New York: Abrams Press, 2019.

26. Clare Wenham, Julia Smith, and Rosemary Morgan, "COVID-19: The Gendered Impacts of the Outbreak," *Lancet* 395, no. 10227 (March 14, 2020): 846–48, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30526-2.

developed societies' standards of living, care provides an entirely different understanding of indispensability, one associated with a more complete and realistic view of vulnerable—that is, dependent—human and nonhuman animals.[27]

The *ordinary environment* (domestic, household, agricultural, everyday, etc.) is itself invisible, and is sometimes disqualified from what counts as the environment, on the pretext that it is often urban, or lacks "environmental" qualities. As early as the 2000s, it was noted that environmentalist concerns connected to the protection of everyday environments lacked visibility. This is because it is women who contribute massively to the reproduction of the human species in all activities related to the education of children, domestic work, and care for others, who occupy a central place in this ecology of everyday life.

Ordinary environmentalism, made up of individual and collective forms of life and mobilizations that structure the production of the environment, is first and foremost the work of women, whose role is crucial in this domestic sphere that extends to the environment. In addition, now as in the past, the formal and informal collectives that participate in protecting the local environment, and in particular in movements against large urban projects, are largely female—and usually invisible.[28] The ordinary environment, as an everyday living environment, difficult or unexciting to represent in the media, is linked to the devaluation of women. It is the permanent invisibilization of women's conditions of existence and production that holds together an unsustainable socio-environmental system, at the cost of increasingly glaring socio-environmental inequalities. In contrast, rescuing extraordinary biodiversity, rare species and spaces, offers new areas of adventure to a predominantly male subset of the population. The media has an immediate interest in the spectacular activities of such people, who in turn use their media visibility to sustain their activities to "save the planet." Visible men, invisible women, this time at the planetary level.

While the current crisis highlights the importance of women's work in times of disaster, it should also raise awareness of the essential role women around the world play in the production of the environment in which we live. This essential work of women in sustaining forms of life has been analyzed in terms of invisible environmental production by the science fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin in her pioneering essay from 1989, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," where she writes:

> "The first cultural device was probably a recipient. . . . Many theorizers feel that the earliest cultural inventions must have been a container to hold gathered products and some kind of sling or net carrier."

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27. I am not including animal care in the discussion although it is an obvious point, which I don't want to just mention superficially. This whole study is a companion to Alice Crary's *Inside Ethics: On the Demands of Moral Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

28. Nathalie Blanc and Flaminia Paddeu, "L'environnementalisme ordinaire. Transformer l'espace public métropolitain à bas bruit ?" *EspacesTemps.Net Electronic Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences.*, April 5, 2018, https://www.espacestemps.net/en/articles/lenvironnementalisme-ordinaire-transformer-lespace-public-metropolitain-a-bas-bruit/.

> So says Elizabeth Fisher in Women's Creation (McGraw-Hill, 1975) . . . for what's the use of digging up a lot of potatoes if you have nothing to lug the ones you can't eat home in—with or before the tool that forces energy outward, we made the tool that brings energy home. It makes sense to me. I am an adherent of what Fisher calls the Carrier Bag Theory of human evolution.[29]

Hence, according to Le Guin, the need to first think about the contribution of women to resources in terms of collecting, and the invisibility of these activities in the history of humanity. She reminds us to what extent we need containers as much as visible *content* to sustain a society. The focus on the spear rather than on the basket has until now been synonymous with the power bestowed on hunters at the same time as the invisibility of women growers. It has led to making visible in public space the heroes who hunt from time to time, rather than the heroines who cultivate, harvest, and clean *all the time*. In short, changing our focus allows us to think about the division of moral labor, and the division between visible and invisible labor.

It is not a coincidence that the groundbreaking work on the subject was written by a woman, Rachel Carson, whose 1962 book *Silent Spring* detailed the harmful effects of pesticides on the environment. The metaphor again is of a call to attention. And today it is eco-feminists from the South who are renewing environmental thought by showing how, in countries suffering from the legacy of colonial domination, the environmental consequences of development weigh heaviest on women. Eco-feminism has made it possible to distinguish between "mainstream," visible environmentalism—that of the protection of natural spaces, characteristic of Western white elites—and an invisible environmentalism "of the poor," which is concerned with pollution, environmental inequalities, and vulnerable populations, and is rooted in disadvantaged countries. This ordinary environmentalism is that of the less privileged, of racial minorities, and of dominated social strata, and it takes into account a world of diverse activities that make ordinary lives possible: domestic work and agriculture, reproductive work, the raising of children, waste collection and treatment, the processing of living animals for food, the exploitation of the resources of distant countries.

Attention to care forces us to see the North's privileged form of life as maintained by the activity of care workers as well as by the siphoning of resources from people from the South who ensure the maintenance of life and the standards of living of the privileged, beginning with the exploitation of women who have migrated to perform the "service" care that can be delegated and purchased in the North. To ignore gender inequality and care work is to neglect what comprises the substrate of disasters. It is also to neglect the possibilities of cultural transformation involved in seeing and recognizing all the invisible services rendered by

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29. Ursula K. Le Guin, 1986 "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," The Anarchist Library, accessed March 9, 2021, https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/ursula-k-le-guin-the-carrier-bag-theory-of-fiction.

humans, nature, and animals. The denial of "dirty work" is the same denial that causes us to "forget" the slaughterhouses that provide food for so many of us.[30] The same invisibility affects women, the environment, and animals in the food industry: the same negation of the resources that allow societies to live. This brings us back to the ordinary reality of *work to maintain life*, which largely falls to women at the global scale and thus is subject to particular exploitation.

In this context, we may consider the notion of eco-systemic services, that is, *services performed by nature* or the benefits that humans derive from ecosystems. It is crucial to emphasize the gendered dimension in how eco-systemic services are perceived and used. It is primarily women who collect and provide water and wood, process food products, and cook. It is as if we take for granted, *together*, the services[31] provided by women, animals, and nature, without ever giving them a voice, or taking them into consideration in political decisions. Here we touch on the crucial issue of social and political invisibility: it is a denial of services rendered. The challenge is now to fight the invisibilization of care work carried out by women, which goes hand-in-hand with the invisibilization of the overexploitation of environments, animals, and the populations of the South. The current COVID crisis is rich in lessons for taking into account the consequences of the invisibility of women, in the North and in the South.

INVISIBLE CHAINS OF CARE

We get a sense of how difficult it is to translate the invisible into the visible in the discomfort we may feel in the face of discourses that call ordinary providers of care *heroes*—and not only because of the hypocrisy of praising these providers without raising their salaries. Herein lies all the difficulty of the ethics of care and the valorization of the ordinary, the discreet, the "low." Like Assane-Lupin, we might well accept and enjoy being invisible—but on the condition that we not be devalorized as a result, and have the choice to be visible or invisible; have a choice in the forms by which we render ourselves visible, which are often stories, narratives that go into detail, into the flesh of the ordinary world, and which leave room for unforeseen bifurcations, reversals, the uncertainty of feelings and their inevitable ambiguity. Still, valorizing the shadows in which women are kept would mean changing an entire system of values. Merely sublimating (or aestheticizing or moralizing) the ordinary does not on its own mean contesting the implicit hierarchy of what is important: a true valorization of the ordinary requires not only its *visibilization* but also its acknowledgment.

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30. Cora Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 1, no. 2 (2003): 1–26.

31. Geneviève Fraisse, *Service ou servitude: essai sur les femmes toutes mains* (Latresne: Bord de l'eau, 2009).

Invisibility can be a choice, as *Lupin*—and many instances of *discreet* human forms of life—have taught us. The devaluation of care work is linked to ignorance of this kind of work as a profession. As if anyone could do this work, since it is an extension of domestic work, long considered not to be work. All the women making an effort to keep the world together, to recreate the ordinary in the context of the pandemic, are not credited with any expertise, with any competence that could reorganize the world. But care work requires exceptional skills, and making it visible means recognizing these skills. As the French psychologist Pascale Molinier[32] has shown, to be effective, care work must be effaced as work—its success depends on its invisibility. In order to avoid tiring or annoying the person suffering and at the same time to save oneself any unnecessary gestures or movements, one must know how to anticipate demand and *conceal* the efforts made and the work done to achieve the desired result. This can take quite trivial forms: for example, putting a glass of water within easy reach, or instead of saying, "you look so tired," pulling out a chair. This type of know-how is always involved in care for the psychological comfort of the other. But discreet know-how mobilizes technical knowledge, as when a (good) nurse hands the surgeon she is "serving" the right instrument at the right time, before he has to go to the trouble of asking for it, just as a (good) secretary prepares the right files (without being asked), on the basis of her boss's schedule. Such tactful, careful know-how has to do with the "fit" and harmony Cavell discovers in ordinary language uses: it is involved, for example, in not telling parents that a special event like their child's first steps has taken place in their absence, or finding the right words or tone with which to do so.[33] These skills are *discreet* in the sense that, to achieve their goal, the means used must not attract the attention of the person who benefits from them. The result is that care is most visible when it is missing, or bad. Care work is hypervisible in its absence: when it is not done, *it shows*, as when the trash has not been collected or a child has not been picked up from school. What defines it (as good care, as work done well) is discretion. And this discretion is the source of its devaluation.

The intrinsic invisibility of care work well done results in a chronic deficit of recognition. Being recognized for it is quite rare, although the *hope* of being recognized plays a fundamental role in being able to continue working, remaining invested in what one does, overcoming fears of getting sick. The fact that care work must be *erased* as work, that it must not let itself appear, contributes to its being undervalued in the register of doing and overvalued in the register of being. But invisibility and discretion must be acknowledged as important, for they define care work done well.

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32. Pascale Molinier, "Le care à l'épreuve du travail," in *Le souci des autres: éthique et politique du care*, ed. Patricia Paperman and Sandra Laugier (Paris: EHESS, 2011).

33. Stanley Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

Discreet know-how goes hand-in-hand with the justification of service work on the grounds of the "love" the provider has for the beneficiary. This is the case with immigrant nannies from southern countries who leave their own children to take care of children in northern countries.[34] The invisibility of these children is, as we shall see in the conclusion, another crucial form of invisibility connected to care.

This is a reminder of the importance of rethinking care and outsourcing or service together. If the question of care is at last bursting into the public sphere with COVID, it is in part because the massive entry of women into the labor market has put traditional ways of providing care in crisis, but it is also because the current lockdowns and restrictions put each woman back in front of her "dirty work." It no longer works to outsource it for it to disappear. In fact, the empowerment of certain women—through work, and at the same time through the development of childcare systems, etc.—has been achieved not by transferring tasks to men, or by a better distribution of tasks, but by putting other women in the service of women (and of men too, still). The point here is not to ironize about the women who have become employers (and it is usually up to them to bear the moral and administrative burden of home-based employment). Rather, as is the case with the paradoxes of care, it is to show again what is right before our eyes: the care tasks that traditionally fall to women still exist even if some women are exempt from them, and men are taking not greater but less and less part in them. Domestic work is increasingly performed by immigrant and devalued populations, which again perpetuates the moral devaluation of care work and the moral categorizations that go with it. What the sociologist Lewis Coser called in the 1970s the "obsolescence of domesticity"[35] (the disappearance of "domestics" from US society) and which he attributed to the rise of democratic values, turns out to be the social invisibilization of domestic work.

The ethics of care is a powerful method for revealing the *further* invisibilization of care work when it is done for the benefit of women (which may explain some feminists' resistance to the concept of care). This inequality between women is revealed by the "care drain" from poor to rich countries. "Drain" because in many countries of the South, there is now a shortage of caregivers, who for the most part have gone to work in the countries of the North. But this leaves their countries of origin facing a chronic shortage of personnel in the health sector. In the Philippines, for example, nearly 10 percent of the population works overseas and sends money home, and nursing is one of the most popular jobs. Each year, around 13,000 nurses leave to work abroad. Migrant nurses have played a very important role in helping countries like Spain, Britain, and Italy fight the virus. Women from Asia, Eastern Europe, and Africa have come to serve as nannies, all-

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34. Arlie Russell Hochschild, "Love and Gold," in *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids and Sex Workers in the New Economy*, ed. Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild (New York: Henry Holt, 2002), 24.

35. Lewis A. Coser, "Servants: The Obsolescence of an Occupational Role," *Social Forces* 52, no. 1 (1973): 31–40.

around maids, and sex workers,[36] leaving behind other dependent people, including their own children. This immigration, which reduces the deficit of care in rich countries, amounts to a loss of care for poor countries.

I will conclude with a fieldwork study by the sociologist Caroline Ibos.[37] In a working-class suburb of Abidjan, Adja, a 14-year-old girl, works for the family of her aunt Aminata. From morning to night, she does household chores and takes care of Aminata's children; Aminata herself works 10 hours a day as a domestic worker in Mana's house, a villa in the Riviera, a residential neighborhood of the Ivorian city. In the midst of a political and economic crisis, Mana has managed to maintain her family's standard of living and to increase her business activities. She has also been raising her grandchildren ever since her daughter, Sylvie, left for Paris, where she is employed as a nanny by Charlotte, a lawyer overwhelmed by her work and family life. Like hundreds of thousands of women from southern countries over the past twenty years, Sylvie has left her young children in her country of origin to come and take care of the house and children of a well-to-do family in a northern metropolis.

After five years in France, Sylvie had another child; now, every day before going to take care of Charlotte's children in central Paris, she drops off her daughter near the Porte de Chapelle, with Awa. Awa is from Mali and has come to France thanks to the law authorizing family reunifications. Her husband, a parking attendant, does not let her work outside her home, so she welcomes into her two-room apartment the children of African nannies from the neighborhood: five children in addition to her own three. Awa left Fatoumata, her disabled mother whom she used to look after, in Bamako; with the money orders that her daughter sends each month, Fatoumata pays Bintou. In addition to taking care of Fatoumata, Bintou is responsible for all the domestic chores of several families who share the same courtyard. While Bintou works for Fatoumata, her eldest daughter, Aïcha, who dropped out of school at 13, takes care of her siblings and the family home.

In this way, across two continents and three countries, seven women and 15 children with different histories, social status, and cultures are *linked* to each other—and these links create invisibility. Sylvie's children are invisible to Charlotte. Aïcha, at the end of the chain, is the most invisible and vulnerable. Arlie Hochschild has proposed the concept of "global care chains"[38] to refer to these networks by which women delegate the care of vulnerable persons to one another. The corollary to these chains of care has been the emergence of a large, worldwide, and invisible market of care.

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36. Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild, eds., *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids and Sex Workers in the New Economy* (New York: Henry Holt, 2002).
37. Caroline Ibos, *Qui gardera nos enfants: les nounous et les mères, une enquête* (Paris: Flammarion, 2012).
38. Arlie Russell Hochschild, "Global Care Chains and Emotional Surplus Value," in *On the Edge: Living with Global Capitalism*, ed. Anthony Giddens and Will Hutton (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000), 130–46.

From North to South, care chains are defined by care work, its invisibility, and its devaluation. Invisibility has changed frame. Care work, previously done silently and for free by women inside the home, is now outsourced. The large market for the care of others may be capable of solving certain problems in the countries of the North, but it creates new, unseen ones in the countries of the South.

In a famous study, the sociologist Rhacel Parrenas showed that in the Philippines, the mass emigration of women has resulted in a depletion of care resources that could disrupt society.[39] The observation of this asymmetry in the relations between North and South reinforces my earlier point about *the invisibility of what sustains societies*. Having plundered the natural resources of the South, exploited the physical strength of its population first through slavery and then through migrations linked to industrialization, the North now endeavors to extract emotional and affective wealth from it. In both cases, it is the invisibilization of these resources that is the weapon of their plunder. Rather than fighting for a more egalitarian distribution of domestic tasks, women, including feminists, delegate them to other women inside the home.

More than anything, these invisible chains of care reveal the extent to which the question of service is the fundamental question of social invisibility. Let us therefore hope that the current crisis will bring awareness of the essential role of women, and of the threats posed to all by the invisibilization of their contributions and by contempt for the tasks of daily care, a contempt currently so well rooted in both society and theory.

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39. Rhacel Salazar Parrenas, "The Care Crisis in the Philippines: Children and Transnational Families in the New Global Economy," in *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids and Sex Workers in the New Economy*, ed. Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild (New York: Henry Holt, 2002), 39–54.

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