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Ethics after Wittgenstein

The Texture of Importance

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The Texture of Importance

Ethics after Cavell and Diamond

Sandra Laugier

An essential essay by Cora Diamond is called “The Importance of Being Human,” and this is also the title I chose for a small collection of her writings on moral philosophy in French.¹ Stanley Cavell and Cora Diamond have refocused moral reflection or shifted it toward the question of importance, of *what matters*. The subversive force of this approach to ethics has appeared to me over the years, while I was teaching—and translating into French—Diamond’s and Cavell’s works. It is of course in Wittgenstein (and Austin for Cavell) that these principles are rooted, but Diamond’s and Cavell’s readings of these texts, what they do *after* Wittgenstein, had a deeply liberating effect, toward a redefinition of ethics, and moral life, as refocused on our ordinary lives. It has also helped me (and so many others) to explore and determine what matters to me (to them).

Understanding what importance is, and that philosophy is about the recounting of importance, helps one understand what Wittgensteinian ethics is about. What does it mean to refocus moral reflection toward the question of *what matters*? How does it matter? For me, speaking of “Ethics after Wittgenstein” means simply the new acknowledgment of importance that Cavell and Diamond achieved after Wittgenstein. My aim in this chapter is to present the transformative power of this perspective.

1 Ordinary Concepts

Let's start with Cavell. Stanley Cavell's work is—among many other things—a redefinition of ethics: it transforms our view of the way ethics and knowledge bear on our ordinary lives. Cavell's teaching on film—in the way he draws our attention to gestures, particulars, details of our ordinary lives—is the basis of such a transformation of ethics and a different approach to morals. This is an ethics of perception and sensitivity, and an ethics of importance. I will define this approach by the idea, expressed in the title of Chapter 3 of *Pursuits of Happiness*, “The Importance of Importance.” The expression comes from Austin:

What, finally, is the importance of all this about pretending? I will answer this shortly, although I am not sure importance is important: truth is.²

Austin is, as we all know, Cavell's first master, and also a very strong and lasting influence as appears in recent texts like “Performative and Passionate Utterances.” My point here is that Austin's presence (importance) in Cavell's work is connected to this transformation of ethics and that such a transformation of ethics is a new understanding, or reinstatement, of importance.

I haven't been able to find in Cavell's Chapter 3 of *Pursuits of Happiness*, “The Importance of Importance,” an explicit reference, or treatment of, Austin's idea of the importance (or nonimportance) of importance. The chapter as a whole is about importance, and reads as a crucial moment of the movie the declaration of the infamous Sidney Kidd about the event of the wedding as being of “national importance.” The whole movie, and its narrative, may be seen as an acknowledgment of what the actual

importance of this wedding is: what is happening at the end (what you see on Kidd's picture, the remarriage) is what is "of national importance."

It could mean for example that they understand their marriage as exemplifying or symbolizing their society at large, quite as if they were its royalty, and their society as itself embarked on some adventure. George is confusedly thinking something more or less like this when he declares towards the end that his and Tracy's marriage will be "of national importance."³

It takes a whole movie, and sometimes many years, to get a clear idea of what is important, and to find the right application of the concept: and finding the right application of the concept of importance would, then, be understanding what is important to you—what are the important turns, or moments, or movies, in your life, or what you care about. Finding the right application of the concept of importance would be understanding "the importance of importance."

"Importance" is an important word for Dexter and throughout the film.⁴ It is an important word for Cavell, as is shown by the strategic reappearance of the motif of importance in *Cities of Words*. First about *The Philadelphia Story*:

Importance is an important word for Tracy's former (and future) husband C. K. Dexter Haven, who applies it, to Tracy's chagrin, to the night she got drunk and danced naked on the roof of the house—it is her saying impatiently to him that he attached too much importance to that silly escapade that prompts him to say to her, "it was immensely important."⁵

But we shouldn't understand the chapter, and Cavell's treatment of what importance is, as a rebuttal of Austin's seemingly ironic sentence "I am not sure importance is important." The question is not: is importance or truth important? The question is to understand—and it is one of Cavell's greatest accomplishments to show—that truth and importance are one and the same, or that importance is just as important as truth, and just as demanding and precise a concept. Just as Austin says parenthetically in a passage of *Truth*, which is later quoted parenthetically by Cavell:

To ask "Is the fact that S the true statement that S or that which it is true of?" may beget absurd answers. To take an analogy: although we may sensibly ask "do we *ride* the word 'elephant' or the animal?" and equally sensibly "Do we *write* the word and the animal?" it is nonsense to ask "Do we *define* the word or the animal?" For defining an elephant (supposing we ever do this) is a compendious description of an operation involving both word and animal (do we focus the image or the battleship?) and so speaking about "the fact that" is a compendious way of speaking about a situation involving both words and world.⁶

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Cavell comments on, or at least uses, this Austinian point in *Pursuits of Happiness* about the mutual expression of words and world:

J. L. Austin was thinking about the internality of words and world to one another when he asked, parenthetically in his essay "Truth," "do we focus the image or the battleship?"⁷

The matter of importance is a matter of focusing, and film is a means to teach us how to focus, how to see fine details, how to see what matters. Importance and truth are

not separate things, but are both *important*: the two words define the way my own experience matters (to myself and to the world), or counts. The motif of counting is thus important in Cavell's work, and especially in his moral work on film (the perfectionist moment in *It Happened One night* (Frank Capra, 1934) where Clark Gable makes an account of the sum, "fully itemized," Claudette Colbert has cost him, which Cavell correlates to the way Thoreau gives an account of the cost of his cabin).

In *It Happened one Night* Clark Gable is not interested in a \$10 000 reward but he insists on being reimbursed in the amount of \$39.60, his figure fully itemized. (. . .) The figure Gable claims is owed to him is of the same order as the figure, arrived at with similar itemization, Thoreau claimed to have spent in building his house, \$28.12 ½. The purpose of these men in both cases is to distinguish themselves, with poker faces, from those who do not know what things cost, what life costs, who do not know what counts.⁸

Recounting of importance, taking up the details where it lies, is the task of philosophy, and what connects it most closely to film. But it means transforming our idea of what is important. Wittgenstein asks significantly,

Where does our investigation get its importance from, since it seems to destroy everything great and interesting?⁹

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Wittgenstein's point, explored thoroughly by Cavell in his work, is that, just as importance is about truth and vice versa, the importance of the grammatical investigation is precisely in this, that "it seems to destroy everything great and interesting," displaces

our interests, focus, care. Here Cavell connects his teaching on film to his reading of *Philosophical Investigations*:

His answer in effect is that it is precisely philosophy's business to question our interests as they stand: it is our distorted senses of what is important (call it our values) that is distorting our lives.¹⁰

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The idea is a shift in the task of philosophy, in ideas of what is important, what we are asked to let interest us, as Cavell notes in his preface to *The Claim of Reason*.

His consolation is to reply that "What we are destroying is nothing but structures of air. But after such consolation, what consolation?"—What feels like destruction, what expresses itself here in the idea of destruction, is really a shift in what we are asked to let interest us, in the tumbling of our ideas of the great and the important.¹¹

(This relocation of importance and interest is what in *The Claim of Reason*, following my reading of Wittgenstein's *Investigations* I call the recounting of importance, and assign as a guiding task of philosophy).¹²

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The strength of this conception of ethics is that it takes further Wittgenstein's questioning of the classical conception of concepts as applying to experience and of particular situations as "falling" under general concepts. Such attention to particular situations is rooted in the conceptual.

Concepts lead us to make investigations; are the expression of our interest, and direct our interest.¹³

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Experience and concept still play different roles in the general economy of our relations with things. The ipseity of experience, an ingredient of the “reality” we give to “things,” is not the same as the normativity of the concept, which, when it is adequately applied, gets a hold on reality, which can be evaluated and described as true or false, correct or incorrect. However, many concepts are fed by this experience.

This is to acknowledge (the meaning of) the fact that to be able to think certain things we must put ourselves in the place of certain people, have certain experiences, immerse ourselves in forms of life. And that the concrete, actual ability to think a certain thing requires a certain form of “fit” to the real that is only acquired by long practice, and itself supposes a number of factual connections with the real. And this is Cavell’s topic.

To subject these enterprises and their conjunction to our experiences of them is a conceptual as much as an experiential undertaking.¹⁴

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As soon as we pay attention, we are struck by how specific our judgments can be, and how they call into play a web of relations that are extremely determined within the world. Or, as Wittgenstein says, what is true or false is what humans say—that is, real people, and what they actually say in real circumstances. At the same time, a determining aspect of what we call “thought” is that no matter how rooted it may be—and it is essential that it is—it can always be applied beyond the circumstances in and for which it was formed.

By concepts, we are giving ourselves means to make reality intelligible. There is no aspect of human experience that we cannot or do not turn into thought. The task of philosophy is to untangle the logic of all this with patience and humility. Here Cora Diamond uses the image of the knots. We imagine, like Frege, that “it would be impossible for geometry to formulate precise laws if it used strings as lines and knots in the strings as points.” In the same way, we believe that ethics cannot be done without the idea of a norm and of an ethical *must* that are quite separate from ordinary reality with its strings and knots, the weave of our life that Wittgenstein evokes in various places.¹⁵

Just as logic is not, for Wittgenstein, a particular subject, with its own body of truths, but penetrates all thought, so ethics has no particular subject matter; rather, an ethical spirit, an attitude to the world and life, can penetrate any thought and talk. So the contrast I want is that between ethics conceived as a sphere of discourse among others in contrast with ethics tied to everything there is or can be, the world as a whole, **life**.¹⁶

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This attitude or spirit concerns the whole of thinking: the ability to project our words and concepts in new contexts, to be ready to *lose our concepts*. It is a sensitivity to “conceptual forms of life”—the sensitive character of the moral concepts that shape and share our lives.

Ethics after Wittgenstein is both normative and descriptive. It is a description of *our life with concepts*. The question of realism is deeply transformed by attention to the particular and by the sensitivity of our concepts to experience. Such radical

transformation of concepts is what I call our life with concepts: the fact that they are in this world/in or of the “ordinary world.”

What they had not realized was what they were saying, or, what they were *really* saying, and so had not known *what they meant*. To this extent, they had not known themselves, and not known the world. I mean, of course, the ordinary world. That may not be all there is, but it is important enough: morality is that world, and so are force and love; so is art and a part of knowledge (the part which is about the world); and so is religion (wherever God is).¹⁷

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The ordinary world is the world of importance, of what matters. Ordinary concepts are in and of this world; as in, for example, what Cavell calls in his autobiography “the philosophy of the concepts of pawnbroking.”

The concepts of grace and of redeeming are only beginning suggestions of the poetry of pawn broking. Counting, especially counting up the monthly interest owed, upon redemption (I mean upon the pawner’s returning with his ticket to redeem his pledge), was another of my responsibilities. Here we encounter certain opening suggestions of **the philosophy of the concepts of pawn broking**. The concept of what we count, especially count as of interest or importance to us, is a matter fundamental to how I think of a motive to philosophy, fundamental to what I want philosophy to be responsive to and to illuminate. Something like the poetry and philosophy caught intermittently in the ideas of redemption and grace and interest and importance (or mattering) was of explicit fascination to me before I

stopped working in the pawn shop, the year I graduated high school. The first stories I tried writing were stabs at elaborations of such connections.¹⁸

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Concepts are about counting: *telling* is another word for counting or recounting or giving an account.

And Tracy had toward the beginning defended George to Dexter by claiming that he is already of national importance, in response to which Dexter winces and says she sounds like *Spy* magazine. Yet George and Tracy may be wrong not in the concept of importance but in their application of the concept.¹⁹

2 The Moral Texture of Importance

To have an experience means to perceive *what is important*. What interests Cavell in film is the way our experience makes what counts emerge, what allows it to be seen. Cavell is interested in the development of a capacity to see the importance, the appearance, and the significance of things (places, people, motifs).

The moral I draw is this: the question what becomes of objects when they are filmed and screened—like the question what becomes of particular people, and specific locales, and subjects and motifs when they are filmed by individual makers of film—has only one source of data for its answer, namely the appearance and significance of just those objects and people that are in fact to be found in the succession of films, or passages of films, that matter to us.²⁰

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What defines importance, circularly, is “to express their appearances, and define those significances, and articulate the nature of this mattering.”²¹ Understanding what

importance is, and that philosophy is about the recounting of importance, helps one understand what Wittgensteinian ethics is about. It means that depicting our ordinary lives does not mean simply describing our practices, what we do. Ethics cannot be described simply by reference to our customs, and our practices cannot form a foundation for ethics, because they themselves are unknown to us. Cora Diamond follows Cavell in her central idea, that our practices are *exploratory* and not merely given, as if we had a complete view before us of what we think, say, and mean. The point is not so much to argue as to explore, to “change the way we see things.” This leads us to change our notion of justification. There is, for Diamond, no subject matter specific to ethics.

I begin by contrasting two approaches to ethics. The first is characteristic of philosophers in the English-speaking tradition. We think that one way of dividing philosophy into branches is to take there to be, for every kind of thing people talk and think about, philosophy of that subject matter. Thus we may, for example, take psychology to be an area of thought and talk, a branch of inquiry, and so to have, corresponding to it, philosophy of psychology, containing philosophical consideration of that area of discourse. We may then think that there is thought and talk that has as its subject matter what the good life is for human beings, or what principles of actions we should accept; and then philosophical ethics will be philosophy of that area of thought and talk. But you do not have to think that; and Wittgenstein rejects that conception of ethics. Just as logic is not, for Wittgenstein, a particular subject, with its own body of truths, but penetrates all thought, so ethics has no particular subject matter; rather, an ethical spirit, an attitude to the world and life, can penetrate any thought and talk. So the contrast I

want is that between ethics conceived as a sphere of discourse among others in contrast with ethics tied to everything there is or can be, the world as a whole, life.²²

This might seem to make ethics more general. But it does just the opposite: Diamond's aim is to define an ethics of the particular, just as Wittgenstein suggests we forget our "craving for generality" and attend to the ordinary and various, *different* uses of language. This is also an ethics of what our moral life *looks like*, the face or aspect of ethics.²³ But that does not mean simply describing our practices, "what we do" as simplistic readings of Wittgenstein might suggest. Diamond criticizes them: "Our practices are exploratory, and it is indeed only through such exploration that we come to see fully what it was that we ourselves thought or wanted to say."

This leads us to change our notion of justification, and of practice. Diamond here refers again to Cavell:

The force of what we are able to say depends on its relation to the life of the words we use, the place of those words in our lives; and we may make the words tell by argument, by image, by poetry, by Socratic redescription, by aphorism, by Humean irony, by proverbs, by all sort of old and new things. And the judgment whether we produce illumination or obfuscation by doing so, the judgment whether there is truth in our words or self-deception, is not in general something on which there will be agreement. Ethics *is not* like mathematics; the role of agreement, the kind of agreement that there is in ethical thought, is not to be laid down in advance on some general Wittgensteinian principles. We need to see—in

ethics as in mathematics—what agreement *belongs to* the intelligibility of the language we use.

Cavell is then the main source, for Diamond, Nussbaum, and others, of the ethical understanding of literature, of examples, of riddles, and of stories. The use of literature is not simply as illustration, but as with all *examples* (see Wittgenstein's *Blue Book* and Cavell's *The Claim of Reason*), it helps us see something more clearly. It helps us to see what we expect from ethics, to *say what we mean* by ethics.

Following Diamond, Hilary Putnam also placed himself in the tradition that aims to vindicate this kind of approach to ethics, his reference being here not only Cavell but mainly Iris Murdoch.²⁴ It consists in paying attention to what we say, to the ways in which our common expressions guide us, or lead us astray. It is certainly not the same as falling back on our “practices” or conventions. What is interesting is the way Murdoch insists on disagreement, misunderstandings, and distances, instead of community and agreement. I quote here from an unpublished Putnam conversation with Jacques Bouveresse:

So it's interesting that the second generation of Wittgensteinian, people that were very close to W and their immediate followers were strongly concerned with ethics. And one thing that is in common between Deweyan ethics and Wittgensteinian ethics is a dissatisfaction with the way ethics has become identified with a very cut and dry debate in philosophy departments. (. . .) Our ethical lives cannot be captured with a half a dozen words like “ought,” “right,” “duty,” “responsibility,” “fairness,” “justice” and the like, and the ethical problems that concern us cannot be identified with the debates between these very

abstract metaphysical propositions of the natural laws, utilitarian, common sense etc. schools, we have to break out of the ethics in these overly restrictive, not only overly restrictive but also overly metaphysical ways.²⁵

Diamond critiques a fascination in ethics comparable to that of Frege and Russell in logic, a fascination with an ideal of rationality that can “ground all moral arguments.” But not everything in ethics happens by way of arguments. We believe that ethics cannot be done without the idea of a norm and of an ethical *must* that are quite separate from ordinary reality with its strings and knots, the weave of our life that Wittgenstein evokes in various places.²⁶ A focus on the latter is the *realistic spirit*: seeing that what matters, what needs attending to, is the knots and strings, the weave of our ordinary lives. We find here an image shared by Henry James and by Wittgenstein, that of a tapestry, which evokes the weaving together of the conceptual and the empirical.

This is exactly what Cavell describes, in maybe his most quoted and still underestimated passage, as the “whirl” of our ordinary lives:

We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected and expect others to project them into further contexts. Nothing insures that this projection will take place (in particular, not the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules). It is a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying.²⁷

Turmoil and details define what has to come to our attention. Wittgenstein uses his idea of family resemblance to dispute the idea of ethical concepts and of moral philosophy. Above all this is an exploration of the way our ethical preoccupations are embedded in our language and our life, in an ensemble of words that extends beyond our

ethical vocabulary itself, and their complex connections with a variety of institutions and practices. In order to describe ethical understanding we would have to describe *all* of this, all these particular uses of words, of which a general definition cannot be given.

Our ethical lives, Putnam said, cannot be captured with half a dozen words like “ought,” “right,” “duty,” “responsibility,” “fairness,” “justice,” and the like: our ordinary language, as Austin has shown in his “Plea for excuses,” is much more refined and “sharp-eyed”: better at drawing differences (cf. Laugier 2013a). What matters is not so much moral judgment or understanding as perception, synoptic vision: an *ordinary* perception.²⁸ Wittgenstein suggests a *Gestalt* approach in ethics, by bringing out the necessity of recourse to a narrative *background* and to define our vision: our particular moral views emerge from a background. Here is how Diamond defines this background:

Our particular moral views emerge from a more general background of thought and response. We differ in how we let (or do not let) moral concepts order our life and our relations to others, in how our concepts structure the stories we tell of what we have done or gone through.²⁹

3 Ethics and Perception of What Matters

Wittgenstein pointed this out in his 1933 course about our uses of the words “game,” “beautiful,” and “good.” The elements of the moral vocabulary have no sense except in the context of our customs and of a form of life. Better, they come to life against the background (the *praxis*) that “gives our words their sense”—a moral sense that is never fixed, and is always particular. “Only in the practice of a language can a word have meaning.” Sense is determined not only by use, or “context” (as many analyses of language have recognized, whatever you might call it), but it is embedded and perceptible

only against the background of the practice of language, which changes through what we do in it.

One might thus be tempted to take ethics in the direction of a particularist ontology—one that puts abstract particulars (derived, for example, from perception) at the center of a theory of values or a realism of particulars. But that would be again to miss the import of the idea of family resemblance, which is precisely the negation of all ontology. Wittgenstein criticizes the craving for generality.

Iris Murdoch, in “Vision and Choice in Morality,” evokes in this connection the importance of attention in ethics (care: to pay attention, to be attentive, caring). Murdoch describes differences in ethics as differences of *Gestalt*:

Here moral differences look less like differences of choice, given the same facts, and more like differences of vision. In other words, a moral concept seems less like a movable and extensible ring laid down to cover a certain area of fact, and more like a total difference of *Gestalt*.³⁰

There are no univocal moral concepts that can simply be applied to reality to pick out a set of objects; rather, our concepts depend, for their very application, on the *vision* of the “area,” on the narration or description we give of it, on our personal interest and our desire to explore: on what is important for us. Here, in the idea of importance, we have another formulation of care: what is important (what matters) to us, what counts.

Now activities of this kind certainly constitute an important part of what, in their ordinary life, a person “is like.” When we apprehend and assess other people we do not consider only their solutions to specifiable practical problems; we consider something more elusive, which may be called their total vision of life, as shown in their mode of

speech or silence, their assessments of others, their conception of their own lives, what they think attractive or praiseworthy, what they think funny: in short, the configurations of their thought which show continually in their reactions and conversation. These things, which may be overtly and comprehensibly displayed or inwardly elaborated and guessed at, constitute what, making different points in the two metaphors, one may call the texture of one's being or the nature of one's personal vision.

Moral expressiveness is at the core of Diamond's moral realism: not the right/wrong dualism or matters of choice and decision but how a person is "like." Cavell pursues exactly this line, about film and the movies that matter to us:

The moral I draw is this: the question what becomes of objects when they are filmed and screened—like the question what becomes of particular people, and specific locales and subjects and motifs when they are filmed by individual makers of film—has only one source of data for its answer, namely the appearance and significance of just these objects and people that are in fact to be found in the succession of films, or passages of films, that matter to us. To express their appearances, and define those significances, and articulate the nature of this mattering, are acts that help to constitute what we might call film criticism.³¹

The importance of film lies in its power to make what is important, what matters, emerge: "to magnify the sensation and meaning of a moment." Attention to particulars is this specific attention to the invisible importance of things and moments, the covering over of importance in our ordinary life. To redefine ethics by starting from what is important, and its connection with the vulnerability of our experience, might be the starting point for an ethics of the *particular*. We can look to a whole cluster of terms, a

language-game of the particular: attention, care, importance, what matters. Our capacity for attention is the result of the development of a perceptive capacity: to see a detached detail, or gesture, against its background. Here importance lies in details.

We do continually have to make choices—but why should we blot out as irrelevant the different backgrounds of these choices, whether they are made confidently on the basis of a clear specification of the situation, or tentatively, with no confidence of having sufficiently explored the details? Why should *attention to detail*, or belief in its inexhaustibility, necessarily bring paralysis, rather than, say, inducing humility and being an expression of love?³²

Moral philosophy must change its field of study, from the examination of general concepts and norms to the examination of particular visions, of individuals' "configurations" of thought: attention to detail, to the seemingly unimportant. The task of ethics is to perceive "the texture of a human's being or the nature of his/her personal vision." It is in the use of language ("choice" of expressions, style of conversation) that a person's moral vision shows overtly or develops intimately. For Murdoch this vision is not a theory but a vision of a texture of being (the texture might be visual, aural, or tactile). This texture is not a matter of moral choices, but of "what matters," of what makes and expresses the differences between individuals. See again Diamond:

But we cannot see the moral interest of literature unless we recognize gestures, manners, habits, turns of speech, turns of thought, styles of face as morally expressive—of an individual, or of a people. The intelligent description of such things is part of the intelligent, the sharp-eyed, description of life, of what matters, makes differences, in human lives.³³

What matters is what makes a difference. These are the differences that must be the object of a “sharpened, intelligent description of life.” This notion of *human life* is connected to Wittgenstein’s idea of a form of life, which also defines a texture. We might also think of the “open texture” that Waismann spoke of in *Verifiability* referring to the dependence of our words and our claims on their uses. “Texture” thus refers to an unstable reality that cannot be fixed by concepts, or by determinate particular objects, but only by the recognition of gestures, manners, and styles. A form of life, from the point of view of ethics, can be grasped only in a perception—attention to textures or moral patterns. These patterns are perceived as “morally expressive.” What is perceived is not, therefore, objects or a “moral reality” but moral expression, which is not possible or recognizable in the absence of the background provided by a form of life.

In her extraordinary essay “Moral Differences and Distances,” Diamond finds an example of this in the life of Hobart Wilson as told in an article in the *Washington Post*. Or consider literary characters as Henry James describes them, in teaching us to see them correctly. In his preface to *What Maisie Knew*, James explains how he wants to actually describe and depict, to really *see*. The whole novel is a critique of perception, connected to the ability to really see, judge, appreciate what Maisie is.

But film is the best approach to what it is to *get* to see something properly.

The background of a form of life is neither causal nor stuck like a décor, but living and mobile. One can speak here of forms of *life* (*life-forms*, as Cavell says, instead of *forms of life*): the forms that our life takes under an attentive gaze, the “whirl” (*Gewimmel*) or turmoil of life in language.

4 Missing the Adventure

It is what human beings say that is true or false, and they agree in the language that they use. That is not agreement in opinions but *in form of life*.³⁴

How could human behavior be described? Surely only by showing the actions of a variety of humans as they are all mixed up together. Not what *one* man is doing *now*, but the whole hurly-burly, is the background against which we see an action.³⁵

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Here two representations of ethics and two approaches to moral perception are opposed: that of the background (cf. Searle, for whom institutions constitute the fixed background that allows us to interpret language, to perceive, and to follow social rules) and that of the perceptual texture of life. The term “background” appears in Wittgenstein in order to designate a background of description that makes the nature of actions appear, and not, as Searle suggests, in order to *explain* anything. The background cannot have a causal role, for it is language itself in all its instability and its dependence on practice:

Our *particular* moral views emerge from a more general background of thought and response. We differ in how we let (or do not let) moral concepts order our life and relations to others, in how concepts structure the stories we tell of what we have done or gone through.³⁶

We perceive action, but taken in the midst of a bustle, the whirl of the form of life in which it emerges and which gives it its meaning and importance. It is not the same thing to say that the application of a rule is causally determined by a background and to say that it is describable against a background of human actions and connections. The background does not determine ethical meaning (for there is no such thing). Rather it

allows us to perceive what is important and meaningful for us (the important moment). The meaning of an action is given by the way it is perceived against the background of a form of life. The “accepted,” given background does not “cause” our actions or expressions but it allows us to *see* them clearly. Here the conceptual adventure intervenes as part of moral perception. There is adventure in every situation that mixes uncertainty, instability, and “the sharpened sense of life.” Diamond shows how Henry James defines this adventurousness that belongs to the *form* of moral thought:

A human, a personal “adventure” is no a priori, no positive and absolute and inelastic thing, but just a matter of relation and appreciation—a name we conveniently give, after the fact, to any passage, to any situation, that has added the sharp taste of uncertainty to a quickened sense of life. Therefore the thing is, all beautifully, a matter of interpretation and of the particular conditions; without a view of which latter some of the most prodigious adventures, as one has often had occasion to say, may vulgarly show for nothing.³⁷

This taste of adventure is what Cavell is constantly referring to in *Pursuits of Happiness* about the “Green world” and the adventurousness of the couples in the films, especially about *The Philadelphia Story* and its sense of society being embarked in an adventure. Perception, defined as care, is activity, mobility, and improvisation. What is important is to *have* an experience (not to derive something *from* experience). Dewey and Emerson both make the point. To *have* an experience means to perceive what *matters*.

Experience itself, if one trusts it, becomes an adventure itself. Failure of attention to experience, failure to perceive what is important, makes one miss the adventure. Thus one can see experience as an adventure at once of intellect and of sensibility (one opens

oneself to experience). There can be no separation, in experience, of thought (spontaneity) from receptivity (vulnerability to reality). This is what, according to James, *constitutes experience*.

Ordinary concepts must be sensitive to this experience and may be understood more like clusters and textures than as a delimited ring. Ordinary ethics is an ethics of perception, of what our moral life is *like*. “I had attempted,” Diamond adds, to “describe features of what moral life *is* like, without saying anything at all about what it must be like.”³⁸

Diamond writes that our practices are *exploratory*, and not given. They have to provide us with a vision of what we think, say, or mean. It is a matter of exploring more than arguing, a matter of “changing the ways we look at things.”³⁹

5 Life-Forms and Differences

This approach to expression, which makes it possible to respond, is a product of attention and of care. It is the result of an education of sensibility. Here we recall the Cavellian theme of “an education for grownups”: in recognizing that education does not end with childhood, and that we still need, once grown-up, an appropriate education, we see that education is not just a matter of knowledge. This is the point of Wittgenstein’s insistence on the idea of learning a language. Learning a language consists in learning an ensemble of practices that could not be “founded” in a language or causally determined by a social and natural basis but are learned at the same time as language itself, and that are the changing texture of our life.

Pain occupies *this* place in our life, it has *these* connections.⁴⁰
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The question of education, on Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein (by contrast with Lovibond's or McDowell's), is infused by skepticism: learning does not offer me a guarantee for the validity of what I do, only the approval of my elders or of the community can do that, and that approval is not something merely given or obvious. Nothing, in sum, founds our practice of language, except this practice itself—"this whirl of organism that Wittgenstein calls *forms of life*." Here we can return to the way Austin defines the method of ordinary language philosophy, and the critique mounted by Wittgenstein against the "craving for generality" characteristic of philosophy. The attention to the ordinary that Wittgenstein advocates goes against our tendency, in science as in philosophy, to theorize the world, and our tendency to look for general meanings in our words independently from the context of expression and from our agreement on/in use.

If we reach this agreement, we shall have some data ("experimental" data, in fact) which we can then go on to explain. Here, the explanation will be an account of the meanings of these expressions, which we shall hope to reach by using such methods as those of "Agreement" and "Difference."⁴¹

Our ordinary language is the best tool of perception, in drawing and discovering differences in reality:

Part of the effort of any philosopher will consist in showing up differences, and one of Austin's most furious perceptions is of the slovenliness, the grotesque crudity and fatuousness, of the usual distinctions philosophers have traditionally thrown up. Consequently, one form his investigations take is that of repudiating the distinctions lying around philosophy—dispossessing them, as it were, by

showing better ones. And better not merely because finer, but because more solid, having, so to speak, a greater natural weight; appearing normal, even inevitable when the others are luridly arbitrary; useful when the other seem twisted; real where the others are academic.⁴²

Attention to our ordinary uses of language is then the way to access, touch reality. As Austin says, “we are using a sharpened awareness of words to sharpen our perception of the phenomena.” The realism of ordinary language philosophy turns out to be its perception and articulation of importance.

When we examine what we should say when, what words we should use in what situations, we are looking again not *merely* at words but also at the realities we use the words to talk about: we are using a sharpened awareness of words to sharpen our perception of, though not as the final arbiter of, the phenomena. For this reason I think it might be better to use, for this way of doing philosophy, some less misleading name than those given above—for instance, “linguistic phenomenology,” only that is rather a mouthful.⁴³

To pay attention to language, to *care* for/about what others say and what we say, and mean, is not only an ethical principle but also a cognitive one. And this takes us back to the ethics of perception and attention.⁴⁴

To subject these enterprises and their conjunction to our experiences of them is a conceptual as much as an experiential undertaking; it is our commitment to being guided by our experience but not dictated by it. I think of this as checking one’s experience. I mean the rubric to capture the sense of consulting one’s experience ([. . .]) and turning your experience away from its expected, habitual track, to find

itself its own track: coming to attention. [. . .] I think of this authority as the right to take an interest in your own experience.⁴⁵

Perception, or more precisely misperception, misappreciation, is what can lead us to “miss the adventure”: what Austin calls “thoughtlessness, inconsiderateness.”

Knowledge is not enough. In order to get importance, we need to properly *appreciate* situations, as Austin explains,

It happens to us, in military life, to be in receipt of excellent intelligence, to be also in self-conscious possession of excellent principles (the five golden rules for winning victories), and yet to hit upon a plan of action which leads to disaster.

One way in which this can happen is through failure at the stage of appreciation of the situation, that is at the stage where we are required to cast our excellent intelligence into such a form, under such heads and with such weights attached, that our equally excellent principles can be brought to bear on it properly, in a way to yield the right answer. So too in real, or rather civilian, life, in moral or practical affairs, we can know the facts and yet look at them mistakenly or perversely, or not fully realize or appreciate something, or even be under a total misconception.⁴⁶

Ethics after Wittgenstein, then, has to take into account this vulnerability in our use of language and in our ordinary lives. Ethics becomes, as Austin suggests, a matter of appreciation—involving both accurateness and attention. In her powerful comment of Cavell’s work, Diamond comes to explaining the significance of this attention.

What I have meant to suggest . . . is that the hardness there, in philosophical argumentation, is not the hardness of appreciating or trying to appreciate a

difficulty of reality. In the latter case, the difficulty lies in the apparent resistance by reality to one's ordinary mode of life, including one's ordinary modes of thinking: to appreciate the difficulty is to feel oneself being shouldered out of how one thinks, how one is apparently supposed to think, or to have a sense of the inability of thought to encompass what it is attempting to reach.⁴⁷

Failure of perception, or more precisely misperception, misappreciation, is what can lead us to miss our own adventure: what Austin called "thoughtlessness, inconsiderateness"—an inability to think.

6 Thoughtlessness

Austin concludes,

Even thoughtlessness, inconsiderateness, lack of imagination, are perhaps less matters of failure in intelligence or planning than might be supposed, and more matters of failure to appreciate the situation. A course of E. M. Forster and we see things differently: yet perhaps we know no more and are no cleverer.⁴⁸

Cavell's autobiography, *Little Did I Know*, acknowledges importance by pursuing the experience and reading of film in autobiographical writing. The "source of data" is still

The appearance and significance of just these objects and people that are in fact to be found in the succession of films, or passages of films, that matter to us.⁴⁹

The importance of film lies in its power to make what matters emerge: "to magnify the sensation and meaning of a moment." Film cultivates in us a specific ability to see the too often invisible importance of things and moments and emphasizes the

covering over of importance in ordinary life. For importance is essentially what can be *missed*, remains unseen until later, or possibly, forever. The pedagogy of film is that while it amplifies the significance of moments, it also reveals the “inherent concealment of significance.”

What interests Cavell most, in film, is the way our experience there makes (visually) emerge, makes visible what is important, what matters. It is the development of a capacity *to see what is important* that allows us to redefine experience—experience *is* not only of the appearance and meaning of things (places, persons, patterns) but also of the hiddenness of significance.

It is part of the grain of film to magnify the feeling and meaning of a moment, it is equally part of it to counter this tendency, and instead to acknowledge the fateful fact of a human life that the significance of its moments is ordinarily not given with the moments as they are lived so that to determine the significant crossroads of a life may be the work of a lifetime. It is as if an inherent concealment of significance, as much as its revelation, were part of the governing force of what we mean by film acting and film directing and film viewing.⁵⁰

What Cavell describes is something else than attention or inattentiveness—it is “an inherent **concealment** of significance, as much as its revelation.” Experience reveals itself as defined by our quasi-cinephiliac capacity for seeing detail, reading expressions. The structure of expression articulates the concealment *and* the revelation of importance, and such is the texture of life (our life form). This is the difficulty that Cavell describes when he speaks of the temptation of inexpressiveness and of isolation and shows the essential vulnerability of human experience (another name for skepticism). We

experience “the appearance and significance” of things (places, faces, patterns, words), but only afterward, after words. *Little did I know*.

Failure to pay attention to importance, it turns out, is as much a moral failure as it is (in Austin’s words) a cognitive one. Yet we discover importance not only through accurate and refined perception but also through our suffering and misperception, in other words, through our failures to perceive. Because “missing the evanescence of the subject” is constitutive of our ordinary lives, it is also at the core of writing an autobiography—as well as being the ultimate truth of skepticism.

Cavell gives us in his autobiography, *Little Did I Know*, an unexpected take on the evanescence of film, and reverses the brilliant move of the opening of *The World Viewed*. He finds the words, in telling and detailing scenes and accurate details from his life in the context of his present life, to break the curse film is the name of, and to express the hidden importance of moments of his life, past and present. The “unspeakable importance” is put before our eyes. To tell the unspeakable and guess the unseen becomes an everyday, ongoing task.

We involve the movies in us. They become further fragments of what happens to me, further cards in the shuffle of my memory, with no telling what place in the future. Like childhood memories whose treasure no one else appreciates, whose content is nothing compared to their unspeakable importance for me.⁵¹

This redefinition of the task of philosophy through the search of importance (what is important to me, what is important to us) and the recognition of our failures to acknowledge importance, to “guess the unseen from the seen,” may be the main teaching of Cavell’s and Diamond’s philosophy. We discover importance not only through

accurate perception but also through accepting our inabilities and misperceptions, our being unable to see, our failure to perceive, our persistently “missing the subject.” This is reminiscent of “the relocation of interest and importance, the recounting of importance” that Cavell assigned as a guiding task of philosophy:⁵² but now a further relocation is needed, because importance is to be defined through our essential failure to see the importance of things.

Take as an example Martha Nussbaum’s argument that *The Golden Bowl* elicits from us as readers an acknowledgement of our own imperfection. We are repeatedly struck, while reading it, by the inadequacies of our own attention and thus learn something about ourselves.⁵³

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Importance may be concealed *as* it is revealed to us. This is something Diamond tells us about “missing the adventure” by studying a different kind of blindness: blindness to what is actually going on in a novel, because we are precisely caught in moral issues and, for example, care so much for a character that we are blind to what is happening to her. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, we like Isabel so much that we are blind to her “power of appreciation” and to other readings of the situation. Our very *care* blinds us.

We readers of *The Portrait of a Lady* may find ourselves reading the novel with the question: Should Isabel or should she not go back to Osmond? (. . .) The moral issue *what she should do* so interests us, we like her so much, we hate so much her having to go back or thinking she must go back to this horrible man, that we do not actually see *her* fully; do not see her as the great maker of something out of what happens to her, we do not see the relevance of her genius for appreciation.

We may miss the sense of what she does, miss her adventure, impoverish our own, through our very concern for her.⁵⁴

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What remains, then, to be explored after Wittgenstein is the mode of appearance of this hidden importance of things, the way we are essentially blind to it—that is, *meant* to be blind to it, in order to share the adventures of the characters we are *interested* in.

Could importance of some kind be essentially, eternally dissimulated from us? To overcome skepticism is to overcome our inability or refusal to see what matters to us: “to fail to guess the unseen from the seen, to fail to trace the implications of things—that is to fail the perception that that there *is* something to be guessed and traced, right or wrong.”

This question remains at the core of ordinary ethics.

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⁷ Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 204.

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¹¹ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), xxi.

¹² Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 262.

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