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INTERVIEW

Wittgenstein and Critical Theory

Alice Crary in Conversation with Mickaëlle Provost

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This is the second of two parts of an interview with Alice 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 first part on "Wittgenstein and Feminism" is published in the NWR Special Issue "Wittgenstein and Feminism", forthcoming later this year.

PROVOST: You have opposed the image of Wittgenstein as a conservative, showing in particular the ties between Wittgenstein and the project of immanent criticism, introduced by the early members of the Frankfurt School. Could you come back to the connections between Wittgenstein and Critical Theory and the way Wittgenstein helps us to strengthen or revive the critical project?

CRARY: Even to get started talking about illuminating ties between Wittgenstein and Frankfurt School Critical Theory requires a long running start. Since Wittgenstein is often taken to be dealing in a conservative creed of very little interest to critical thinkers, it's useful to know something about how he, and, to a lesser extent, other ordinary language philosophers, came to be seen as dealing in reactionary ideas. And it helps to know that members of the Frankfurt School such as Herbert Marcuse were involved in spreading the message and, further, that this failed reception of ordinary language philosophy contributed in its way to the shaping of the conceptual space in which, even today, much work in Critical Theory is done. Of course, we also need to be aware that there is longstanding resistance

to conservative takes on the ideas of Wittgenstein and ordinary language philosophers. This is why in settings, such as this journal, in which alternative strategies of inheritance are well-known, it is not unduly shocking to claim that Wittgenstein's writings are the source of critique-inspiring themes that can help to clarify and strengthen core ambitions of the Frankfurt tradition.

These ambitions first got articulated in late Weimar Germany when thinkers tied to Frankfurt's Institute for Social Research organized around the idea of a critical theory of society. The goal was a liberating picture of social life that would make it possible to free ourselves from ideologically distorted types of social compulsion. This picture would take seriously that practical attitudes mold notions we use in getting social relationships into focus. It would reflect those attitudes, and it would also aspire to a universal authority that involves "transcending" its "immanent" grounding. A major ambition of the Frankfurt School is a theory that qualifies as liberating and accurate because it manages to juggle these claims of immanence and transcendence, and the phrase standardly used for this project is "immanent critique".

The history of attempts to specify how the desiderata of such critique might be satisfied is somewhat dauntingly involved. Some of the earliest efforts are also among the most straightforward. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer opposed suggestions of barriers to social thought that is, in the plainest sense, both immanently shaped by practical attitudes and possessed of context-transcending authority. Partly guided by the method of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and partly inspired by elements of Kant's account of aesthetic judgment, they effectively taught that all critique is immanent critique. Subsequently, the tradition has issued in a striking array of different accounts of such critique, inheriting from, for instance, revisionary, institutionalist, discursive, and more orthodox versions of Kant's moral theory, post-structuralist theory, and reconstructive takes on the procedures of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. Within this welter of views, one consistent theme is that the demands of immanence and transcendence are in tension, and that theoretical maneuvering is required for their joint attainment. We are asked to believe it would be metaphysically exorbitant to treat values as in the world in a manner that would allow immanent modes of thought to be, without further ado, transcendently

revelatory. An image of world-directed thought as value-neutral and aperspectival is thus introduced in a manner that seems to complicate the task of immanent critique, and it's possible to get an overview of many of the accounts of immanent critique in circulation today by classifying different strategies for addressing these supposed complications.

There are contrary contributions to Critical Theory that revive inspirations of the early Frankfurt School. One clear case is the work of Rahel Jaeggi, who rejects the value-neutral conception of social understanding that bedevils the enterprise of immanent critique, arguing that characterizations of our forms of life call for inseparably descriptive and normative categories. Jaeggi encounters pushback from critics who, unsurprisingly, think her non-neutral view of social understanding disqualifies her from talking about context-transcendence. Yet even so she doesn't directly defend the more relaxed image of world-directed thought with which she operates. Given the role of value-neutral epistemic ideals in resistance to attempts, like hers, to reclaim the critical enterprise, such a defense seems pressing, and it is here again that Wittgenstein has something distinctive to contribute. He is unyielding in tracing and attacking critique-thwarting value-neutral, aperspectival ideals of thought—and also in following up on ways in which these ideals continue to haunt our reflections even when we take ourselves to have exorcised them.

PROVOST: You have recently argued that Wittgenstein's later philosophy is a valuable resource for ecofeminism. How does this go together with your appeals to Wittgenstein with respect to Critical Theory, and is there a connection with your work in critical animal studies?

CRARY: At one level, it's very easy to answer this answer. Ecofeminism, as I understand it, is a critical theory in the spirit of the Frankfurt School, and it provides a theoretical framework of the sort needed for reimagining animal ethics so that it is responsive to forces devastating animal life on the planet. That second point is one I have developed in recent years with philosopher and ecofeminist Lori Gruen.

Ecofeminism is a roughly half century-old political and intellectual movement which identifies historical and structural ties between the

catastrophic destruction of nature and the enduring subjection of women, the poor and colonized, racialized and other marginalized people. Its key practical injunction is that effective responses have to confront these wrongs together, and its main theoretical commitments include the following three interrelated strands of thought.

One strand of ecofeminist thought deals in historical narratives about how early modern Europe's development of capitalist forms of social organization, and its colonizing zeal, were accompanied by new practices of treating animals and nature as mere objects of use, together with new practices of denigrating women, Indigenous and enslaved people. A second, Marxian strand is devoted to isolating larger political and economic structures capable of explaining this persistent alignment of the ruination of non-human nature and the subjugation of women and other marginalized human groups. And a third primarily philosophical strand of ecofeminist theorizing traces this coincidence to the overreach of the instrumental uses of reasons that capitalism accents, issuing a call to rethink reason so it can recover non-exchange values in the natural world and in human interactions. This last strand of thought converges with Horkheimer's and Adorno's claims, in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, that a significant response to the advancing cataclysm must reimagine reason so that sensibility is integral to its exercise in getting the world in view. Ecofeminists likewise call for this kind of reworking of a dominant image of reason, and in this and other respects they inherit Critical Theory for our time.

This is the background for the work in animal ethics that I have undertaken with Gruen over the past several years—a significant portion of which will be published in our co-written book *Animal Crisis*, out this May. The heart of our project is a re-envisioning of the fifty-year-old academic discipline of animal ethics, which developed in a manner cut off from traditions of critical social thought devoted to exposing social structures with disastrous effects on humans and non-human nature. Many practices devastating to non-human animals are embedded in bigger institutions that are also the source of grievous wrongs to marginalized groups of humans. So, there is no way to grapple meaningfully with ethical questions about how to improve human-animal relationships without thoroughly reorienting animal ethics so that it is a form of critique. An important feature of our

alternative method is thinking in response to the predicaments of animals in particular worldly contexts. We are consciously working in solidarity with ecofeminists and other critical theorists, and we draw attention to this aspect of our posture by calling the method "critical animal theory.

PROVOST: Your work on Stanley Cavell extends your critical reading of Wittgenstein. Austin and Wittgenstein were very important for Cavell, in order to think democracy within our forms of life, to inscribe the ordinary at the heart of social criticism, or to propose a properly American political philosophy in the wake of Ralph Waldo Emerson or Henry Thoreau. Could you come back to how you linked to Cavell's important work and made it fruitful for critical theory?

CRARY: Cavell was one of my teachers, a wonderful friend, and a model for me of how the pursuit of philosophy could be a confrontation with life's challenges, not a mere professional technique. He is yet more than usually on my mind right now. Nancy Bauer, Sandra Laugier, and I—all of us advisors to his literary estate—have worked for several years on what will be the first volume of his *Nachlass*, a brilliant and engaging collection called *Here and There: Sites of Philosophy*, due out this April, which contains philosophical exercises that clearly express his distinctive voice.

In his accounts of his own philosophical development, Cavell treats his early encounter with J.L. Austin as decisive, explaining that Austin's lectures provided him with a route to his own thinking. Of particular importance for him was Austin's exhortation to attend to how words do things, together with Austin's suggestion that doing so depends on our willingness to register and refine our feeling for language. When Cavell started to seriously read Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, a few years afterward, he elaborated this image of our ways with words. Later he often discussed what he saw as substantial differences between Austin and Wittgenstein, but he credited both with powerful evocations of how the speaking of a language is inseparable from the engaged settings that Wittgenstein calls "forms of life."

That is the scene of Cavell's distinctive conception of philosophy. Situated in what Cavell calls "the ordinary," philosophy involves

responsiveness to particular contexts, employing the categories available at a particular time and place, and it also reflects our drive capture how things really are. To philosophize is to negotiate between these two demands—in *Here and There* and elsewhere he represents the two as shores of a river that must be endlessly navigated—and an Austinian-Wittgensteinian image of language sheds light on how such negotiations can be locally resolved. Regarding the topic of ties between Cavell and the Frankfurt School, a key point is that we can redescribe Cavellian philosophizing as a balancing of the demands of immanence and transcendence. We can also say that Cavell favors an image of language that allows us to satisfy the demands of immanent critique—and that the seed for such critique is, for him, there in all true thinking.

These aren't of course the terms that Cavell himself uses in reflecting on the social and political interest of ordinary language philosophy's legacy. He tends to connect this tradition's themes with lessons about democratic conversation in American philosophy, in particular, in the work of Emerson and Thoreau. Within such conversation in its optimal form, individuals' contributions express their own judgment, where judgment is understood as presupposing the ability to register and develop their interests and attitudes. Though Cavell himself doesn't make this point, this political vision converges strikingly with Hannah Arendt's later work on judgment as a "specifically political capacity." One of the vision's central morals is that it is our responsibility as citizens to strive for conditions under which each of our fellows can judge. This is a far from unimportant message in the catastrophic times in which we live, in which political structures that treat so many human beings as fungible, and that devastate non-human animals and threaten all life on the planet, also veer toward depriving us of resources to judge otherwise, and so to resist.

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. Mickaëlles'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.