

## INTERVIEW

# Wittgenstein and Feminism

## *Alice Crary in Conversation with Mickaëlle Provost*

Mickaëlle.Provost(at)univ-paris1.fr

Alice Crary is a moral and social philosopher who has written widely on issues in metaethics, moral psychology and normative ethics, philosophy and feminism, critical animal studies, critical disability studies, critical philosophy of race, philosophy and literature, and Critical Theory. She has written on philosophers such as John L. Austin, Stanley Cavell, Cora Diamond, John McDowell, Iris Murdoch and Ludwig Wittgenstein. This is the first of two parts of the interview with Crary conducted in a single exchange in the first weeks of January 2022, where she discusses ordinary language philosophy and feminism, Wittgenstein’s conception of mind and its relation to feminist ethics, the link between Wittgenstein and Critical Theory, and her own views about efforts to bring about social and political transformations. The second part on “Wittgenstein and Critical Theory” is published in the regular issue 11 of NWR.

**Keywords:** feminist epistemology; objectivity; care; vulnerability; poststructuralism; ordinary language philosophy

PROVOST: In *Beyond Moral Judgment* and *Inside Ethics*, you suggest that Wittgenstein’s contributions to thought about objectivity are helpful for thinking about ethics and politics. You propose a “wider” conception of objectivity, capable of enriching feminist theory. Could you describe this conception of objectivity and comment on its interest?

CRARY: “Wider objectivity” is a term I introduced when I was first defending a morally and politically consequential philosophical worldview, decisive for my thinking, that is jarringly out of synch with the contemporary *Zeitgeist*. Our age’s standard outlooks feature the idea that getting the world in view means pursuing point-of-

viewlessness, and so working toward dispassionateness and value-neutrality. I proposed the term “narrower objectivity” for the metaphysical counterpart of this epistemic idea, and I spoke of a contrasting “wider conception of objectivity” in discussing the metaphysic at play when we treat bringing worldly things into focus as an engaged exercise that requires virtues such as experienced judgment and perspectival flexibility.

Wittgenstein’s later work, as I read it, contains resources for this shift in philosophical worldview. It’s not that Wittgenstein uses “objectivity” as a term of art. But one of his signature achievements is ferreting out with great thoroughness some of the deepest sources of philosophical resistance to the view that our sensitivities contribute internally to undistorted mental contact with the world. Another achievement is attacking with devastating focus considerations that have seemed to many to speak against this view. There are, to be sure, additional modern thinkers who undertake projects along these lines. Alongside other figures in the tradition of ordinary language philosophy, such as J.L. Austin, this includes figures in the traditions of, say, post-Kantian German idealism and American pragmatism. Still, a relentless philosophical case for the transition to a widely objective worldview is one of Wittgenstein’s hallmarks.

There are straightforward links between efforts to “widen” received understandings of objectivity and core themes of many twentieth and twenty-first century discourses of liberation, including feminist ones. When I first sounded Wittgensteinian themes in exploring the idea that thought about the world is an engaged business, I was guided by sympathy with the work of feminist and other social justice-oriented theorists, above all, with these theorists’ often Marx-inspired claims about the cognitive power of perspectives of the oppressed. I was searching for tools to make such claims palatable within Anglo-American analytic philosophy, the site of my training and a tradition to a great extent organized by assumptions that impede these claims’ reception.

An image of Wittgenstein as an ally to discourses of liberation will seem to some like a crude misrepresentation. It is at odds with claims, in circulation since the years just after his death, about how

he and other ordinary language philosophers held philosophically and politically blinkered views with reactionary ramifications. The story about how the now familiar idea of Wittgenstein's conservatism was propagated is quite colorful. One major episode is the publication of Ernest Gellner's 1959 *Words and Things*, which represented ordinary language philosophers, and, above all, Wittgenstein, as favoring a damagingly restrictive approach to philosophical and political questions. The fact that Gellner's book was interpretatively weak, and that it included *ad hominem* attacks, didn't stop it from having a large and enthusiastic reception. When Gilbert Ryle, the editor of *Mind*, pointed to the book's "personal animadversions" as grounds for refusing to have it reviewed in the journal, it became an international *cause célèbre*.

Congenial readings that represent Wittgenstein as, if not advocating politically conservative ideas, at least urging that established modes of thought and speech are sacrosanct, have become a fixture of discussions of his philosophy in the intervening sixty years. But they have long co-existed with textually better-grounded interpretations that bluntly challenge any suggestion of critique-impeding tendencies. This opposing trend gets its start with Stanley Cavell's evocations of Wittgenstein's later philosophy in some arrestingly original essays in the 1960s, and it subsequently comes to include contributions of philosophers such as Hannah Pitkin, Cora Diamond and Hilary Putnam. It was in the context of engaging with these thinkers' non-standard approaches that I initially turned to Wittgenstein in relation to feminist and other critical theories.

PROVOST: Can the epistemic orientation you ascribe to Wittgenstein be articulated within feminist standpoint theories and the anchoring in lived experiences to which these theories aspire?

CRARY: Standpoint theories were among the feminist projects that originally interested me, and early on I closely followed discussions of the work of standpoint theorists such as Nancy Hartsock and Sandra Harding. Standpoint theories claim that we have to explore standpoints that members of oppressed groups are made to occupy

in order to grasp politically salient features of the social world. These theories assume that perspectival resources directly contribute to bringing the world into focus, and, in a couple of places, I set out to show how strands of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy equip us to bring out the philosophical soundness of this key assumption.

My terminology for talking about these topics has changed over time. When I was getting started, in the early aughts, I didn’t speak of “feminist standpoint theory” in my own voice. This label was then sometimes associated with politically noxious racist, ableist, trans-exclusive and generally elitist assumptions that point confusedly toward a single ‘standpoint of women’, obscuring social differences among women that are functions of subjection to multiple, crossing forms of bias. I rejected the label out of respect for politically crucial insights, pivotal for the work of many Black feminists, that are now often picked out with Kimberlé Crenshaw’s moniker “intersections”.

Today the label “feminist standpoint theory” has to some degree been reclaimed, and there is greater acceptance of the idea that it applies to theories that, while representing perspectives women are made to adopt as cognitively necessary, also reflect the complex interplay among the different modes of oppression women confront. Though I didn’t speak this way then, my early concern was finding philosophical resources to affirm the insights of feminist standpoint theories in this intersectional sense.

PROVOST: Is the feminist stance you have developed on the basis of Wittgensteinian themes at odds with the dominant strategies in moral philosophy?

CRARY: Wittgenstein’s philosophy, on my preferred reading of it, goes against the grain of mainstream analytic philosophy in ways that include conflict with dominant strategies in ethics. So, yes, my style of inheriting from Wittgenstein for feminist theory is inseparable from an oppositional stance to dominant trends in moral philosophy.

The key Wittgensteinian theme is that we need non-neutral resources in order to get the world into focus. To accept this is to reject an entrenched metaphysical outlook characterized by, in the

words of historian of science Lorraine Daston, “the moral evacuation of nature”. This metaphysic is the source of the idea of a “naturalistic fallacy in ethics”, and, for all their differences, the currently best represented ethical approaches, including various familiar consequentialisms, standard takes on Kant’s ethical theory, and even some virtue-based theories, are organized by commitment to this idea.

Not that there are no contrary voices within analytic ethics. A group of women philosophers who were at Oxford in the immediately post-World War II years, Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley and Iris Murdoch, have been among the most outspoken in laying down paths in ethics that cleanly depart from the idea of a sharp is/ought divide. Philosophical attention to the work of these women philosophers, which has increased markedly over the last decade, is at a high point now with the emergence of two monographs that consider them as a group. Benjamin Lipscombe has just come out with *The Women are up to Something*, and Claire MacCumhaill and Rachael Wiseman’s *Metaphysical Animals* is due out next month. Since Anscombe, Foot, Midgley and Murdoch count Wittgenstein among their influences, it might seem reasonable to think that inheriting from Wittgenstein in the way I’m discussing is not terribly oppositional. But it isn’t so. Despite the new excitement surrounding the work of Anscombe et al., advocates of their thought are generally in the position of dissenters. There are still very good reasons to think that using Wittgenstein in the manner at play here—in a manner that makes his work helpful to standpoint theorists and other feminists—means contesting fundamental tenets of mainstream moral philosophy.

PROVOST: Can the feminist epistemology you espouse help us to think about a feminist ethics, as it applies to care ethics, that is attentive to the ordinary dimension of the activities carried out by women, to the vulnerability of certain experiences, to the deprivation of voice and the danger of being reduced to silence?

CRARY: In fact, the links between work I’ve done in feminist epistemology and care ethics are straightforward. The heart of care

ethics is the idea that a satisfactory ethics needs to acknowledge human dependencies and vulnerabilities, and care ethicists typically see these vulnerabilities as extending to our condition as knowers. One suggestion, which resonates with my own commitments, is that sensitivities cultivated through engagement in activities like caring are necessary for understanding social relationships. A further suggestion, also in synch with my work, is that social understanding is indelibly value-laden. Care ethicists use this non-neutral conception of social understanding to shed light on challenges of getting sexist and overlapping oppressions in view. Bringing them into focus requires attention to the ordinary rhythms of women's lives, and these modes of attention must be sensitive. We must, as care-oriented anthropologist Veena Das puts it, remain alive to "the strangeness that is happening right before our eyes".

There is a lesson here not only, as you put it in your question, about the vulnerability of women and other marginalized people to being silenced but also about the kinds of political remedies required to respond adequately to such silencing. Care ethics teaches that having a voice is closely tied to enjoying material circumstances that accommodate modes of appreciation internal to good social understanding.

Mainstream social and political philosophers tend to suggest that liberation from ideologies that obscure the lives of, and so silence, the downtrodden is at bottom a matter of nothing more than eliminating distorting forces and creating what they conceive as a "neutral" space for thought. Care ethicists allow us to see such views as harmfully cramped and wrongheaded. In line with generations of anti-racist and anti-colonialist theorists, they equip us to see these neutrality-claims not only as false but as themselves perniciously ideological. For such claims disavow evaluative commitments they can't help but have and so disguise their own partisanship.

One of my projects in recent years has been contributing, in concert with care ethicists such as Sandra Laugier and many other radical social thinkers, to the larger public discourse about the insidiousness of allegedly neutral accounts of social relations. I have argued that meaningful resistance to ideological silencing has to involve agitating for new, more caring forms of life. Among other

things, together with Matt Congdon, I co-edited a special issue of *Philosophical Topics* on *Social Visibility*—it’s technically the spring 2021 issue, but due to pandemic-related delays it’s just about to come out now—that brings together groundbreaking work on ideology and social critique, much of it concerned with the specifically critical power of partisan or non-neutral methods.

PROVOST: Wittgenstein’s thought stresses the embodied dimension of our linguistic practices, and, within feminist theoretical circles, it is sometimes mobilized against certain post-structuralist approaches to discourse, which are supposedly too abstract or detached from lived experiences. Do you share this view of a distinction between two conceptions of language?

CRARY: The political stakes of this theoretical difference are surprisingly high. There is no doubt that most post-structuralist feminists have emancipatory ambitions. But their characteristic claims deprive us of the unqualified use of ideals such as truth and accuracy as instruments of social assessment, making it seem that we cannot without qualification represent sexist, racist, ableist, ageist and anti-trans ideologies as distorting the lives of those they allege to depict. And, as huge as this initial political downside is, there are much larger costs to not fully dismantling an aperspectival image of thought.

This aperspectival image is the source of the idea, engrained in our public culture, that accurate accounts of social relations must be value-neutral. Claims to neutrality in turn contribute to sustaining harmful sexist and racist ideologies. These claims disown the value-orientations they invariably have, and their concealed partisanship makes them fitting instruments for reinforcing unjust relations of domination.

These dynamics come more clearly into view from social-theoretical and historical perspectives. Interrelated strands of social theory, including those represented by theories of social reproduction, theories of racial capitalism and ecofeminist theories, reveal how sexist and racist ideologies are reliably reproduced by fundamental structures of capitalist forms of life. This social-

theoretical corpus acquires additional interest alongside strands of historical research that tie the widespread acceptance of aperspectival epistemic ideals to political, economic and technological developments of capitalist modernity. What emerges is a picture of aperspectival ideals on which they are tied to the very capitalist structures that, according to many social theorists, reliably reproduce the modes of oppression that appeals to these ideals serve. The task of freeing ourselves from aperspectival—or narrower—epistemic ideals in a thoroughgoing manner thus appears to be a crucial exercise of resistance, necessary for discerning values of, and to working toward, more just and sustainable forms of life.

The theoretical difference between taking one's cue from Wittgenstein and following in the footsteps of post-structuralist feminism is far from politically trivial. It is the difference between directly challenging the image of our cognitive predicament that is part of the unfolding of global extractive capitalism and merely inverting this image in a manner that not only fails to fully disempower it but also deprives us of crucial critical instruments for fighting the most grievous injustices of our time.

## Biographical notes

**Alice Crary** is University Distinguished Professor in Philosophy at the New School for Social Research, New York, and Visiting Fellow at Regent’s Park College, University of Oxford, UK. Her research covers issues in metaethics, moral psychology and normative ethics, philosophy and feminism, critical animal studies, critical disability studies, critical philosophy of race, philosophy and literature, and Critical Theory. She has written on philosophers such as John L. Austin, Stanley Cavell, Cora Diamond, John McDowell, Iris Murdoch, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Crary’s article *Wittgenstein Goes to Frankfurt (and Finds Something Useful to Say)* has been published as an invited paper in NWR 7(1), 2018.

**Mickaëlle Provost** (she/her) received her doctorate from the Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne in September 2022, and is a postdoctoral fellow in 2022-2023 in the *Extending New Narratives in Philosophy* project at Dalhousie University (Nova Scotia) under the supervision of Dr Chike Jeffers. Mickaëlle’s work focuses on the phenomenology of sexist and racist oppression through the cross-reading of Simone de Beauvoir and Frantz Fanon and on the articulation between discursive norms, language and lived experience. She has published, among other texts, “Articuler l’expérience et le discours: réflexions à partir du poststructuralisme et de la phénoménologie féministe” (*Glad! Revue sur le langage, le genre, les sexualités* [en ligne] n°10 *Varia*, 2021) and co-edited, with Dr Marie Garrau, *Expériences vécues du genre et de la race. Une phénoménologie critique* (Editions de la Sorbonne, Paris, 2022). She has taught on feminist philosophy, contemporary philosophy and critical phenomenology.