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# Working through our differences: Limits of ontology in the ordinary lives of critical geographical theory

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## Abstract

You won't get far in geographical theory today without bumping into one ontology or another. Metaphysical assertions about key spatial concepts – 'space is open', 'community is exclusionary', 'the political is agonistic' – guide empirical analysis. In this mode of theorising, the vocation of critical geography is to correct conceptual misunderstandings and thereby direct political action. Curiously perhaps, the geographer becomes one who – in the name of emancipatory projects – points people to their proper place. An alternative approach to critical theory might consider instead how people place themselves. Just such a concern animates the varied enterprises operating under the name of ordinary language philosophy. This article examines how philosophies of ordinary language might contribute to new avenues of geographical research by examining the relationship between Stanley Cavell's writings on the human voice as a site of embodied and passionate response and Clive Barnett's call for an action-theoretic approach to social inquiry as an alternative to ontological critique. Taken together, their work recommends a programme of inquiry into ordinary critical geographies: how people circumscribe the meaning, worth and wisdom of their actions, and, in doing so, work to place themselves in the world.

## Keywords

Clive Barnett, critical geography, ontology, ordinary language philosophy, spatial grammar, Stanley Cavell, worldly accountability

...being critical can be thought of more modestly - more ordinarily - as a matter of clarifying the pressures and limits that orient possibilities of action in particular situations (Barnett, 2020: 9).

Then philosophy would show itself as a struggle against melancholy, against being overtaken by pointlessness (Cavell, 2005: 115–116).

## Introduction

Geographical theory is full of twists and turns – especially turns. For some time now, the 'turn' has

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been the preferred metaphor with which to announce a new theoretical contribution, a new direction for the field. Writing amid geography's 'cultural turn', Clive Barnett noted that the rhetoric of turns imagines the discipline as a vehicle swerving from an old path to a new one (2004: 39; 1998). He took issue with the metaphor, both for its 'totalising' depiction of the discipline and its narration of geographical theory as a succession of research traditions, each supplanting the last. Most of all, however, Barnett's criticism was trained on a type of unreflective theory-building facilitated by the rhetoric of turns. He argued that geographers had been too willing 'to construct "theory" in terms of a set of propositions whose truth-status is already established by virtue of coming from somewhere else', that is, drawn from other disciplines, or through 'recourse to the authority of the proper name of a Theorist' (Barnett, 2004: 42–43). Within the orthodoxy of the next big turn, metaphysical assertions about key theoretical concepts become reliable resources to get analysis of empirical data off the ground rather than topics for scrutiny in their own right.

Barnett's critique seems to detect another image contained within the rhetoric of turns: the geographer turning to theory for answers, and his concerns anticipated a broader shift in prevailing styles of geographical theory – a new turn to ontology (Barnett, 2017: Ch.3; Bridge, 2021; Joronen and Häkli, 2017; Kinkaid, 2020). Behind the growing 'ontological register of theoretical argumentation', Barnett observed a supposition 'that inquiry can and must be preceded by clearly delimiting the general metaphysical properties possessed by objects of analysis' (2008: 187). Within such approaches, the proper task of critical theory becomes the settling of key conceptual questions to enable 'proper' forms of emancipatory politics, a 'picture of theory' that has prevailed across much of the critical humanities and social sciences since the 1970s (Moi, 2015).

Against this idea, Barnett argued for a 'more ordinary account of the vocation of critique', one which would 'start from the assumption that critique is a dimension of ordinary life' (2017: 3–4). He suggested an alternative task for theory to inform social

inquiry by analysing what is at stake in specific circumstances of a concept's use to develop arguments and to advance political projects (2017: 6; 2019). Such an approach would build theory 'in more modest ways and in closer proximity to empirical concerns' (Barnett, 2017: 8).

Barnett's search for an alternative vocation of critical theory in tune with the concerns of ordinary life resonates with recent arguments against ontological theory from a range of scholars in the humanities (Felski, 2015; Laugier, 2020; Leys, 2017; Moi, 2017) and social sciences (Das, 2020; Norris, 2017; Zerilli, 2016; see also Pitkin, 1972), who share a philosophical grounding in ordinary language philosophy. Associated most closely with the works of Ludwig Wittgenstein, John Austin and Stanley Cavell, philosophies of ordinary language are generally understood to be concerned with language as human action. Ordinary language philosophy is not, however, narrowly interested in language – although the name is admittedly not doing much to clarify this fact.<sup>1</sup> As Cavell puts it, 'The philosophy of ordinary language is not about language, anyway not in any sense in which it is not also about the world. Ordinary language philosophy is about whatever ordinary language is about' (2002: 87–89). In this sense, philosophers of ordinary language are interested in our sayings and doings as themselves means of '*placing* ourselves in the world' and taking a *stance* on what is worth doing (Barnett, 2014; Cavell, 1992: 53–54; 61–63).

Critical geography and philosophies of ordinary language share a worldly sense of accountability, yet there has only been sporadic and often disconnected engagement between the two (see Barnett, 2005; Curry, 2000; 1989; Entrikin, 2002; Laurier, 2011; Olsson, 1975; Pugh, 2017). This paper's aim is to locate opportunities for greater dialogue between them by undertaking a 'grammatical investigation' of ontology within critical geographical theory. Rather than merely summarising familiar ontological projects, my intent is to understand what ontology is used to *do* and specifically what problems ontological argument is intended to solve (see Barnett, 2017: 6; Cavell, 1999: 6; Wittgenstein, 1958: §373).

Recent debates within critical geographical theory nicely set the scene for such an investigation. I begin

by tracking the development of an ontological mode of critique within geographical theory, first by advocates of geography's 'relational turn' and then in more recent arguments for a revised 'non-relational' ontology of 'relation/detachment', which aspires to refine ontological critique by addressing issues of limits and uncertainty in social life – partly by drawing on philosophies of ordinary language (Bissell et al., 2021; Ginn, 2014: 541; Harrison, 2007). The nonrelational reading takes Cavell to be a philosopher of metaphysical scepticism and ontological tragedy. In the following section, however, I discuss how the non-relational perspective misinterprets ordinary language philosophy's critical project, and I recommend reading Cavell instead as a philosopher of the human voice, understood as a site of response to uncertainty (Laugier, 2018).

In the final two sections, I examine the 'action-theoretic' alternative to ontological modes of political critique developed by Clive Barnett (2008, 2014, 2017): an approach that locates critical theory within processes of intersubjective 'social inquiry' and the ordinary giving-and-taking of reasons about what should be done. I discuss the sometimes-understated influence of Cavell and other philosophers of ordinary language on Barnett's ideas and help to situate his arguments for an alternative vocation of critique as a geographical contribution to philosophies conducted in an 'ordinary spirit'. Philosophies of ordinary language can help geographers to reconsider the spirit in which they turn to theory by providing, as Barnett argues, a sense of the 'heuristic' uses of ontology in ordinary, intersubjective reasoning in and about the world. Rather than a source of metaphysical certitude, theory can contribute to practices of public inquiry into the ways people account for the world and make themselves accountable to it – how they circumstantiate the meaning, worth and wisdom of their actions through a giving and taking of perspectives.

### **Limits of ontology: comparing two grammars**

Today the idea that 'space is relational' is so intimately familiar to geographers that it nearly goes

without saying. As early as 1995, Doreen Massey was willing to observe that 'To say that social space is relational [had] become commonplace' within the discipline, though she expressed worry that the slogan was often misused, 'more easily said than fully understood or thought through into practice' (Massey, 1995: 1). Massey offers a fairly succinct explanation as to what relational space means to her: that space 'should not be conceptualised as some absolute (that is to say, pre-existing) dimension and also that it is actually *constructed out of*, is a product of, the relations between social phenomena' (Massey, 1995: 1). But across her writing she assembles an inspiring and daunting vocabulary to convey not just what she meant by relational space, but also what she saw to be at stake in its correct conceptualisation – the importance of an appropriately relational spatial *ontology*. Various she argues that space must be seen as heterogeneous, ongoing, and open-ended; it is a multiplicity, a challenge, and a question. By thinking space 'conjuncturally', as a locus of intersecting 'trajectories' and 'unfinished stories', Massey's work sketches an alternative to essentialist understandings of space as a 'coherent, closed system ... a container for always-already constituted identities' (2005: 11–12; 1992). Within Massey's ontological project, the re-conceptualisation of space as 'open' and places as 'throwntogether' helps to ensure a distinctive question of politics will always remain on the agenda: 'the (ever-contested) question of our being-together' (Massey, 2005: 142).

Massey adapts her formulation of the question of politics from the work of cultural theorist James Donald (1999: 152). Although Massey and Donald stake the question of politics on different concepts – 'space' and 'community', respectively – they build their arguments on common grounds: the 'inescapable feature of sharing urban turf' (Donald, 1999: 157) and the 'implacable spatial fact of shared turf' (Massey, 2005: 157; 2004: 6). For each, the question of politics is ongoingly, unavoidably negotiated in a 'here and now' of encounter with others (Donald, 1999: 151; Massey, 2005: 139; 1999). As Massey writes, 'because space on this reading is a product of

relations-between, relations which are necessarily embedded material practices which have to be carried out, it is always in the process of being made. It is never finished; never closed' (2005: 9; see Donald, 1999: 169).

The picture of space and politics as 'always in process' through a 'never finished' sequence of questions of encounter is essential to Massey and Donald's conjoint project to resist theoretical prescriptivism about the proper time, place and form of politics (Donald, 1999: 151–170; Massey, 2005: 153–155). It is a critique of essentialism, determinism and what Massey excoriates as the 'heroic impotence' concealed within appeals to the status quo, claims that 'there is no alternative' to globalisation, free-market neoliberalism and economic austerity offered recurrently by politicians like Margaret Thatcher in 1980, Bill Clinton in 1998, Angela Merkel in 2010 and Rishi Sunak in 2022 (and so on). Such slogans flaunt 'a powerfulness which consists in insisting on *powerlessness*' by disguising their agency and hence responsibility: 'This vision of global space, then, is not so much a description of how the world is, as an image in which the world is being made ... imaginative geographies which *legitimise* their own production' (Massey, 2005: 83–85; see also Featherstone, 2012: 251–252).

Massey's ontological critique is thus aimed at the rhetorical manoeuvres used by politicians to refuse accountability: invocations of essential identities and historical necessities obscure matters of personal interest and gain, while disavowing responsibility for the costs and consequences of political decisions. By insisting on seeing politics as an open-ended *question* of shared space, a relational ontology strives to ensure such claims are seen as *responses* to the challenges posed by living with others, but ones which seek to evade calls for justification – and justice. At its heart, this is the problem that Massey's relational ontology aims to resolve: the spatial grammar of relational space works to wedge open the possibility for critique, redress and accountability indefinitely, to pre-empt appeals to the givenness of the status quo.

While geography's 'relational turn' has seen the development of a range of distinctive ontologies

(see Amin, 2007; Anderson, 2022; Castree, 2003; Massey, 2005; Whatmore, 1997), the conceptualisation of space and politics as 'open questions' has given rise to a distinctive style of ontological critique that cuts across much of the discipline. Practices seen to 'order' or 'close down' social and spatial life are condemned as ontologically misguided, while 'rupture' and 'contestation' are praised as the proper expression of democracy 'opened up to critical questioning' (Barnett, 2017: 81–83). In such a view, efforts by governments and power-holders to promote 'cohesion' or 'common values' are necessarily viewed with suspicion, but so too are the ordinary concepts and activities of more everyday actors when they are thought to emoliate the 'constitutive power of disagreement' (Amin and Thrift, 2005: 232; Staeheli, 2008: 18; 2010).

In an early example, Ash Amin (2002: 971–973) critiques the emphasis placed by the British Government on fostering community cohesion 'rooted in common values, a shared sense of place, and local networks of trust' in response to the 2001 Riots in Oldham, Burnley and Bradford. Amin recommends instead looking to local practices of 'accommodation' that 'mark places as process, as meeting places, as open ended ... not achievements of community or consensus, but openings for contact and dialogue'. Similar lines of argumentation run through a host of critical geographical rejoinders to romantic and idealistic portrayals of community in political and popular discourse (Bloch, 2022; Herbert, 2005; Hirsch, 1986; Joseph, 2002). Lynn Staeheli offers perhaps the sharpest and most succinct summary of the implications of the relational critique of community in her memorable prognosis that community is a *problem* (2008; Staeheli and Thompson, 1997). Echoing Massey's conceptualisation of relational space, Staeheli argues that community must be understood as ontologically differentiated, contested and unsettled through the 'entry of new voices, ideas, and agents into the public realm ... by definition, disruptive, if not obviously conflictual' (2010: 74; 2008: 18; see also Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010: 488). She presents politics as a confrontation between 'those who seek to maintain particular

kinds of order and those who would disrupt it' (Staeheli, 2010: 74). Notably, within relational critique, those who 'maintain order' are taken as metaphysically mistaken, evading the open question of space through a 'refusal to recognise the antagonism' inherent in conjuncture, difference and politics – they mistakenly, or perfidiously, emphasise 'political agreement' (Massey, 2005: 157; Staeheli, 2010: 68). Critiques rooted in relational ontology share an a priori opposition to consensus as a form of closure and a normative picture of progressive politics as disruption, disagreement, confrontation and the conjunctural 'meeting-up of the different' (Massey, 2005: 180).

This common conclusion is due in no small part to a sustained engagement in critical geographical theory with the ontological theories of political antagonism developed by Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001; see Amin, 2002: 973; Donald, 1999: 168; Massey, 2004: 10–11; 1992; Staeheli, 2010: 70). Mouffe and Laclau ascribe a strong ontological dimension of antagonism to their understanding of 'the political'. Mouffe (2013: 3) introduces this position in opposition to a 'typical understanding of pluralism' which envisions 'a world in which there are indeed many perspectives and values, but ... when put together, they could constitute an harmonious and non-conflictual ensemble'. Such a view is ascribed to proponents of 'liberalism' and 'deliberative democracy', such as Rawls and Habermas, for their prioritisation of 'rational agreement' and 'consensus' (2013: 56). On Mouffe's (2013: 14–17) reading, these theorists are engaged in a depoliticising – and perhaps nonsensical – effort to imagine pluralism without agonism, when the ontological reality of encounters with difference 'requires making decisions in an undecidable terrain ... to institute an order, frontiers need to be drawn and the moment of closure must be faced. But this frontier is the result of a political decision; it is constituted on the basis of a particular we/they, and for that very reason it should be recognized as something contingent and open to contestation'.

This formulation of Mouffe's theory of ontological 'radical difference' helps to clarify why she holds moments of 'agreement' in permanent

suspicion: any given social or political order (a 'we') is held to be contingent on exclusion (of a 'they'). The pursuit of agreement or consensus is thus taken, ontologically, as an aversion to questions of justice and emancipation. It should also help contextualise the political priorities at play within ontological modes of relational critique in geography: within empirical analyses, relational ontology's spatial grammar of conjuncture intends to illustrate a reality of political agonism and, in so doing, resolve *metaphysically* the grounds for future progressive politics. In Massey's fateful words, 'For the future to be open, space must be open too' (2005: 12).

### *Nonrelational revisions*

Relational ontology's grammar of conjuncture is also the point at which geographers interested in the 'negative geographies' of the 'nonrelational' have staged their own ontological intervention (Harrison, 2007: 590–593; Rose et al., 2021: 22–24). For these geographers, the relational turn's sprawling 'coagulation of moves – non-representationalist, more-than-human, vitalist, affective, creative-geohumanistic, and more' – has produced a widespread ethos of 'affirmationism' within geography, an approach that overemphasises vitalism, action and the generative capacities of encounter (Dekeyser and Jellis, 2021; Philo, 2021: 76–77). In this reading, ontologies of relation offer a rose-tinted vision of the 'constitutive power of disagreement', one in which encounter and contact with others are optimistically viewed as *necessarily* productive of new relations and new possibilities. The nonrelational geographers contend that theories of relation have not sufficiently considered 'what it means to struggle with limits' and the 'unknowability' of others (Harrison, 2009; Rose et al., 2021: 2–3). On their reading, relational ontologies risk an *over-determination* of identity and meaning by neglecting issues of uncertainty, limits and impossibility.

The nonrelational intervention is thus an argument for a revised spatial grammar of ontology, one that shifts from a 'conjunctural' geography of the question of politics in favour of an 'intervallic' and 'distanced' one (Harrison, 2007: 603). By

emphasising uncertainty, gaps and limits in everyday social life, the nonrelational geographers relocate the question of politics from a ‘negotiation of intersecting trajectories’ (Massey, 2005: 154) to a ‘careful negotiation of distance’ to face the ‘irresolvable’ challenge of limits and the ‘unknowable’ (Philo, 2021: 89; Rose, 2021: 276; Rose et al., 2021, 11–13). While they argue that this revision is not in itself a ‘positive’ ontology-building project, they assert that ‘The negative is what precedes ontology and thus emerges as the problem to which all ontologies respond’ (Rose et al., 2021: 288). Giving priority to the nonrelational thus involves a reassessment and relocation of the problem that critical ontological theories intend to settle: ‘it is the situation of not knowing, of our distance from others, that invites us into the labor of creating relation ... to engage with and encounter others not so much in spite of, but *because* of, such limits’ (Harrison, 2007: 591; Rose, 2021; Rose et al., 2021: 23; and see Olsson, 1975: 367 for a consonant, if distinct appraisal of ambiguity).

Questions of difference, taken as questions of limits, are of direct relevance to the ways in which nonrelational geographers have enrolled ordinary language philosophy into their ontological project, particularly Stanley Cavell’s writings on philosophical scepticism (Pugh, 2017; Rose, 2021; see Harrison, 2002 for a similar engagement with Wittgenstein on uncertainty). The ‘threat of scepticism’ is an abiding and central concern throughout Cavell’s thinking (see 1999: 7, 47; 1994; 2002). While not easily worked through in summary, Baz (2018: 18–19) offers a lucid understanding of Cavell’s understanding of philosophical scepticism as:

the refusal to accept, or to acknowledge, our responsibility for the meaning or meaningfulness, of our words, and hence for the intelligibility of our world. The age-old philosophical wish to (be able to) speak about what Kant calls “the world as it is in itself” – that is, about a world that is wholly independent of our ways of making sense of it.

Cavell argues that scepticism is not just a problem for philosophers, but an abiding and *ordinary*

feature of human life: this observation is what Rose (2021) and Pugh (2017: 43–44) draw on to assert the relevance of ‘the sceptical problem of other minds and the external world’ as ineluctable uncertainties which plague human sociality, and which warrant a nonrelational revision of relational ontology’s image of political life. Scepticism is taken as an expression of the ‘unresolvable’ negativity of ‘limits of activity and engagement’ that do not emerge through encounter (*viz.* relationally), but through the insurmountable separation of individuals, ‘aspects of experience that are radically incommunicable, such as the singular pain or suffering of an other (*sic*) which can never emphatically be known and only hesitatingly acknowledged’ (Rose et al., 2021: 22–23). This assertion contains an allusion to Cavell’s (2002: Ch. 9) distinction between ‘knowledge’ (say, a matter of getting the facts right) and ‘acknowledgement’ (an issue of recognition or attention-giving). Rose (2021) offers an extended elaboration of the nonrelational reading of these ideas. The ‘utter unknowability of others’ renders claims to ‘know’ another an act of erasure and violence, he argues, ‘eradicating the other’s distinctiveness ... subsuming the other into our own modalities of understanding and sense-making’, while ‘acknowledgement’ describes a ‘recognition of the unbridgeable divide that separates the “I” from the “you”’ (Rose, 2021: 274).

Rose draws out the political implications of this picture of sociality – in a surprising parallel to relational ontologies of difference – by placing Cavell in dialogue with Chantal Mouffe’s ontologisation of ‘radical difference’ through the ‘we/they’ distinction. With scepticism and antagonism ‘inherent to all human relations’, Rose finds that entry into the homogenised collectives of a ‘we’ and a ‘they’ is an inescapable and tragic ‘submission’ to others (2021: 281). Individuals lend their voices as ‘a temporary agreement to submit to a demos ... allowing one’s voice to be provisionally subjugated in the name of certain desired futures ... to others whose interests we do not know, whose desires we cannot understand, and whose actions we cannot predict’ (2021: 280, 282–283). Reading Cavell and Mouffe against each other, Rose relocates the political question of others to the compromises and sacrifices that

condition our acceptance of this ‘submission’, ‘[how] we come to terms with our submission to the otherness of others’ (Rose, 2021: 264–265).

For the nonrelational geographers, a revised spatial grammar is necessary to grapple with the tragic dimensions of life. They assemble an alternative metaphysical image of the question of politics with space for shortcomings and uncertainties, impossibility and unpredictability. It should be seen as an open question whether ontologies of relation – particularly their emphatically agonistic varieties, such as Massey’s (see 2005: Ch. 11, for instance) – so completely ignore experiences of uncertainty and limits. Nonetheless, it is clear that relational and nonrelational ontologies each develop a distinctive and contrary image of *where* questions of politics, space and others are posed, and hence *what* it is that calls for response or negotiation. They offer different accounts of what keeps questions of politics open and contrasting views of the proper circumstances, and targets, of political critique. Ontologies of relation look to neutralise political appeals to the status quo by highlighting the generative potential of relation and encounter. Nonrelational accounts pursue a homologous political project to keep open possibilities that exceed our knowledge, ‘a space for something utterly unknown and unforeseen ... whose disruptive power resides precisely in the fact that it was not part of the relations that preceded it’ (Rose et al., 2021: 6).

Theories of relation and nonrelation propose different spatial grammars for a shared (open-ended, ever-contested, irresolvable) question of difference. One stakes the question of politics on presence and proximity; the other, absence and distance. In each, however, the purpose of ontology is to hold open the possibility of critique and political alternatives indefinitely. In this sense, the elaboration of ontological spatial grammars is intended as a metaphysical solution to the trouble of finding good grounds for political critique.

### Placing theory in the world: Cavell and the human voice

For the nonrelational geographers, a metaphysical reading of ordinary language philosophers

like Wittgenstein and Cavell offers a useful resource for articulating an ontological theory of scepticism and a political critique of certainty (Pugh, 2017; Rose, 2021: 264). This interpretation places them squarely in line with the philosopher Saul Kripke’s well-known reading of Wittgenstein as a postmodern arch-relativist, which argues that Wittgenstein’s philosophy offers a ‘sceptical solution’ to the ‘problem of other minds’ (see Hammer, 2021: 114–117). In Kripke’s account, the ‘meaning’ of an action or the ‘truth’ of a statement inheres relatively, through an individual’s acceptance or rejection by a community’s members – an image of sociality directly reflected in Rose’s account of the tragedy of democracy as a submission to unknowable others (2021: 276).

This is, however, only one way of reading Wittgenstein. Moreover, it is one that Cavell himself explicitly rejects, going so far as to call the conclusion of Kripke’s arguments in unassailable scepticism ‘disturbing’ (1990: 65–69). He instead advocates a ‘therapeutic’ reading tied to Wittgenstein’s announcement that, ‘What *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use’ (1958: §116; Moi, 2017: 7–25; Conant, 2005). Philosophies of ordinary language share Wittgenstein’s sense that ‘philosophical constructions are as apt to mask as to relieve philosophical perplexity’ because metaphysical solutions seek to speak outside ‘language-games’, the ‘contexts’ or ‘homes’ of concepts in life – leaving the philosopher’s concepts ‘without relation to the world’ (Cavell, 2006: 24; 1999: 226–243). Metaphysical debates about ‘knowledge’, for instance, fail to consider – or take seriously – the actual situations when we say or deny or doubt that we ‘know’ something in day-to-day life. To speak of ‘knowing’ something, rather than a claim about metaphysical essence, tends to comment on the speaker’s degree of accountability for their words: as opposed to merely ‘thinking’, or ‘suspecting’, or ‘guessing’ something is so. In this sense, the desire to speak about a Kantian ‘world as it is in itself’ is a wish to escape the circumstances of our concepts: by what terms, at what cost, under what auspices, conditions and consequences someone comes to characterise or question or



refuse certain relations to the world and those with whom we share it.

This is why Cavell describes metaphysics as philosophy's 'flight from the ordinary', a removal of 'our access to context, to the before and after, the ins and outs, of an expression' (2022: 117; 1994: 112–141). Cavell's commitment to 'the ordinary' expresses an interest in the 'complex contexts in which our everyday utterances make sense' (Dahl, 2011: 82). This is not the kind of naïve reference to a 'given' context of space or community that both relational and nonrelational ontologies of difference are formulated against. Nor is it a recapitulation of the valorisation of context within familiar critiques of so-called 'grand theory'. Attention to the 'ordinary' uses of language, instead, endeavours 'to discover the specific plight of mind and circumstance within which a human being gives voice to [their] condition' (Cavell, 2002: 222–223). Cavell's mentor John Austin called it, 'examining what we should say when, and so why and what we should mean by it' (1957: 7–8). Austin's contemporary, Gilbert Ryle (1953: 171–179) described the focus of ordinary language philosophy as the 'employment of expressions' – how words find purchase in the world (or fail to). Ordinary language philosophers are interested in uses and misuses of words – the conditions, criteria, terms and circumstances which provide the difference between a use and misuse, and what these tell us about human experiences of inhabiting the world. Rather than asserting that all theory or all language is 'context-dependent', philosophies of ordinary language aim to direct our curiosity toward the often fraught and uncertain processes of circumstantiation, evaluation and justification that we use to furnish any theory (grand or otherwise) with a context.

Likewise, Cavell is interested in scepticism, but as an ordinary concern. For him it is the *temptation* of scepticism that can be said to characterise the human condition. His account of scepticism does not involve an appeal to ontological 'negativity', but rather to *scenes* of unintelligibility, disagreement and dismay. Cavell (1999: 115–118) directs our attention toward questions of *when* and *where* we encounter limits of understanding:

When do I find or decide that the time has come to grant you secession, allow your divergence to stand, declare that the matter between us is at an end? The anxiety lies in the fact that my understanding has limits, but that I must draw them, on apparently no more ground than my own ... if I say "They are crazy" or "incomprehensible" then that is not a fact but my fate for them.

Cavell describes situations of uncertainty as moments when 'I am thrown back upon myself by another's confusing acts, when 'I as it were turn my palms outward ... declare my ground occupied, only mine, ceding yours' (Cavell, 1999: 115). But Cavell writes that these are closer to 'limits of experience' than 'merely' limits of knowledge – these are instances where we find someone's life or manners or assertions *unrelatable*. They are 'far' from anything we've been through or could find ourselves saying, 'We cannot find ourselves in them ... find that we cannot speak for them' (2002: 62–63). But ultimately, in these moments, Cavell is interested in how we respond. Rather than ending with an ontological scepticism of 'other minds' and the world in general, scenes of scepticism, uncertainty, limits and difference are experiences to be *worked through* time-and-again, in their specific and ordinary circumstances (Entrikin, 2002: 109–110; Norris, 2017: 67).

Wittgenstein's frequently quoted passage describing the 'encounter with bedrock' is a crucial reference point in Cavell's arguments about ordinary confrontations of difference. Wittgenstein (1958: §217) asks what happens if we are pushed beyond our reasons, if we come up short when quizzed about the way we act: 'If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: "This is simply what I do"'. Metaphysical readings of Wittgenstein have taken 'bedrock' to gloss the kinds of irreconcilable differences between 'isolated' individuals or cultures theorised within non-relational ontologies. Cavell conversely describes the encounter as a 'scene of instruction', the site of our 'getting to know' others and ourselves (1990: 71). Such encounters may goad uncertainty, reflection, hesitation, anguish, stuttering, inquiry,

rectification, excuses or apology. They are *questioning* situations, and not ones we are always eager to embrace.

Aligning with Cavell, political theorist Linda Zerilli (2016: 234–237; see also Celikates, 2015) argues that Wittgenstein's passage calls attention to the *occasioning* of justification – how it is demanded and found sufficient or wanting. As scenes of dynamic exchanges of perspective – be it through conversation, friendly gesture, angry shouting, physical violence – Zerilli describes such encounters as 'potentially world-opening' because they harbour the public process of 'getting to know' new ways of acting, talking and reasoning about the world (2016: 233). Zerilli (2016: 228–229; see also Bridge, 2021) highlights how such encounters lead to *inventive* acts which animate the dynamic formation and re-formation of a 'sense of community' through practical and provisional 'agreements in judgments' that are creative of new and modified forms of life. Through an interchange of responses, we learn what happens if we – and in that sense, what it *means* to – do certain things or act in certain ways and in what certain places and with what certain people. These are ordinary ways of 'finding out' and 'discovering' where we stand: 'To discover what is being said to us, as to discover what we are saying, is to discover the precise location from which it is said; to understand why it is said from just there, and at that time' (Cavell, 1992: 64). This makes Cavell less a philosopher of scepticism than a philosopher of the *human voice*, and far from a strictly linguistic concern, he understands voice as an embodied, passionate and vulnerable site of human expression and judgment (Cavell, 1994: 126; Laugier, 2018; Norris, 2017: Ch.3).

Metaphysical theories of ontology cut ordinary language philosophy – but also ordinary language and ordinary life – short. They seek to specify in advance where to find questions of difference and politics, but also in that sense what those questions must mean. They discount the ordinary practices of judgment and response people use to work out their own answers. Echoing Wittgenstein's image of leading concepts 'home' from their metaphysical use, Cavell distinguishes his thinking from

metaphysical approaches by suggesting that they lead in opposing directions: for ordinary language philosophy 'explanations come to an end somewhere, each in its time, place by place', whereas postmodern theories of meaning<sup>2</sup> '[follow] the path this opposes, or reverses, suggesting that there is somewhere, as if metaphysical space, at which all explanations come to an end, or else there is nowhere they end' (1985: 531; 1990: 22–25; Baz, 2018: 24–25). These rival metaphysical destinations capture the two inflections of ontological theory discussed above remarkably well: the all-ending limit of nonrelation or the boundless challenge of relation, respectively. They also cast light on Cavell's 'opposite' or 'reversed' concern with *situations* of tragedy – refusals of acknowledgement, breakings-off of relation – as abdications of responsiveness and responsibility (1999: 109).

Cavell and his fellow ordinary language philosophers offer an invitation and a provocation to reconsider the 'spirit' in which we turn to philosophy (Moi, 2017). Their interest in the ordinary has often been misunderstood. Rather than an empiricist and depoliticising appeal to the 'givenness' of everyday life, philosophers of ordinary language are interested in the complexity and uncertainty of establishing context: how people take their bearings and *work out* how to respond. Cavell variously describes ordinary language philosophies as concerned with 'the point or stake in saying something'; bearing the task of 'responsiveness'; and taking up 'a struggle against melancholy' to work out what is worth saying and what is worth doing in a perplexing, perhaps even dispiriting world (2005: 115–116; 2004: 4; compare Barnett, 2012, 2014).

Such concerns call for ways 'to help bring the human voice back into philosophy', to attend to how people confront actual questions of politics in ordinary life rather than searching for ever-more refined ontologies of the 'proper' location and meaning of a generalised question of politics (Cavell, 1994: 58). Cavell's thinking, and ordinary language philosophy more generally, leads in a different, 'reversed' direction from the styles of ontological critique on offer in both relational and nonrelational geographical theory. However, it is not antithetical to their shared ambitions toward

political critique. Cavell's aspiration to examine where explanations come to an end in life 'place by place' recommends an alternative approach to critical geographical theory as open-ended inquiry in dialogue with the voices and concerns of everyday life (Hammer, 2021: 113; Pitkin, 1972: 21–23). Such an approach has been taken up within geography by Clive Barnett in his project to develop an 'action-theoretic' alternative to ontological theorising.

### Ordinary geographies of critique

Throughout his work on the everyday dynamics of responsibility, injustice and political progress, Clive Barnett expresses a sustained caution toward theory built on ontological grounds (2008; 2017: Ch. 3). Echoing Cavell's warnings about the flight to metaphysics, Barnett is critical of attempts to theorise the question of politics that begin from what he calls, following Adorno, an 'ontological need'. Such approaches share a conceptual approach in which 'the agency for transformative change is not located in particular social actors or organizational forms but is deduced from philosophical explications of the ontological composition of the world itself' – a stance Barnett associates with a narrow view of theory as a type of 'science' and hence calling for a metaphysical 'order of thought set off and distinct from the everyday world' (2017: 82 and see Curry, 1989: 296 for a similar earlier concern about the role of theory in geography).

In this mode of theory, ontologies are offered as 'a distanced, third-person perspective on [the] underpinning conditions of possibility' and they inform an explicitly *revisionary* style of metaphysical critique, in which the correct conceptualisation of the nature of the world – for instance, as relational or conjunctural or nonrelational or intervallic – provides the recipe for good politics (2017: 83; see also Moi, 2015: 204). They lead 'almost automatically' to a priori normative prescriptions (Barnett and Bridge, 2013: 1023–1026). Because they know how the world always-and-really is, such ontological accounts always know what to say and what is to be done.

This style of argumentation is what leads to Barnett's crucial and repeated observation that

geographical theory tends to offer 'ontology talk' as a *reason* for certain *commitments* – but in such a way as to eschew 'the conventions of justification, that is, the giving and asking for reasons ... an ordinary aspect of practical conduct and a conventional virtue of academic argument' (Barnett, 2008: 187–190). Barnett's claim is not that ontological argumentation fails to supply readers with reasoned examples that might illustrate or lend credence to their preferred ontology. Rather, his point is that ontological reasoning has a way of 'naturalising' our commitments as metaphysical facts and hence obviating the need for reasons. To take one example, relational thinking may stem from a valuable commitment to questioning simplistic political narratives, but its conversion into an ontological claim that space, the world and the political *just are* relational draws a limit on the give-and-take of justification. In any particular instance, the actions and claims of political actors can be critiqued as 'not relational enough' and then attributed to their flawed ontologies – but this analytical manoeuvre cuts short questions about what is at stake in making a particular claim or action more relational, and indeed why a particular assertion or decision is relational in the right way. Barnett thus argues that 'the turn to ontology in political thought involves an *unacknowledged arrogation of interpretative authority*', a practice of claims-making about what to value, attend to, think or feel that denies its own normative arguments by presenting them as purely descriptive accounts of the world 'as it is in itself' (2017: 79 emphasis added).

Ontological critique aims to *settle* the grounds of justification, leading to a 'tyrannical' mode of theory with an 'innate tendency to tell people how they should see the world and their own place in it' (Lane, 2004: 459; see Pitkin, 1972: 325–340). Both relational and nonrelational ontologies of difference, although they begin with emancipatory aims, come to prescribe specific spatial grammars for 'properly' understanding the question of politics. They come to place the ideas and actions of 'mundane' political actors under scrutiny in ways that the theorists' own ideas ask not to be, a 'hope to liberate themselves from any relationship to accountability to the explanatory and interpretative

narratives characteristic of social inquiry' (Barnett, 2017: 8). Ontology talk seeks to side-step worldly accountability to other perspectives and interpretations – to the *continued* questions, concerns, factors and commitments of others – much like the conservative appeals to the status quo which ontologies of difference were devised to upend.

The driving concern behind Barnett's critique of ontological reasoning, and his project to cultivate an alternative 'action-theoretic perspective on political life' within critical geography (2020: 8; 2017), is a sense that 'social inquiry' is an empirical, prosaic and ongoing aspect of living in a shared world. It is fundamental to the *ordinary* challenges of working out how to live, not the privileged occupation of professional theorists. His action-theoretic alternative can thus be seen as an effort to articulate and defend an alternative mode of 'dialogical' (Barnett and Bridge, 2013: 1026) and 'democratic' (Barnett, 2017: 42) critical geographical theory about the concerns, interests and questions faced by 'everyday' actors. For Barnett, the key characteristic that would distinguish such work from ontological modes of theory is a commitment to the ongoing and situated work of *justification*, 'the ordinary give-and-take of reasons in helping move life along' (2017: 39–43). Rather than providing a framework from which evaluations and categorisations flow 'almost automatically', the 'reasoned critique' that Barnett depicts is occupied with how professional social theorists identify, assess and respond to specific cases among, with and *as* ordinary actors themselves – and hence become subject to the same open-ended, ordinary expectations to justify their claims case-by-case (2017: 47–48). His point is not that ontological critique is a form of *non*-ordinary language, but a reminder – despite its flight to metaphysics – that it too is still part of an ordinary search for reasons to ground our interpretations and decisions about the world.

Barnett argues that ontological reasoning isolates professional theorists and their theories from the very communities and social groups they hope to support. His challenge is for theorists to *claim* their commitments, to accept accountability for their 'arrogation of interpretive authority' – the arguments and empirical evidence they go on in

concluding they're right. In the end, his aim is not to jettison talk of ontology wholesale, but rather to insist that *even* ontology can best be understood as a part of a 'heuristic approach' to our concepts: an 'intersubjective' use of ontology 'as a matter of describing the structure of our own commitments ... to disclose what we are committed to in what we do, what is obligatory for participants in a practice to believe and do' (2017: 83). This might involve studying how, why and where the question of what something 'is' or 'counts as' becomes a pressing material concern (as in Hacking, 2002; Joronen and Häkli, 2017; Lynch, 2019). Such analyses can help clarify the ordinary consequences and commitments of certain ways of talking and acting – what is at stake in such perspectives, what concepts are used to *do* (Barnett, 2017: 6) – but critique and arguments for alternatives will still call for justification.

Although understated at times, observing the frequent reference to the 'ordinary' dynamics of political activity in Barnett's arguments, in the quoted passages above and throughout his work more broadly (e.g. 2014; 2017; 2019), can help make clear the significant influence philosophies of ordinary language have had on his thinking.<sup>3</sup> What is important to recognise, however, is that Barnett does not turn to philosophies of ordinary language in search of an alternative 'theory of' politics or sociality: instead, he is interested in the ways philosophy in an 'ordinary spirit' might change geographers' relationship to and accountability for their writing and research (see Moi, 2017: 7–8). Of particular significance here is Barnett's previously mentioned distinctive claim that a key trouble in ontological reasoning is its function as an 'unacknowledged arrogation of interpretative authority'. This phrase stems from Cavell's own assertion that philosophy is fundamentally an act of 'arrogation', a 'claim to speak for the human – hence in terms of a certain universalizing use of the voice ... the arrogant assumption of the right to speak for others' (1994: vii). Notably, however, Cavell does not absolve his own writing, nor that of his predecessors in Ordinary Language Philosophy Austin and Wittgenstein, of these universalising pretensions. Instead, the crux of the 'reversed' or 'opposed' directions of ordinary

language philosophies and their metaphysical counterparts lies in how these scholars relate to their own arrogations of voice (Cavell, 1994: Ch.1–2).

In speaking for the world ‘as it is in itself’, a metaphysical voice claims to speak for everyone – how everyone *should* see things – but refuses to acknowledge its own claims-making. The ordinary voice is itself also an arrogation, but one which works to acknowledge itself as such – and to *test* itself against the experiences and voices of others. This contributes to the distinctive, sometimes jarring, frequently misunderstood, nearly ubiquitous appeals to what ‘we’ say and do within ordinary language philosophy (recall, for instance, Austin’s definition of the entire enterprise in such terms). As Moi (2017: 18) writes, these references to ‘we’ are ‘an invitation to the reader to test something for herself, to see if she can see what I see. If she can’t, we can try to figure out why’. In its more critical register, the claim to ‘we’ can also function as a *provocation* (Cavell, 1992: 70). In such a mode, critical theory functions less as an effort to ‘instruct one who knows less than you’ and more as a goad prompting readers to respond and to take a stand, ‘to call [them] forth and incite [them] to speech and action’ (Norris, 2017: 122; Norris, 2002).

Barnett argues that critical geographical theory is best able to contribute to emancipatory politics as a form of intersubjective social inquiry into how to respond to the challenges of a shared world. To join this common pursuit requires leaving room to try geographers’ own arrogations – their expressions of concepts, commitments and political claims – not once and for all, but time-and-again against the responses of other voices and interests. In such a mode, critical theory serves as an invitation and provocation to its readers to assess under what circumstances, with what commitments, and at what costs they are willing to consent to a particular account of the world as good enough; a principle as necessary or expendable; a form of life as acceptable or unjust *in their own voice* – that is, to claim responsibility for their judgments (Cavell, 1990: 63). Voiced among ordinary interests and concerns, commitments and justifications, critical theory can become an ‘opening up of a scene of claims and counterclaims’, a working out of collective senses

of justice (Barnett, 2017: 155). This is the conversation metaphysical ontology-building cuts short.

## Conversations of justice

Perhaps Barnett’s crucial but easily-overlooked objection to David Harvey’s theorisation of justice best highlights what is at stake in adopting an ordinary understanding of the vocation of critical geography. Harvey initially argued that critical theorists should theorise justice by specifying the forms of ‘a just distribution justly arrived at’ (1973: 98), but then later revised his understanding of justice as the ‘just production of just geographical differences’ (1996: 5; see Barnett, 2018: 321). Barnett contested this revision, and claimed it was emblematic of a widespread analytical assumption in critical geography more generally. The shift to focus on the ‘production’ of justice seeks causal dynamics in ‘underlying social structures’ and totalising systems; it expresses the idea ‘that grasping the dynamics of a particular order of production provides the key to discriminating between forms of difference that are to be valued, on the one hand, and patterns of disadvantage that are expressions of unjust inequalities on the other’ (Barnett, 2018: 321). Barnett’s (2017: 71) preference for the earlier concept of ‘just distribution’ reflects a commitment to the ordinary and public processes of response and accountability through which people articulate and redress, or contest and reject, claims to injustice. He argues for a style of critical theory that examines how justice is ‘arrived at’ in ordinary social life – the criteria of its practical accomplishment – in different ways, in different places. This requires taking occasions of justice or injustice, as Cavell puts it, ‘each in its time, place by place’.

Although ordinary language philosophy is not often acknowledged as a ‘critical’ philosophy concerned with issues of injustice by others, it is home to a diverse range of critical scholarship concerned with the political challenges and vulnerabilities of voice and expression. Contemporary feminist philosophers of ordinary language have written extensively on the suppression of women’s voices, for instance (Das, 2020; Drews Lucas, 2023; Laugier, 2018; Moi, 2015). Cavell’s own

work is haunted by the appropriation of black voices within American culture (2005: Ch.3; 1999: 370–378). And there is a long tradition of concern for the expressive abilities of non-human animals – and human refusals of its acknowledgement in order to license animals’ exploitation (Diamond, 1978; Hearne, 2007; Midgley, 1984). Such work shares a concern for the ways in which humans (and other living things) can be denied or deprived of *their voice*, their capacity to express perspectives and values or to ‘make a difference’ at all (Cavell, 1990: Ch.1; Das, 2020: 5).

Recognising the influence of ordinary language philosophy on Barnett’s thinking is essential to understanding his critique of ontological reasoning as a form of theory that hinges on the silencing and marginalisation of others’ voices. In this sense, his opposition is not so much against any particular formulation of ontology as against the understanding of ‘the vocation of critique’ as the ongoing revision of ontologies toward an ever-more-refined account of ‘the world as it is in itself’ – geography’s own flight to metaphysics. Barnett’s arguments oppose the nonrelational geographers’ *ontological response* to their dissatisfactions with overly ‘affirmative’ ontologies of relation; likewise, he does not so much criticise ‘thinking relationally’, but rather the *ontologisation* of relational space and the ‘conjunctural’ question of politics as natural facts. The ontological mode of argumentation leads geographers in the wrong, metaphysical direction – wrong, that is, if they want to take part in the ordinary conversations people have about how to respond to injustice in their actual lives.

This should go some way in showing how Barnett’s writing, in turn, offers a distinctly geographical contribution to philosophies of ordinary language. Across decades of in-depth readings of theories of democracy and justice, Barnett’s own critical theory increasingly turned focus on experiences of injustice and specifically the ‘public processing of claims of injustice and demands for justice’ (2017: 267). By this, Barnett meant the ordinary practices of inquiry through which people clarify what is ‘at stake’ in a situation and work out how ‘best’ (considering the circumstances) to respond (2017: 7). Rather than treat injustice as

the ‘absence’ of justice, he insisted on recognising it as an ordinary concept used to voice human experience, and hence rejected attempts to theorise ontologically what ‘justice’ and an ‘ideal’ society should look like. He crucially argued that, ‘[J]ustice is not an ideal at all. It is a condition that is approached through processes of repair, recognition, redress, reparation, and redistribution’ (Barnett, 2018: 323).

Hence the importance of Cavell’s assertion that ‘Responsibility remains a task of responsiveness’ (1990: 25) to Barnett’s thinking about living with and acknowledging others and other voices (2005: 5; Barnett et al., 2011). Barnett draws on Cavell’s thinking to articulate critical theory as a form of social inquiry into the ordinary ways people (including professional theorists) work out what others are asking of them – and what to do about it – in the ordinary course of their lives. His critical reflections are focused on the ways in which theory – as a voicing of the professional theorist – accepts or rejects accountability to these concerns (Barnett, 2017: 153–155). Conducting critical geography in an ordinary spirit would thus mean attending to the practices, material resources, conversations and concepts people use to *voice* and to *place* themselves in the world – to assemble, review, submit and critique, to *circumstantiate* the meaning of their surroundings, words and projects as lively and ongoing works-in-progress (Barnett, 2019; Bodden, 2022).

Such thinking is at work in Barnett’s call for critical geographers to study the ‘contextually enacted’, ‘emergent’ and ‘pluralistic rationalities of action through which political issues enter into the world as contested claims against injustice’ (2017: 69). Barnett envisioned this task as a study of the ‘logical geographies of theories of action’ – a phrase he adapts from Ryle – but we might also usefully think of it as a study of the ordinary geographies of political reasoning (2019: online). Thinking with philosophies of ordinary language can help clarify how neither term proposes to determine certain forms of political response as metaphysically ‘logical’ or ‘reasonable’. Instead, it would examine how various types of response are put to the test as they play out in public life, how they come to ‘count’ as logical or reasonable, by what criteria,

in what circumstances, for whom and with what consequences. Rather than a ‘corrective’ approach that seeks to define the ‘proper’ apprehension of spatial concepts presumed to be corrupted in their ordinary use (Barnett and Bridge, 2017: 1201; see also Celikates, 2015: 90), it suggests a mapping of the accountabilities taken and refused by acting and speaking in different ways. Theory – both professional and everyday – would constitute a ‘recounting of our accounts’ of the world, a practice of ‘placing what is placing us’ (Barnett, 2020: 8; Cavell, 1990: 141). Through professional practices like fieldwork and teaching, geographers move through and converse with different projects, places and communities: they can help to articulate ‘the dangerous geographies in which human urgency has to find its intelligibility’ by drawing attention to the ways we work out what to do (Cavell, 2022: 112). Geographers can provide critical accounts of the local logics of concepts, commitments and claims in their use, but also how concepts, principles and practices ‘travel’ or reach their limits on the ‘rough grounds’ of everyday life in other places and for other people (Barnett, 2017: 278–279). Such concerns would constitute being critical ‘more modestly – more ordinarily – as a matter of clarifying the pressures and limits that orient possibilities of action in particular situations’ (Barnett, 2020: 9).

Barnett’s arguments (2017: 154–156) direct attention to the communicative, embodied, passionate practices of ‘public reasoning’ through which people work out what is at stake in their interactions, what he once described as their ordinary and plural ‘geographies of worth’ (2014; compare Cavell, 2008: 55). In specifying ontologically *how and when* questions of sociality are always ‘open-ended’ or ‘unsettled’ – at the point of encounter or the barrier of limits – ontological theories put people in their place, whereas the action-theoretic alternative is to examine how people place themselves as they articulate their positions, make claims on others, and face (or flee) any response – the geographies of their ordinary experience. An ordinary approach to question of politics and space looks for how these are *opened up* through conversations, interactions, responses and their refusals. Their

openness and specificity are not provided metaphysically: to suppose so is to overlook the work required not just in mustering *any* response, but also in clarifying the criteria and terms of a *good* response – even if often only *good enough*. Relational thinking then is crucial, but it is set out through the criteria we use to account for ourselves, others and our shared world, ‘the terms in which I *relate what’s happening*, make sense of it by giving its history, say what goes before and after’ (Cavell, 1999: 93–94). Specifying what goes ‘before’ and ‘after’, a way of locating ourselves and our actions, must surely also be a matter of geography.

## Conclusion

Ordinary language philosophy offers a rich resource for reconsidering the place and task of critical geographical theory in the world. The main aim of this paper has been to give a sense of the different ‘spirit’ of an ordinary geography, and to identify Clive Barnett and his action-theoretic alternative to metaphysical ontologies as, in part, a project to develop an ordinary vocation of critical geography – a geographical contribution to philosophies of ordinary language in its own right.

Geographical theory’s ontological turn has sought to provide metaphysical grounds for political critique and the meaning of spatial concepts. Barnett’s observation that ontology stands in geographical theory as a reason, however, nicely marks how metaphysical ‘turns’ might merely describe what particular geographers turn to for their explanations and analyses, rather than a description of the discipline’s direction of travel. Taken metaphysically, concepts of relation, or the political, or community, or space become the point where geographers are inclined to, in Cavell’s words, turn their palms outward, to say ‘this is simply what I do’ – or ‘how the world is’. Ontology becomes the point where ‘justifications run dry’ (Zerilli, 2016: 234). Barnett’s action-theoretic alternative directs geographers to turn instead to the ordinary and worldly dynamics of public reasoning *with questions* about how spatial and political concepts are used to set,

contest or query what is at stake in our different forms of living. Barnett's ideas are an invitation and provocation to respond to the ordinary practices we use to circumscribe what we say and do in the world: how we, including professional theorists, negotiate our worldly accountabilities.

Barnett's work does not exactly aim to *correct* ontology. As the political philosopher Hanna Pitkin (1972: 18–20) warns, attempts to refute 'philosophical positions' with evidence from ordinary language would be a kind of 'vulgarization' of ordinary language philosophy's commitments to the ordinary work of our concepts in life. She notes that theorists' use of concepts in a 'special way' – reflected in their desire to pin down a concept's meaning metaphysically, once and for all – ought to be seen as a sign of their 'puzzlement' about something in the world, a dissatisfaction with how a concept currently functions, what it enables and at what cost. Pitkin smartly observes that 'deviance is not a sin, it is a clue': the ambition of ordinary language philosophy is not 'to forbid deviations from ordinary usage ... but [rather] understanding the ways in which we cannot deviate from it without implying certain things' (1972: 19–20).

Ontological styles of critique can tell us about a theorist's concerns and commitments, their grounds and criteria, and their sense of the political questions they seek to face or avoid. There are ways of learning from, thinking with and inheriting ontological styles of critique as accounts of uncertain commitments and incalculable costs. But they should suggest sites for further 'critical inquiry' with others, rather than provide a metaphysical interpretive lens ready with 'almost automatic' answers (Barnett, 2017: 267; Bodden, 2022: 407). They call for investigations of the specific circumstances in which a concept, practice or form of life *becomes* a problem, 'when we experience a confusion, when our categories seem to fail in the encounter with concrete and specific identities or situations' (Moi, 2015: 204–205; see also Midgley, 1992).

In Barnett's style of charitable, if critical, reading (2017: 17), this site of curiosity, uncertainty and political inquiry is so often the discipline of geography itself, or 'GeographyLand' as he affectionately

called it on his blog. His was an effort to understand the inhabitants of that world, their own attempts at working toward justice, and perhaps above all the challenges, limitations, uncertainties, risks and failures those efforts face as they travel with us (or fail to) into the world beyond. Recognising Barnett's work to articulate his own ordinary critical philosophy can help clear up two of the most common misconceptions about his work: that it argues for a narrow style of 'deliberative' politics and that it fails to heed its own advice to study 'ethnographically emergent' forms of democracy and politics 'empirically' (see Crossan et al., 2023: 2–3; Kinsley, 2020: 2–3, 5). The first point overlooks Barnett's interest in elections, lobbying and policy-making as ordinary practices for opening up and working through questions of politics, *alongside* the procedures of 'spectacular' politics like protest or strikes which critical geographers have written about more frequently. His point is that all these practices are ordinary: in each specific instance those involved will justify, question, revise and respond to different ways of acting by considering their complex and uncertain circumstances. Barnett's critique is directed at the assumptions that lead geographers to incautiously prize certain forms of political action a priori, as it were, metaphysically.

As such, Barnett's empirical data has often consisted of geographers' own practices of reading, writing, teaching and researching, empirical studies of geographical thought in action (see Barnett, 2020: 7). Early in his career, reflecting on his own attempts at finding a place in the discipline, Barnett expressed dismay at a prevailing style of geographical historiography consisting of 'path-breaking books, pivotal debates and heroic individuals undergoing miraculous conversions ... providing certain self-representations of professional vocation, stories about what it is that geographers should do and of the worth of what they do' (1995: 419). Rather than narrating the concept of geography as a linear path full of turns, pivots, conversions, upheavals, revolutions, posts-this and posts-that, Barnett called for critical questions about the social and material processes shaping academic practices and institutions 'examining the



discipline as it exists in the here and now' – ordinarily, perhaps (1995: 419).

Barnett and Cavell's work shares a sense that scepticism and uncertainty are just as often, or perhaps more often (or perhaps at least always also), a concern with the struggles, vulnerabilities and risks of *self-knowledge* and *self-doubt* (Cavell, 1994: 132–164). For Cavell, knowing oneself is the capacity 'for placing-oneself-in-the-world', not merely a matter of 'knowing' what one does, but further '[looking] to see *whether* it is done' (1990: 108). Self-knowledge becomes an ongoing series of questions about 'Knowing how to go on, as well as knowing when to stop' (Cavell, 1992: 136).

In this ordinary sense, issues of justice, space and community *are* settled time and again (Cavell, 1990: 12), arrived at here-and-there each time we take stock of where we are and consider how to respond (Barnett, 2017: 271). Such questions are posed, formulated and directed to others, expressed with degrees of greater or lesser urgency, raised within hospitable or inhospitable circumstances, and accordingly received with anxiety, acknowledgement, refusal or disdain. But they are not settled metaphysically, once and for all: they are re-opened time-and-again through practices of shared inquiry and response. In such a light, Barnett's challenges to ontology and his engagements with philosophies of ordinary language can be seen as a call for critical and intersubjective *self-inquiry* into the work of geographers and critical geography. Far from advancing a new 'turn to ordinary language' in geographical theory, future engagements between critical geography and ordinary language philosophy might instead re-examine the spirit in which we turn to theory – in our writing, research and teaching – and how we work out what to do with the communities, colleagues, students and others we work with.

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### Notes

1. Ordinary language philosophers are frequently enough dissatisfied with the name themselves: in this paper, short of offering an alternative, I refrain from using the acronym 'OLP' to resist 'collapsing commitments into a rubric' (Cavell, 1964: 951–952; see also Moi, 2017: 6–7).
2. In the original text, Cavell is specifically contrasting his approach with postmodern theories of meaning, specifically Derrida's, after a number of commentators had likened their philosophical approaches. There is not space to say more about this encounter here, but Cavell (1994: Ch.2; see also Bearn, 1998) works through it in detail.
3. In a wry comment on his blog *Pop Theory*, Barnett himself concedes that his 'special' use of ordinary is not always clear: 'I have been trying, and probably failing, to think in a "Cavellian" way for a while, which mainly ends up meaning that I just use the word "ordinary" a lot and in a knowing kind of way' (2010).

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