TROIS QUESTIONS À...

ALICE CRARY

(NEW SCHOOL FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH)

You started your philosophical work in ethics, partly drawing on Wittgenstein, and you are one of the advisors to American philosopher Stanley Cavell's literary estate, as is Sandra Laugier. Could you explain how you have connected these interests?

I gravitated to ethics, the topic of my dissertation and my first two books, because doing so enabled me to address the social and political questions that grabbed me. Some of my earliest philosophical preoccupations had to do with feminist consciousness-raising and pedagogies associated with liberation theology and other liberating social movements. The framing empiricist commitments of the analytic tradition are unhelpful for making sense of these liberating practices. So, while getting an analytic education at Harvard and Pittsburgh, I also read feminist history and theory, other critical theories, literary theory, 19th and 20th century European philosophy, and the work of thinkers like Wittgenstein, JL Austin, Cavell, and Cora Diamond who, though associated with analytic philosophy, aren't at home in its mainstream.

The writers who excited me operated with non-empiricist images of language, on which thinkers' sensibilities internally inform every move of thought and speech. I was especially taken by philosophers, like Cavell and Diamond, whose philosophical practice reflects this commitment. I aspired to such a mode of philosophizing but couldn't take it for granted. Central strands of the analytic tradition erect obstacles to doing philosophy in such a manner, and in this respect the analytic tradition reflects the larger culture. Ethics was, for me, a place at which the apparent barriers to what I wanted to do could be confronted head on. Core research programs in analytic ethics start from the idea that moral thought can't be both essentially a matter of sensitivity to the world and immediately relevant to action. This prohibition expresses an engrained, scientistic view of what reality is like and of what it is for the mind to bear on it. My initial aim in philosophy was to show that this view, which organizes research in ethics and other sub-disciplines, owes its apparent plausibility, not to any merits but to its fit with the status quo.

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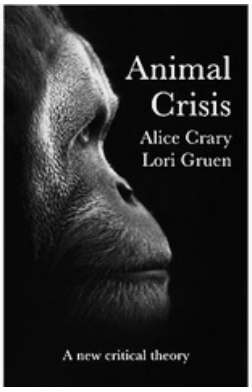
Cavell was one of my mentors while I figured these things out. Although I did my PhD at Pittsburgh with John McDowell, to whom I owe a great deal, I spent three years during my graduate studies at Harvard, where I served for a year as Cavell's research assistant. His importance for me is immense, as is my gratitude to him. It is an honor and pleasure to serve as advisor to his literary estate and an honor and pleasure to do so with Sandra Laugier, whom I met a quarter century ago and treasure as a friend and interlocutor.

What was it that led you to Critical Theory and to social philosophy more generally, and how did your interest in feminist thought and politics inform your work in these areas?



Alice Crary and Lori Gruen
Animal Crisis. A New Critical Theory
(Polity, 2022)

Here I'll reverse the question, since it was partly interest in social and political philosophy that brought me to ethics. I was exploring social and political themes when I was working on my PhD on ethics, and some of my first articles are on feminist consciousness-raising and the political significance of Wittgenstein's philosophy. Frankfurt School Critical Theory was on my radar after 2000, when I was hired just out of graduate school by the New School for Social Research, where my colleagues included several thinkers associated with the Frankfurt School, Jay Bernstein, Richard Bernstein, Nancy Fraser, and Christoph Mencke, and where others, like Ranier Forst, Rahel Jaeggi, and Eva von Redecker, visited for substantial periods.

I took these and related influences as prompts to further develop my feminist engagements, which, early on, focused on demonstrating conflict between the demands of including women's voices and liberal-rationalist accounts of political community. The New School-turn in my thought is marked by inheritance from strands of Marx-influenced social theory important for the Frankfurt School and other critical social theories. Like many feminists, I push back against social theorists dismissive of feminism, considering it bourgeois and secondary to class-based analysis, and a decade ago I led a successful initiative to reinstate graduate-level gender studies at the NSSR.

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My own social-theoretical posture incorporates socialist feminists' insights about the importance of 'feminized' unwaged care and reproductive work as an analytic category; respects Black feminists' perception that Black women and other racialized women and men get exploited as providers both of such 'feminized' unwaged work and of 'masculinized' waged labor; reflects ecological Marxists' observations about structural analogies between the exploitation of waged labor and the destructive treatment of nature as a free resource; and integrates these insights with reference to Indigenous environmentalists' and structural ecofeminists' discernment of structural analogies between the exploitation of labor, whether 'feminized'-and-unwaged or 'masculinized'-and-waged, and the destruction of nature. Though at times modified by legal reforms and internalizing strategies, these social trends haven't been eliminated, and theoretical tools for identifying them remain invaluable at a time at which the intensification of late capitalism, fueled by Big AI, threatens to produce new socio-economic formations, such as the neoliberal extremism cheered by fans of "network states" or the post-capitalist arrangements at issue in talk of "techno-feudalism" and "Muskism".

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Turning to social theory has not, for me, meant abandoning normative theory but seeing it in a new light. Ethical notions like dignity, majesty, and, vulnerability figure in my accounts of the wrongness of exploitative and extractive social mechanisms, and, by my lights, the social structures that explain the repeated infliction of exploitative and extractive wrongs are themselves irreducibly normative and invisible apart from historical and other perspectives. Just as I push back against social theorists dismissive of feminism, I push back against those dismissive of ethics.

Much of your recent work has been on how non-human animals show up in moral and political thought and on the kinds of claims and responsibilities they place on human beings. Could you say more about how this aspect of your work has developed over the past few years and how it relates to your other scholarship?

Non-human animals have been a topic for me not just recently but since I started in philosophy.

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As an undergraduate, I was captivated by the view, advocated by Diamond, that animals don't enter moral thought apart from a tangle of ways of responding to them. I quickly learned this view had no place in standard surveys of animal ethics. I didn't take up the question of animals in my dissertation or in my first book [*Beyond Moral Judgment*], but I did defend the idea, there in Diamond's work on animals, that the world to which moral thought is responsible isn't available independently of a certain moral sensibility. Later, it seemed to me that, to account for inadequacies of received approaches to animal ethics, I had to directly confront the deep-seated prejudice that the categories used to pick out animals in ethics—say, "giraffe"—are merely biological, non-moral categories. That led me to challenge the equally deep-seated prejudice that the category "human" used in ethics is a merely biological, non-moral category. I devoted a second book, *Inside Ethics*, to showing that getting humans and animals in view in ethics requires moral resources and that humans and animals are thus already "inside ethics."

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Animal ethicists often assume that insisting on the unqualified dignity of non-linguistic humans reflects a morally unjustifiable "speciesist" bias and that advocating for animals means questioning the classic idea of human moral equality. In Inside Ethics, I deconstruct this divisive political logic and show that respect for human moral equality has nothing to do with demeaning animals. By the time of the book's completion, I was steeped in social theory and thinking about historical and structural ties between, on the one hand, the marginalization of disabled and racialized humans and, on the other, the disparagement of animals and other aspect of nature. I saw that these ties had provided soil for the growth of conceptual linkages enabling invidious comparisons to animals to serve as dehumanizing tools, and I concluded that any meaningful intervention in animal ethics would need critical social theory's resources. This is what Lori Gruen and I argue, drawing substantially on ecofemism, in our 2022 book *Animal Crisis*.

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While writing that book, Gruen and I, with Carol Adams and others, pursued a related thread, arguing that the animal activism of members of the philanthropic movement Effective Altruism or EA, because based on utilitarian considerations that lack social theory's critical instruments, is overwhelmingly detrimental to the cause of animals. I have continued to write about EA and to attack its future-oriented, "longtermist" wing, both of which have roots in Silicon Valley and are best understood as ideological cover for harms of Big AI, and, during the past few years, I have also taken time to co-write, with Joel De Lara, a short book on Wittgenstein and politics. But I have never abandoned my focus on animals, and I am currently writing a book that approaches the same cluster of issues Gruen and I addressed, now from a different direction, showing that any meaningful steps toward human justice must involve a revaluation of the lives of animals.

Entretien mené par Annabelle Lever (CEVIPOF)

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