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Introduction

Nancy Bauer, Sarah Beckwith, Alice Crary, Sandra Laugier, Toril Moi, Linda Zerilli



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Introduction

WE HAVE CALLED THIS CLUSTER of essays “Feminist Investigations,” in reference to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*.¹ The five essays that follow work in the philosophical tradition after Wittgenstein, J. L. Austin, and Stanley Cavell. Although we call this tradition “ordinary language philosophy” (OLP for short), most of us have misgivings about the name. Some of us feel that the term “ordinary language philosophy” may lead to misunderstandings, not least among philosophers, who often take it to mean either a certain Oxford-based, post-war linguistic philosophy centered on Austin, or certain contemporary analytic continuations of that linguistic philosophy.² Moreover, the term “ordinary language philosophy” doesn’t explicitly include another fundamental source of inspiration for many of us, namely Cora Diamond’s pathbreaking work on Wittgenstein, moral philosophy, and literature. Despite our reservations, we have decided to use the term in this introduction.

Although the members of our group differ on many philosophical issues, we share an experience of profound liberation at the discovery of the power of OLP to revolutionize our most fundamental understanding of language, theory, and philosophy. We believe that OLP helps feminists to understand everyday experience in transformative ways. In their attunement to the ordinary, the philosophers in the OLP tradition offer us a chance to rethink the everyday contexts in which normative relations of gender and sexuality are reproduced.

This leads to a two-pronged project. In our engagement with feminist theory, we must show how to escape theoretical pictures that block our return to our everyday lives. Such a project entails a diagnosis and description of the philosophical pictures that hold us captive (cf. *PI* § 115), a challenge taken up by most of the essays in this cluster. But we must also show, through analyses of particular cases, what our own engagement with the everyday actually looks like. This leads us to work on everyday experience, on ethics, and on aesthetics.

From the beginning, our project has been frankly polemical: we believe that feminist theory in some of its most influential incarnations—notably, poststructuralism and various forms of scientism, including certain strands of posthumanism, and analytic philosophy—has drifted precariously far away from its roots in feminist practice. The metaphysi-

cal subliming of human experience characteristic of these strands of feminist theory is a standing temptation for philosophically minded theorists, feminist or not.

In opposition to such tendencies, we seek to “bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” (*PI* § 116). The phrase “everyday use” is not to be taken univocally. Wittgenstein did not mean that each word has one everyday use, or a finite range of everyday uses. To the contrary: in *Investigations* he explores the ways in which human beings, in their everyday activities—including their theorizing—naturally project words into new contexts and thereby, to the extent that these new uses are comprehensible and engaging, change what can be done with these words.

We have all experienced a certain exhaustion with the various schools of feminist theory that purport to provide the definitive account of gender (e.g., as biologically grounded, as constructed, as performative, etc.). Precisely because we remain committed to the original project of feminist theory—to make visible and intelligible the everyday experiences of human beings whose sufferings and aspirations do not count in sexist and heteronormative regimes of oppression and exclusion—we have found ourselves increasingly wary of theory itself.

OLP makes us question the assumption that it is the task of theory to provide an ontological picture of how things really are. We question the theoretical and political usefulness of trying to reconstruct the ontological presuppositions, the conditions of possibility, of gender as such. We believe that this desire for universalizing theoretical reconstruction, what Wittgenstein aptly called the “craving for generality,” leads to the kind of “contemptuous attitude toward the particular case” that we find problematic.³ OLP calls attention to this craving for generality, invites us to ask what motivates the craving, and enables us to speak about individual cases without yielding to the politically untenable particularism that so often bedevils feminist refusals to think beyond the case at hand. We share a commitment to the particular, understood not as the opposite of theory or philosophy, but as the place where philosophy can take place. In our view, OLP opens a space in which we can begin to imagine new and different ways of speaking critically.

* * *

In feminist theory, this tradition is not well known. To be sure, feminists have pioneered a variety of strategies for reading Austin and Wittgenstein. There has been a flourishing poststructuralist uptake of Austin,

as exemplified in Judith Butler's work.⁴ In literary theory, feminist and nonfeminist work on Austin's "speech act theory" abounds.⁵ The last decade or two have also witnessed a striking upsurge of interest in Austin among analytic feminists, inspired in large part by Rae Langton's and Jennifer Hornsby's use of Austin in arguing that pornography harms women.⁶ The fundamental understanding of Austin at work in these high-profile endeavors diverges substantially from ours.

Additionally, there is a less commented-on but still notable body of feminist work that draws on strains of Wittgenstein's thought. Although some contributions to this literature take up Wittgenstein's thought in ways starkly different from ours, others are kindred enterprises. In the latter category, we include a loosely related set of feminist projects that not only reject the idea of a metaphysical vantage point from which we seem obliged to choose between a hygienic and dehumanized objectivism and a disempowering relativism, but also champion the complementary idea that reality presents challenges that yield not to theory but to the pressures of moral imagination.⁷

Our distinctive contribution to feminist debates is first, our understanding of language not simply as representation, but as expression and action; our conviction that the ordinary is a fundamental category for feminist analysis; and our commitment to the theoretical, philosophical, and political importance of examples, hence the need to pay attention to the particular case. But how new is this? How does our work fit with feminist thought more broadly conceived?⁸

Our misgivings about the abstraction of feminist theory, our concern to find a way back to the ordinary and the everyday, our emphasis on expression and experience, our wish to make women's voices and women's everyday lives central to feminist theory, are not new. Feminists concerned with race and class have voiced similar concerns for years. In literary studies, Barbara Christian, in her famous 1988 essay "The Race for Theory," argued that the language of French-inspired theory "mystifies rather than clarifies our condition," and that the rise of theory prevented critics from taking an interest in literature, and thus muted the voices of "people of color, feminists, radical critics, creative writers" just as they were beginning to gain more attention.⁹ In her genre-breaking book, *Landscape for a Good Woman*, Carolyn Steedman combined intellectual reflection with the expression of working-class experience. For her, neither the traditional academic treatise nor the language of theory could convey the longings that shaped the lives of working-class women in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War in England.¹⁰ Within philosophy, Marilyn Frye started her 1983 monograph *The Politics of Reality* from an understanding of feminism as

“making the experiences and lives of women intelligible” by identifying strains of sexist, heteronormative, and racist bias. Approaching such intelligibility was, as Frye saw it, not in the first instance a theoretical project but rather a demanding exercise of attending to things that individual women are made to undergo, equipped with a sense of the significance of systemic social forces.¹¹

There are crisscrossing overlaps and differences between the kind of work we mention here and our own. For us, OLP is an ally, not an enemy of the critic who wishes to understand literature and other artistic works. While we agree with the critique of abstract theorizing in poststructuralist thought, we remain wary about the ways in which the craving for generality persists even in those texts that are openly critical of theoretical abstraction. In particular, we don't wish to abandon the project of feminist theory or to relinquish philosophy, but to change, radically, the understanding of the kind of work theory and philosophy can do. We do not see ourselves as engaged in the classic feminist project of generating another theory of gender or sexuality, or identity. Our aim is not to provide an alternative theory of these things, but to expose the misunderstandings that lead feminists to seek, in theorizing, solutions to problems that have no theoretical answer but that call, rather, for attention to the ordinary and the particular case.

* * *

Our group came together when we realized that we shared a rare, double commitment to OLP and to feminism. In 2011, Nancy Bauer, Sarah Beckwith, Alice Crary, Sandra Laugier, Toril Moi, and Linda Zerilli began to meet informally to think about how we could make ordinary language philosophy more widely available to feminist thought. After some discussion we decided that we should each try to write a paper on OLP and feminism, from within our own research interests and traditions. We would try to challenge and support each other by convening regular public airings of the work in progress. To get the process started, Nancy Bauer and Toril Moi applied for a Radcliffe Institute Exploratory Seminar. We hoped that such a high-intensity meeting would help us to gain a clearer sense of what we were trying to do, and how to push the project further.

In April 2013, the Exploratory Seminar met in Cambridge. We are pretty sure that none of the participants will ever forget that meeting, for the first day was severely curtailed by the shelter-in-place order in the Boston metro area during the search for the Marathon bombers.

The context threw into special relief, for us and for our participants, a number of whom had traveled thousands of miles to be with us, the question of the significance and meaning of the notion of the “ordinary.”

We received extraordinarily generous and helpful comments at our Radcliffe Seminar, both on individual papers and on our overall project, from Juliet Floyd, Jack Gunnell, Christine Hamm, Cressida Heyes, Kate Manne, Magdalena Ostas, Salla Peltonen, Naomi Scheman, Corina Stan, and Mark Richard. Next, we gave longer, reworked versions of our papers in Paris in September 2013 at a seminar hosted by Sandra Laugier. There Bruno Ambroise, Solange Chavel, Nicolas Delon, Pierre Fasula, Estelle Ferrarese, Roberto Frega, Anne Le Goff, Mona Gerardin-Laverge, Salla Peltonen, Julianne Flory, and Jeanne-Marie Roux sharpened our thoughts and inspired us further. Finally, Alice Crary organized a larger conference at the New School of Social Research entitled “Feminist Investigations: A Manifesto” during April 2014, which brought us into productive conversation with Jay Bernstein, Nancy Fraser, Mark Greif, Vivaldi Jean-Marie, Kathleen Kelley, and Paul Kottman. The high quality of the responses at these events forced us to make what we were trying to say in our papers more precise and more explicit.

The papers in this volume have each been through countless iterations, many of which were a function of our pushing ourselves to make ourselves intelligible just to one another. Each of us at one time or another, and in most cases many times over, had to grapple with the shock of our failing to make ourselves understood across the disciplinary boundaries in our small group, which were marked, despite our common cause. As time went on, we became increasingly invested in finding ways to communicate clearly and simply to each other. Our struggle to achieve mutual intelligibility brought home to us both the challenges of OLP itself, and the challenges involved in making ourselves clear to a broader audience.

How far our work will turn out to be helpful to other feminists remains to be seen. A hallmark of OLP, especially in the incarnation represented by Cavell, is that it does not take its audience for granted, that it understands writing as constituting in large part an attempt to *find* an audience. To express one’s experience—one’s view of the world, of philosophy, of feminist theory—is to risk rebuff. But it is also the only way to discover to what extent one’s words make sense to others. For us, these essays are an exploration, an inquiry: an invitation to a conversation we hope will be joined by many different voices.

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Toril Moi wants to make feminist theory less remote from women's lives than it is today. In her paper, she shows that Wittgenstein's philosophy, and particularly his critique of the "craving for generality," transforms our understanding of concepts, and theory. By teaching us how to think through examples, ordinary language philosophy releases us from the grip of the logic of representation—the logic of inclusion/exclusion—that dominates feminist theory today. The ubiquitous obsession with "exclusionary" concepts is based on a counterproductive picture of concepts, a picture that presupposes the very "exclusionariness" or "boundedness" that feminist theorists are rightly eager to undo. The current picture of concepts and theory renders feminist theorists unable to pay philosophical attention to the particular case, and thus also unable to provide the kind of concrete feminist analysis that makes women's lives intelligible. Moi takes her examples mostly from intersectionality theory.

Sandra Laugier, meanwhile, brings out the profound, but previously unnoticed, connection between the feminist ethics of care and the writings of Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell, as it arises in their opening of the theme of the *ordinary* and their attention to human *expressiveness*. Anchored in the "rough ground" of the uses and practices of language, OLP raises the theoretical and practical question of the ordinary. In contemporary thinking, however, the ordinary is often denied or undervalued, in ways that parallel the undervaluation of women's contributions. Such neglect (*carelessness*) expresses contempt for ordinary life, conceived of as domestic and female, and imposes a gendered hierarchy of the objects of intellectual research. In this essay, Laugier continues her long-standing project of developing *an ordinary conception of ethics* for thinking about care and gender inequality, and for making the human voice heard in its integrity. Following Cavell's discovery of the specificity of women's voices in Hollywood comedies and melodrama, Laugier shows that OLP is also a philosophy of care for human expression as embodied in women's voices. Given that, at its core, feminism is about finding or claiming one's voice, OLP's reframing of ethics is its main contribution to feminist thinking and agency. The "different voice" that Carol Gilligan discovers is the ordinary voice of women, and OLP shows us how to pay full attention to it.

In her essay, Sarah Beckwith shows that feminist criticism of Shakespeare tends to focus on representation to the exclusion of the myriad other ways in which women are implicated in speech acts. Through an examination of Cavell's concept of criteria, she takes issue with the idea that there is a specific "literary" language, as opposed to ordinary

language, and shows how fiction can perform conceptual investigations. Taking theater as a form of ordinary language philosophy, she reads both Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* and Eric Rohmer's *Conte d'hiver* as explorations of what Cavell calls "just response." Through her investigations, she argues for a greater awareness of how fiction operates in our lives. Her essay explores how reality comes into the picture for any given person as the difficult reality of others, and as the task of self-recognition, through an extension of the work of ordinary language philosophy into the ethics of speech.

Linda Zerilli explores what the historian of science Ruth Leys has decried as the "nonintentionalism" of affect theory and its implications for critical feminist practices of judgment. To insist, as Leys does, on intentionalism as concept possession, argues Zerilli, does not adequately account for the fascination with nonconceptualism. Such fascination must be understood in relation to a wholly intellectualist view of conceptual rationality, according to which knowing how to do something involves a highly abstract and disembodied form of rule-following. Far from unique to affect theory, this view is shared by certain phenomenological philosophers and postfoundational feminist theorists who have been eager to recover the idea of human practice as a form of nonrational and nonconceptual embodied coping. Zerilli draws on ordinary language philosophers such as Gilbert Ryle, Cavell, and Wittgenstein to uncover the misunderstandings that animate the turn to nonconceptualism as the only alternative to intellectualism.

Finally, Alice Crary sets out to underline the interest of an aspect of feminist moral and political thought that gets obscured in key strands of contemporary feminist theory. Crary starts from the observation that feminist thinkers often try to shape our visions of the world, for instance by conveying a vivid sense of what it is to inhabit a social world in which women experience widespread, substantial, and structural disadvantages. She notes that many feminists who in this way attempt to mold our modes of appreciation present themselves as thereby directly contributing to our ability to understand real aspects of the world (such as, say, sexist abuses of different kinds). Crary's claim is not only that gestures that direct our attitudes may in doing so internally inform genuine understanding but, moreover, that we need to recognize this if we are to do justice to challenges of productive feminist thought. Recognizing that this claim runs counter to two major currents of feminist theorizing—currents associated, respectively, with Anglo-American moral philosophy and poststructuralist thought—she mounts a defense that draws on lines of thought from Wittgenstein's later philosophy. She brings out how, in some of his reflections on language and logic, Wittgenstein undercuts

the idea that a disengaged stance is a necessary prerequisite of rational authority, and thus makes room for the possibility that discourse that addresses our routes of feeling may as such possess rational interest. The resulting transformation in our understanding of what rational discourse is like represents a noteworthy contribution to feminist theory—a contribution that not only illuminates past achievements of feminist thinkers but also better positions us to foster future feminist thought and action.

While Nancy Bauer could not contribute an essay to this cluster, her new book, *How to Do Things With Pornography* (published in 2015 by Harvard University Press), exemplifies feminist work in the tradition after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell. In this book, Bauer investigates both philosophy's power to shift the ways we understand the everyday world and its tendency to distort the phenomena it purports to discuss. She shows that Austin's *How To Do Things With Words* should be read not as a theory of speech acts, but as a revolutionary conception of what philosophers can do in the world with their words.

NANCY BAUER, SARAH BECKWITH,
ALICE CRARY, SANDRA LAUGIER,
TORIL MOI, LINDA ZERILLI

NOTES

1 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 4th rev. ed., ed. P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, Hacker, and Schulte (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) (hereafter cited as *PI*).

2 An example of recent analytic versions of ordinary language philosophy can be found in Nat Hansen, "Contemporary Ordinary Language Philosophy," *Philosophy Compass* 9, no. 8 (2014): 556–69.

3 Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books: Preliminary Studies for the "Philosophical Investigations,"* 2nd ed. (1960; New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965), 18.

4 See for example Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

5 Influential examples include Shoshana Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body: Don Juan with J. L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2002), and J. Hillis Miller, *Speech Acts in Literature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2001).

6 For a sample of Rae Langton and Jennifer Hornsby's key papers on these topics, see Langton, "Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 22, no. 4 (1993): 293–330; Langton, "Sexual Solipsism," *Philosophical Topics* 23, no. 2 (1995): 149–87; Langton and Hornsby, "Free Speech and Illocution," *Legal Theory* 4, no. 1 (1998): 21–37; Langton, "Subordination, Silence, and Pornography's Authority," in *Censorship and Silencing: Practices of Cultural Regulation*, ed. Robert Post (Los Angeles: Getty Museum Publishing, 1998); Hornsby, "Things Done with Words," in *Human Agency: Language, Duty, and Value*, ed. Jonathan Dancy et al. (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1998).

7 We are thinking of texts such as Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 2006); Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1983); Cressida Heyes, *Line Drawings: Defining Women Through Feminist Practice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2000); Alison Jagger, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1983); Sabina Lovibond, *Iris Murdoch, Gender and Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2011); José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013); Michele M. Moody-Adams, *Fieldwork in Familiar Places: Morality, Culture, and Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2002); Naomi Scheman, *Engenderings: Constructions of Knowledge, Authority, and Privilege* (New York: Routledge, 1993); and Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Contexts* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003). Finally, *Feminist Interpretations of Ludwig Wittgenstein*, ed. Scheman and Peg O'Connor (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 2002), provides an overview of a wide range of feminist responses to Wittgenstein.

8 There are also significant affinities between OLP and other broad intellectual traditions, such as existentialism, phenomenology, and psychoanalysis, which we cannot discuss further here. In particular, Simone de Beauvoir's existentialism, her capacity to pay philosophical attention to particular experience, is deeply congenial to our work. The work of Iris Marion Young and Sandra Bartky on quotidian practices of feminine embodiment also resonates with our attention to the ordinary.

9 Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 1 (1988): 71, 69.

10 Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (London: Virago, 1986).

11 Frye, *The Politics of Reality*, xi.