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Concepts of the Ordinary

Sandra Laugier

University Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne

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.

Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*

The study of concepts is one place where anthropology has clearly exerted a transformative influence on philosophy, putting pressure on the classical notion that concepts *apply to* experience and that particular situations « fall » under general concepts. I shall start with Wittgenstein:

« Concepts lead us to make investigations; are the expression of our interest, and direct our interest. » (Wittgenstein, *PI* §570)

Veena Das adds: “It is this interest – so *what matters to us* – that give them life, flesh them out ». Experience and concept 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 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, the actual ability to think a certain thing requires a certain form of calibration or “fit” to the real that is only acquired by long practice and itself supposes a number of factual connections with the real.

Where does our investigation get its importance from, since it seems to destroy everything great and interesting? (Wittgenstein, *PI* §118)

“Wittgenstein’s answer in effect is that it is precisely philosophy’s business to question our interests as they stand: it is our distorted sense of what is important (call it our values) that is distorting our lives.” (Cavell *CW* 40)

“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.” (Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* XXI).

Skepticism is the name philosophy gives to various attempts to deny the sensitivity or vulnerability of our concepts to experience. The question of realism is profoundly transformed by

attention to the particular, **and by an emphasis on context**. As Cora Diamond has clearly said in *The Realistic Spirit*, « Attention to particular cases can alter our whole way of understanding the problems themselves » (Diamond 1991) The application and transformation of concepts becomes a realism of concepts, and which is not a realism of reality as structured by concepts or of concepts applying to a necessarily present reality. It is a claim to reality made by particular cases and some kind of concepts, like family resemblances concepts, or concepts of Africa, or the concept of John Cusack (not the actor, but the sum of the roles), or the concept of suffering, of life and the various ways *concepts live as a component of the real*. “The statements fit the facts always more or less loosely, in different ways on different occasions for different intents and purposes” (Austin, 1962b, 130) Certainly, giving oneself the means to make reality intelligible—what we call “concepts”—constitutes an essential condition for acting. As Benoist says: There is no aspect of human experience that we cannot or do not turn into thought, that is, no aspect which does not give rise (in its own way) to the edification of norms.

Concepts and experience

The question of realism is deeply transformed by attention to the particular and by the sensitivity of our concepts to experience (the reverse of what we might call a Kantian conception of the application of concepts to experience — **at least the Kant of the first *Kritik***). The radical transformation of concepts is what I call our life with concepts: the fact that they are in this world and even often (for ordinary concepts) in or of *the ordinary 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). (Cavell, *MWM* 40)

The ordinary world is the world of importance, of what matters. Concepts of the ordinary are in 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. (*LDIK* 115-6)

“The concept of what we count?”. Concepts are at first, about counting: telling is another word for counting or recounting or giving an account. Cavell reads Hollywood comedies from this basis.

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. (PH 5-6)

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". 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. (PH 147).

In his preface to Veena Das' *Life and Words*, Cavell (2007) notes that *the ordinary* is that in *our* language that is, or that we constantly render as, foreign to ourselves – an invocation of the Wittgensteinian image of the philosopher as explorer of a foreign tribe. That is, a tribe where we find ourselves strangers in our own company – "at home perhaps nowhere, perhaps anywhere." This intersection of the familiar and the strange, shared by anthropology, psychoanalysis, philosophy, is the location of the ordinary:

Wittgenstein's anthropological perspective is one puzzled in principle by anything human beings say and do, hence perhaps, at a moment, by nothing. (ibid.: x)

The call to the ordinary, or the return to practice, is neither evidence (*given*) nor solution, as certain varieties of empiricism suggest. It is traversed by the "uncanniness of the ordinary." And by the presence of ordinary concepts. Emerson, in a passage in his address, "The American Scholar", gives up concepts:

I ask not for *the great, the remote, the romantic*; what is doing in Italy or Arabia; what is Greek art or Provençal minstrelry; I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low. Give *me insight into today*, and you may have the antique and future worlds. (Emerson 1837, 171)

Admittedly, *the great, the remote, the romantic*... are concepts. Emerson *brings* all thought back to the categories of the ordinary – the low, the close - which stand precisely in opposition to the great and the remote, and allow for "knowing the meaning" of ordinary life...

What would we really know the meaning of? The meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat; the glance of the eye; the form and the gait of the body (*ibid.*).

Emerson described, in advance, the privileged objects of American cinema, or those of photography, as though it were necessary to renounce "sophisticated" European art in order to envisage truly American ordinary art.

His list in "The American Scholar" of the matters whose "ultimate reason" he demands of students to know – [...] – is a list epitomizing what we may call the physiognomy of the ordinary, a form of what Kierkegaard calls the perception of the sublime in the everyday. It is a list, made three or four years before Daguerre

will exhibit his copper plates in Paris, epitomizing the obsessions of photography (Cavell 1972: 149-50)

It is not only a matter of art in this aesthetic of the ordinary, but the perception of reality. There is the elaboration of a list of new categories, those of the ordinary, more precisely of the elements of a physiognomy, of a gait, or of a 'look' of the ordinary, that philosophy, but to an equal degree also cinema and photography, would have to describe. It is as if the classic transcendental question has transformed itself: the question is no longer about knowing the "ultimate reason" of the phenomena of nature, but of establishing a connection to ordinary life and to its details, its particularities. For Emerson, this new approach, particularist and emphasizing the perceptual, is inseparable from a new relationship between social classes, from a democratization even of perception.

One of these signs is the fact that the same movement which effected the elevation of what was called the lowest class in the state, assumed in literature a very marked and as benign an aspect. Instead of the sublime and beautiful, the near, the low, the common, was explored and poeticized. That which had been negligently trodden under foot by those who were harnessing and provisioning themselves for long journeys into far countries, is suddenly found to be richer than all foreign parts. The literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life, are the topics of the time. (Emerson 1982 [1837]: 565) "The American Scholar" 99.

The poor, the child, the street, the household: these are the new objects that it will be necessary to *see*. For Cavell as for Wittgenstein, the task of philosophy is to bring back the ordinary to us – to bring our words and concepts back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.

In this he joins his thinking with the new poetry and art of his times, whose topics he characterizes as "the literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of the household life. (Cavell, « An Emerson Mood », Cavell 1972, 149-150)

Emerson associates this loss of concepts with the failure of speech, which by definition renders it inadequate, or unhappy – it is a matter of infelicity in the application of concepts.

Their every truth is not quite true. Their two is not the real two, their four not the real four; so that every word they say chagrins us, and we know not where to begin to set them right. (Emerson 1990: 34).

The connection means that I see both developments—ordinary language philosophy and American transcendentalism—as responses to skepticism, to that anxiety about our human capacities as knowers. My route to the connection lay at once in my tracing both the ordinary language philosophy as well as the American transcendentalists to the Kantian insight that Reason dictates what we mean by a world. (Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary*, 4)

For Emerson, America must reinvent transcendental philosophy, while following its own methods, temperaments, and moods. It must then invent an access to the ordinary, a specific mode of

approach of this nature – for which the categories of transcendental philosophy, the conceptual mode of access to nature developed by Europe, are inoperative.

As Cavell says, “Words come to us from a distance; they were there before we were; we are born into them. Meaning them is accepting that fact of their condition” (1972: 64). The meaning of a word is its use – to borrow Wittgenstein’s phrase. Cavell adds: “We do not know what “Walden” means if we do not know what Walden is” (ibid.: 27). And this true of all the words employed by Thoreau, and which he gives a new sense: morning (*morning* is when I am awakening and there is the dawn in me), the bottom of the pond (we do not know what the base is, or the foundation, so long as we have not probed, like Thoreau, the bottom of Walden Pond), the sun (a morning star). These ordinary concepts are vulnerable to everyday experience.

“Discovering what is said to us, just like discovering what we say, is to discover the exact place of where it is said; to understand why it is said at this precise place, here and now” (ibid: 34). Ordinary concepts are *used* – because without its use a word is a “dead sign” (Wittgenstein 1996 [1958]: 3). It is not a matter of discovering an authentic or hidden meaning of words. Everything is already in front of us, displayed before our eyes: “see the visible” says Foucault.

What we are supplying are really remarks on the natural history of human beings; we are not contributing curiosities, however, but observations which no one has doubted, but which have escaped remark only because they are always before our eyes. (PI §415)

One could return to a beautiful formulation of Foucault’s, where the important point is the connection between this capacity to “see the visible” with ordinary language philosophy and its project of using language use to criticize concepts: “faire une analyse critique de la pensée à partir de la manière dont on dit les choses.”

We have long known that the role of philosophy is not to discover what is hidden, but to render visible what precisely is visible – which is to say, to make appear what is so close, so immediate, so intimately linked to ourselves that, as a consequence, we do not perceive it. (Foucault 1994 [1978]: 540-41).

The ordinary is always an object of investigation and inquiry – this is the **claim** of pragmatism; the ordinary is never given. The low always has to be reached, in an inversion of the sublime. It is not enough to want to start from the ordinary. It is not a matter of correcting the heritage of European philosophy, or of generating new concepts. Rather, it is necessary to give another sense to those concepts we inherit (such as those of experience, idea, impression, understanding, reason, necessity and condition), to bring them back from the metaphysical to the ordinary.

Emerson proposes his own version of categories, in the epigraph to “Experience”, with the list of “the lords of life”:

The lords of life, the lords of life, - / I saw them pass, / In their own guise, / Like and unlike, / Portly and grim; / Use and Surprise, / Surface and Dream, / Succession swift, and Spectral Wrong (Emerson 2005: 77)

At first glance, the lords of life resemble concepts that control our life, our experience, and determine our access to the world, as with Kant – those of causality, substance, or totality. But the list demonstrates well that it cannot be [a matter of] these categories: use, surprise, surface, dream,

succession, evil, temperament... In Emerson there is the idea that a new collection of concepts must be invented in order to describe the ordinary, the given or, rather, the diverse materials, “strewn along the ground.” And it is a new ordinary man who will need to be built or, as he says, “domesticated.” This domestication of traditional concepts, brought home.

This revolution is to be wrought by the *gradual domestication of the idea of Culture*. The main enterprise of the world for splendor, for extent, is the upbuilding of man. Here are the materials strewn along the ground (Emerson 1982 [1837]: 562).

If Emerson were satisfied with carrying on with the arrangement of the categories, and substituting for a traditional list (the European transcendentalist heritage) a modernized, Americanized list, the contribution would be weak. To imagine concepts of the ordinary alters the very idea of concept. The idea of domestication of culture is not of mastery of reality – because the ordinary is neither conceptualized nor grasped: it is an understanding of the connection to the world, not as knowledge but as proximity and nextness to things, as attention to them. For Emerson and Cavell, it is not a matter of rewriting the list of categories, but of redefining their *use*: not as conceptual grasping of reality, but, instead, as neighboring. It is the recognition of reality as next to me, near or close, but also separated from me, next door. The revolution achieved by Emerson consists less in a re-definition of categories than in a remodeling of what experience is.

Hence, our relation to the world is no longer a matter of (actively) applying categories of understanding to experience but of (passively) watching the lords of life pass by. *Concepts emerge from experience*, suddenly standing before you – “I find them in my way” – as if the categories, instead of being imposed or posed, are simply to be *found* (cf. our discussion of the found child and finding as founding)

Illusion, Temperament, Succession, Surface, Surprise, Reality, Subjectiveness – these are threads on the loom of time, these are the lords of life. I dare not assume to give their order, *but I name them as I find them in my way*.

Emerson subverts Kant’s system. The lords of life do not control our perception, or our experience - instead they come out from it, like *forms* on a background: “I saw them pass,” he writes (Ibid 7). The concepts themselves are the object/subject of observation and exploration. Such is the conceptual revolution brought about by transcendentalism. The transcendental question is no longer: How do we know from experience? How do we go from experience to concept? (A question which, since Hume, one knows leads to the response: one knows nothing at all – and thus leads to skepticism). But rather: How do we *have* an experience? This difficulty of approaching the world is expressed by Emerson in “Experience” in regard to the experience of grief, and is generalized to an experience of the world taken as a whole under the sign (the category) of loss. Skepticism is found there, in the inability to have an experience and to *touch* our concepts. We are not so much ignorant, as inexperienced.

In Emerson, experience cannot teach us anything, contrary to what “paltry” empiricism would tell us – not because it is insufficient, that we must go beyond it, as the traditional epistemology asserts, but because it does not touch us. Our attempts to master the world and things, in order to *grasp* them in all senses of the term (materially and conceptually) distance us from them. It is what Emerson describes in Experience as “the most unhandsome part of our condition” (81) – this fleeting reality slips between our fingers at the moment when, because, we clutch at it: *unhandsome*. It is our desire or craving to grasp reality that causes us to lose it, our craving to know (as theoretical appropriation) that keeps us from ordinary proximity with things, and cancels their

availability or their attractiveness (the fact that they are at hand, *handsome*). Emerson transforms the Kantian synthesis, not via the transcendental route, but instead through its opposite, towards immanence. Emerson launches into an ironic recapitulation of Cartesian and Kantian themes from the European theory of knowledge:

It is very unhappy, but too late to be helped, the discovery we have made, that we exist. That discovery is called the Fall of Man. Ever afterwards, we suspect our instruments. We have learned that we do not see directly, but *mediately*.

It is *conceptual activity as such* that must come to give up this “cognitive rapaciousness”, that is unhandsome (this hand and these fingers which clutch and clench) and creates a *mediation* (like the wall/blanket in *It Happened one Night*). Let us refer to Wittgenstein’s criticism in the *Blue Book* of the “craving for generality” characteristic of philosophy. The attention to the particular that Wittgenstein demands goes against our tendency toward a thorough grasp.

We feel as if we had to *penetrate* phenomena: our investigation, however, is directed not towards phenomena, but, as one might say, towards the ‘*possibilities*’ of phenomena.

We remind ourselves, that is to say, of the kind of statement that we make about phenomena. [...] Our investigation is therefore a grammatical one. (Wittgenstein *PI* §90).

When Wittgenstein specifies that our “grammatical” investigation is directed not towards phenomena but towards their possibilities, he intends to substitute for the categories an imaginative grammar of human concepts. The difference with Kant is that, in Wittgenstein and Emerson, each word of ordinary language, each bit of ordinary experience, each aspect of the features of the ordinary, they each require a *deduction* to know its use: each one must be retraced in its application to the world. A word, for must be stated in the particular context where it has a meaning, or else it is false (it sounds false), it “chagrins me.” One may read the series of words not as a renewed list of categories, but as a grammar of the particular experience. Transcendentalism is therefore strangely named, because what Emerson proposes is a form of realism—“The true romance which the world exists to realize”.

Why not realize your world? But far be from me the despair which prejudices the law by a paltry empiricism – [...] There is victory yet for justice; and the true romance which the world exists to realize, will be the transformation of genius into practical power. (Ibid.: 106).

To *realize* the world: Emerson transforms and de-sublimes the transcendental, bringing the categories back to the ordinary, realizing the “possibility” of “true romance,” realizing genius into practical power.

Cavell returns to “the empiricism practiced by Emerson and Thoreau.” Empiricism thus re-read defines the paradoxical link between experience and trust: it is necessary to educate one’s experience in order to trust it. Here again is a new reversal of the Kantian inheritance: not to surpass experience via theory, to move in reverse from what is, in philosophy, the very movement of knowledge; to surpass the concept via experience. The trust in the self is defined by the ordinary and expressive authority one has over one’s experience: “Without this trust in one’s experience, expressed as a willingness to find words for it, [...] one is without authority in one’s own

experience.” (Ibid 19). The trust consists of discovering in oneself (in one’s “constitution,” says Emerson, in the political and subjective sense) the capacity to have an experience, to experience what one knows or what one believes one knows, and to express and describe this ordinary experience.

To return to ordinary language is to speak seriously – “to take yourself seriously”, as Cavell claims in his memoir, *Little Did I Know*, echoing the title of his first book, *Must We Mean What We Say?*

Textures and motifs

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. (What becomes of things on film/ *Themes out of school* 182-3)

What defines importance, circularly, is “to express their appearances, and define those significances, and articulate the nature of this mattering” {183}.

If 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. (The Thought of movies/ *Themes* 11)

Experience turns out to be defined by our capacity for attention. Our capacity, that is, to see the detail, the expressive gesture, the texture of persons. It is attention to what matters in the expressions and styles of others – what makes and shows the differences between people, how they are *like* (cf. Françoise Héritier, *Le sel de la vie*: “How I was like”)– that we must then describe.

To recognize restores, 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 life, of what matters, makes differences, in human lives. (Diamond RS 375).

These are the differences which must be the object of “the intelligent, sharp-eyed, description of life.” This refers to the Wittgensteinian form of life, seen not as a social norm, but as the context where gestures, manners, textures, ordinary styles are visible. In this way, attention to the ordinary, “to what we would like to know the meaning of” (Emerson), is the perception of textures or of motifs. What is perceived are not objects, but expressions, which is only possible against the background of the form of life.

This idea of form of life or life form is connected, for Cavell and Das, to Wittgenstein's anthropological sensitivity, to his attention to everyday language forms as being at once obvious and strange, foreign, and vulnerable. The human, or life, is not a given; it is defined by the permanent threat of denial of the human, of dehumanization or devitalisation. Das and Cavell draw our attention to the ordinary by making us attentive to human expressiveness. This is attention to what is right before our eyes (the visible) and to human capacities for expression.

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. (H. James, *The Art of the Novel*, 1934, 286)

Experience itself, if one trusts it, becomes an adventure. Lack of attention to experience, the failure to perceive importance, causes one to miss out, to miss what happens (it shows for nothing). One can see experience as a both conceptual and sensible adventure – simultaneously passive (one allows oneself to be transformed, to be touched) and active. In this reading of experience and concept, there is no separating thought (spontaneity) and receptivity (vulnerability). It is this, for James, which “constitutes experience.” The texture of ordinary concepts is described here:

The power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern, the condition of feeling life, in general, so completely that you are well on your way to knowing any particular corner of it – this cluster of gifts may almost be said to *constitute experience*.” (H. James “The Art of Fiction”, 1948 [1884]: 10-11).

Ordinary concepts must be sensitive to this experience and may be understood more like clusters than as a delimited ring. Here enters the theory of resemblances in Wittgenstein and Austin, not as comparisons or as “family resemblances”, but as a concept of being “like”. 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”.¹

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” (RS 27).

Diamond goes further in redefining concepts when she criticizes a fascination in ethics, comparable to that of Frege and Russell in the field of logic, with a mythological and abstract ideal: the ideal of ethical rationality “underlying moral arguments.” In ethics, rather distinctly, not everything requires arguments.

Just as mathematics can be done by proof but also (as Wittgenstein mentions) by drawing something and saying, ‘Look at this’, so ethical thought goes on in argument and also *not* in

¹ Cora Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and The Mind* p. 27;

argument but (e.g.) in stories and images. The idea that we have not got *Thought* unless we can rewrite the insight as argument in some approved form is a result of a mythology of what is accomplished by argument ²

We imagine, like Frege, that “it would be impossible for geometry to set up precise laws if it tried to recognize threads as lines and knots in threads as points.”³ In a similar way, we imagine that morality couldn’t be thought without norms and without necessity, only on the basis of ordinary reality and its knots and threads, on the basis of the *tapestry* of life that Wittgenstein brings up on several occasions: “A [particular] pattern on the weave of our life [*Lebensteppich*]” (PI II i).

No threads or knots in logic or ethics! We have a false idea of how our thready, knotty lives can stand in relation to the rigor of logic, the bindingness of ethics, the necessity of mathematics. We are dazzled, by ideals and fail to understand their role in our language. When we are thus dazzled, we are “out of agreement” with ourselves, our language, our lives of threads and knots... Philosophy can return us to “agreement with ourselves” where we least thought to find it. The solution to the riddle was right there in the knots and threads. (RS 36)

This is what characterizes “the realistic spirit” - understanding that what matters, what must be looked at, are the knots and threads, the weaving of ordinary lives. Henry James and Wittgenstein have this simile in common, that of the image of the tapestry, revealing the weft of the conceptual and the empirical. Seeing life as a weave, this pattern (pretense, say) is not always complete and is varied in a multiplicity of ways.

But we, in our conceptual world, keep on seeing the same, things recur with variations. This is how our concepts take it.⁴

In his later philosophy, Wittgenstein suggests a **physiognomic** or *Gestalt* approach in morality, the necessity of bringing out the situation against a narrative *background*. Here is how Diamond defines it, and here obviously the general background of thought and response is the human form of life, where moral concepts structure narratives.

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.⁵

Elements of ethical vocabulary only make sense within the context of our common practice and a form of life or, rather, are brought to life against the background (that of *praxis*), which “gives words their meanings”—⁶.

Meaning is not defined only by use or context. It is also a part of, and indeed only perceptible against the background of, the practice of language, of the form of life, and which is

² Cora Diamond, RS, p. 9.

³ Gottlob Frege, “Letter from Gottlob Frege to Giuseppe Peano, 29 September 1896,” in *Philosophical and Mathematical Correspondence of Gottlob Frege*, trans. Hans Kaal, ed. Brian McGuinness (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 114–5; cited in Cora Diamond, “Frege Against Fuzz,” RS 36.

⁴ Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, trans. and ed. G.E.M. Anscombe (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), §568.

⁵ Diamond, “Henry James, Moral Philosophy, Moralism”, *Henry James Review* 18:3 (Fall 1997), 251.

⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Wittgenstein’s Lectures: Cambridge 1930–1932*, ed. Desmond Lee (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1980), 344.

modified by what we do. It is thus tempting to bring ethics close to a particularist ontology—which would set abstract particulars at the center of a theory of values or a realism of particulars. But that would still amount to missing the meaning of family resemblance, and to missing what a concept is. This is how Wittgenstein criticizes the craving for generality:

The tendency to look for something in common to all the entities which we commonly subsume under a general term (...) The idea of a general concept being a common property of its particular instances connects up with other primitive, too simple, ideas of the structure of language.⁷

In “Vision and Choice in Morality,” Iris Murdoch expresses this idea of ordinary ethics in connection with attention and care. Murdoch introduces differences in morality in terms of differences in *Gestalt*. She criticizes the standard idea of a concept:

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 moveable and extensible ring laid down to cover a certain area of fact, and more like a total difference of *Gestalt*. We differ not only because we select different objects of the same world but because we *see* different worlds.⁸

There are no univocal moral *concepts* ready to be applied to reality in order to determine objects. Our concepts depend for their very application, their use, on the *vision* or experience of the “domain,” on the narrative or description that we give of it, on our personal interest and our desire to explore – what matters to us, what counts.

Moral philosophy therefore has to modify its field of study, from the examination of general concepts to that of particular visions, of “configurations” of people’s thought:

Now activities of this kind certainly constitute an important part of what, in the ordinary sense, 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 one may call the texture of a man's being or the nature of his personal vision.⁹

It is certainly in the use of language (the “choice” of expressions, the style of conversation) that a person’s moral vision is elaborated. Which vision we adopt, according to Murdoch, is not so much a theoretical view as a *texture of being* (it may be a visual texture, a sound texture or a touch texture). This texture does not concern our moral decisions or values but “what matters,” what makes and expresses differences between people.

⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, “The Blue Book,” in *The Blue and Brown Books* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1965), 17.

⁸ Iris Murdoch and R.W. Hepburn, “Vision and Choice in Morality,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, “Dreams and Self Knowledge,” supp. vol. 30 (1956), 40–1.

⁹ Murdoch, “Vision and Choice in Moral Philosophy,” 39.

These differences must be the object of “the intelligent, the sharp-eyed, description of life.” Human lives echo the Wittgenstein’s form of life, which is also a texture.

Let’s note also the *open texture* defined at the same time by F. Waismann, which concerns the sensitivity of our words and statements to their uses.¹⁰ This particular texture – *Porosität* – is devised by Waismann to express the openness of empirical statements, and refers to an unstable reality that cannot be fixed by concepts, but by the recognition of gestures, manners, and styles. Wittgenstein actually uses it to express the vulnerability of concepts. Ordinary propositions (like Cora Diamond’s example “the book is on the table”) are repeatedly said by Wittgenstein to have a *complete sense* when they have sense. Wittgenstein, Diamond shows, conceives of two kinds of use – something like a law-use (hypothetic) and non-law use (not saying anything beyond, “things are so,” or look so, with no commitment to any objects beyond experience). In the first use, the proposition says something about the world, but by a certain kind of connection, through the *application* of language. In the second use, the proposition has a complete sense. Not that it has a fuller relation to experience. As Diamond points out, completeness of sense is in the *Tractatus* a *logical* matter, not an empirical one – it doesn’t involve that a description is always complete, a point questioned later by Wittgenstein, anyway. A meaningful proposition like “the watch is in the drawer”, could be conceived as descriptively incomplete, as Wittgenstein says in his discussions with the Vienna Circle. Waismann shows clearly why, in his paper “Verifiability.” Namely, because of what he calls the “open texture” of our empirical concepts, no verification is possible even of particular empirical statements, there are always “other directions in which our concept has not been defined.”

Take any material statement. The terms which occur in it are non-exhaustive ; that means that we cannot foresee completely all possible conditions in which they are to be used; there is always a possibility, however faint, that we have not taken into account something or other that may be relevant to their usage ; and that means that we cannot foresee completely all the possible circumstances in which the statement is true or in which it is false. Thus the absence of a conclusive verification is directly due to the open texture of the terms concerned. (Waismann, *Logic and Language*, 121)

Losing Concepts

How far can concepts go? We can use an example drawn from Diamond’s reading of a passage in which Peter Singer declares himself to be in favor of the defense of animals:

What I mean by “stupid or insensitive or crazy” may be brought out by a single word, the word “even” in this quotation: “We have seen that the experimenter reveals a bias in favor of his own species whenever he carries out an experiment on a non-human for a purpose that he would not think justified him in using a human being, *even a retarded human being*. (1991, 23)

What doesn’t work in such an argument is not the argument itself, but the use of the word “even”. When Diamond affirms that moral philosophy has become blind and insensitive, she means by that that it has become insensitive to the human specificity of moral questioning and to ordinary moral life. It is this dimension of that separates an ordinary ethics from theories of consensus and community, from an alleged common sense to which one has easy recourse in justifying conformist

¹⁰ See Friedrich Waismann, “Verifiability”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume XIX* (1945), reprinted in Gilbert Ryle and Anthony Flew (ed.), *Logic and Language (First Series): Essays* (Blackwell: 1951).

positions. What matters, in moral perception, is not agreement and harmony, but rather the perception of contrasts, distances, differences and their expressions. It is in this moment that there is a « loss of concepts ».

A sensibility to the conceptual world in which someone's remarks are situated is a moment of human sensibility to words. (Diamond, "Losing Your Concepts," *Ethics* 98:2 (1988), 273–4.)

On Diamond's account, it is not so much that sensibility and concepts are opposed to one another, but instead that there is within sensibility already a form of *conceptual life*. Concepts are political in these situations of loss of the stich that holds experience and concepts together (and it can motivate a desire to come out of this situation, to repossess one's language, and to find a world that would be the adequate context for it). When Diamond affirms, in her introduction to *The Realistic Spirit* (23–24), that moral philosophy has largely become "stupid and insensitive," she means insensitive to the specificity of human moral questioning, to this ordinary moral life bound up with others.

Cavell's interest is in the emergence of radical disagreement in morality. The possibility of radical misunderstanding defines moral perception: the moral question implies our agreement "in language"¹¹ but also basic disagreement and misunderstanding, distance, a *feeling of nonsense* (as natural reaction, indignation, or rebellion).

For not only does he not receive me, because his natural reactions are not mine; but my own understanding is found to go no further than my own natural reactions bear it (Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* 115).

Diamond is interested in our capacity to acknowledge when one's words betray a manner of leaving our common conceptual world. This capacity relates to our ability to lose—and reciprocally to extend—our (moral) concepts, to use them in new contexts. Such an extension, as well as the measure of its limits, is the work of moral imagination, of our (in)ability to put ourselves in a situation and to understand another's words, which becomes manifest when we measure our distance from the other's moral vision.¹² In "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," Diamond mentions an aspect of ethical life that finds an expression in literature – and in anthropology (of a kind): the fact that some aspects of reality are unbearable, that they cannot be thought of without great difficulty.¹³ (This is the *difficulty* in the "difficulty of reality"). The question is not just one of imagination and sensitivity, as sources of knowledge, but also the (skeptical) elucidation of the loss of our concepts, the difficulty of putting them to work in further contexts, in another conceptual world.

"The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy" studies our moral capacity to put ourselves in the place of an animal, whether this is Kafka's monkey speaking to the Academy or an animal being killed in a slaughterhouse, and mentions J.M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*.

¹¹ See "Wittgenstein and Cavell: Anthropology, Skepticism, and Politics," in *The Claim to Community: Essays on Stanley Cavell and Political Philosophy*, ed. Andrew Norris (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 19–38.

¹² One can get an idea of this by looking at the quotes from *The Washington Post* article written by Chip Brown on the life of Hobart Wilson and the response letters cited by Diamond in her essay "Moral Differences and Distances: Some Questions," in *Commonality and Particularity in Ethics*, 197–215.

¹³ Cora Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," *Partial Answers* 1:2 (2003), 1–26.

There are people who have the capacity to imagine themselves as someone else, there are people who have no such capacity (when the lack is extreme, we call them psychopaths), and there are people who have the capacity but choose not to exercise it. There is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination.¹⁴

Anthropology becomes the name of this capacity, which is illustrated in Wittgenstein at the very moment when he discovers the concrete sense of the limits of language posited in the *Tractatus*. For example, in the *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, Wittgenstein imagines

that [he] might have had to choose some being on earth as my soul's dwelling place, and that my spirit had chosen this unsightly creature as its seat and vantage point. Perhaps because the exception of a beautiful dwelling would repel him. Of course, for the spirit to do so, he would have to be very sure of himself.

Agreement in language is not in opinions but in form of life (Wittgenstein, *PI* § 242). By replacing opinions or beliefs by the concept of form of life in what we may call his anthropological picture, Wittgenstein destroys the idea of attributing beliefs that is as the core of traditional epistemology. For Cavell, the *availability* of Wittgenstein's philosophy is conditioned by recognition of forms of life and lifeforms—the whirl of organism—as the objects of philosophical and anthropological description. The anthropological method in philosophy (what Austin calls “fieldwork”) doesn't make philosophy anthropology, but it does outline a conceptual task common to anthropology and philosophy: paying attention to the ordinary.

We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able 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), just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of [...] of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation—all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls ‘forms of life.’ (Cavell 1969, 52)

Cavell takes inspiration from Wittgenstein when he defines “the uncanniness of the ordinary” inherent to the anthropological tone. For Wittgenstein, philosophy *must* become a mythology: a clarification and expression of the myths deposited in our language; an archeological as well as anthropological task. Our inherited mythology – our lifeform – can then also “change more or less profoundly,” as Wittgenstein supposes in *On Certainty*.¹⁵ It is Wittgenstein's philosophy as a whole, beginning with the *RFGB*, that explores anthropology, and strives to give sense and significance to philosophy becoming anthropology, and philosophical concepts becoming anthropological. As noted by Jacques Bouveresse,

Wittgenstein's interest in the most concrete and familiar details of human existence, and his passion for the anthropological document, is one of the most striking elements of his

¹⁴ J.M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons*, New York: Vintage, 2004), 79–80.

¹⁵ *OC* § 97.

philosophical personality. In a way it can be said that it has never dealt with anything other than anthropology.¹⁶

Ordinary ethics, as Veena Das develops it, illustrates the method Wittgenstein proposes: attention to ordinary human forms of life in their unity and diversity; that is, attention to forms of life and lifeforms. Within the recent history of anthropology, understood as an independent discipline, the relations between anthropology and philosophy have been rearranged in various ways. The difficulty is that philosophy and anthropology are related (they are “cousins,” as Wittgenstein says about “agreement” and “rule” [*PI*, §224]), once philosophy begins to turn toward the concept of *the human* in general, as part of the “modern” turn operated by Kant and analyzed by Foucault. They grow apart precisely because philosophy, when it takes an “anthropological tone”, speaks of “the human”—without paying attention to the various ways of being human that exist or to the various ways in which humans may be living beings. Wittgenstein’s main discovery is of the uncanny character of ordinary life, and hence of the normativity of description.

Are mathematical proposals anthropological proposals that say how we human beings infer and calculate? - Is a collection of laws a book of anthropology that says how the people of this people treat thieves, etc.? - Could we say: “the judge consults a book of anthropology and then sentences the thief to a prison sentence”? Fine, but the judge doesn’t use the collection of laws as an anthropology manual. (*Remarks on the foundations of mathematics*, 65)

A response to those who see, nowadays, “ordinary ethics” as conservative or uncritical in its reference to ordinary human experience might be advanced through this relation of experience to (moral) concepts. Our “practices” and experiences are themselves shaped by what we expect from ethics, and ethics itself is shaped both by what we do, and by what we want or imagine. Diamond mentions this point again in “Losing Your Concepts”:

A responsiveness to the conceptual world of someone’s remarks is part of an ordinary human responsiveness to words. Cavell himself was interested there in our *sharing* such things; I am interested now also in our capacity to recognize when someone’s words show, or seem to show, some departure from the shared conceptual world.

To recognize yourself and the person with whom you are speaking as sharing the same moral world is not to think of him or her as someone with whom you will be able to reach agreement on moral issues. You take yourself not to be sharing the same moral world if your response to something he says is, for example, “How can he have adduced *that* here? How can he so much as think that relevant? . . . What life does he live within which such a discussion goes on?”¹⁷

For Diamond, this capacity 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”. Concepts are vulnerable to experience. What matters is no longer the classic opposition between sensibility and understanding, but rather a conceptual sensibility, not exactly as thinkers like

¹⁶ Bouveresse, afterword to *L’animal cérémoniel*, L’âge d’Homme, 92.

¹⁷ Cora Diamond, “Losing Your Concepts,” *Ethics* 98:2 (1988), 273–4.

J. McDowell have developed it (as a conceptualized sensibility), but as the actually sensitive character of the moral concepts that shape and share our lives.

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