Check for updates

Original Research Article

PSC

The Genius of Feminism: Cavellian Moral Perfectionism and Feminist Political Theory

Philosophy and Social Criticism
2022, Vol. 0(0) 1–25
© The Author(s) 2022

Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/01914537221093718
journals.sagepub.com/home/psc
SAGE

Sarah Drews Lucas
University of Exeter, Exeter, South West, UK

Abstract

Work on Stanley Cavell in contemporary political theory tends to foreground Cavell's reading of Emersonian moral perfectionism, but this aspect of Cavell's thought is often left out of feminist readings of his work. In this paper, I give an overview of Cavell's importance to political theory, and I also trace two Cavellian-inspired feminisms: Sandra Laugier's ordinary language inflected ethics of care and Toril Moi's understanding of feminist theory as the close and careful reading of examples. I argue that Cavellian-Emersonian moral perfectionism enhances these feminist readings of Cavell because it helps us explain certain practices in feminist activism, such as resisting conformity, acknowledging the limits of our understanding and being receptive to other members of our feminist community.

Keywords

Stanley Cavell, care ethics, moral perfectionism, feminist theory, ordinary language philosophy, community, intersectionality

The Genius of Feminism: Cavellian Moral Perfectionism and Feminist Political Theory[1]

> 'In every work of genius we recognize our rejected thoughts…with a certain alienated majesty', as a description of the ambition Emerson harbours for his own writing, links up with Wittgenstein's saying of philosophy that what it seeks is not (as in the case of science) to teach something new and to hunt out new facts to support its claims, but rather to understand what is already before us, too obvious and pervasive to be ordinarily remarked…This seems

Corresponding author:
Sarah Drews Lucas, University of Exeter, Amory Building, Rennes Drive, Exeter, South West EX4 4QJ, UK

> to me to capture…the sense of philosophy as revealing the rejected or undervalued, in which the uncovering of something obvious can create astonishment.
>
> -Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words*[2]

The question of Stanley Cavell's importance to *feminist* political theory has been largely ignored by political theorists interested in his work. Mainstream (mostly male) political theorists and philosophers who read Cavell as a political thinker tend to locate the source of Cavell's importance to politics in his reading of Emerson and especially his understanding of Emersonian moral perfectionism.[3] Feminist philosophers, on the other hand, tend to emphasize the Cavellian/Wittgensteinian revolution in the philosophy of language that calls for a return of words from their metaphysical to their ordinary use (and, by extension, requires a careful attention to the way 'we' use words). They have explored a number of obviously feminist themes in Cavell's thought, including the ethics of care, the relational nature of selfhood, the complexity of moral and political judgement making, and the importance of articulating the harm of experiences so ordinary they often escape our notice, such as domestic violence and sexual harassment.[4] My aim in this paper is to bring together these two understandings of Cavell's importance to political philosophy in order to offer a few insights in both directions.

To those 'mainstream' political theorists who see Cavellian moral perfectionism as offering a promising path forward for understanding democracy, it is important to point out the extent to which that path must be paved with feminist arguments. Cavellian-Emersonian democratic politics, I will argue, represents a radical challenge to dominant voices and requires sustained and careful attention to, and meaningful engagement with, marginalized voices. On the other hand, as a feminist engaged in my own reading of Cavell, I hope to extend the feminist uptake of his thought to include the idea of moral perfectionism, an aspect of Cavell's thought present in much of the political theory literature but underdeveloped in feminist work.

Moral perfectionism[5], for Cavell, is not the pursuit of any specific moral code or set of virtues, nor is it the attainmeant of any final version of the self, but is, rather, a sensibility (a turning, a register a state of mind) through which we approach our lives, in which we recognize that we are obliged to be accountable to our political community as individual but imperfect selves. Grounded as it is in the Emersonian idea of self-reliance, moral perfectionism is an uneasy fit with feminism for obvious reasons. Indeed, one of the great achievements of feminist thought has been to demonstrate that the supposedly self-sovereign subject of western philosophy is a harmful myth responsible for erasing ways of being in the world that do not conform to the propertied, White, able-bodied, hetero-sexual, cisgendered and male norm. There is also a formidable tradition in feminist theory of treating the notion of individual agency with suspicion, since what might look like free choice is really coerced conformity to existing (oppressive) norms. Finally, feminists have compellingly argued that our political world is made up of interdependent, relational selves, and that the political vocabulary of liberalism (including words like self-reliance, autonomy and perfectionism) is ill-equipped to describe this reality. As powerful and accurate as these concerns are, I do not think they foreclose the possibility of a feminist

moral perfectionism, understood as the requirement that each of us must engage as a self when we engage in feminist politics. Such a feminist moral perfectionism, I will argue, helps us account for the difficult moral work we do in the ordinary course of living a feminist life (to borrow Sara Ahmed's much-borrowed phrase).

In this paper, I work through three interrelated aspects of Cavell's political thinking: (1) the importance of conversation for the formation of moral judgements which leads to (2) the constitution of our political selves through our shared community which in turn requires that (3) we have an ethical responsibility to mean what we say to one another (a responsibility that requires moral perfectionism).[6] Each of these strands of Cavellian politics has a feminist dimension. In the first part of the paper, I introduce what Cavell calls 'moral conversations'. I read the work of Sandra Laugier on Cavell's relevance to feminist care ethics as demonstrating the nature and importance of moral conversations. In part 2, I unpack Cavell's view of politics as a claim to community, which I then further illustrate through Toril Moi's understanding of feminist theory as the discussion of examples.[7] In part 3, I highlight three key elements of Cavellian-Emersonian moral perfectionism – resisting conformity, education and shame – and I suggest that integrating these themes into a Cavellian feminism brings into focus some of the things we already do as feminists; namely, 'show up' for difficult political conversations, acknowledge that there is always more work to be done, and check our privilege. I suggest that Cavell's understanding of Emersonian moral perfectionism gives us a way to describe the ordinary genius of feminist thought: its responsiveness to others and its receptivity to the call to be better, always.

Moral conversations

Stanley Cavell (1926–2018) left a marvellously miscellaneous legacy. An analytic philosopher of language and a student of JL Austin, he also wrote about film, Shakespeare, theatre, American transcendentalism, continental philosophy and psychoanalysis, among other things.[8] Though most of the early uptake of Cavell's thought was in philosophy (especially philosophy of language and aesthetics), its importance to politics and political theory has increasingly been treated by a number of thinkers, most notably (and most thoroughly) Andrew Norris (2017). All of these accounts agree that Cavell was always concerned, if at times obliquely, with politics, especially with the unfulfilled promise of American democracy.

The infrastructure of Cavell's thought has its foundations in his response to ordinary language philosophy as practiced by JL Austin and the later Ludwig Wittgenstein. The basic insight of this philosophical project (and I am here summarizing many hundreds of thousands of words) is that we think very little about why we say what we say. We have access, as language speakers, to a complex and largely unexamined set of rules about 'what we say when…', but we do not really understand these rules. Cavell's development of this insight is toward the idea that examining 'what we say when' forces us to reckon with the kinds of commitments we make when we participate in language, and, ultimately, to acknowledge these commitments as truly belonging to us. In other words, when we think seriously about how we use language, we are forced to do purposefully and

responsibly what we ordinarily do automatically: we are forced, as Cavell puts it, to 'mean what we say'.[9] Meaning what we say requires that we assume responsibility for our convictions, which we then try to make intelligible to others.

In *The Claim of Reason* (1979), Cavell works through the problem of moral judgement with an eye toward critiquing the (implicit or explicit) use of an 'epistemological' paradigm to understand what we do when we disagree about moral concepts. Within this paradigm, philosophers tend to believe that moral disagreements may be settled by correct conclusions with which all rational people would agree.[10] One problem with an epistemological understanding of morality is that it leads us to believe *that disagreement about moral concepts is irrational*, when, in fact, people may disagree about moral concepts for any number of very good reasons. Another problem is that the epistemological view is *impersonal*: it holds that universal agreement is the product of using the correct method in a prescribed way, thus negating the importance of *who* the person is for the kinds of moral judgements they make. But, for Cavell, the kinds of real-life worries we have about moral concepts are much more about respect and responsibility than they are about agreement. Indeed, the appropriate attitude toward moral conversations is the *expectation* of rational disagreement and the consideration of whether or not respect for another is warranted considering that disagreement. We can argue, of course, with the hope that we might eventually agree, but whether or not we agree is less important than that we articulate and take responsibility for our own points of view. As Cavell puts it, 'the point is to determine *what* position you are taking, that is to say, *what position you are taking responsibility for*—and whether it is one I can respect'.[11] The purpose of disagreements about moral issues, then, is not to win the argument or to establish the objectively correct conclusion. It is, rather, to explore the reasons that individuals might have for holding certain views. This exploration is fruitful not only for providing a venue in which a moral agent might hold forth about their views but also because it allows the moral agent to be receptive to the views of other voices and, in turn, to see their own views in a new light. The objective in moral conversations should be to take responsibility for our moral points of view – in other words, *to claim them as our own*. We can only do this if we articulate them alongside and in response to the moral points of view of others.

I want to imagine a moral conversation between feminist friends to illustrate the kind of give-and-take Cavell describes here to help us see the ordinariness of this kind of moral talk (it happens between friends, acquaintances, fellow activists and colleagues) and the particularity of what we reveal when we have moral conversations (we have to show up as selves when we engage seriously with others, even though we are not, and cannot be, in possession of either complete self-knowledge or objectively correct moral information):

In the aftermath of the killing of Sarah Everard and the violent police response to the vigil held in her honour, two friends – April and Deena – both experience feelings of grief and anger. April feels that it is a feminist imperative to post on social media that both the murder and the police response reflect systematic misogyny. Deena is so upset by the events that she turns away from socializing altogether. April is irritated by Deena's silence, and she confronts her about it with a text message saying, 'I have been really distraught by the news this week, and I thought you would be too'. This call out hurts Deena, who replies that she has been upset, but that she has been having trouble engaging.

Deena survived a violent rape in her late teens and has, as a result, been deeply triggered by the ubiquitous reporting about the murder, especially by pictures of Sarah Everard's face. April is aware of this aspect of Deena's history, but her awareness does not quell her frustration with her friend in this instance. April, recently divorced, has been living alone in a rough neighbourhood and has been existing in a heightened state of anxiety for some months. She is hurt that Deena has not spoken up for her, a potential victim; she feels Deena should share her rage and fear. Deena, on the other hand, feels April should share her grief and exhaustion and that she should understand her need to withdraw. To complicate matters further (but not to fully describe the complexity of the matter), Deena is generally suspicious of social media as a place where meaningful political conversations can happen and believes that it tends to oversimplify complex issues, while April feels an enormous sense of solidarity when engaged in online activism and believes it can be a force for good in the world. They text back and forth about the incident, about their views on social media, about their emotions, about their histories and about their commitment to feminist resistance in the face of male violence. By the end of their conversation, their moral differences are laid bare, their different reactions are mutually understood and each respects the other's point of view.

In this example, the participants have achieved the aim of moral discourse as Espen Hammer sums it up: 'to disclose aspects of their own selves, and to clarify the nature and sustainability of their relationship, that is, the extent to which they are able to speak for each other and thus be morally authoritative'.[12] There are real differences here between the moral intuitions of each feminist, and the conversation is fraught with misunderstandings, moments of discomfort and failures to fully explain emotions and actions. But the friends arrive at tentative, responsive moral judgements that reflect their unique moral lives. There is a shared sense of belonging to a feminist community and a consent to allow one another to speak as a member of that community. An asset of Cavell's approach to thinking about moral discourse, then, is its ability to account for the everyday, ordinary, actual way we exchange moral points of view, when this happens successfully. In moral conversations, we give reasons for holding our specific points of view, but these reasons will reflect our rational moral disagreement and are not to be understood as evidence for the correct conclusion. Because we will inevitably disagree, we approach the other with an openness to who they are, why they think what they think and how what they think may sit alongside what we think.

And so, the moral judgements we make reflect *who we are*, and this is an especially important point because it shows us that we cannot evade responsibility for our moral lives, though often this is precisely what we try to do. We avoid having moral conversations in favour of making a case grounded in our ideological commitments. Or we may approach moral conversations convinced of our own rightness by virtue of our method (if we are moral philosophers or scientists), our clear-eyed conviction (if we are political ideologues), our insistence on the inefficacy of morality (if we are political realists or nihilists) or our scripture (if we are religious fundamentalists). But these approaches miss the point of what moral discourse actually is: the endless comparison of our inevitably different points of view. The exchange of moral intuitions in the conversation above is made possible by an openness to disagreement. We can easily imagine

it failing as a moral conversation if one or both of the participants decided in advance that the other person was completely wrong. Imagine if April so strongly believed that Deena's silence amounted to complicity with the oppressor that she could not be receptive to Deena's moral point of view. Or if Deena was so cynical about the efficacy of online political activism that she could not be receptive to April's.

However, understanding moral conversation as the sharing of different points of view need not lead us to an untenable moral relativism.[13] In moral conversations, we defend our own judgements by being answerable to them, and we ask that others are answerable to their judgements as well. These kinds of disputes are not something that can happen in a purely political, professional or philosophical conversation; they often require a more demanding and personal kind of communication. Calling out someone's views on these grounds often looks like using the kind of language a friend might use to ask another friend whether they mean what they say. Perhaps this means saying something like, 'I know you—you can't mean that. Think again'.[14] By these lights, *we have to care about each other* in order to have productive moral conversations.[15] That is, we have to see one another as situated in complex moral universes made up of theoretical commitments, blind spots due to privilege, wounds from childhood, spiritual orientations, examined and unexamined vulnerabilities, exceptional emotional states such as love or grief or rage, and so on. We have to be attentive to the reality of this moral complexity in ourselves and in others; only then will we be able to understand the reasons behind the moral judgements of others and to be responsible for our own moral judgements.

The texture of being: moral conversations and feminist care ethics

As we have seen, Cavell's injunction to bear full responsibility for our moral points of view is grounded in the ordinary, that is, in what we actually say and do and not what we imagine we should say and do. The ordinary is often left out not only of 'mainstream' philosophy and political theory but also of theoretical approaches to feminism (from the analytic to the critical). Sandra Laugier approaches the return of feminism to the ordinary as an extension of care ethics, where care refers to an attentiveness to others and, in particular, to what others say.

Laugier locates this approach within Cora Diamond's (1991) 'ordinary realism', the idea that vulnerability, dependence and the need for care are common to all human beings rather than exceptional conditions. 'Vulnerability', as Laugier puts it, 'defines ordinariness'.[16] Since this is true, an ethics of care will need to attend to the moral relevance of the details, especially the language, of everyday life. This means that we will have to look at all the different kinds of things we say and do in order to get a sense of the reality of our moral lives, which, as Laugier puts it, 'cannot be captured with a half-dozen words like "good", "right", "duty", "fairness", "justice", and the like'.[17] Laugier draws on Veena Das and Iris Murdoch to illustrate what this attention looks like. Das, an anthropologist, gives a detailed account of particular responses to political violence in India. She describes, for instance, the many conversations she had with Shanti Devi, who lost her husband and three of her sons in the massacre of the Sikhs in 1984. Shanti's mourning is confused and confusing, riddled with guilt and anger, and shaped by gendered expectations of what a

grieving wife and mother must be. Her moral universe is impossible to understand through a linear narrative or through an account of how gendered power relations work the Sikh community. But by the close examination of her daily life, Das brings Shanti into focus in all of her complexity.[18] Iris Murdoch endorses this sort of attention in a philosophical register, arguing that we understand the ethical orientation of others by knowing them, seeing them navigate their lives, hearing them speak, and so on. We understand the ethics of real-life scenarios through 'a sensitivity to the texture of being'.[19]

This vision of moral philosophy is, for all of these thinkers (Diamond, Das, Murdoch and Laugier herself), like Cavell's work, a response to Wittgenstein's call to pay attention to the ways in which language enables our form of life. We do not come to understand what happens between us in our moral lives through the investigation of general rules about what is right or wrong; we come to understand it through the investigation of the kinds of things we (as members of the same form of life) actually say and do. We come to know what morality is for us and for others we encounter, in other words, through moral conversations with others. For Laugier, grounding a feminist ethics of care in ordinary language philosophy means that we can set aside the concerns about how and whether justice and care are compatible. The kind of attention that we must pay to the ordinary, the care we give to it, is a precondition for any and all philosophical pursuits, including those we may end up calling 'theories of justice'. Paying attention to the ordinary helps correct for the problematic tendencies of both care *and* justice. It requires that we keep sight of the complex, unique moral lives and the agency of caring selves so as not to imagine an ethics of care that is self-less or completely other-centred. It also requires that we challenge the tendency in theories of justice to equate one's moral understanding with an objective moral law or truth. Laugier picks up on Cavell's insistence that philosophy requires the presence of a partial, receptive, responsive self in order to be truly meaningful.

Theories of justice, however they are rendered, will need to reflect the real moral lives – the sensibility – of the people who render them. As Laugier puts it, a theory is in need of more than just new categories that might encompass care; it is in need 'more radically, *of seeing sensibility as a necessary condition of justice'*.[20] For her, as for Cavell (and hearkening back to Carol Gilligan), this corrective in moral philosophy is a question of attending to *voice*. When moral philosophy is carried out through thought experiments, abstract questions of duty or choice, or appeals to universal laws, it fails to acknowledge the voice of actual people making moral judgements every day. Ordinary caring activities (from playing with a baby to talking with a friend about her problems) are devalued in the dominant mode of moral thinking, whether carried out by philosophers or by politicians, lawyers and policy makers. Where care ethics has made an impact over the past forty years, this acknowledgement of only the dominant voice has begun to change, and there has been a growing acknowledgement of other voices. This shift has been couched in the difference between the masculine voice and the feminine voice for good reason – the people in the seminar rooms and policy discussions have traditionally been men, and those doing the bulk of the care work, women. But from an ordinary language philosophy perspective, we can move past this gendered split to argue that attentiveness is a virtue for everyone. An ordinary language philosophy inflected ethics of care, then, calls for attention to the validity of neglected and silenced voices, often the voices of disabled

people, working people, people of colour, women and others left out of the physical rooms and the imagined moral universes where conversations about moral philosophy take place. It *also* makes a more sweeping, radical claim: that 'attention [is] a moral value, beyond or before ethical concepts such as right, wrong, or good. *Attention* is part of the meaning of care: one must pay attention to these details of life that we neglect (for example, who has cleaned and straightened the room in which we are standing?), and to questions we do not *want* to consider'.[21] Understood this way, ethics of care feminists are making the case that attention to the ordinary *is a precondition for any kind of meaningful thinking about ethics*.

This shift in the way we should do moral philosophy is, as Toril Moi puts it, nothing short of revolutionary. It suddenly demands a complete account of what has been there all along – a fragile language game that is riddled with vulnerability and the possibility of unintelligibility. Feminists have long pointed out the extent to which the public voice (the voice of reason, the voice of philosophy) has been a White, propertied, able-bodied, heterosexual man's voice; ordinary language philosophy helps us make sense of the *moral wrongness* of this state of affairs. There is *no excuse* for failing to acknowledge who has cleaned the room, who has never had a chance to be in the room, who has sat in the back and been too afraid to speak, who has stuttered and stumbled in the attempt to become intelligible, who is too tired to speak at all because they have been up all night with the baby and so on. A philosophy (moral, linguistic, etc.) that is concerned only with propositions, logic and reason crowds out the actual human voices that should lend that philosophy meaning.

Political community

Understanding the fragility and indeterminacy of moral life is essential for understanding the insights Cavell has into political life. When we express ourselves in ordinary language, we are not merely talking as individuals but as members of a political community. When I articulate my point of view, I appeal to others who might be expected to share my view and/or who have informed my view. Cavell stays with Wittgenstein to underwrite this insight. For Wittgenstein, we are always speaking with others according to the rules of a shared language game. When we think about what we say in response to others, we are claiming community with that 'we' of other language users. Important here is the implication that the individual only exists meaningfully as an individual by virtue of their membership in some community. We cannot be sure in advance of speaking exactly what will constitute this community. As I try to articulate my own thoughts, I search for others who will understand me. I have, as Cavell puts it, 'nothing more to go on than my conviction, my sense that I make sense'.[22] Making appeals to what 'we' say – what 'we' care about and what we should care about – requires that others exist who do, should, can or might share our point of view. And so, in articulating and taking responsibility for our own judgements, we claim community with others who are also doing this work.

Andrew Norris points out that, for Cavell, this appeal to what we say is not an appeal to rules, but an appeal to conversation, to what Norris calls 'our life in language'.[23] We do not arrive at any final set of criteria for understanding the boundaries of our political

community. Instead, we are always navigating these boundaries. This means we are always *looking* for our political community when we speak in the public voice. Cavell gets at this idea of a mutable, partial community through a reimagining of the social contract. For him, the idea of a social contract does not just help us explain to ourselves why it is in our best interest to consent to be governed; rather, it gives us a way to think about the extent to which we are vitally, consistently responsible for the existence and maintenance of our political community:

> What I consent to, in consenting to the contract, is not mere obedience, but membership in a polis, which implies two things: First, that I recognize the principle of consent itself; which means that I recognize others to have consented with me, and hence that I consent to political *equality*. Second, that I recognize the society and its government, so constituted, as *mine*; which means that I am answerable not merely to it, but for it. So far, then, as I recognize myself to be exercising my responsibility for it, my obedience to it is obedience to my own laws; citizenship in that case is the same as my autonomy; the polis is the field within which I work out my personal identity and it is the creation of (political) *freedom*.[24]

For Cavell, our interdependency is, ultimately, the *guarantee* for our democratic community. We are not individuals who come together in public to offer our privately (autonomously) formulated ideas, as in most liberal accounts of democracy. But we are likewise unable to avoid our personal responsibility for the maintenance of our public sphere, since it is only by showing up to articulate our actual beliefs (in our own personal use of the public voice, as Cavell would put it) that we can come to an understanding of what we really mean and of who we really are.

In this view, we have a *political responsibility* to pursue the kind of moral thinking that helps us understand *who we are*, as individuals and as a community. This is an insight of Cavell's that is, I think, especially useful in feminist thinking. Indeed, it is another way of saying that the personal is political. Cavell helps us see that the use of this (and any) maxim must always be accompanied by a capacious, attentive understanding of what we mean by 'the personal'. Feminists often (rightfully and powerfully) think in terms of making visible in public the kinds of structural harms that have been previously invisible, experienced as existing mostly on a personal level. So, one accurate feminist explanation of something like the #metoo movement would be to say that the mass sharing of women's personal stories has revealed the urgency of the problem of ubiquitous sexual assault of women by men. But an important addendum to this way of thinking about what we do as feminists is the recognition that these personal stories are not just an accumulation of evidence for the existence of a phenomenon in need of change; they are, rather, reflections of a varied, diverse, active engagement with feminist community by unique individuals, including ourselves.

Embedded in this idea of political responsibility, then, is the imperative to make political speech one's own. That is, to constantly re-evaluate whether we mean what we say and to respond to what others mean when they speak as members of our community. If, in making political claims, we do not just speak for ourselves but for others who are also members of our community, then political selfhood is always relational because it

consists not just in listening to 'other' points of view and adjusting your (somehow separate) point of view in response but in realizing that your political voice *is also* the voice of your political community. As Cavell puts it: 'The alternative to speaking for myself representatively (for *someone else's* consent) is not: speaking for myself privately. The alternative is having nothing to say, being voiceless, not even mute'.[25] So, the practice of being fully accountable for our moral judgements animates a democratic politics within which we hope that others will understand where we are coming from and within which we hope to be able to speak for and with others. The importance of disagreement in politics is not that it shows us who is on 'our side' and who is not. Instead, disagreement helps us understand that *we are always implicated in politics*. It helps us navigate what Espen Hammer refers to as 'the reciprocity between ourselves and our political community'.[26] By these lights, we do not speak for others in the sense that we speak when they cannot. Instead, we speak for others in the sense that we recognize that others must see what we see and say what we would say in order for our words to have meaning.

Meaning what we say: A feminist politics of the ordinary

This proposition that we 'speak for' others when we speak in the public voice is a tricky one, especially considering the decolonial feminist insight that dominant voices tend to colonize marginalized voices in political conversations.[27] But, as we have seen, meaning what we say and demanding that others mean what they say requires paying attention to (caring about) the ordinary voices that are side-lined or silenced in dominant modes of public discourse.[28] If this is right, then to 'speak' for the consent of others, more often than not, entails listening to, learning from and amplifying these voices. Cavell says that this listening is 'not…a matter of keeping your mouth shut but of understanding when, and how, not to yield to the temptation to say what you do not or cannot exactly mean'.[29] One way to understand feminist theory, then, might be as resistance to the temptation to offer an *abstract* account of hierarchies of power and privilege. Feminism must instead be understood as the messier and more demanding work of claiming community with others who seek to dismantle these hierarchies by navigating our disagreement and reciprocity with them.

For Toril Moi, this means that we 'begin where feminist thought has always begun: with a woman's own experience of pain and confusion'.[30] Ordinary language feminism calls for an upending of any approach that puts theory (as in, an already endorsed set of theoretical commitments) before the particular case (which is all too often referenced only as a way to reinforce those commitments). For such approaches, 'the particular case is not *theoretically* interesting; it remains a mere illustration of the general claim'.[31] For Moi, this upending is a necessary corrective to the overly abstract and problematically general kinds of thinking that go on in a feminist theory beholden to the legacy of post-structuralism.[32] I am not convinced that this problem remains as prevalent as Moi thinks it is. It seems to me that we are entering into a moment in feminist theory and activism in which common sense, plain speaking and an understanding of the importance of the everyday lives of women are central to the work we do.[33] However, the tendency to start

with (and stick to) the general *is* a problem in feminist, as well as all other kinds of, theorizing – the allure of the metaphysical is such that the overall picture (of a general theory of oppressive power relations, say) holds us captive (to foundational premises we feel we must reiterate whenever we state our case). Following Toril Moi's reading of intersectionality will help us understand the nature of this tendency and the importance of addressing it.

To fill in the contours of the problem of generality, Moi gives an overview of feminist theory's reckoning with the concept of intersectionality. She is at pains to demonstrate that it is not intersectionality itself, as a concept or as an approach, with which she wants to take issue. Intersectionality, understood as the insight that power and privilege affect different people differently, often gives us the words we need for articulating everyday experiences of oppression; and intersectionality as a theoretical approach can be productively conceived as a language that allows us to describe particular cases more accurately. The problem, for Moi, is with any 'intersectionality theory' that attempts to set out a general theory of difference in order to apply it to particular cases:

> Even when theorists' whole project is fueled by a desire to understand the infinite differences among women in all their particularity, they set out to do so by producing a general theory (of difference, identity, language, power, and so on) that they hope will generate the appropriate understanding of the particular case.[34]

She grounds her critique in Wittgenstein's diagnosis of 'the craving for generality' that obscures our understanding in philosophy.[35] If we expect the general concept to tell us everything we need to know about the particular case, then we will be able to appreciate neither the importance of the particular case nor the connection between various cases. The point here is that words gain their meaning in and through their *use*, rather than from some essential criteria preceding their use. Take, for instance, the word 'woman'.[36] We can give a detailed analysis of particular cases in which the use of this word is exclusionary – for instance, the critique of the Violence Against Women Act for not including the protection of trans women or Sojourner Truth's demand that she, too, is a woman – without having a general (metaphysical, essentialist) definition of 'woman'. A concept, by these lights, is traceable not through the enumeration of general criteria but through the observance of a 'criss-crossing' network of similarities in its ordinary use.[37] It is much more productive to look at particular uses of the word 'woman' and examine what those uses include and exclude than to imagine that the word 'woman' is hopelessly, essentially exclusionary.

Work on intersectionality succumbs to the craving for generality when it imagines it must fully account for the complexity of identity through theory. Moi takes as her foil here Susan Stanford Friedman, whose work (*Mappings*, 1998) attempts to produce a taxonomy of oppressive discourses in the hope of arriving at a general view of identity as 'essentially' situational and multiple. For Friedman, the categorization and labelling of 'identity discourses' must be primary to the investigation of particular instances of identity-based oppression. In other words, a general theory of identity-based oppression is necessary for understanding particular cases. This approach to feminist theorizing leads us

astray because it acts 'as if the main task of feminist theory should be to settle the question of (female) identity once and for all. [A]s if the right theory could guarantee the right politics…[A]s if identity is always a problem, always *the* problem to be settled before feminists can say or do anything'.[38]

What we can avoid by shifting to a Cavellian ordinary language understanding of feminism, then, is 'the wish to find words that somehow would never exclude anything…a general reassurance about the meaning of any contentious words in advance of their use'.[39] Instead, we are able to think about the problems of feminism, including intersectionality, as a language game with infinite permutations. Intersectionality might, in other words, be 'the name of a language we need to learn to speak'.[40] If its central insight is that oppression and identity overlap in an endless variety of ways, then that insight will be best expressed through the enumeration of particular cases of identity-based oppression. These cases will not be definable in terms of a general set of criteria for what constitutes identity-based oppression, but they will share a criss-crossing network of similarities that reveals them to be part of the same problem: 'If learning to understand women's oppression is like learning a language, then it is not incoherent to claim that women's oppression…is at once vastly complex, unimaginably varied, yet stunningly systematic. Just like a language'.[41] If this is true, then our task as feminists is not only to read and discuss examples as they arise. It is also to do our best to learn the language of intersectionality, which will involve educating ourselves about the history of the word, the problems that have arisen out of its use and misuse, and the kinds of harms it has made visible when used to explain the experience of oppression.[42]

There is, obviously, a normative element to this understanding of feminism – as Laugier argues, we *should* put the intelligibility of ordinary experiences at the centre of our feminist investigations. But there is also a descriptive element: starting with the particular case and seeing what it has in common with other particular cases *is what we already do* when we come across a problem we need to understand. We do not (and should not) need an abstract theory of identity-based oppression to be able to understand that the police murder of Breonna Taylor, the confirmation of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court despite Christine Blasey Ford's testimony, or the passage of SB 8 by the Texas legislature have something to do with the oppression of women. What we do need, as feminists, is a shared language that allows us to express more accurately in complex conversation with one another the harm of each of these examples. We need the language to discuss difficult things, such as privilege, race, class, trauma, carceralism, rape, the different histories of reproductive freedom for White women and women of colour and more. For these discussions to be meaningful, we cannot decide in advance what these words will necessarily mean in any given conversation. In this view, feminist politics is fraught with harmful misunderstandings we cannot hope to avoid; the best we can do is speak for the consent of other feminists and hope that they will see what we see.

Moral perfectionism

Thus, a Cavellian feminist politics requires that we be accountable to the feminist community as individual selves. As Sandra Laugier puts it, '[I]n the case of political

claims, I am brought back to myself, to the search for my voice'.[43] We might say this search for voice *is* Cavellian moral perfectionism. In our ordinary political lives, we may tend to rely on what others have said and done, but this posture is an abnegation of our responsibility to acknowledge and affirm our community. Moral perfectionism refers to the work we need to do to take up this responsibility. It involves at least three overlapping habits of mind: resisting conformity (which often looks like pointing out what is wrong with what everyone else seems to take for granted as normal), receptivity to further education (which is Cavell's understanding of Emerson's idea of genius) and shame (which is the realization that we are not living up to the ethical standards that we collectively endorse).[44]

Claiming community in the way laid out above *does not* consist in aligning our views with those already out there. On the contrary, it often reflects a deep disappointment with the status quo and requires what Cavell calls, after Emerson, resisting conformity. It is possible, and for most people preferable, to live in conformity with the world *without* claiming a political community. The problem of conformity arises when members of a polis refuse 'to be responsible for meaning what [they] say and desire only that [their] words be defined with reference to an impersonal structure'.[45] In conformity, people shirk their responsibility to articulate their approval for, and understanding of, the political community in which they find themselves. Without taking up this responsibility, they forfeit democracy, which must be mutually articulated by its citizens again and again.

The citizen who resists conformity is therefore at odds with the world: may, indeed, feel that they have no place in it at all. As Cavell puts it, '[T]o be chagrined by every word that most men say is going to put you at odds with those men and make your common sense sound paradoxical. This is the crisis out of which moral perfectionism's aspiration takes its rise, the sense that either you or the world is wrong'.[46] Cavell reads Ibsen's *A Doll's House* to explain what he means. Nora, when she is trying to express the necessity for her leaving, is met by utter incomprehension from her husband, Torvald (Nora: 'I must find out which is right—the world or I'. Torvald: 'You're ill, Nora, I almost believe you're out of your senses').[47] She has no voice within the bounds of their marriage, but she refuses to accept that this state of affairs should be normal. So, she leaves him, following her 'genius', which Emerson says is the feeling that 'what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men'.[48] Nora 'feels herself representative beyond herself, beyond personal resentment as it were…', and in her resistance to conformity is a powerful rejection of the compromise with justice represented by bourgeois patriarchal marriage.[49] When she trusts that she is right to leave, she makes a claim to an imagined future community, one that understands why she found her lot unbearable. She manifests for us as an example of perfectionist nonconformity.

The model for successful democratic discourse is not political debate, then, or any other antagonistic political conversation in which the object is to 'win' an argument. It is, instead, education: specifically, the inspiration that accompanies what Emerson calls the provocation of one by another.[50] We see ourselves (our political selves, that is, the ideas that we endorse and affirm) in others, and we manifest ourselves (as people who mean what we say) *for* others.[51] This may look like education in the more conventional sense (a lecture, an inspiring teacher), or it may look like consciousness raising, reading novels,

following activists on social media or having conversations with friends. Inevitably, we will get stuck in conformity – we will fail to understand the urgency of this or that issue as it arises, we will hold this or that belief without sufficiently examining it, we will allow ourselves to sit in ignorance of this or that injustice. It is at this point that the friend (the lover, the teacher, the admired person, the fellow human being) says something that provokes us and makes us see that we have lapsed. In these moments, Cavell says, we find ourselves *ashamed* of our conformity and of our failure to be responsible. We are called into ourselves as selves in these moments: the rightness of what another says inspires me to pursue my better self.

We are moved to resist conformity and to claim our community as our own through a continuum of education and shame.[52] There is, Cavell writes, 'no question of reaching a final state of the soul but only and endlessly taking the next step to what Emerson calls "an unattained but attainable self"—a self that is always and never ours—a step that turns us not from bad to good, or wrong to right, but from confusion and constriction toward self-knowledge and sociability'.[53] The opposite of conformity, Emerson tells us, is self-reliance, which is the difficult but necessary affirmation of your own thoughts. The idea of self-reliance has been more or less successfully hijacked by those who think of it in terms of rugged individualism, wherein we simply reject society in order to fall back on our own ideas which are somehow separate from that society.[54] But to understand the self as separate and separable from others is to miss completely what self-reliance actually demands of us, which is a deep, ongoing, thoughtful engagement with our community in order to affirm who we are (where that 'we' simultaneously refers to the individual and the community). In resisting conformity, we side not with our self-sovereignty but with the self and community we know we should have. Moral perfectionism, then, entails the rejection of easy answers, whether those take the form of a reliance on metaphysics, an unthinking adoption of beliefs held by others like you, a contempt for those who think differently than you do or a nihilistic rejection of the call to be a member of the political community. Instead, the moral perfectionist self is tasked with resisting these shortcuts and puzzling things out.

What we puzzle out is not, as we have seen, the abstract questions of philosophy. It is, instead, the stuff right in front of our eyes – the stuff that makes us angry, that 'chagrins' us.[55] To explain this sense of the ordinary, Cavell draws on the uncanniness at the heart of philosophical scepticism: we are consistently confronted with the ordinary world, and we are ever-haunted by the weirdness of seeing it in a certain way (of failing to see it at all, perhaps), and then seeing it differently, acknowledging it.[56] Whatever afflicts us, whoever we are, we always have the ability *to say what it is that we see*. When we make our lives intelligible in this way, we are doing so in conversation with other people, checking to see whether they see what we see. It is not some arcane or rarefied project, then, to claim our community; it is a matter of articulating, in our own voice, what is already there.

Moreover, when we claim our community, we have to think about whether we ourselves are worthy of that community. In his reading of *Walden*, Cavell talks of the disappointment and disgust we feel, as Thoreau did, when we see our fellow citizens 'living lives of quiet desperation'.[57] The society Thoreau has left does not understand the meaning of the values it parrots (equality, justice and democracy) because it takes these

values for granted. But to be worthy of the ideals of democracy, we must adjust *ourselves* such that we can claim them as our own. Sometimes this will mean that we have to sit with the feeling of shame that comes with suddenly seeing that we have been ignoring something vital or taking for granted something important. When we do this, we cultivate a moral clarity that is born out of the (always unfinished) project of giving voice to the ordinary rather than out of a set of ideological convictions. Thus, what may seem at first blush to be a naïve or overly earnest appeal to 'siding with your unattained but attainable self' now looks like a prescient and powerful resource for the pursuit of social justice.[58] Moral perfectionism, so understood, can give us both a way to strive for a more complete understanding of self and community and a ground upon which we demand that *others* mean what they say, whether those others are our elected leaders, our fellow travellers in political activism or our friends.

Feminist moral perfectionism: to speak my latent conviction

It should be clear by now that moral perfectionism is an indispensable part of Cavellian politics. If we endorse Cavell's view that the complexity of our moral lives enables the founding of meaningful political communities, then we also have to accept that each of us is required to work toward being a self worthy of those communities.[59] I hope that it is also clear that this understanding of moral perfectionism is already inherently feminist. The feminist call for attention to the ordinary, the rejected, the undervalued is a call to resist conformity. When we direct attention to difficult conversations, we are motivated by the crisis of moral perfectionism – we know that either we are wrong or the world is wrong. But calling out the world does not mean correcting it; it means holding it to account (calling for it to acknowledge that, by our shared standards, it cannot mean what it says). The conversation that follows will always be a difficult one and will involve both receptivity to the way others experience the world and constant self-critique.[60] In feminism, as in Cavellian democracy, the continuum between education and shame is endless. We will always receive education from others who say what we have missed, feel shame at having missed it and acknowledge that we have missed it. In other words, we are never finished with the work of living up to the ethical standards we have set for ourselves.

Feminist moral perfectionism, then, refers to the ordinary conversations that orient us toward better but always unfinished versions of ourselves and our feminist community. To explore this idea, I'll turn to an example from social media, since it is an outsize region of our life in language and since it is often there that feminist activists engage in moral conversation with one another.[61] In the wake of the murder of six Asian women in Atlanta in March of 2021, Janet Mock, a prominent feminist activist and artist posted a message of solidarity. Here is what she said:

> [graphic: The only promise of white supremacy is that none of us are safe]
>
> Eight people in Atlanta, SIX of them Asian women, were murdered yesterday. The rise of nationalism, enduring white supremacy and racist rhetoric continues to fuel hate, harassment and violence. This domestic terrorism is tormenting and killing us.

> There have been nearly 3800 incidents of hate violence targeting Asian folks nationwide since last March, according to @stopaapihate.
>
> There are so many ways we can show up for Asian and Pacific Islander (API) communities. As Alice Wong (disability_visibility) shared on Twitter. We can all do our part by:
>
> -Engaging in a political education
>
> -Following Asian and Asian American people and supporting their work
>
> -Learning about Asian American history, and most important
>
> -SHOWING THE F*** UP
>
> Here are some organizations doing the work to protect and resource API communities:
>
> @aaaj_alc
>
> @nationalcapacd
>
> @stopaapihate
>
> @aapiwomenlead
>
> @acttochange
>
> #StopAsianHate[62]

Here we have not a philosophical argument or a work of art, but an ordinary piece of political speech. We can read it from a conformist point of view or a perfectionist point of view. Conformist readings might take a number of forms, since there are many such structures at work in our political lives (I go on at some length here to emphasize the ubiquity of conformity). One conformist reading could be scientistic: someone might refuse to countenance the claims made here without hard evidence for the existence of White supremacy or a detailed account of the methodology used by @stopaapihate. Another might be conservative reactionary: a reader might dismiss the post without even reading it because it was written by a liberal who uses words like 'folks' and cites people interested in 'disability visibility'. Another might be liberal conservative: someone might dismiss out of hand the idea that White supremacy could possibly exist in America. Another might be anti-trans: The reader might be deeply transphobic and so dismiss anything Janet Mock has to say because she is trans. And there are as many conformist readings on the 'other side', so to speak. A well-meaning White liberal might like the post out of guilt for having racial privilege or as a performance of allyship with anti-racism activists. A trans activist might like everything Janet Mock posts, no matter what it is. An anti-racist activist might like any post that denounces White supremacy without engaging with the particular content of that post. An image-conscious social media user might like it as a way to signal their stylishness to others on Instagram, since Janet Mock is currently enjoying increased fame after directing the popular TV series 'Pose'. It should be clear, then, that a conformist reaction of some stripe is, in fact, the most *likely* reaction.

For Cavell, conformity is a ubiquitous parody of political community – it is 'merely obedience to the law and the voices of others' with no real acknowledgement or endorsement of that law or those voices.[63] But if conformity is the virtue most in request, resisting conformity is a necessary but difficult part of being in community with others who are committed to facing up to the reality of incomplete justice.[64] Recall that it is often shame at seeing a truth I had failed to acknowledge spoken by another that prompts me to speak in my own voice. A perfectionist response to Mock's post entails seeing her as the one who provokes that sense of shame in me. Recall, further, that when others mean what they say when claiming community, they manifest as an example of perfectionist nonconformity. We can understand Mock as manifesting for others in her community in just this way. She herself is showing up for Asian Americans by calling attention to the racism behind this murder, by emphasizing the scale and seriousness of the problem and by amplifying the voices of people better informed about this particular problem than her.

Mock's post is making the kind of feminist claim both Sandra Laugier and Toril Moi foreground as most important: a claim that attempts to make visible an everyday phenomenon (anti-Asian racism and misogyny) that often goes unnamed. In it is also clearly reflected the Cavellian claim to community. Mock is speaking for herself (as a trans woman of colour who feels unsafe because of the rise of White supremacy), but she is also speaking for the consent of her community (the 'us' under threat and the 'we' who can show up – what we might call the inclusive feminist community). If we think of the constitution of our community this way, then we are able to make sense of an open-ended, constantly evolving ethics in feminism, which Paul C. Taylor calls a 'post-supremacist ethics'.[65] Such an ethics simultaneously acknowledges both the intractability and the moral absurdity of identity-based oppression and exclusion. It requires that I pay attention to others when they call out the continued existence of this kind of harm and check to see whether and how my moral intuitions sit alongside the moral intuitions of others in my community.

When I read this post, I feel the rightness of what Janet Mock has said. I acknowledge that anti-Asian racism is a problem that I have noticed but not one that I have treated with the requisite attentiveness, and I feel a motivating sense of shame at seeing my own rejected thoughts spoken by another. But being provoked to side with my better self (to 'show the f*** up') does not mean that I see Janet Mock as somehow beyond reproach or able to dictate to me what I should do out of blind loyalty to the cause of social justice.[66] Nor does it mean that I should expect to agree with her about every aspect of every particular case. And though I pay due attention to what the post says, I certainly do not reach anything like a complete understanding of myself (especially the extent of my privilege as a White woman) or of the experience of the API community. Provocations such as these do not offer correct or complete answers, but they inspire us to keep doing the work necessary to be worthy of the community we should have. This feeling of shame that accompanies the crisis of moral perfectionism should keep us engaged with, and open to, one another, Cavell's 'step that turns us not from bad to good, or wrong to right, but from confusion and constriction toward self-knowledge and sociability'.[67] The point is that, without some idea that it is *up to me* to claim community, to see whether and how *my* moral intuitions line up with the moral intuitions of others – without, in other words, 'showing up' – then I cannot make this turn toward self-knowledge and sociability.

ORCID iD

Sarah Drews Lucas https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4907-4556

Notes

1. The bulk of this paper was written while I was a visiting fellow at the Hobby School of Public Affairs at the University of Houston. I would like to thank the University of Exeter for granting me leave to take that post and to Daniel Engster for hosting me while I was at U of H. I would also like to thank the members of Daniel's Care Ethics Reading Group for a stimulating discussion of an earlier draft; the two anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments; and Kate Goldie Townsend, Herjeet Marway, James Houlihan, Katherine Guild, Bice Maiguashca, Louise Pennebaker and (especially) Robert Lamb for wonderful conversations about the paper throughout its development.
2. Cavell, 2004: 33.
3. See Norris, 2017 (especially his reflection that the importance of gender in Cavell's thought will be 'more helpfully addressed by other readers' 225n21); Hammer, 2002; Havercroft, 2011; Dumm, 1999; and Mulhall, 1999. Though Stephen Mulhall does devote his last chapter (a postscript) of his study of Cavell to the question of Cavell's feminism. Mulhall argues, intriguingly, that Cavell's thought is underpinned by two essentially feminist preoccupations: first, the oppression of (usually conceived as the silencing of) a non-conformist voice, which Cavell often understands to be a feminine voice, especially in his readings of Hollywood melodramas in *Contesting Tears* (1996b), and, second, the explanatory and normative importance of the particular over that of the universal. These two commonalities that Cavell shares with feminism are not explored in conversation with feminist literature, much to the chagrin of some feminists – see Modleski, 1990, and Cavell's response. And yet, Mulhall thinks that the presence of feminist ideas in Cavell's work *is* feminist – in other words, feminism is not just germane to, or fruitfully brought into conversation with, Cavell but is central to his thought. Naori Saito (2018) makes a version of this argument as well
4. Many of these feminist readings of Cavell grew out of a reading group at Duke, which published some of its conversations in a special issue of *New Literary History* in 2015 (Bauer et al., 2015). See also, for care ethics: Laugier, 2015 and 2018; for relational selfhood: Beckwith, 2013; for judgement, see Crary, 2007, Zerilli, 2016, and Bauer, 2015; for the primacy of examples, see Moi, 2017 and Das, 2006
5. Cavell uses this phrase differently than those who use it in the Aristotelian and virtue ethics traditions, in that it is a non-teleological concept for him. For extended accounts of the distinctiveness of Cavellian moral perfectionism, see Richard Flathman's chapter, 'Perfectionism Without Perfection: Cavell, Montaigne, and the Conditions of Morals and Politics', in Norris (ed.), 2006. See also Matteo Falomi, 2010; Alice Crary, 2014; and Paul C. Taylor, 2018.
6. I borrow this structure from Espen Hammer (2002), whose overview of Cavell's politics is admirably succinct.
7. I look closely at the work of Sandra Laugier and Toril Moi for a couple of reasons – first, because they are, arguably, the two feminist thinkers most closely aligned with Cavell himself (though both are working in the tradition of ordinary language philosophy more generally) and,

second, because it seems to me their work is most amendable to, and constructively enhanced by, the concept of moral perfectionism, which is already implicit in their work.

8. It is customary when writing about Cavell to make a note of the difficulty of both defining his work within a particular discipline and reading his actual words. As Andrew Norris writes: 'Cavell's style is at once concrete and elusive in a way that delights and frustrates equal numbers of his readers. The twists and flights of his prose, so precise and measured in his presentation, make any recapitulation and summary difficult if not impossible' (2017: 3).
9. Cavell, 1976. The ethical worldview that grows out of this basic insight is what interests me in this paper, but it is somewhat heretical to jump straight into it without a lengthy examination of Cavell's development of ordinary language philosophy (to which I refer throughout but which I do not recount systematically). It seems to me, however, that the common sense of Cavell's ordinary language philosophy emerges most clearly when we put it to use. I do not mean to suggest that spending due time with Austin, Wittgenstein, and the many commentaries on Cavell's importance to the philosophy of language is unnecessary for understanding him. It is also not my intention to suggest that Cavell can somehow be made immediately accessible to readers by way of any shortcut. But I do think that my response to Cavell here – my attempt to understand how moral perfectionism illuminates what feminists do – is in keeping with the spirit of Cavell's thought.
10. Cavell's main target in *The Claim of Reason* is moral philosophy as practiced in North America in the middle of the 20th century, to which he often simply refers as 'epistemology'. I thus refer to rationalistic approaches to morality here (approaches that imagine there can and should be a 'correct' outcome in moral disagreement) as 'epistemological', but this way of thinking about morality arguably remains a problem across contemporary academic and political life, from moral psychology to Marxism.
11. Cavell, 1999: 268, original emphasis.
12. Hammer, 2002: 124.
13. In his chapter on Rawls in *Cities of Words*, Cavell argues that abstract theories of justice are only meaningful if they are endorsed in citizens' ordinary moral lives. In a democracy, we cannot come to know what we mean by justice by appealing to a universal moral high ground. He writes: 'To have that faith [in justice] is the wager of democracy, the faith a democracy stakes in itself. But I do not now, in general, have any better knowledge of these things than you. I cannot *inform* you of these things. I am not morally more competent than you. But if not then your rebuke of me stands to show that I am morally compromised. How I live with this determines my contribution to the moral life of my society.' 2004: 184, original emphasis.
14. As Cavell puts it, 'Questioning a claim to moral rightness (whether of any action or any judgment) takes the form of asking "Why are you doing that?", "How can you do that?", "What are you doing?", "Have you really considered what you're saying?", "Do you know what this means?"…' 1999: 268.
15. This means we always have to care about our political community as well. The example I've given here is an easy case. It reflects a friendship that is situated within the political community of feminism (which, like Cavellian democracy, is a diverse and open-ended community). Caring about other members of the political community – and about the community itself – is much harder when the fabric of that community breaks down, as it has across some understandings of 'America' as a political community.

16. Laugier, 2015: 219.
17. Ibid., 221.
18. Das, 2007: 184–199.
19. Hepburn and Murdoch, 1956: 39. See also Murdoch's famous example of the mother (M) who changes her mind with regard to her daughter-in-law (D) in Murdoch, 2013: 17–44.
20. Laugier, 2015: 225, emphasis added.
21. Ibid., 230.
22. Cavell, 1999: 20.
23. Norris, 2017: 130.
24. Cavell, 1999: 23, original emphasis.
25. Ibid., 28, original emphasis.
26. Hammer, 2002: 131.
27. Resisting the colonization of marginalized voices by dominant voices (especially White academic feminist voices) is the central concern of decolonial feminisms. See, for instance, Alcoff, 1991; Lugones, 2010; Vèrges, 2021. Cavell himself was acutely aware of the tendency toward domination in the philosophical voice (a theme throughout his work, but see especially 'Philosophy and the Arrogation of Voice' in Cavell, 1996a), and so, arguably, was Emerson (see Ritter, 2021). The point that I want to make here is not that we should set this problem to one side. Rather, I want to say that fear or discomfort in the face of this problem does not exempt us from claiming feminist community.
28. 'The literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life, are the topics of the time…I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic…I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar and the low.' Emerson, 2003a: 102.
29. Cavell, 1992: 145.
30. Moi, 2017: 89.
31. Ibid., 93, original emphasis.
32. See Moi 2009 and also her critique of new materialism in Moi 2017: 16–17.
33. Across academic feminisms, there has been a recent shift toward the concrete and the practical. To cite just a few examples: a renewed interest in the interconnectedness of academic work and activism in the work of twentieth-century radical feminists like Catherine MacKinnon (Finlayson, 2014); an explosion of ameliorative projects in analytic philosophy that explore the way we conceptualize patriarchal harms (Manne, 2017); a re-thinking of intersectionality as an open-ended and generative project (Nash, 2019), a surge in transnational feminisms that take as a starting point the full humanity of women and the importance of human rights (without getting bogged down in an intractable metaphysical muddle by those things) (Khader, 2019); a shift (back) toward the empirical as a way to understand intersectional oppression (Emejulu et al., 2019); a growing understanding of the philosophical implications of paying attention to the everyday pain of women (especially trans women) (Bettcher, 2019); a commitment to making visible the lives of disabled people (Hirschmann and Linker, 2014); and a recognition of the primary importance of care to our ordinary lives (Kittay, 2019).
34. Moi, 2017: 93.
35. Wittgenstein, 1965: 17.
36. A favourite example of Moi's – see Moi, 1999.

37. Moi, 2017: 100.
38. Moi, 2017: 101.
39. Ibid., 103.
40. Ibid., 108.
41. Ibid., 108.
42. Ange-Marie Hancock conceives of intersectionality as careful stewardship of the many different uses of the idea. She writes: 'If we think of a steward as someone entrusted with caring for valuables that she does not herself own, then my role is not only to disavow ownership of intersectionality, but to remember that while I am permitted to use it, I must do so ethically…' 2016: 23.
43. Laugier, 2018b: 217.
44. See Taylor 2018 for a wonderful account of the centrality of shame to Cavellian moral perfectionism.
45. Hammer, 2002: 132. David Owen also offers a clear summary of the problem of conformity: 'A conformist is someone who does not have experiences that are his or her own; that is, the conformist can only recognize his or her experiences as the experiences of a certain type of self rather than the experiences of this, his, or her own, self. Consequently, the conformist avoids responsibility for his or her own (moral) judgments precisely because these judgments are not, in the relevant sense, his or her own…' 1999: 582.
46. Cavell, 2004: 29.
47. Quoted in Cavell, 1988: 110.
48. Emerson, 2003b: 175–176.
49. Cavell, 1988: 110–111.
50. 'Truly speaking, it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul. What he announces, I must find true in me, or reject; and on his word, or as his second, be who he may, I can accept nothing. On the contrary, the absence of this primary faith is the presence of degradation.' Emerson, 2003c: 112.
51. See Norval, 2011 for an in-depth account of manifesting for another as a mode of action in democracy.
52. By 'shame', I hope it is clear that I do not mean the kind of shame caused by internalized neoliberal notions of success, heteronormativity, homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, racism or ableism. Moral perfectionist shame is something I feel when I know I should side with my better self and with the community of others who are siding with their better selves. It seems to me that the moral perfectionist kind of shame is a powerful weapon against the damaging kind.
53. Cavell, 2004: 13.
54. See George Kateb (2002) for the paradigmatic reading of Emerson as an individualistic thinker and see Andrew Norris' chapter 'Receiving Autonomy' for a nuanced account of different readings of Emerson's individualism.
55. 'Well, most men have bound their eyes with one or another handkerchief, and attached themselves to some one of these communities of opinion. This conformity makes them not false in a few particulars, but false in all particulars. Their every truth is not quite true. Their two is not the real two, their four is not the real four; so that every word they say chagrins us and we know not where to begin to set them right.' Emerson, 2003b: 181.

56. '…What scepticism suggests is that since we cannot know the world exists, its presentness to us cannot be a function of knowing. The world is to be accepted; as the presentness of other minds is not to be known but acknowledged.' Cavell, 1976: 324.
57. Thoreau, 2017: 26, quoted in Cavell, 1992: 56.
58. A quote from Cavell that captures this idea: 'It is a characteristic criticism of Emerson to say that he lacks a sense of tragedy; for otherwise how can he seem so persistently to preach cheerfulness? But suppose that what Emerson perceives, when he speaks of his fellow citizens as existing in a state of secret melancholy, is that in a democracy, despair is a political emotion, discouraging both participation and patience. So when Emerson asks of the American Scholar that he and she raise and cheer us, he is asking for a step of political encouragement, one that assures us that we are not alone in our compromise with justice, that our sense of an unattained self is not an escape from, it is rather an index of, our commitment to the unattained city, one within the one we sustain, one we know there is no good reason we perpetually fail to attain.' *Cities of Words*, 2004: 18.
59. We must, as Emerson puts it, "[s]peak [our] latent conviction..[E]lse tomorrow..."?
60. Cavell understood that moral perfectionism was part of the work of political activism: 'Perfectionism proposes confrontation and conversation as the means of determining whether we can live together, accept one another into the aspirations of our lives…Left to itself it may seem to make the ability to converse do too much work—what prevents us from coming to unjust agreements, or intimately talking ourselves into misdeeds? *Perfectionism is the province not of those who oppose justice and benevolent calculation, but of those who feel that most people have been left out, or leave themselves out, of their sway.*' 2004: 25, emphasis added.
61. Indeed, feminist activists often use social media to manifest for others within the feminist community to great effect. There is a style of educational post on Instagram, TikTok and Twitter which intends to provoke and shame the viewer that we should understand as exhibiting feminist moral perfectionism; though, of course, at times it may also make sense to understand these posts as the conformist repetition of feminist platitudes (to say nothing of the importance of critically assessing how algorithms owned by powerful corporations function to bring them to our attention in the first place).
62. Janet Mock, 17 March 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/CMhfRLiASZ9/.
63. Cavell, 1988: 45, 125.
64. 'The virtue most in request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion.' Emerson, 2003b: 178.
65. Taylor, 2011: 141.
66. Andrew Norris explains that being provoked by another is the opposite of letting someone else think for you: 'the role of the exemplar is not the heteronomous one of making discrete decisions for me—something no text could ever do—but rather that of drawing me into the process of making those decisions for myself. Indeed, in so far as the exemplary other shames me by speaking for me, he [!] prods me to speak and hence to decide only for myself, to cease delegating him to speak for me (about this, here, now). Heteronomy is precisely what the exemplary other forecloses.' 2017: 213.
67. Cavell, 2004: 13.

References

Ahmed, Sara. 2017. *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Alcoff, Linda. 1991. "The Problem of Speaking for Others." *Cultural Critique* 20, (Winter 1991–1992): 5-32.

Bauer, Nancy. 2015. *How to Do Things with Pornography.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Bauer, N., Beckwith, S., Crary, A., Laugier, S., Moi, T., and Zerilli, L. 2015. "Introduction." *New Literary History* 46, (2): v-xiii.

Beckwith, Sarah. 2013. *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Bettcher, Talia Mae. 2019. "What is Trans Philosophy?" *Hypatia* 34, (4): 644-667.

Cavell, Stanley. 1976. *Must we Mean What we Say?* Cambridge: Cambridge UniversityPress.

Cavell, Stanley. 1988. *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Cavell, Stanley. 1990. "Editorial Notes." *Critical Inquiry* 17, (1): 237-244.

Cavell, Stanley. 1992. *The Senses of Walden*. Expanded Edition. Chicago: The University Of Chicago Press.

Cavell, Stanley. 1996a. *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Cavell, Stanley. 1996b. *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Cavell, Stanley. 1999. *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy.* New Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cavell, Stanley. 2004. *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Harvard.

Cavell, Stanley. 2013. *This New Yet Unapproachable America*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Crary, Alice. 2007. *Beyond Moral Judgment*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard, University Press.

Crary, Alice. 2014. "A Radical Perfectionist: Revisiting Cavell in the Light of Kant." *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 48, (3): 87-98.

Das, Veena. 2006. *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary.* Oakland: University of California Press.

Diamond, Cora. 1991. *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Dumm, Thomas. 1999. *A Politics of the Ordinary.* NY: NYU Press.

Emejulu, Akwugo, and Sobande, Francesca, eds 2019. *To Exist is to Resist*. London: Pluto Press.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. 1837, *The American Scholar" in Nature and Selected Essays*. Larzer Ziff, ed, 83-106. London: Penguin Classics.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. 1841, *Self-Reliance" in Nature and Selected Essays*. Larzer Ziff, ed, 175-204. London: Penguin Classics.*Self-Reliance" in* Nature and Selected Essays

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. 1838, *An Address Delivered Before the Senior Class in Divinity College" In Nature and Selected Essays*. Larzer Ziff, ed, 107-128. London: Penguin Classics.

Falomi, Matteo. 2010. "Perfectionism and Moral Reasoning." *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy II-2*.

Finlayson, Lorna. 2014. "How to Screw Things with Words." *Hypatia* 29, (4): 774-789.

Friedman, Susan Stanford. 1998. *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Gilligan, Carol. 1992. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hammer, Espen. 2002. *Stanley Cavell: Skepticism, Subjectivity, and the Ordinary*. NY: Polity.

Hancock, Ange-Marie. 2016. *Intersectionality: An Intellectual History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Havercroft, Jonathan. 2011. *Captives of Sovereignty*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hepburn, Ronald W., and Murdoch, Iris. 1956. "Symposium: Vision and Choice in Morality." In *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume, Supplementary Volumes*, Vol. 30: Dreams And Self-Knowledge. 14-58.

Hirschmann, Nancy, and Linker, Beth, eds 2019. Penn Press.*Civil Disabilities: Citizenship, Membership and Belonging*. Philadelphia: Penn Press

Kateb, George. 2002. *Emerson and Self-Reliance*. New Edition. Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield.

Khader, Serene. 2019. *Decolonizing Universalism: A Transnational Feminist Ethic*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Laugier, S. 2015. *The Ethics of Care as a Politics of the Ordinary"*, Vol. 46, 217-240. *New Literary History*2

Laugier, Sandra. 2018a. "Cavell on Feminism and The Ethics of Care." *Conversations: The Journal of Cavellian Studies* 6: 55-80.

Laugier, S. 2018b. "This is Us: Wittgenstein and the Social." *Philosophical Investigations* 41, (2): 204-222.

Lugones, Maria. 2010. "Toward a Decolonial Feminism." *Hypatia* 25, (4): 742-759.

Manne, Kate. 2017. *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Moi, Toril. 2017. *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies After Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Moi, Toril. 2015. "Thinking Through Examples: What Ordinary Language Philosophy Can Do for Feminist Theory." *New Literary History* 46, (2): 191-216.

Toril Moi, Toril. 2009. ""They practice their trades in different worlds": Concepts in Post-structuralism and Ordinary Language Philosophy." *New Literary History* 40: 801-824.

Moi, Toril. 1999. *What is a Woman? And Other Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mock, Janet. Instagram Post, 17 March 2021. Last accessed 7th February, 2022 https://www.instagram.com/p/CMhfRLiASZ9/.

Modleski, Tania. 1990. "Cavell, Stanley and Melodramas of Unknown Women." *Critical Inquiry* 17, (1): 237-238.

Mulhall, Stephen. 1999. *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Murdoch, Iris. 2013. *The Sovereignty of Good*. London: Routledge.

Nash, Jennifer C. 2019. *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Norris, Andrew, ed. 2006. *The Claim to Community: Essays on Stanley Cavell and Political Philosophy*. Redwood City: Stanford University Press.

Norris, Andrew. 2017. *Becoming Who We Are: Politics and Practical Philosophy in theWork of StanleyCavell*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Norval, Aletta. 2011. "Moral Perfectionism and Democratic Responsiveness: Reading Cavell with Foucault." *Ethics & Global Politics* 4, (4): 207-229.

Owen, David. 1999. "Cultural Diversity and the Conversation of Justice." *Political Theory* 27, (5): 579-596.

Ritter, Eric. 2021. "Emerson's abolitionist perfectionism." *Philosophy & Social Criticism*. 10.1177/01914537211017575.

Saito, Naoko. 2018. "Educating the Feminine Voice in Philosophy." *Philosophy of Education*: 122-134.

Taylor, Paul C. 2011. "Melting Whites and Liberated Latinas." In E. Jones Ward, and Vice Samantha, eds, *Ethics at the Cinema*. 136-157. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Taylor, Paul C. 2018. "Moral Perfectionism." *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin LutherKing*. Shelby Tommie, and M. Terry Brandon, eds, 35-57. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Thoreau, Henry David. 2017. *Walden: Life in the Woods*. Layton, Utah: Gibbs-Smith.

Vergès, Françoise. 2021. *A Decolonial Feminism*. London: Pluto Press.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1965. *The Blue and Brown Books: Preliminary Studies for "The Philosophical Investigations"*. NY: Harper Torchbooks.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 2009. *Philosophical Investigations*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Zerilli, Linda. 2016. *A Democratic Theory of Judgment*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.