

**ETHICAL CONFIDENCE AND  
EDUCATION:  
BEYOND *DOUBT AND DEFLECTION***

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I hereby declare that, except where explicit attribution is made, the work presented  
in this thesis is entirely my own.

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# Abstract

I begin this thesis in the classroom, and with a depiction of a particular, quite prevalent, approach to moral education. My aims are then as follows: (1) to trace how certain influential positions in philosophy of education bolster such an approach, (2) to critique the picture of ethics and ethical development shared by these positions, and (3) to suggest an alternative conception of the ethical life which promises to offer a richer, more fruitful, approach to moral education. My first aim is met through an examination of the works of Robert Dearden and Michael Hand on teaching controversial issues. From these writers I draw out what I describe as a 'rationalistic' approach; where a particular vision of rationality is (a) called on to provide definite foundations for the ethical life, and where by implication, (b) teachers are encouraged to teach various ethical concerns as 'issues' which are resolved, or potentially resolvable, by 'rational' means. My critique of this approach focuses on the deeper but unacknowledged senses of unease that underpin both its vision of rationality, and the justificatory role reason is supposed to play in ethics and moral education. The challenge considers the idea that its conception of rationality is ethically *deflective* (e.g. that it can constitute an attempt to avoid dealing directly with ethical doubt and disquietude). I go on to explore whether there might be a non-deflective philosophical engagement with the ethical: an approach which avoids succumbing either to the certainties of 'rationalism' or to the potentially corrosive nature of relativistic doubt. In arguing that such a conception can be found in the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, I explore the possibilities it presents for moral education. Particular attention is paid to the role that the study of literature might play in deepening certain forms of ethical awareness in the classroom.

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# Chapter I

## Philosophical Rationalism and the Classroom

### (i) Starter in the Classroom

It was late September; the class were beginning to study for their GCSE examinations in English Language. I mention this only because what I am about to describe could have taken place in any number of classrooms in the same school. But English it was. And in an English lesson taught by an experienced and highly-regarded teacher, working in an innovative department, in a Good School with at least some Outstanding Features. That is not, of course, to say that it could not have taken place in a lesson delivered by a newly qualified teacher in *that* other school on the far side of the town. Nor is it to say that what I describe is typical, even common, merely that it could in fact have happened almost anywhere.

“OK guys, let’s recap on what we’ve just learned,” said Ms Comberton, for whom regular plenary sessions had, quite imperceptibly, come to form part of her everyday practice. A trusty tool in her teacher’s toolkit. She had often had cause to remind herself how OFSTED themselves had been much impressed by the fact that her lessons were guided, but not constrained, by the ‘law of the three-part-lesson’: a plenary does not, after all, have to be something that occupies only the final five or ten minutes of an effective lesson. Assessment and learning were, indeed, properly viewed as conjoined twins rather than as distant cousins. This plenary, however, was going to be different. She knew it. She had already confessed to herself that she was going to transgress. She was about to commit the sin of telling them what happened in the texts they had been studying; reminding *them* what *they* were supposed to know, not to mention understand, about how the language used by the writers of two different accounts of a mountaineering accident had varying effects on the reader. As she continued to talk, she thought she heard the Guardians of Educational Quality muttering as if present invisibly at the back of her

classroom: 'Far too teacher-led'; interrogating her still further with that familiar yet terrifying question, 'But how do you *know* they have all learnt what you wanted them to learn?' Of course, she ought really to have got one or more of them to remind the class about the key features of the two reports, but it was Monday morning, she was tired, they seemed tired...and this would just have to do. She would continue to speak.

Plenary over, and it was time to get them active again; to get them to think for themselves, and to learn from each other. It was time for class discussion. With a click of a button, Ms Comberton's next slide was projected on the board, and with another, the discussion question marched in dutifully from left to right. (I should perhaps add that it wasn't strictly speaking *her* slide. It was the Department's slide. It was one of the thirteen that made up the lesson that every teacher followed for this part of the unit. It was, you see, part of the Scheme of Work.) And so, to what appeared to be a room crowded with bowed heads, the teacher proceeded to read from the slide:

"Turn to face the person behind you and discuss with your partner the following question: *Do you think it is acceptable to sacrifice the life of one person, to avoid two people dying?*"<sup>1</sup>. "I'll give you ten minutes to discuss," she added, secure at least in the knowledge that pace and timing were vital ingredients in a good lesson, "and then I want to hear back from some of you". With that she was finished. It was down to them.

There was silence at first. There often was. 'It does usually take a little time for their brains to warm up', she reminded herself, consolingly. She also knew from her own experience how difficult it was to be the first voice to confront a room full of potentially critical quietness. With that thought in mind she proceeded to circulate the classroom, kneeling beside various desks to prompt and to probe, to get them

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<sup>1</sup> This is in fact a 'real' question, quoted verbatim from Taylor, P, Addison, R, and Foster, D. (2011) *Edexcel IGCSE English A and B*. And here I must also confess to one minor inaccuracy: according to the Edexcel website, this particular English syllabus is not fitted for teaching in state schools in the UK; so strictly speaking, that particular question could not be asked *anywhere*.

to engage; perhaps even to care. Sure enough, the silence soon gave way to the familiar, comforting hum of classroom noise. Returning to her desk to remind herself of the homework task she was required to set, she became struck, albeit briefly, by the thought of what it would be like to have to sacrifice a human life. Beyond the example in the text of the mountain climber who considered leaving his injured friend to die in order to prevent both their deaths, she was surprised by how difficult it was to think of another instance where such a sacrifice might actually occur. She was no Odysseus forced to choose between Scylla and Charybdis. She was not even a mountain climber, or potholer, or anything of that sort. It was all somehow outside of her experience. At last, however, sanity returned. This sort of thinking simply wasn't helpful, and anyway, it wasn't the point of the exercise. She knew full well that the question demanded a much more abstract, higher-level sort of thoughtfulness.

Ten minutes had passed. It was time to ask for volunteers or, perhaps, to single out the odd shy or surly reluctant. She spotted Emma in the third row with her head on the desk. 'If she's bored at least she could show some respect; some bloody manners,' she seethed to herself, with the sort of hurt that professionalism would now require her to keep firmly in check. "Emma," said Ms Comberton sharply, "Perhaps you would like to share your opinion with the class. That is if we are not keeping you from your beauty sleep". After the couple of slightly awkward giggles had subsided, the girl looked up, somewhat uneasily. She spoke with a slight stutter, all the time staring down at her desk: "Sorry Miss...but...I don't know what to think about it". Ms Comberton remained silent. Emma *knew* what was expected of her: "Well... I haven't been in a situation like that have I...I can't imagine what it would be like. I don't know what to think."

The teacher's heart dutifully sunk. Yet another one who couldn't grasp the point of the exercise. There were always some Emmas in her classes. They always made it too personal. They always thought the question was concerned with 'What would *you* do?' rather than '*What should we think?*' They seemed to need 'the lives' in question to have names and histories - they simply couldn't *think* without the need

for irrelevant detail. In the mouths of some others, of course, 'the Emma reply' was merely a response borne of laziness. An excuse to stop thinking. On such occasions, 'How can you know unless you're in the situation?' means simply, 'I am not in that situation, therefore, I can skip any further discussion and switch-off my brain until break-time.'

However, perhaps Emma was different. She was a bright girl - well at least according to the baseline data passed to her at the start of the year by the head of department. Her scores on various cognitive ability tests put her in the top 10% of her year group; her projected grades were similarly intimidating. Ms Comberton hadn't yet had the time to get the measure of Emma *personally*, so perhaps the girl was simply trying to be difficult. Deliberatively subversive. Yet another case of the 'smart-kid-that-thinks-everything-is-beneath-her-syndrome'.

Ms Comberton would try again. "Yes, OK. But the important question is whether you think that *in principle* it would be acceptable. Could it ever be justified? Would it ever be right?"

"I still don't know what I am supposed to say!" blurted Emma with increasing agitation.

'She is being awkward', decided Ms Comberton, 'She is accusing me of not explaining the question properly: of being a *bad teacher*. She must *surely* understand what I am getting at. She's supposed to be bright isn't she?'

"Well, let's put it more simply shall we?" the teacher continued, her hostility barely disguised beneath the slow, deliberate tone of her further questioning, "Do you think two lives count for more than one life? If so, might we not be doing the right thing if we sacrifice one life to save two lives?"

"Miss, I am not being funny," said Emma, sensing the increasing tension in her teacher's voice, "I just don't know how I am supposed to weigh it all up. I mean



sitting here in a classroom and just, like, thinking about it. Of course, I know that *two is more than one...*"

She was interrupted briefly by a loud, dismissive 'Durr!' and some slow clapping from somewhere at the back of the class.

"But...but I don't know about sacrificing...I don't know how I am supposed to work all of this out when it's about people's lives."

"Oh, I see," said the teacher, "so what you are saying is that it's not a matter of number, and that to cause or allow the death of a human being is simply wrong. Full-stop."

"No, that's not it...not really" replied Emma, "I guess I am just...just confused, that's all".

It was time to put an end to this. She was getting nowhere with Emma, and besides, quite enough valuable class learning time had already been lost.

Fortunately, Jeremy, a serious and studious pupil who somehow managed to avoid the nerdiness too often associated with such qualities, raised his hand with an air of control and self-confidence.

"Yes, Jeremy", said Ms Comberton, hopefully.

"I would say yes. I think it is acceptable. Sure, it could be a very tough decision to make, but the answer would still have to be yes".

This was more promising. *Much* more promising.

"I mean, two lives have got to be more important than one. Just as a thousand lives have got to be worth more than two. However much I would hate to make the

sacrifice myself, it would still, in principle, be acceptable for *us* to sacrifice the one for the two. It's just a matter of logic really."

'Phew, I am saved...' 'Thank God', she thought, 'for Jeremy.'

### **(ii) The Wrong Question?**

What, we may well ask, was Emma's problem with *that* question? One sympathetic response would be to recognise it was in fact a rather poor question. There is certainly little doubt that it required an immediate leap to a high level of abstraction. Unlike the situation with many of the hypothetical 'moral dilemmas' beloved of various philosophers, Emma was given little, if any, contextual information: she was missing the 'who am I?', 'where am I?', 'who will be sacrificed?', 'do I personally have to perform the sacrifice?', 'who or what requires me to do so?' etc. Perhaps, then, Emma's difficulties could simply have been resolved by better teaching. One might even be inclined to suggest that there is nothing wrong with the question *per se*, but simply with when or with how it was asked. It could be a good question to ask to different, perhaps older, students; it might even have been made suitable for the same class if the teacher had erected the appropriate intellectual scaffolding, perhaps by modelling some 'sample' responses with them. In short, the teacher needed to better support Emma to understand the point of the question; to access its demands more effectively. While it is certainly possible that there were more appropriate ways for the teacher to have responded to Emma's concerns, the problem here was not simply one of allowing her to better grasp the point of the question. This would assume that Emma, unlike her classmate Jeremy, simply did not understand *the point*. Once this assumption is challenged, then so too is the idea that insufficient teacher explanation (poor task 'modelling' etc.) was the single source of her difficulties. Also, to be fair to Ms Comberton, it is likely that her class would begin to discuss the question in the light of the two unfortunate mountaineers whose accounts of a climbing accident they had just been studying. The question of whether one ought to leave his injured companion to meet his fate, or stay with him in an act of almost

certain self-sacrifice, would have provided at least some sort of background from which further discussion might have been imagined to arise.

Emma's muddle, then, seemed not to be with understanding what the question required, but with the idea that it required her to respond in a certain way. Emma may have been troubled partly because she could not conjure at will the feelings experienced by someone, such as the mountaineer, who was forced to contemplate making an intolerably difficult decision. That said, I also doubt whether Emma must simply have suffered from a failure of imagination or empathy. There need not have been much wrong with Emma's imagination: she may well have imagined herself there on that mountain, not knowing what to do for the best, but knowing nevertheless that a decision would have to be made. She struggled, perhaps, with the idea of looking the mountaineer in the eyes and telling him whether leaving his injured friend would constitute acceptable behaviour. But I suspect that this was not all there was to it. Another side of Emma's difficulty might better be described as stemming from having, in spite of herself, to approach and answer questions of life and death in a peculiarly abstract sort of way. She may have struggled with the idea that she, or indeed *anyone*, could speak for *everyone*; that any *one* person could be in the possession of the means by which they could specify what *we all* 'ought' to recognise as 'acceptable' or 'unacceptable' behaviour across any number of hypothetical situations.

Emma of course may not have put it quite like this. Yet, she would perhaps have appreciated that Ms Comberton's question did not require her to begin and end her deliberations with specificity: with the lives, thoughts and actions of particular individuals. It did not ask whether it would have been acceptable for Joe to leave the injured Simon in order to prevent two deaths rather than one. The question concerned whether it is ever right to sacrifice one person to save the lives of two. The mountain context was in an important sense incidental. One is perhaps supposed to recognise that the dilemma faced by the two mountaineers represents a single instance of a more general sort of problematic. A broader issue thus hides behind the ethical struggles faced by that one man on that particular mountain

slope. It is *the issue*, then, that unites any number of hypothetical mountaineers, doctors, sailors, soldiers, teachers, and so on. It was something of this sort that, I surmise, Emma recognised, and it troubled her. It troubled her in ways that she would nevertheless find it difficult fully to understand or to articulate. Yet, for Emma there was something wrong, alien even, in this sort of approach, even if it was the approach that she knew she would have to adopt in order to satisfy her teacher.

It would no doubt have been more acceptable if Emma had replied, 'Well, sometimes...it depends on the situation', and proceeded to provide and explain a couple of conflicting examples. Depending, of course, on how well she went on explained both the examples and their relationship to her initial 'point', she would at least have been credited with providing a balanced and justified response. Her teacher may still have dismissed her as yet another hapless teenage relativist, but she would at least have been operating, so to speak, within the spirit of the game. But then again, it was not as if Emma must merely have seen two competing responses to the question as equally compelling, and couldn't as such, decide between them. The problem, perhaps, was that she found it hard to think about the question in terms of competing sides, or of being compelled by competing, abstract arguments at all.

I should probably add at this point that I have met Emma. More accurately, as a teacher, I have encountered a significant minority of students who seemed troubled by the sorts of questions (both by the content and the style) that moral philosophers have traditionally asked, and which have found their way, in various guises, into the syllabi of countless school curriculum subjects<sup>2</sup>. Emma is not, then, merely a philosopher's fiction, or indeed a fictional philosopher. She is, nevertheless, in part a vehicle for expressing my own concern at the concerns of these particular students, and with how their unease remains both under-examined

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<sup>2</sup> One thinks not only of Philosophy, which at the time of writing is taught and examined only post-16, but of other subjects too, such as Religious Education, Citizenship, History, Critical Thinking, English Language and Literature.

and untreated. It is too easy to put such difficulties down to a failure to understand the question, and of simply not being capable of the right sort of critical, abstract thinking. I have been as guilty as Emma's teacher of adopting this sort of response as an easy, general diagnosis. In my own case, a few years of philosophical study had meant that such questions no longer appeared strange to me, but had come to seem commonplace, even natural. In this sense, of course, Ms Comberton and I differed. She at least remained a little confused by the question she had set to the class. She also saw, or at least sensed, something problematic about it: something that mere re-phrasing or better teacher 'modelling' would not easily resolve. Nevertheless, she knew why that question, and a host of similar questions, are set in schools; she knew too what sorts of student responses were helpful and appropriate, particularly for a class studying for a public examination. The pressing immediate demands of the classroom, not to mention having to adhere strictly to a Scheme of Work, also prevented her from pursuing her own suspicions, and from attending more sympathetically to Emma's.

Unlike Ms Comberton I can, however, put the immediate pressures of the classroom to one side and, in this thesis, take something akin to Emma's *puzzlement* seriously. In short, I believe that Emma was right to be troubled by the sort of question she was asked in class. Moreover, I suspect that the problems with this and similar 'ethical' questions run deep, and can help to reveal the influences of a particular, and still prevalent, approach to philosophical thinking about the aims and purposes of moral education. I describe this approach as *Philosophical Rationalism*. I want to be clear from the outset that I do not imagine this to be a school of thought with fully paid-up, card-carrying members. It is not intended to describe a distinctive movement in either moral philosophy or the philosophy of education. Nor is it intended as an easy way of identifying individuals; in fact, it is not a way of identifying ('outing') individuals at all. Rather, the writings of the two philosophers of education I go on to discuss are said to be 'rationalistic' insofar as they appear to share certain attitudes or tendencies towards the role, and the value, of ('critical', 'abstract') rationality in approaching ethical questions and concerns in the classroom.

The philosophical literature on controversial issues makes for a useful starting point because it allows one to grasp some major concerns of this rationalistic approach, and also to appreciate the nature and extent of its influence on recent trends in moral education. The teaching of controversial issues has a fairly recent origin as a distinct, or at least a distinctive, area of educational theory and practice (c.f. Stradling, 1984). That is not, of course, to suggest that those sorts of issues now commonly described as controversial are all somehow new, or have never before been the subject of classroom discussion. The point, rather, is that educational discussions about how best to understand and handle certain topics in schools, as if they required a particular sort of categorisation *as controversial*, as well as a distinctive form or style of teaching, are arguably much more modern. Through examining a selection of philosophical contributions to this recent educational debate, we can also gain some insight into Emma's question: why it might have been set, why it might have taken the form it did, and how it fits with certain views of educational aims, including how best to approach ethics, and to present *ethical* problems and concerns, with students.

### **(iii) Development and Further Discussion**

The following chapter involves an exploration of Robert Dearden's work on understanding and teaching controversial issues in schools, with a particular emphasis on his seminal paper: 'Controversial Issues and The Curriculum' (1981). I will here take a closer look at Dearden's objections to the 'behavioural criterion' as a way of identifying controversial issues, along with why he supposed an epistemic approach to be more fruitful in this respect. I will, however, go on to argue: (a) that Dearden's attacks on the behavioural criterion fail to make the desired impact on their target, and (b) that his account of an alternative, 'epistemic criterion' of controversy seems both ambiguous and confused. In terms of how this chapter fits with my overall aims, I should make it clear that in critiquing Dearden, I do not seek to defend the behavioural criterion against his attacks on it. In fact, I do not aim to identify an alternative approach to understanding controversial issues at all. In both

describing Dearden's account, and in pointing out the problems I see with it, my larger purpose is better seen as preparatory in a different sense. The same can be said of my treatment of Michael Hand's updated approach to the epistemic criterion in the chapter that follows it. To be clear, the chapters on both Dearden (Chapter 2) and Hand (Chapter 3) are not intended simply as self-contained critiques, but also as ways of *exemplifying* (as I will draw out more explicitly in Chapter 4) a particular 'rationalistic' attitude shared by both philosophers toward ethics and moral education. My overarching aim for the next three chapters, then, is to move progressively beyond the assessment of particular sets of arguments about how best to approach 'controversial issues' with children, to reveal the deeper disquietudes about ethics and education that underpin the work of both Dearden and Hand in this area. This is, accordingly, a kind of 'investigation' in Wittgenstein's sense, and although its significance extends, I think, beyond the immediate discussion, this will not be explored in detail in the thesis.

I will take up the notions of doubt and disquietude again in Chapter 5, and examine the challenges that moral relativism might pose for the foundational ambitions of the rationalistic picture I have been sketching. This will lead to consideration of a further challenge to the rationalist account in Chapter 6, where I introduce the work of Cora Diamond, and her uses of Stanley Cavell's notion of *deflection*. In particular, I explore the idea that an approach to ethics and ethical development which centres on the provision of abstract argument, may merely serve to bypass the encouragement of certain deeper forms of ethical awareness. Chapter 7 will then mark an attempt to move beyond a critique of the certain rationalistic tendencies I have identified, and to suggest how a Wittgensteinian approach to philosophy points to an alternative, *non-deflective*, approach to the ethical life. I develop this idea further in Chapter 8. Here the focus is on the question of what ethical learning and development might look like on the Wittgensteinian account described. Finally, in Chapter 9, I return to the school setting. Having by this stage outlined a picture of ethics and ethical learning which offers an alternative to the rationalistic understanding explored in the first part of the thesis, I examine how the use of literature in the classroom can help to encourage this sort of ethical

learning, or what I describe elsewhere as a progressive *deepening* of ethical awareness.

#### **(iv) Aims, Scope and Style**

To avoid as far as possible any misunderstandings of the aims of the thesis, I would like to make a couple of brief, preliminary remarks about its scope and style. Given my stated aims, the reader will rightly expect to discover here an extended critique of a particular 'rationalistic' approach to ethics and moral education, as well as the exploration of an alternative, 'non-deflective', account. If this is, indeed, the main purpose or direction of the thesis, some other features of its journey may strike one as puzzling; even ill-advised. For one thing, the reader will, *en route*, encounter discussion of various other philosophical problems and concerns, including some of those which surround understanding and teaching controversial issues, ethical doubt, moral relativism, the philosophy of Wittgenstein, the place of personal testimony in encouraging ethical development, and, finally, the role of literature in helping to promote non-deflective ethical awareness in the classroom. If this scope is, as I will argue, relevant both to my critique of 'rationalism' and my advocacy of an alternative picture of ethics and moral education, the reader may still reasonably be concerned by a question of depth: she may expect much more to be said about various problems; she may also desire the inclusion of a far greater range of participants in these discussions.

The problem of selection, which necessarily involves one making certain omissions, is of perennial relevance to any writer. In discussing this very problem, although philosopher and historical theorist Beverley Southgate (2012; 4) is correct to suggest that one can "...invite to our parties only those to whom we have been introduced, or of whom we are at least aware...", it also seems that one may still invite the wrong people, or otherwise be thought unduly limited in one's range of acquaintances. Selection can, nevertheless, be a matter of aims; of strategy. To speak of inviting the *wrong* people, or *too few* people, to one's party – or indeed to one's philosophical discussions – relies, at least in part, on the question of what one



intended the proposed gathering to achieve. This thesis, then, is not intended to offer a deep and synoptic study of the potentially relevant scholarship in understanding Wittgenstein's philosophy, or of moral relativism, or indeed, of how to approach controversial issues in the classroom. Nor is it intended specifically to advance the scholarly knowledge in any, let alone all, of these fields of study. To be clear, what it is intended to do is the following: to engage in a strategic selection and deployment of philosophical sources - those which best allow me to marshal the arguments I need in order (a) to critique one ('rationalistic') approach to ethics and moral education, and (b) to outline and defend another, alternative, picture which is informed by Wittgenstein's later philosophical writings.

I would, finally, like to say something about how terms such as 'ethics', 'morality' and 'moral education' will be approached in this thesis. Firstly, my main interest is with ethics rather than morality, certainly insofar as the latter can present a far narrower conception of what might constitute an ethical life; a particular 'species' of answer to the question: 'how should I live?' (c.f. Williams, 1985). To adapt Charles Taylor's threefold image of corral, field and forest, my main preoccupation, then, is less with the 'corral' of morality, and with the question of what we ought to do, and more with the 'field' of ethics, of what it is good to be. I also touch on what could be described as the relationship between field and forest: with the overlapping territory between the field of ethics and the forest of the 'unconditional' (c.f. Taylor, 2011).

This is especially evident in the later chapters devoted to Wittgenstein's philosophy, where I speak of deepening ethical awareness; of experiencing, living and discerning rather than merely 'grasping' - which often means reasoning or even calculating - aspects of the ethical life. It is, however, much less evident in the earlier chapters, where I am concerned to understand, and to critique, the approach I describe as rationalistic. Here, writers frequently speak of 'moral' and 'morality' - sometimes in the same breath as 'ethics' or 'ethical'. Secondly, I have chosen to persist with the notion of 'moral' education' (rather than speaking of 'ethical education') when describing, for example, the 'morally' educative role of

literature in the classroom. This decision was borne, in part, from convention: ethical education still - at least to me - sounds rather awkward compared with the more familiar moral education. Of course, talk of moral education carries its own risks, not least that I will be taken to be suggesting something narrowly systematic or prescriptive. Nevertheless, my use of the term - particularly in the final chapter - ought to be read in terms of what I say in Chapters 7 and 8 about *ethical* learning and development in the context of Wittgenstein's philosophy.

# Chapter 2

## Dearden, Reason, and Controversial Issues

### (i) The Behavioural Criterion of Controversy

It might, at first glance, seem rather surprising that there could be any meaningful debate about how best to identify a controversial issue. One would not have to look too long or hard to discover a wealth of books, films, artworks, and even songs that have been widely condemned, censored or even banned. These works are frequently described as controversial, largely because of the issues they examine and/or the manner in which those issues are examined and presented. In short, a controversial work is so described because it challenges, threatens, offends; it is both provocative and divisive, often deeply so. If one attends to everyday parlance, the meaning of the word controversial is, then, quite clear: controversy plainly implies division, disputation, and disagreement. Closer attention to the etymology of the word also supports this conclusion, where the English word controversial comes, originally, from the Latin *controversus* - literally, turned against. Thus, by extension, a controversial 'issue' would seem to be one on which people are manifestly 'turned against' one another: in short, they are involved in disagreement.

Assuming of course that it is valuable for schools to teach students about controversial issues, or that it is at least unavoidable that they will encounter widely and deeply contested topics in school, then the question of which particular issues to teach as controversial might be considered a straightforwardly empirical one. As such, once the everyday meaning of the term controversial is discovered, one would need simply to discover which issues were particularly divisive at a given time and place, and then select the most appropriate pedagogical strategies to teach them. No doubt some rather large survey could assist in highlighting the issues where there exists the most profound lack of public consensus. One thinks,

perhaps, of something like Gallup's annual *Values and Beliefs Survey* (2010), conducted on a fairly large sample (n= 1,029) of adults living in the United States, selected using a random-digit dial telephone sampling technique. The survey indeed revealed that "...doctor-assisted suicide is the most controversial of the issues tested, with the public tied at 46% over its moral acceptability", while the morality of gay or lesbian relationships was also fairly divisive (52% acceptable; 43% unacceptable). On this approach, one might then credit Gallup with helping to identify two 'controversial issues' which could be included in a school curriculum.

This manner of approaching the meaning of controversy, and deciding what issues might count as controversial, is in keeping with what is described in the educational literature as the *behavioural criterion* of controversy. To use the words of philosopher Charles Bailey (1975: 122), an issue is controversial if "...numbers of people are observed to disagree about statements and assertions made in connection with the issue". His understanding is termed 'behavioural' because it proposes that observed or observable 'behaviour' ought to be the decisive factor in determining whether an issue is controversial. As such, if public 'behaviour', or perhaps more accurately, public opinion, is widely divided on an issue – such as that of assisted suicide in the Gallup survey - then that issue is controversial. As Bailey (1975: 122) also rather notoriously puts it, whether or not an issue is controversial is "...a matter of social fact": it could simply be a 'fact' that an issue profoundly divides members of a given society, and hence, whether that issue counts as controversial.

Despite the *prima facie* plausibility of such an approach, Dearden famously raised various concerns about its value as a way of approaching controversy for educational purposes. In his paper, 'Controversial Issues and the Classroom' (1981), he attacks this type of account on two main counts. His first objection is to argue that the mere existence of disagreement on an issue does not provide an adequate basis for thinking that an issue is controversial. In essence, this line of attack maintains that not all issues that are disputed should count as controversial, while not all issues that should count as controversial are much, if at all, disputed (c.f.

Hand, 2008: 214). As Dearden puts it, "...much disagreement which socially occurs" is likely to reflect either 'simple ignorance' or 'undisciplined assertiveness'. In other words, people may clash on an issue simply because some do not know the correct answers, even when those answers are readily discoverable (Dearden, 1981: 38). Others, such as members the Flat Earth Society, perhaps owing to mere stubbornness, or to other vested interests, may sustain disputes by sticking fast to what are demonstrably misguided views. Either way, the behavioural criterion, for Dearden, proves inadequate because it fails to operate with the requirement that a dispute be a reasonable dispute.

Dearden's second objection is that the behavioural criterion, "could give undeserved encouragement to relativism", and thereby promote "...the thought that what is true should be collapsed into what some social group regards as true, with epidemic relativism and a sociological carnival as the result." (Dearden, 1981:38). Although it is far from immediately obvious why Dearden thinks that the behavioural criterion will promote such socially damaging frivolity amongst the young, I suspect he has something like the following scenario in mind. If, as educators, 'we' choose to teach certain issues as unsettled (controversial) and settled (uncontroversial) simply based on levels of social consensus, then we will give the impression that consensus alone, to use Hand's (2008: 218) words, is "...the proper warrant for belief". If so, we run the risk of promoting complete disregard for the question of whether any competing view on an issue is, in fact, subject to "...ungroundedness, inconsistency, invalidity or mere expressiveness of vested interest" (Dearden, 1981: 38).

In the face of such objections, Dearden would have schools and educational policy makers abandon the behavioural criterion as a means of establishing what ought to count as a controversial issue, and have them adopt an alternative, epistemic criterion. For Dearden, then, an issue should count as controversial if, and only if, "...contrary views can be held on it without those views being contrary to reason" He is quick to clarify what he means by reason, lest we take him to be referring, solely, to formal or logical consistency, whereby minimal standards such as the

principle of non-contradiction must be met. Reason does not, then, refer to something, 'timeless' or 'ahistorical', but to the body of "...public knowledge, criteria of truth, critical standards...that have so far been developed" (Dearden, 1981: 38). I leave, for the moment at least, the questions of how far this understanding of reason as presupposing 'agreed public standards' is either useful, or indeed, fully intelligible. The important point for now, however, is to recognise that for Dearden it is the 'reasonableness' of competing sides of a disagreement (in that each adheres to these standards) that makes the disputed issue *controversial*.

In contrast, to pick out an issue as controversial according to the behavioural criterion is to say nothing about the reasonableness of any of the disputed positions on that issue. Whereas something akin to the justifiability of an issue is, according to Dearden's epistemic criterion, already written into the way that controversy is to be understood. On Dearden's approach, then, the existence of unjustifiable views on an issue, even if they were particularly widespread, would not be sufficient to render that issue controversial. On the other hand, the existence of a 'rationally preferable' view on any issue must, thereby, make that issue non-controversial – that is settled; not controversial at all – quite irrespective of how few people actually endorsed such a position.

## **(ii) Assessing Dearden's Objections**

In its present form, Dearden's first objection to the behavioural criterion seems to beg the question, by confusing two seemingly different questions. One is whether or not the existence of widespread dispute is sufficient to render an issue controversial, which is actually what the behavioural criterion states; the other is centred on whether or not such disputes are either resolved or 'easily resolvable', and as such, constitute 'unreasonable disputes'. Without further argument, the fact that a widely disputed issue might turn out not to be worthy of dispute seems to have little to do with whether widespread dispute is itself an adequate criterion for identifying an issue as controversial. As such, the mere existence of unreasonable disputes, or disputes which are otherwise relatively simple to settle, does not give

us a good basis to think that a disputed issue should or should not be thought controversial. Nor, as Michael Hand (2008: 217) points out, does the existence of right or widely accepted answers count, "...against there being others who are ignorant of the answer and among whom the question remains controversial". Hence, on the basis of Dearden's objection alone, the most one can say against the behavioural criterion is that it could present us with many controversial issues that were, in fact, fairly easy to resolve. Whereas Dearden, seemingly illegitimately, wants us to say that the behavioural criterion presents us with many disputed issues which are not in fact *controversial*.

It is by no means clear that the second objection offers much more than an extension of Dearden's first objection, which renders it vulnerable to the same sort of counter criticisms. In short, the 'bogey' of relativism is invoked by the fact that the behavioural criterion does not, strictly speaking, require a dispute over an issue to be a *reasonable* dispute. As such, young people may grow up with a dangerously limited, 'non-rational' understanding of what it means for an issue to be settled or unsettled; uncontroversial or controversial. The problem is that, once again, this idea seems to rest on confusion between how one should approach or define controversy on the one hand, and how one might go about resolving (and teaching) controversial issues on the other. Indeed, if one accepts the behavioural criterion, and the idea that rational dispute need not form the basis of a criterion by which to identify 'the controversial', it by no means implies that one must also accept that reason could have no role in allowing teachers to examine and teach controversial issues. Or to put it in slightly different terms, to understand controversy behaviourally does not imply that disputes could not be approached, or even 'resolved', epistemically<sup>3</sup>.

### **(iii) Assessing Dearden's Epistemic Criterion**

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<sup>3</sup> Although, to be clear, I am not actually recommending any such 'approach' to teaching controversial issues in this thesis. The point, rather, is to suggest that such an approach could, for the sake of argument, be adopted with behaviourally identified controversial issues.

In order to move on to assess Dearden's understanding of what might actually count as a genuine (epistemic) dispute, let us first remind ourselves how Dearden formulates his epistemic criterion. Thus, for Dearden, a matter is controversial if, and only if, "...contrary views can be held on it without those views being contrary to reason" (Dearden, 1981: 38). And for a viewpoint to fall within the scope of reason it should, as we have seen, not contravene the body of "...public knowledge, criteria of truth, critical standards...that have so far been developed" (Dearden, 1981:38). This stance would initially appear to exclude many strange or exotic viewpoints which could otherwise be taken seriously if controversy were identified behaviourally. For example, a belief that the earth is flat, or that there are gods on Olympus, might be cause for some albeit limited disagreement within a given society. Such issues would not, however, count as epistemically controversial because the evidence and arguments presented in their favour would likely contravene publically attested standards of what counts as good evidence, or a good argument.

However, the fact that its formulation is couched in negative terms could lead to the accusation that Dearden's account presents a rather 'thin' idea of epistemic controversy. As things stand, for a dispute to be rational, competing views need only meet the requirement that none are *contrary* to reason, rather than the seemingly more demanding condition that they must actually enjoy the support of compelling reasons or evidence. To adapt a familiar if well-worn example to illustrate the difference, the hypothesis that an evil demon is deceiving me about the grounds of my most cherished beliefs is, arguably, not contrary to reason, although there still might be no good, credible reasons to suggest it is in fact the case. Of course, it is likely that Dearden would want to claim that the difference between his formulation and the more demanding condition is more apparent than real. As such, the demonic deceiver 'hypothesis' could well prove contrary to reason because there are no good reasons or evidence to suggest that it is in fact the case. The point however remains that Dearden does not spell this out, and his negative formulation seems readily to invite the charge of permissiveness: that it



could allow an issue to count as controversial on the basis of some rather strange or obscure ideas that nevertheless do not straightforwardly contradict reason.

Further problems for Dearden's account come from his attempts to identify the broad categories of disagreement which are supposed not to contravene standards of reason. The first of his four examples of what might constitute the grounds for genuine (epistemic) controversy, concerns those cases where people who broadly agree about the means of settling an issue, are nevertheless engaged in dispute because they, "...simply have insufficient evidence to settle the matter" (Dearden, 1981: 38). The second case is where although the wider criteria for guiding rational choices are shared between disputants, the weight to be given to various 'consideration-making criteria' is nevertheless disputed (Dearden, 1981: 39). Dearden's example of this type of rational dispute centres on the proposed building of a new coal mine where, 'all will agree' that 'environmental and economic criteria are relevant'; and yet, the respective weightings given by local residents and the 'National Coal Board' might be rather different. Dearden's third case is where although there "...is no agreement even on the criteria..." to be used to resolve an issue, shared commitment to underlying rational standards is clearly in evidence (Dearden, 1981: 39). To take Dearden's own example again, although there may be no clear rational grounds to prefer consequentialist to deontological approaches on the morality of torture, a broad concern for, say, 'consistency and clarity' will be equally apparent on both sides of the debate (Peters 1972: 226). Finally, Dearden's fourth case is where, "...not just individual criteria..." but "...whole frameworks of understanding are different." It is interesting that Dearden uses the controversy between the religious believer and non-believer over the "...correct description of a great many things in the world", as a good example of where different views may be held without either side contravening reason (Dearden, 1981: 39-40).

Although each of these examples is worthy of further comment, I will focus on the second and the fourth. In the second case, and the example of the proposed coal mine, Dearden asserts that perfectly 'reasonable' people may agree on broad rational 'decision making criteria,' but nevertheless disagree about 'the weight to

be given to them.’ We might, however, ask what agreement on rational criteria could amount to in the example he offers. Here, agreement that criteria are ‘relevant’ seems only to require that two parties admit that environmental and economic criteria are among the range of considerations that people could bring to bear on the issue. Nevertheless, one crucial concern for those who disagree about the building of the coal mine could be that their opponents in fact favour the *wrong* criterion. One might even expect them say that it is quite unreasonable, even *irrational*, for the other side to weigh the issue as they do: for them to put, for instance, immediate financial gain before long-term environmental damage. To agree that certain criteria can be relevant in certain cases may say very little about whether people would agree that it is not ‘contrary to reason’ to apply or to favour them in any particular instance<sup>4</sup>. It is not as though disagreement must simply be about *the extent* to which a criterion applies; it could instead be about whether it is right to apply it *at all*.

It might be considered unfair of me to criticise Dearden’s understanding of this class of rational disagreement simply by probing the example he uses to illustrate it. Moreover, Dearden could also seek to address my broader concern by suggesting that it is, in and of itself, irrelevant if one of the competing sides in a dispute were to view the decision making criteria used by the other as contrary to reason. The point is that the objective grounds provided by publically attestable standards of reason will allow a hypothetical third-party to decide whether they are in fact rationally applied. Of course, none of this could be supposed to rule out the existence of the class of disagreement Dearden seeks to establish here: cases where people do, in fact, agree that decision making criteria are relevant but, unlike their opponents, choose not to favour them in a given situation. It could even be suggested that my disagreement with Dearden here could be resolved by the provision of further examples. (It might even be said that the type of [academic]

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<sup>4</sup> If one says that it was *rational* for an ‘opponent’ to apply a given criterion (e.g. the economic benefits), what one could have in mind is little more than the idea that it was predictable, understandable, or consistent, given what is known about the other’s motivations and priorities (‘That would be typical of him!’, ‘Well of course he would say that wouldn’t he!’, ‘It comes as no surprise to hear her say that’ etc.)

disagreement we have on this very issue provides a better example with which to illustrate Dearden's point.)

Perhaps it could be said that Dearden simply finds it easier than I do to imagine those engaged in a genuine dispute, such as the proposed building of a coal mine, as being willing and able to credit their opponents with applying decision making criteria 'rationally'. Moreover, it might also be pointed out that the fact that any number of actual disputes might become similarly heated, and thus prevent both sides from acknowledging the others' criteria as applied rationally, does not in itself damage Dearden's general point that this class of rational disputes can and do occur. Nevertheless, I want to suggest that my disagreement with Dearden over his example of 'rational dispute' reveals an important difference between us, one that is also relevant in emphasising what I see as the rationalistic tendencies in his account.

The question I want briefly to consider at this point, and then pursue in more detail later is the following: what are the people in Dearden's example *like*? In other words, what can we say about them *as people*? This is clearly different from inquiring into the purpose of Dearden's example: the answer to this seems simply to be that evoking a recognisable, 'real-life' dispute will help to clarify his general point. What I will add here is that Dearden's coal mine dispute presents us not only with an instance of a disagreement over the use of certain rational criteria, but also with an example of 'people' behaving *reasonably* while in dispute. Insofar as they are recognisable as human beings engaged in an actual dispute, the people in Dearden's example are those who are willing and able to apply the term 'rational' dispassionately to their opponents, even in the midst of a disagreement with them. The competing sides are comprised of those who are able to acknowledge that their opponents apply criteria that they themselves understand to be relevant, although not compelling in this particular context. They are engaged in dispute, but are also clear-thinking, reflective, and self-controlled in the midst of disputation.

Moving away from Dearden's second example of what might constitute a genuine controversy, to his fourth and final example, it appears that his epistemic account has all but crumbled into the behavioural one it sought to replace. The trouble arises in part because Dearden allows religious worldviews to count as competing 'frameworks of understanding' which still operate within a wider 'space' or 'sphere' of public reason. Although I have a great deal of sympathy with Dearden's desire to broaden what might count as a 'rational account', and with the related concern that religious outlooks are not automatically regarded as 'non-rational', the examples he offers seem nevertheless to open the intellectual floodgates wider than he *himself* would have desired or anticipated. If I understand him correctly, it would seem that it is not simply the existence of a particular deity that can be rationally disputed between different religious viewpoints, and between the theist and atheist, but the 'correct description' of the nature and purpose of human life, including perhaps, the moral status of numerous activities. Quite aside from the issue of whether we ought to include, say, followers of the Jedi, or some other sect, among the class of religious believers whose views do not contravene reason, we are seemingly committed to accept that the condemnations from world religions of heterosexual cohabitation, homosexual sex, Sunday trading, the teaching of evolution in schools etc., are based on a 'framework' of understanding that remains *rational*. Of course, if that is so, then according to the epistemic criterion all must count as genuinely controversial issues.

Innumerable other viewpoints might also be seen to offer distinctive, yet competing ways of understanding the world, and be situated within long-standing traditions of thought and practice. As such, our old friends in the Flat Earth Society can boast a long history, along with a distinctive, if 'anarchic' idea of what is to count as certainty on empirical matters. Yet, does this mean that we are entitled, on Dearden's account, to see their views as rational? Given Dearden's own use of flat-earth ideas to attack the permissiveness of the behavioural criterion, this is something he would almost certainly deny. However, as things stand, it looks doubtful that Dearden's own account ends up being much less permissive: to assert the importance of reason in establishing which views are controversial is of little

help if almost any view could count as rational according to a different framework of understanding.

#### **(iv) Conclusions**

It is interesting to note something that Dearden says at the end of his article which appears further to undermine the supposed advantages of his epistemic criterion. Hence:

The point here is that serious and mature people can be in disagreement precisely over what is controversial, in the epistemic sense. One party regards the matter as definitely known while the other regards it as controversial (Dearden, 1981: 43).

Dearden then asks, rhetorically, “Can there be a rational solution in such cases?”, only to raise yet another question: “Does it just depend on who is finally in a position to enforce his view?” (Dearden, 1981: 43). Although Dearden is no doubt correct to note that people may indeed disagree about what would constitute an epistemically controversial issue, and also to attend to the notion of power relationships in establishing what might come to count as a rational solution to a problem, it is nevertheless striking that such ideas are raised at all. It ought to be remembered that they are raised in the concluding paragraph in an article devoted, at least in part, to making a case for the superiority of the epistemic criterion for deciding what ought to count as a controversial issue for educational purposes.

One might well ask why, if Dearden’s apparent confidence in the objective nature of public standards of rationality were well placed, would ‘serious and mature’ people disagree in this manner? Perhaps they should not so diverge if there were indeed a rational consensus on what constitutes the grounds for sound argument or credible evidence. If Dearden’s serious and mature people disagree about what counts as an epistemically controversial issue, then it is because (according to the terms of Dearden’s account at least) they disagree about whether a give position

has contravened reason. If one side views an issue as settled, then it is because they maintain that only the arguments or evidence offered for *one* position do not contravene certain rational standards. If the other side views the issue as controversial, then it is because they hold that more than one position is supported by arguments or evidence that are not contrary to reason. Because they disagree about whether a given case is rationally disputed they also disagree, in this sense at least, about what a rational dispute looks like. If this were the case, then one might say that there is little benefit in adopting Dearden's view that a dispute must adhere to certain 'shared' rational standards when people do not actually agree on what adherence to such standards would require. One might also suggest that Dearden has started to undermine the grounds he provided for the superiority of his epistemic criterion over its behavioural predecessor: one could hardly use the notion of a rational dispute as a reliable means of identifying controversial issues, if the nature of rational dispute is, in fact, *rationally disputed*.

One possible reply here is to suggest that while such broad convergences on the nature of rational standards do in fact exist, there may always be a few borderline cases where there are disagreements about whether those standards are in fact satisfied. Hence, the existence of such issues ought hardly to weaken our confidence in public standards of rationality *in toto*; nor should they prevent Dearden from identifying controversial issues on the basis of competing views which do not contravene such standards. A deeper problem, however, appears still to remain. It is centred not so much on the extent to which 'serious' people agree on what counts as a rational dispute (and thus on what counts as an epistemically controversial issue), but on Dearden's continued reliance on the notions of convergence or consensus.

We are reminded how, for Dearden, the behavioural criterion is likely to cause educational damage because it relies on social consensus (and the lack of such consensus) in order to identify controversial issues. Dearden thus sought to avoid this situation by replacing social consensus with rational consensus, whereby an issue is to count as controversial if the support offered for it does not contravene

'standards of reason' on which there is public agreement and consensus. These standards, of course, can only count *as* standards because people have agreed to treat them as such. The difference between this agreement of rational standards, and the sort of agreement presupposed by the behavioural criterion, is that the former consensus is reached by the right sort of people. Although one might want to use the term 'rational agreement' in this case, as opposed to mere 'social agreement', the distinction is somewhat disingenuous given that the reasoning that underpins it seems to be circular. What would make a case one of 'rational agreement' would, I take it, be that the people who agree with one another are those rationally disposed, 'mature and serious' people, that Dearden speaks about in his paper. And yet, what allows us to call them 'rational' people other than they have in fact agreed to the adoption of certain rational standards? It would then seem that they have agreed to such standards because they are, in fact, 'rational' people, and they are 'rational' and serious-minded people because they have agreed to the standards. Hence, we seem to be presented with the situation where there are no mature and serious-minded people who do not also agree with the standards of reason; and no standard of reason which is not also agreed on by mature and serious minded people.

What is more, when Dearden speculates whether a rational solution to disagreement between serious people about what might count as a genuinely controversial issue might "...just depend on who is finally in a position to enforce his view?" his epistemic criterion seems further to collapse into some version of the behavioural criterion (Dearden, 1981: 43). For here the crucial factor in determining whether an issue counts as epistemically controversial is simply whether or not one has the *power* to make one's view stick. So, whether or not a dispute is considered 'rationally' resolved might actually be determined by the decisions of an influential group, or groups, of people: those in the position to enforce their preferred standards of rationality as the only acceptable standards in this case; the only *genuinely rational* considerations. Hence, in all, it is possible that Dearden's confidence in the agreed nature of rational standards may reveal more about the kinds of power relationships that exist where decisions are made about what could

count as a rational dispute, than it does about any intrinsic, or epistemic nature of the disputed issues themselves.

In spite of the problems I have highlighted with Dearden's account, I still view his paper as a deep and serious attempt at mitigation: as affecting important educational damage limitation. Dearden writes with an awareness of the growing influence of various trends which seemed to threaten to sweep away much of what he viewed as valuable in education. As I will make clear in Chapter 4, we find Dearden attempting a balancing act through his work on controversial issues; one which represents, I think, an attempt to square the aims of a liberal curriculum (which includes a range of subjects in which debate and disagreement form a prominent part), with the swelling tide of positivistic thinking about education, and the increasingly politicised nature of public debate surrounding the school curriculum. In fact, I will go on to point out that many of the problems I have highlighted with what Dearden has to say about the epistemic criterion, for example his reliance on the notion of rational consensus, stem from the fact that he ends up conceding too much to positivism. While it is true that Dearden's work does reveal something of the rationalist attitude I also seek to draw out in Chapter 4, it also offers much more than mere exemplification. In an important sense, then, we might also read it as a piece of intellectual history: one that helps to throw light on the origins of more recent philosophical discussions of controversial issues, and also on the growing ubiquity of 'Emma's question' - and others that resemble it - across various subject areas in schools.

For the present, however, I will move to examine the work of Michael Hand on understanding controversial issues. This proves valuable both by way of a comparison with Dearden's work on controversial issues - which Hand seeks to both adopt and refine - and also because Hand's thought will help me to reveal some further facets of what I see as a rationalistic approach to thinking about ethics and moral education.



# Chapter 3

## Hand and Rational Controversy

### (i) Mending Dearden's Epistemic Criterion

Although Michael Hand (2007; 2008) considers the epistemic criterion as the most promising way for schools to approach controversial issues, he nevertheless seeks to adapt and improve on Dearden's version. The main thrust of Hand's modification of Dearden's formulation is centred on developing what he calls an 'expanded argument', which attempts to reveal the core aims of education that an application of the behavioural criterion "...might reasonably be thought to frustrate." This argument rests on the 'normative premise' that "the central aim of education is to equip students with a capacity for, and an inclination to, rational thought and action." Of course, if 'we', as educators, are truly serious about promoting rationality, then for Hand, we must be equally serious about "...teaching students to judge candidates for belief against the evidence or arguments in their support" (Hand, 2008: 218). In short, teachers must encourage students to accept a claim only if "...the evidence is epistemically adequate". Against these supposedly core educational commitments, Dearden's concerns about the inadequacy of the behavioural criterion, and its promotion of relativism, are also seen to become 'readily intelligible'. For, as Hand supposes, the behavioural criterion, "...requires teachers to refrain from endorsing a view on any issue about which there is controversy", even, of course, "...when only one view is epistemically justifiable" (Hand, 2008: 218).

For Hand, it would seem that this requirement "...cannot do other than convey to students the message that epistemic considerations are not decisive". If epistemic considerations are not thought decisive in determining whether an issue ought to be thought settled, then teachers once again run the risk of promoting "...the sort of relativist thinking that Dearden is anxious to avoid" (Hand, 2008: 218). One must

read slightly between the lines to discover why Hand thinks his vindication of Dearden's concerns about the educational use of the behavioural criterion actually provides a positive reason to favour the epistemic criterion. As things stand, Hand has not seemingly shown why it is superior to its behavioural competitor in meeting this 'core' aim of education, or, indeed, that there is not a different formulation that is superior to both. Here, one must suppose that, for Hand, only when controversial issues are defined and selected on the basis of rational dispute can the young truly be immersed in, and grow to use and respect, the power of rational argument. The epistemic criterion is to be favoured because it is the only method of approaching controversial issues that gives priority to the notion of epistemic adequacy; *ergo*, it is the only criterion that is fully compatible with the core educational aim of developing pupils' rationality.

Hand's modification of the epistemic criterion also includes clarification of the wording of Dearden's formulation. Dearden's own apparent lack of clarity on what it might mean for opposing viewpoints not to contravene reason arguably led to the following objection lodged against his epistemic criterion by Peter Gardner (1984). Here, Gardner takes Dearden's requirement that competing views on a controversial issue should not be contrary to reason to entail that the issue would be one on which, 'reason favours neither side'; and where contrary views must appear, 'equally sound and reasonable' (Gardner, 1984: 381). He then asks how a person genuinely confronted with two equally rational viewpoints could prefer one to the other; on what basis is such a person entitled to take a view at all? For Gardner, the only truly rational approach in this situation would be for them to suspend judgement on the matter.

This certainly appears to present the epistemic criterion with a problem. To understand an issue as controversial according to the epistemic criterion would be to understand it as an issue on which one could not rationally adopt a position. If one were to adopt a certain stance, the issue could no longer count as controversial: reason would, so to speak, have favoured one side of the dispute over the other. If the only rational response to a controversial issue is agnosticism,

one could indeed ask whether Dearden is not, somewhat ironically, left to cope with his own second objection to the behavioural criterion: that it too may give undue encouragement to some variety of relativism because it would present controversial issues as, to adapt Hand's words, ones on which reason alone "...can get no purchase" (Hand, 2008: 220). For Hand, however, Gardner's objection fails to deliver a knock-out blow to the epistemic criterion once it is appropriately adapted. It appears instead to be based on a misunderstanding of what is required for contrary viewpoints not to contravene reason.

If Dearden's version of the epistemic criterion does little to prohibit the idea that 'rational dispute' implies the epistemic equivalence of competing positions, Hand's account does seem to go some way in addressing Dearden's seeming ambivalence, and providing a way of side-stepping Gardner's attack. Nevertheless, the safe-house he erects is both temporary and unstable. To reveal how Hand's position itself becomes entangled in similar difficulties will require a clear account of his epistemic criterion, and how exactly it is supposed to meet Gardner's objection. Before I pursue this, however, I want to make clear that Gardner's objection remains a problem for Hand only insofar as he is wedded to a particular approach to the nature of reason and reasoning. And as I will also make clear in Chapter 4, when bringing together certain strands in the accounts of Dearden and Hand, this approach bears many of the hallmarks of what I call philosophical rationalism. As such, Gardner's attack should not be treated as a final, all-out assault on the efficacy of 'reason' when approaching, say, ethical controversy, but instead, as a cause for concern only insofar as a particular (rationalistic) approach to thinking about such issues is being endorsed.

### **(ii) Answering Gardner's Objection?**

There are times when Hand quotes Dearden's 'negative' formulation of the epistemic criterion with apparent approval, as the following passage makes clear:

The answer I propose to defend is that a matter should be taught as controversial when “contrary views can be held on it without those views being contrary to reason” (Hand, 2008: 217).

While elsewhere he offers what looks to be a different, more demanding account: where an issue is controversial if, and only if “...two or more conflicting views on a matter enjoy the support of corroborating evidence or credible arguments.” (Hand, 2008: 217). If we can safely assume that Hand does not wish to endorse two different versions of the epistemic criterion, it would appear that he understands a viewpoint not to *contravene reason* if, and only if, it enjoys the support of evidence or arguments that are at least *credible*.

That competing views on an epistemically controversial issue need only enjoy the support of credible reasons provides the basis for a reply to Gardner. As I have suggested, Gardner’s objection seems to be directed at something like the notion of epistemic equivalence, where competing viewpoints are understood to enjoy the support of *equally* good reasons or evidence insofar that none contravene reason. Hand insists that such equivalence is not implied by the epistemic criterion. Instead, he argues that it is quite reasonable to find the grounds for one credible position ‘less persuasive’ than another, while acknowledging that the arguments or evidence for the rejected position also remain credible. For Hand, then, I can be “...simultaneously confident in my own reading of the evidence...” on a controversial topic, and still be “...willing to recognise that other readings are both possible and rationally credible.” (Hand, 2008: 220). So, even though I might come to reject one set of credible supporting reasons as less plausible than another, the issue, *contra Gardner*, remains controversial because more than one competing viewpoint is supported by credible arguments or evidence.

It might also be said that Gardner mistakenly ties the notion of rational credibility to that of compellingness. He assumes that the epistemic criterion requires us to understand any view which does not contravene reason as rationally compelling. For Hand, a controversial issue should instead be understood as one on which there

are no rationally compelling positions. Credibility itself does not imply compellingness. Of course, as long as rational credibility were supposed to guarantee compellingness, then each competing view on an issue supported by credible reasons should be thought rationally compelling. One would, then, have simultaneously to endorse every competing view, which would be patently absurd, or otherwise suspend judgement on the issue and remain agnostic. To avoid this dilemma, Hand insists that only viewpoints supported by what are called 'epistemically adequate' reasons should be found rationally compelling. If a viewpoint on any issue were supported by epistemically adequate reasons it would count as a 'settled' rather than a controversial issue; as definitely 'known' rather than merely rationally contested. For example, it is on this basis that Hand understands the moral permissibility of homosexual sex as a non-controversial issue. For, "...the view that homosexual acts are morally legitimate" is the only option that enjoys 'rational support'; in the absence of any credible arguments against it, the reasons in favour reach beyond credibility to the level of epistemic adequacy required to settle the issue (Hand, 2007: 84).

If Hand manages to side-step Gardner's objection, he does not I think defeat it. His account still fails to deal effectively with the suspicion that epistemic controversy implies the epistemic equivalence of competing views on an issue. While he denies that any credible position could be considered rationally compelling, he still wants to claim that competing viewpoints supported by credible evidence and arguments could be more or less *persuasive*. If he did not accept this, Gardner's point that agnosticism is the only properly rational response to an epistemically controversial issue would stand unscathed. Hence, in the following passage Hand discusses the range of rational possible responses for someone confronted with a controversial issue, and on what basis they may adopt a position:

In some cases they may opt to remain agnostic, on the grounds that they consider the evidence to be inconclusive and see no pressing need to commit themselves one way or the other. But in other cases they will judge one view to be significantly more plausible than its rivals, or will commit

themselves to a view they find only marginally more plausible because of some practical imperative to take a position. None of these options is incompatible with recognizing that the matter at hand is such that other, equally rational people will judge the available evidence and arguments differently and thus come to different conclusions (Hand 2008: 220).

It is clear that plausibility admits of degrees here: credible positions can indeed appear more or less plausible. It is also clear that in some borderline cases, one could be prompted to adopt a stance on a controversial issue by so-called extra-rational considerations: a 'pressing need,' or a 'practical imperative'. The existence of such practical considerations would not, however, appear to increase the plausibility of any one position on an issue; nor would it prevent someone from simply endorsing a significantly more plausible position on the basis of credible evidence alone. This is to say that practical considerations are understood by Hand to provide little more than an additional push to abandon agnosticism, and to adopt on epistemic grounds alone, the marginally more plausible view.

The point, however, is that if one credible position is considered more plausible than another solely on the basis of its supporting evidence or arguments, the credibility of supporting reasons is thereby sufficient to guarantee the level of plausibility required for one to endorse it. Even if one assented to a view that appeared only marginally more plausible than another, it would be on the basis that its credible supporting evidence is more plausible, more persuasive, than that of its competitors. In supplying no additional grounds for accepting a viewpoint on a controversial issue beyond the credibility of a set of supporting reasons, we can now see why Hand again faces Gardner's objection that to understand a controversial issue epistemically is to understand it as one on which reason alone can get no purchase. The problem re-emerges with the decision about which of the competing viewpoints on a controversial issue one ought rationally to accept.

Hand clearly wants to understand a controversial issue as one where there is an absence of epistemically adequate, compelling reasons for belief, and also as one

where it is possible to rationally adopt any of the credible competing positions. But in what sense could one position be said to be preferable, rationally speaking? Either the supporting evidence or arguments for one credible viewpoint are stronger in a sense that any rational person ought to prefer them, or else they appear more plausible *for me*, because I am the person that I am. In which case, I could also readily admit that they might not seem so persuasive to another person with a quite different character and history. To adopt the former position would make it hard for Hand to maintain that the issue could remain controversial: if there are independent, rational considerations that call for the assent of any rational person, they ought surely to settle the issue.

To admit instead that beyond credibility there are no impersonal criteria for rational preferability, no basis that should force the hand of any rational person, could be seen as conceding Gardner's point that a controversial issue is one on which 'reason' can get little grip. It is as if the appeal to reason can lead us into the arena of the controversial only to abandon us once we get inside. This is also another way of saying that Gardner's problem of epistemic equivalence has not gone away. If Hand understands a controversial issue as one on which more than one viewpoint is supported by credible evidence or arguments, and there is no single, independent rational basis to prefer one credible position to another, then the positions do appear to be epistemically equivalent. And if two or more views on an issue are epistemically credible, and it is no less contrary to publicly agreed standards of rationality to adopt any one credible view, it seems that one must indeed remain agnostic on the issue as Gardner suspected, or else appeal to another, less impersonal basis to end the *impasse*.

If an alternative route is for Hand to adopt a more perspectival account of rational preferability, there are grounds for thinking that he would not want to follow it. Here, whether or not someone came to endorse any particular viewpoint on an epistemically controversial issue is more a matter of their personal history: a history that opens one up to certain types of consideration while restricting and closing down other possibilities. Other 'equally rationally people', to adopt Hand's phrase,

with different experiences and preoccupations would no doubt see things differently. They might of course agree that each other's views are rationally credible, in that none are flatly 'contrary to reason', but would still see the other as holding a position that they could not themselves accept. One reason Hand would be disinclined to adopt this sort of perspectivism is, I suspect, that it could be thought to encourage the 'slide into subjectivism' that concerned Gardner about adopting the epistemic criterion. It might well give the impression that once we enter the realm of the epistemically controversial, we must indeed, "...trust to subjective preference and cannot trust to reason" (Gardner, 1984: 381).

It is certainly difficult to see how it would fit with what Hand has to say about the aims of education. Here, the "...core educational aim is to equip students with a capacity for, and an inclination to, rational thought and action"; where students should be encouraged to accept a claim, "...if, and only if, the evidence is epistemically adequate." (Hand, 2008: 214; 218). Of course, given Hand's terminology, issues on which there is an epistemically adequate claim count as 'settled' rather than controversial. The point, nevertheless, is that the grounds for endorsing such claims seem to lie beyond the 'personal', beyond what may merely strike *me* as compelling, and in the epistemic adequacy of the reasons themselves. The force of the reasons demand our assent *as rational thinkers*. And if there is no perspectival account of compellingness, it would be strange for Hand to introduce a perspectival account of persuasiveness in his account of controversial issues. There is certainly little indication that when a 'rational person' encounters a controversial issue, and aims to make their decision rationally, according to "the best available evidence and arguments", they should for Hand allow perspectival concerns to interfere unduly with their assessment of the reasons (Hand, 2008: 220). Yet, without such an account, it is hard to see how any move from credibility to persuasiveness could be made on the basis of reason alone, at least as Hand seems to understand it. In short, on Hand's account it seems that the rational person is forced again into the clutches of agnosticism.

### **(iii) The Educational Implications of the Epistemic Criterion**



In discussing the implications of Gardner's concern about how one could rationally endorse any view on a controversial topic, what Hand does is to shift the focus of the debate back to education. Here, Gardner's worries about the epistemic criterion are seen to result, at least in part, from his failure to acknowledge the 'important distinction' between "...believing that one knows the answer to an epistemically controversial question and believing that one has the right to impart that answer to students." Hence, the basis I have for endorsing a particular view on a controversial issue should not entitle me, as an educator, "to ensure that my students come to the same conclusion". Whether or not my preferences derive from something peculiar to my nature and history, the important educational point is that as a teacher I ought merely to encourage my students to come to their own decisions on the basis of 'the best available evidence and arguments'. For Hand, a teacher's "...awareness of the fact that different answers to a question can reasonably be inferred from the same evidence..." ought rightly to 'trump' their confidence in the correctness of their own preferred solution. The teacher's job when teaching about a controversial issue is to present as neutrally as possible the arguments and evidence given in support of the range of epistemically credible views (Hand, 2008: 220).

It is not, however, as if the question of what entitles someone to prefer a certain viewpoint on a controversial topic could so easily be side-lined; superseded by the question of how such topics should be taught in schools. This is particularly relevant given what Hand himself has to say about the centrality of rational development as an educational aim. For what message could the teacher now give about the role of reason in deciding which viewpoint to prefer on an epistemically controversial topic? Consider, for example, the case of abortion: an 'issue' that would I assume count as controversial according to Hand's epistemic criterion. On Hand's account, although there may be no compelling reasons to adopt, say, a 'pro-choice' over a 'pro-life' stance, we could nevertheless acknowledge that both types of position were supported by credible reasons. This would not for Hand prevent us from reaching a rational position on the 'issue': it would not stop us from finding one

viewpoint either marginally, or even significantly, more plausible. Yet, even if one found the arguments in favour of the pro-choice stance significantly more plausible, one must nevertheless acknowledge that it is *no less rational* for someone else to adopt a 'pro-life' position.

The risk is that according to this position, the message a teacher would deliver to students is that, rationally speaking, it makes not a jot of difference which position they choose, if in fact they choose at all. Not only could this send the message that epistemic considerations are not decisive in allowing students to make up their minds about an issue like abortion, it runs the risk of promoting the idea (one that Hand wants to counter) that we ought to abandon reason altogether in such cases. For what, one might ask, is the point of thinking long and hard about such issues when one may as well go along with, say, the pro-choice views of one's peers, or trust instead to one's pro-life gut instinct? (C.f. Hand, 2008: 218). This again appears tantamount to admitting that having helped the teacher identify certain epistemically controversial issues with students, reason (certainly as Hand seems to understand it) must now raise both hands in resignation, and admit, 'I've gone as far as I can. Now it's over to you...'

#### **(iv) Conclusions**

To make things worse, Hand's epistemic criterion also helps to mask at least one reason why certain 'issues' are commonly thought to be controversial: they involve problems that continue to *matter* to people, often quite profoundly. This links to Gardner's concern that "...a purely epistemic account will not guarantee the satisfaction of the social condition of an issue being regarded as important" (Gardner, 1984: 381). So, while Dearden is rightly concerned that not teaching controversial issues would 'misrepresent' the true nature of curriculum subjects, Gardner is also right to say that we also, "...misrepresent the frontiers of subjects and the nature of heated disputes..." if we simply present them as areas "...where disputants must acknowledge..." that reason favours neither side (Gardner, 1984:383). The misrepresentation, however, goes deeper still; beyond the question

of how best to understand and represent various subjects on a school syllabus, and so to knotty and seemingly intractable ethical problems, and why they continue to be socially disputed.

If the epistemic criterion might be said to gloss over the deep cracks of various ethical disputes with the thinnest coat of reason, the behavioural criterion itself attends only to the range of surface fissures. Hence, what appears to make an 'issue' like abortion controversial is not simply that disagreement over the issue is widespread, as Charles Bailey would seem to suggest. An ethical dispute is not the same as a squabble, however many people may be involved in the latter. The ethics of abortion are disputed, intractably so, in part because the 'issue' continues to touch at various points on what matters most to people; the level of fundamental values, or to quote from a poem by Philip Larkin, on "...what we think truest, or most want to do."<sup>5</sup> The disagreements generated are often characterised by raised temperatures and bitter exchange; where there is precious little agreement about what criteria should be appealed to in discussing and 'resolving' the issue (c.f. Dearden, 1981: 86-7). Indeed, without reference to the quality or depth of the disagreements generated by such problems, it seems that Hand fails fully to appreciate the need to understand 'controversial issues' for the purpose of teaching as deeply *sensitive issues*: those which might demand not just that a 'non-directive' teacher examine the strength of competing sets of evidence and arguments with pupils, but that she proceeds in her teaching with great delicacy and care.

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<sup>5</sup> From Larkin, P (1988) 'Dockery and Son' in *Collected Poems*, London: Faber.

# Chapter 4

## Controversial Issues and ‘Philosophical Rationalism’

### (i) Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to bring together various strands in the work of Dearden and Hand on understanding and teaching controversial issues, and show how they reveal an approach to ethics and moral education which can be described as rationalistic. I do not aim in this chapter to provide arguments against the rationalistic features in their respective accounts, but merely to identify them as present in these accounts. This will, however, form part of a larger concern to begin to widen the discussion from understanding and teaching controversial issues in schools, to how ethical problems and concerns are to be approached and addressed educationally. What I will begin to reveal, then, is what a rationalistic approach to such questions looks like, and why it might also take this sort of form. This will enable me, in Chapter 5, to go on to identify the deeper anxieties that seem both to inspire and underpin the various features of the rationalistic approach to ethics and moral education revealed in this chapter.

### (ii) ‘Rationalism’ and Objective Standards

Let us begin our discussion of philosophical rationalism by reminding ourselves how Dearden makes clear that in speaking of the ‘standards of reason’, he does not refer to something ‘timeless or unhistorical,’ but to the body of “...public knowledge, criteria of truth, critical standards...that have so far been developed” (Dearden, 1981: 38). It seems clear enough that Dearden seems to have in mind here something akin to the publicly attested forms of human endeavour epitomised by the physical sciences: while new scientific discoveries are made, and old theories revoked, the informing standards that underpin each of these discoveries or

theories are supposed to be broadly constant. Nevertheless, it is also clear from Dearden's paper on controversial issues, that other 'subject' areas beyond the physical sciences are marked by a similar constancy of rational standards. It is this, perhaps, that allows Dearden to suggest that it is 'uncontroversial' that Turner was a 'better' painter than himself, and that theological disagreements about the true description of the world, can be viewed in the light of something akin to R.S. Peter's talk of 'traditions of inquiry', each underpinned by differing 'frameworks' of rationality. What makes each of these areas of human knowledge and enquiry worthy of the epithet of 'rational' is, for Dearden, that one can seemingly detect in each 'domain' a certain stability of values: a general *modus operandi*; a constancy of shared standards.

This is not to say that reason for Dearden is wholly domain specific, or that there were not any rational standards shared between the diverse domains of human knowledge. One would again do well to acknowledge his sympathy with something akin to Peters' view of the basic educational endeavour, whereby one's life becomes transformed through internalising the very principles "...which give structure and point to theoretical enquiries". The educated person, then, is to be filled with a sense of wonder before the facts, a sense of humility in the face of human endeavours in the arts and sciences, a broad concern for 'consistency and clarity' and a generalised 'hatred' for "...irrelevance and other forms of arbitrariness" (Peters 1972: 226). It is these basic standards that underpin both the arts and the sciences, and unite the various frameworks of reason offered in each and every legitimate domain of enquiry. It is adherence to these basic standards that in part makes any field of human endeavour worthy of inclusion as a 'subject' in the school curriculum. One is reminded, perhaps, of a passage from Louis MacNeice's *Autumn Journal*, and the idea that the ancient Greeks provided, at least for the humanist in "...his room with Jacobean panels", various ways of training the modern mind through a university syllabus based on "...models of logic and lucidity, dignity sanity..." (MacNeice, 1990: 58). For Dearden too, while each area of human endeavor and enquiry can be clearly separated into different 'subjects' with varying aims and methods, and while the clarity revealed in, say, a history essay differs

from that expressed in a mathematical equation, it is crucial that the value of clarity is present in both insofar as they are domains of human knowledge (and know-how) at all.

The key question in this respect concerns why Dearden placed so much weight on the question of how best to understand controversial issues, rather than on simply how best to teach students about such issues. Given that it is at least plausible that schools could adopt the same clear and balanced approaches to teaching regardless of how they chose to select an issue as controversial, the reasons for Dearden's insistence that they ought to adopt an alternative, epistemic criterion, do indeed require exploration and clarification. Schools could, for example, still have encouraged students to examine the respective force of reasons given by competing positions on controversial issues, even if such issues were identified behaviourally. One might well argue, then, that the epistemic criterion is surplus to requirements: even if certain views on various controversial issues (identified behaviourally) were clearly unjustifiable, then it would presumably not take too long for students to discover this for themselves, if they were encouraged to identify and critically weigh-up the reasons proponents commonly give for holding such views.

There are, I think, at least two strands to a satisfactory answer as to why Dearden sought to encourage the use of an epistemic criterion. The first requires us to attend to the perceived aims of education, and to what aim or aims the use of the behavioural criterion would, for Dearden, be supposed to contravene. The second, involves further examination of the social, political and intellectual climate of the 1970's and 80's, insofar as public debate about the nature and purposes of education had a bearing on Dearden's views about teaching controversial issues. Both strands are related; both also coincide insofar as they help to reveal something of the influence of philosophical rationalism in shaping the background concerns and preoccupations which informed Dearden's discussion of teaching controversial issues.

### (iii) Rational Development and Educational Aims

One way to better understand the first of the two strands of influence on Dearden's account of controversial issues, is to consider the supposed gaps in that account identified by Michael Hand (Hand, 2007; 2008). For Hand, then, Dearden not only fails adequately to explain, "...how or why application of the behavioural criterion is liable to result in epidemic relativism.", he also neglects to supply an account of the educational aims, "...that the encouragement of relativism might reasonably be thought to frustrate" (Hand, 2008:218). As we have seen in Hand's own reworking of the epistemic criterion, he proceeds to make explicit what Dearden is accused of omitting. To be fair to Dearden, however, he seems far clearer about why 'relativism' might actually be encouraged by the behavioural criterion than Hand appears to suppose. Hence, he argues:

If all that is needed is for a number of people to assert a counter-opinion for the matter to become controversial, regardless of that counter-assertion's ungroundedness, inconsistency, invalidity or mere expressiveness of a vested interest, then even the shape of the earth becomes at once controversial (Dearden, 1981: 86).

Recalling Charles Bailey's use of the phrase, Dearden proceeds to point out that it is 'a matter of social fact' that some still believe the earth to be flat. Yet, he goes on to ask, somewhat dismissively, "...what have such social facts to do with the shape of the earth?". It would not only be foolish to treat this issue as controversial simply because of the wilful persistence of some individuals, it could also be dangerous: encouraging the thought that, "...what is true should be collapsed into what some social group regards as true" (Dearden, 1981: 86). The idea that we are left with no other standard *beyond* social consensus by which to judge the settledness of an issue is at least reminiscent of some form of relativism. For to recall and adapt Protagoras's injunction, 'Man', or at least the society of 'men', becomes the sole measure of all things controversial. Moreover, if the behavioural criterion allows the shape of the earth to count as controversial simply because it is disputed, then

there is little to prevent *any* issue counting as controversial if some prominent groups in society disagree on how to resolve it. So, for Dearden, it seems clear that without the provision of some other criterion beyond the mere social fact of disagreement, we may well end up in our schools with a situation where 'anything goes': where the quality of the evidence or arguments presented for a viewpoint are not considered conclusive in such matters, if they are even considered at all.

Although none of this does much to advance his objections against the behavioural criterion, the nature of the supposed educational damage caused by use of the behavioural criterion is at least a little more clear. And while it is fair to say that unlike Hand, Dearden never spells-out that, "The central aim of education" is to "equip students with a capacity for rational thought and action", the substance of his concerns about the potential damage caused by epidemic relativism point us very much in that direction (Hand, 2008: 218). In this respect, Dearden's fear that adopting the behavioural criterion might allow 'ungrounded', 'inconsistent' and, 'invalid' views to play a central role in forming our understanding of controversy, is telling. Relativism, as Dearden seems to have understood it, would pose a clear threat to public standards of rationality: those "...criteria of truth, critical standards, and verification procedures..." that underpin his development of an alternative, epistemic criterion of what is to count as controversial (Dearden, 1981: 38). Moreover, his concerns about the 'endemic relativism' encouraged by the behavioural criterion will not make much sense unless we view this perceived danger as contravening what else he held to be educationally valuable.

For Dearden, as for Hand, it seems that it is nothing short of pupils' rational development that will be 'frustrated' if we allow them to think that reaching a judgement on a complex issue involves little more than personal preference, or an otherwise whimsical selection from a range of different standpoints. This is a clearly undesirable outcome, particularly given Dearden's wider sympathy with the idea that to remain insufficiently grounded in rational 'forms of knowledge' is to fail to become a fully developed human being (Dearden, 1972; Peters, 1972). Indeed, it is equally apparent from what Dearden says about the educational benefits of



teaching controversial issues that the development of 'rational faculties' is held in high regard. Hence, given the correct exposure to such issues, pupils will likely become 'better informed' and 'more discriminating' (Dearden, 1981: 41). And yet, we would also do well to remember that for Dearden, the teaching of controversial issues could be truly beneficial only if our understanding of controversial falls firmly under the jurisdiction of reason. If not, pupils could well develop a kind of *misology*: a distrust or disregard for the roles of reason and evidence in forming and settling disputes, along, perhaps, with the attendant belief that the existence of widespread and persistent dispute means that there is no real truth to be had.

#### **(iv) Controversy and the need for Objective Standards**

...it often happens that a philosophical position is a critical elaboration of an attitude or outlook which is abundantly present in a less examined way at the level of common sense, or for that matter in non-philosophical educational theorizing. For example, much that is of a positivist spirit is to be found in behaviourism and its offspring, such as the behavioural objectives movement and certain calls for more objective styles of assessment, and more generally in strong attachment to the observable and quantifiable as our sole guiding light (Dearden, 1981: 37).

If, as Dearden suggests at the beginning of his paper, the grip of Logical Positivism over analytic philosophy was well and truly loosened by the 1980's, the ways in which he supposed the 'spirit of positivism' still to haunt the educational landscape are nevertheless worthy of discussion here. For Dearden, the positivistic insistence on procedural clarity and empirical verifiability continued to echo with the so-called 'behavioural objectives movement', and with the supposed requirement for teachers to formulate clear and specific lesson *objectives*, and beget wholly measurable learning *outcomes*. In such a climate, there existed for Dearden a very real risk that, "...moral or social education, political education, religious education and literature and the arts" could simply disappear from the school curriculum: excluded on the basis of their epistemological vagueness, as being concerned with

mere feelings and self-expression rather than with 'hard' knowledge<sup>6</sup>. How he supposed the notion of the controversial to sit with this quasi-positivistic insistence on the observable and quantifiable is also instructive. For if a controversial issue is to be understood as that which is simply contested or contestable, then such issues too risk simply being excluded from a knowledge or fact centred school curriculum. Indeed, it is partly in the context of this fear of depredation and disappearance that one can view Dearden's discussion, and indeed, rethinking, of the place of controversial issues in the school curriculum.

Dearden's concern with how best to define controversial issues for educational purposes, and his subsequent proposal of an epistemic criterion by which one ought to distinguish the *controversial* from the *settled*, ought to be seen in the light of his belief that teaching controversial issues, "...is not simply an epistemological disaster area into which the responsible curriculum constructor should not care to go" (Dearden, 1981: 37). It is possible, at least partly, to view Dearden's emphasis on the epistemological rather than the merely behavioural in the light of a pressure to appease certain positivistic tendencies of his time, and the threat they presented to the ideal of the liberal curriculum. In this light, one can better understand Dearden's desire for schools to identify controversial issues not as widespread and sentiment-driven disputes, but as debates between opposing parties who have good reasons for holding their positions<sup>7</sup>. On this basis schools can thus avoid

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<sup>6</sup> Time, one might say, has proved Dearden wrong in certain matters of detail. He may nevertheless be credited with being most perceptive in identifying the growth of an educational trend which has profoundly changed the face of teaching in schools in recent years. On the matters of detail, the growth of interest in teaching controversial issues in schools has, contra Dearden's fears, increased in spite of the ascendancy of what he described as that offspring of positivism: the behavioural objectives 'movement'. This ascendancy has not involved replacement so much as assimilation. Curriculum subjects have survived insofar as they adhered to the 'evidence-based' demands of the movement. We have not, for example, seen the removal of arts and humanities subjects from the curriculum, but instead have witnessed their gradual compartmentalisation into lists of key elements, key skills, and competences. Their survival, one might say, was guaranteed only insofar as the content of such subjects, and the approaches to teaching them, could be rendered into the quantifiable, the measurable, and the replicable. There may, of course, be some room left for debate in, say, English Language as to whether there are in fact five, six or seven different 'types' or 'categories' of writing; whether a given text may be both 'persuasive' and 'informative', or must be exclusively one or the other.

<sup>7</sup> Or more accurately (according to the letter but not, perhaps, the spirit of Dearden's wording of the epistemic criterion) this ought perhaps to read: understood as debates between opposing parties whose respective positions were *not contrary to reason*. This matters only insofar as Dearden's

teaching about disputes, however widespread and heated, which are not also marked by the existence of two or more sets of rationally 'proper' positions.

Equally importantly, however, they would not have to avoid teaching controversial issues on the basis that these disputes were, as the positivistically inclined might suspect, driven merely by mere 'subjective' preferences. Dearden's recourse to reason, and to epistemology, constitutes an appeal to the existence of what is known and knowable. It implies *shared* methods, *shared* standards, *shared* knowledge: something that ought to satisfy positivistic demands that properly educational subject matter ought to be clearly articulable, examinable, testable and measurable. Dearden's idea that various value judgements may be treated as 'positions' on epistemically controversial 'issues', not only brings such judgements under the aegis of 'objective' standards of reason, it also provides a basis for suggesting that not all judgements of value are indeed controversial. We can also discover that at least some such judgements cannot be rationally disputed, but must instead count as settled; as definitely *known*. This, I think, helps to explain Dearden's use of the "...moral value-judgement that it is not only wrong but viciously so when someone amuses himself by stubbing out burning cigarettes on a baby entrusted to his care..."(Dearden, 1981: 40). We are supposed then to know the action described here is simply and absolutely wrong: there can, for Dearden, be no rational debate about this, despite the fact that it has to do with moral values.

To better understand what else might have helped inform Dearden's epistemic approach to teaching controversial issues, it is helpful to hold in mind the existence of certain social and political changes Dearden does not refer to explicitly in his paper. Research carried out by Robert Stradling (1984), however, helpfully points out how the teaching of certain topics had become increasingly 'politically sensitive' by the beginning of the 1980's, hence:

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wording does not strictly require both sides to have positions which are supported by 'good reasons'.

If there ever was any measure of public consensus about whether or not such issues should be taught or how they should be taught then there are clear signs that this consensus is breaking down in the 1980s (Stradling, 1984: 122).

Stradling goes on to explain how this was due, in part, “...to growing polarisation between the political parties, particularly on economic and social issues and on defence issues”, which intensified during the 1970’s; and was coupled with increased “...public debate about what schools should be doing and which values they should be promoting”. One concrete example of this can be seen in the example of teaching about nuclear disarmament. Here, Stradling emphasises how teachers who had been committed members of CND since the early 1960s, and had “...been teaching about nuclear disarmament for nearly 20 years”, found themselves subject to increasing suspicion and hostility. Stradling explains that recent “...public debate about the siting of Cruise and Pershing missiles” had a knock-on effect for schools, whereby many people increasingly came to question the inclusion of this topic in schools, along with the ways in which it was frequently taught (c.f. Stradling, 1984: 121-2).

What we begin to get a sense of here is the growth of public anxiety about *politically motivated* teaching, along with schools and teachers coming under increasing public scrutiny. If we link a growing concern with the political committedness of the curriculum with the presence of positivism in what Dearden terms, ‘common sense’, and ‘non-philosophical educational theorizing’, then the threat to the very idea of teaching controversial issues in schools is clearly exacerbated. One may then be permitted to view Dearden’s epistemic approach as inspired by the need to effect a defence of the teaching of controversial issues: a defence that needed to appease certain positivistic tendencies in educational thought, and allow schools to avoid charges of political bias and student indoctrination.

Against this background, Dearden’s epistemic criterion certainly looks promising. The charge of political bias might, indeed, be averted if educators were to make

curriculum choices based solely on the demands of reason. If concerns over nuclear disarmament were taught at all in schools, they could be taught as epistemically controversial 'issues'<sup>8</sup>: as *rationaly divisive* issues where competing sets of reasons could be identified and critically examined with students. To adopt Dearden's epistemic criterion is, one might say, to allow reason to decide which issues are to count as controversial, rather than leaving the decision to the whims of individual policy makers, schools or teachers. While, of course, some person or other must in fact make the decision about which subjects to include, their decision could be demonstrably guided by criteria that we would all endorse insofar as we were thinking in accordance with reason, and not mere subjective biases.

#### **(v) Controversy, Epistemology and Compelling Arguments**

Dearden's 'recourse to reason' allowed for controversial issues to be both identified and approached according to objective, publicly attestable standards. This, I have argued, can be seen at least in part as a response to the positivistic trends he saw infecting the educational discourse of his day. Contrary, then, to the extremes of logical positivism, aesthetic or ethical claims should not for Dearden simply be dismissed as meaningless, as merely 'subjective', on the basis that they could not be verified according to the standards of the empirical sciences. We might well say that although rational standards were, for Dearden, as important to human enquiry as they were to the logical positivists, the positivists had yet failed to recognise how they are more broadly manifested. Although we have also seen, in Chapter 2, how Dearden's permissive notion of rationality seems to present various problems for his epistemic criterion (i.e. that it seems to allow too much to count as a rational dispute), we can at least understand why he might have wanted 'rationality' to constitute an appropriately 'broad church': it would at least allow for a range of arts and science subjects to count as rational, and thus publically attestable, pursuits, which could thereby continue to be included in the school curriculum.

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<sup>8</sup> Assuming, of course, that opposing views on the 'issue' could be discovered which did not contravene the standards of reason.

With Michael Hand, however, the requirement that reason provide objective standards arguably takes on an increasingly abstract and *impersonal* dimension. If Hand shares with Dearden a belief in the importance of rational development as an educational aim, and the need to identify controversial issues as those which are rationally disputed, the sorts of disputes that would count as rational appear to be of a far narrower class than Dearden would have desired. Gone, then, is the talk of various areas of human enquiry being underpinned by different 'frameworks of rationality', and in its place is posited something far more general: that an idea, whatever its source, constitutes a 'claim' or 'position' which is supported by various 'arguments'; arguments that are themselves wholly amenable to a critical, recognisably philosophical, style of assessment.

Hand's desire that schools identify controversial issues correctly is, also, inextricably tied to the perceived need for educators to identify non-controversial, or settled, issues, and to teach them directly to students. There appears to be a particular concern in Hand for educators to provide substantive moral guidance to their pupils, and for the pupils to emerge from schools as, what we may well term, 'ethically confident' individuals. Their confidence is to be promoted through, (a) the idea that some moral issues can be settled by reasoning and that these moral truths can be transmitted to children; and, as we have seen in the previous chapter, (b) the idea that *any* moral issue, even those which are more stubbornly intractable and 'controversial', can in a sense be 'tamed', made intelligible, by critical philosophical reasoning. Furthermore, what we might describe as ethical confidence (a confidence which is tied to one's ability to select rationally defensible ethical positions) is to be progressively bolstered by the discovery of more epistemologically uncontroversial or settled moral issues. Roughly speaking, then, the more moral issues one can determine as settled, the more ethically *confident*, in this sense at least, one becomes. As far as education is concerned, the more issues are determined as settled, the more the epistemic solutions to ethical issues

can be taught to students, and the stronger the guidance one can give them about their moral roles and responsibilities<sup>9</sup>.

For Hand, to come to possess (and to promote) the right sort of ethical assurance one must, in a sense, have confidence in *philosophy*: certainly in the sort of reasoning which aims, via the critical examination of various arguments, at establishing the epistemological foundations for certain positions on ethical issues. If one is, so to speak, 'confident' without first submitting one's ethical beliefs to the acid test of critical reflection, then it would seem that one's confidence is, at the very least, premature, if not misplaced. One has confidence in one's 'ethics' but such confidence is not as yet properly credible or desirable. Of course, to say that one has not submitted one's belief to the right sorts of 'critical reflection' does not mean that one has not previously thought long and hard about the 'issue' in question. But this would not in itself be enough on Hand's view: one has to think in the right way; have the right sort of critical thoughtfulness. What is also implied in such an approach is that one should not have more than a tentative 'position' on any matter of ethics until one has thought in the correct manner: critically, and with a sort of ideal detachment. The 'ideal', one might well say, is that the educated person has no ethical beliefs that are not first chosen, or at least parsed, 'rationally'<sup>10</sup>. As Hand himself puts it:

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<sup>9</sup> Where issues cannot be settled through the discovery of epistemically adequate grounds, i.e. controversial issues, it is hoped that students will at least come to see critical reasoning as the most fruitful approach, in spite of the fact that their own 'rational' position on such issues will never be uniquely defensible.

<sup>10</sup> There is at least something recognisably Kantian in such an approach. For Kant, one might say that reason is our way of acting *autonomously*; although other factors might act upon us – external and internal – we have a capacity to act freely precisely because we can formulate and follow certain 'rules' or maxims that *any* rational being can *rationally* approve. Hence, fully moral principles are those that can be universalised, and understood as binding upon any rational agent: indeed, if we could not universalise them, then they would not be rational; and, therefore, they could hardly count as moral either. Being autonomous does not imply that we must reject externally imposed rules: rules that are laid-down externally can be subjected to rational scrutiny, universalised and found acceptable to a rationally autonomous being. Good reasons, then, may be found for accepting at least some rules not originating from the self. The locus of control in the Kantian project does shift from obedience to an external authority for its *own sake*, to obedience only once we test a rule for rational coherence, and find it morally binding in that respect.

To give a child a moral education is precisely *not* to bully or charm her into a non-rational acceptance of moral beliefs. It is to enable her to think rationally about moral questions and to commend to her such values, virtues and principles as enjoy the support of rationally compelling arguments. (Hand, 2007: 6).

While Hand does not say here that all moral education reduces into the directive teaching of settled moral questions (directing students to the correct answers on various issues), it is clear that it must involve getting students to think rationally about moral beliefs, which means, at least in part, commending to them the values, virtues and principles which enjoy the support of rationally compelling arguments. When a teacher cannot commend a given moral belief it will be because there are no rationally compelling arguments, which for Hand, is the case precisely when an issue is epistemically controversial rather than settled. In such cases, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the proper response is to encourage a pupil to think rationally about the issue, which means weighing-up the arguments offered by competing sides of the debate, and reaching a defensible position of one's own. It seems clear that on this picture the moral thinker is, in an important sense, the critical assessor of arguments; while whatever else the moral agent is, she will nevertheless be one who acts or desists from acting, on the basis of reasons that she has first submitted to rational scrutiny.

It follows that, to decide whether a particular issue, e.g. the morality of homosexual sex, should be taught as a controversial issue, one must, for Hand, examine the strength of the arguments for and against the moral legitimacy of 'homosexual acts'. This he does in his 2007 paper, 'Should we teach homosexuality as a controversial issue?' In support of the moral legitimacy of 'homosexual acts', Hand provides an argument which I cite at length below:

An argument in support of the moral legitimacy of homosexual acts is as follows. Reproduction is only one of a number of goods that can be served by engaging in sexual acts. Other such goods include 'pleasure, romantic



feelings, companionship, mutual support, sexual outlet, ecstasy, intimacy, and interpersonal communication' (Vacek, 1980: 133). These latter goods (or at least some of them) constitute morally sound reasons for engaging in sexual acts even when the possibility of reproduction is naturally or artificially precluded. Since reproduction is the only sexual good that is unavailable to homosexuals, it follows that homosexual acts are morally legitimate. This is not to deny that homosexuals sometimes have sex for bad reasons, just as heterosexuals sometimes have sex for bad reasons. It is simply to observe that all but one of the good reasons for engaging in sexual acts are available to homosexuals as well as heterosexuals. (Hand, 2007: 7).

He continues by stating that "Whether or not one regards this argument as decisive, it has undeniable rational force"; which, he supposes, is equivalent to demonstrating that "... those who regard homosexual acts as morally legitimate do not hold a view that is contrary to reason". I am not at this juncture interested in assessing this argument, merely in understanding what offering it suggests to us about Hand's approach to reasoning about ethical questions.

Let us look, firstly, at what the human beings in Hand's argument in support of the 'legitimacy' of homosexual sex are like. Or rather, at how their lives are treated by Hand. Here we find that people 'engage' in sexual 'acts' for good and bad 'reasons'; that such acts can be 'morally legitimate'; that they can serve various 'sexual goods' which themselves 'constitute' morally 'sound reasons' to engage in an 'act'. Human lives are approached here largely in the abstract; insofar as we recognise those engaging in various acts as individual and individuated human beings at all, they appear to us as self-consciously deliberative, even calculative. They act, in this case sexually, on the basis of reasons that can be good or bad. Their actions, and their lives as such, are motivated by such reasons. This links to another important feature of Hand's approach here. Hand's provision of the argument in favour of the moral legitimacy of homosexual acts helps to reveal that reasons, in the shape of philosophical arguments, are supposed to have a certain force: they *ought* to move one to accept or reject a moral claim depending, of course, on something like the

*compellingness* of the arguments provided. To be compelled by the weight of reason means that one is moved to assent by the strength of the arguments alone. A proper assessment of arguments requires maximal disengagement from one's own commitments or personal history, except of course where that such things might themselves provide good general reasons to move any rational agent to assent to a particular belief. One is compelled to accept a belief not so much as an individual, or individualised, human being, but impersonally, insofar as one attends simply to the strength of the reasons themselves.

What one might say, of course, is that in order for one to adopt so-called moral beliefs in this manner, one must see, and be open to, the value of such reasoning. One must be able to accept argument as a force in one's own life. A question such as: 'Why ought I to assent to a moral belief if it is supported by compelling arguments?' would no doubt be treated as a complete non-starter: the questioner would likely be admonished for asking for a compelling reason to accept beliefs on the basis of compelling reasons. Although the question above could be answered in the manner I have just described, I do not think that this necessarily does justice to the sorts of scepticism that might have driven the questioner. I will deal with this issue further in the next chapter, where I deal in more depth with the 'threat' of relativism. Nevertheless, before continuing with the task of making explicit what Hand's particular arguments about the morality of homosexuality reveal about his approach to reasoning about ethical questions, I do want to make the following observation. The quick dismissal of the question about why one ought to assent to moral beliefs which are supposed to enjoy the support of compelling arguments, actually helps to reveal what can be viewed as the circularity inherent in the sort of approach Hand appears to recommend.

Here it appears that one will assent to a given moral belief on the basis of argument alone if one is being rational, while one is only being rational insofar as one's moral assent is based on the assessment of arguments alone. Furthermore, it would seem that if someone were to ask why they ought to do something, they would be supposed to be asking for compelling arguments in favour of doing that thing,

which they could ask for only insofar as they are already a rational agent and thus moved by the power of reason. I do not intend any of this to function as a criticism in the traditional sense that it must thereby ‘weaken the argument’, and provide a ‘reason’ for us to reject it. In defending rationality *as it is understood here*, what else, one might say, is the defender supposed to do other than simply to reassert its absolute indispensability? To re-position it, so to speak, at the centre of the moral universe. To ask why one ought to accept moral beliefs only on the basis of reasons must seemingly be to ask what reason or reasons one has for believing in the power of reasoning. It seems that the questioner has thus presupposed the very thing she is questioning. If her question were, in fact, asking something of this sort: ‘Why is the right ethical response given only by the correct assessment of reasons or arguments?’, one again hits again upon the idea that rational correctness and ethical rightness are supposed coincide: that the correct assessment of reasons simply leads to the correct ethical beliefs; that reasoning in this sense *gives us* the ethical. On the flip side, to refuse to assent to a moral belief which enjoys the support of rationally compelling arguments would, on this position, be to choose the wrong ethical belief. It is, in this sense at least, also to go wrong ethically: it constitutes an ethical failure.

Of course, our questioner could simply have meant something similar to the following: ‘How would it benefit me to assent to moral beliefs on the basis of good reasons?’, to which the reply must, it would seem, be that it would be of benefit insofar as you wish to be right in your thinking, which in this case means thinking correctly ethically, as well as simply coming to the ‘correct answer’. If she replies that she is not interested in being right in *that* sense, only in advancing certain aspects of her life (e.g. financially), then she might well be seen to be asking us to give her extra-rational considerations to adhere to a moral belief that she should, one might think, have adopted on the basis of good reasons alone. She may thereby show herself to be amenable to reasoning but only insofar as it could be supposed to benefit her in certain other ways. Would one, in such a case, also want to say that she was being *irrational* if she rejected a moral belief that we supposed to enjoy the support of compelling arguments, in favour of a belief that would simply

benefit her, say, financially? One might want to say that her starting point was in some sense wrong. But what would it mean for it to be wrong? We may want to say that she makes a mistake ethically, but given that she merely wishes to advance herself financially, on what basis could we also say that she selects a belief in a way that is, to use Dearden's phrase, *contrary to reason*? If she believes in a way that is consistent with her other stated beliefs and aims then it might indeed appear rational for her to believe that this course of action constitutes the right (i.e. the most suitable; the most prudent) course of action. If, of course, we say that she is wrong ethically, but not rationally, we seem then to be suggesting that rational does not always give us the ethical; that the two do not always coincide in the way that Hand, for example, seems to suppose.

Of course, for Hand, the point is that if there were rationally compelling arguments in favour of a particular moral view which she chose to ignore, in favour of a position that would merely bring her various social or financial benefits (perhaps espousing it would bring her social acceptance, popularity, fame etc.), then she would, of course, be acting irrationally as well as unethically. The broader question, however, is what rational compelling arguments for an ethical position are supposed, in general, to look like. One point that Hand's account seems to overlook, or at least avoid, is the following: that compelling reasons offered in support of an ethical belief must already be *ethically* compelling reasons. They will already be ethical considerations which one is amenable to treating as being the sorts of reasons that could count as compelling. Ethical considerations do not simply seem to be revealed or grounded by our reasoning. The ethical seems, rather, to be tied-up with reasoning about ethics: connecting with, and even inspiring, what counts as compelling reasoning in certain cases. It is not as if something like a 'process of reasoning', uninfected by the ethical, could somehow be used to ground or justify the ethical or, *ex nihilo*, lead to the conclusion that this or that consideration has ethical weight or value. To suppose that reason and ethics coincide in the way that Hand suggests cannot be shown independently by another 'independent' standard of reason, it has rather to be assumed; taken for granted. I

will revisit this point in the later chapters when dealing with attacks made by those who are equally suspicious of the rationalistic approach to ethics.

Following on from this discussion, let us now look at the following passage where Hand deals with the existence of scriptural condemnations of homosexuality. He is clear that although the condemnation of homosexual acts in these biblical passages is 'fairly unambiguous':

...the existence of such passages is only pertinent to the moral assessment of homosexual acts if one has good reason to accept the major premise that all biblical injunctions are morally sound. And this premise is rationally indefensible (Hand, 2007: 12).

One way to show this is for Hand to draw attention to biblical injunctions that are 'self-evidently *not* morally sound'. We are then presented, Hand thinks, with a *reductio ad absurdum* of condemnations of homosexual sex based on scriptural authority. To this end, he goes on to cite the following examples:

The Bible sanctions purchasing slaves from neighbouring countries (Leviticus 25: 44), selling one's female children into slavery (Exodus 21: 7), animal sacrifice (Leviticus 1: 5) and the subordination of women (Ephesians 5: 22-24). It prohibits, frequently on pain of death or exile, eating shellfish (Leviticus 11: 10), working on the sabbath (Exodus 35: 2), sexual intercourse during menstruation (Leviticus 20: 18) and wearing garments made of two kinds of cloth (Leviticus 19: 19) (Hand, 2007: 12).

The point here is that these examples are selected precisely because they will be taken by the reader to be either straightforwardly wrong, or downright morally superfluous. Presumably, for Hand, this is precisely because any attempt to defend them simply would not be rationally compelling. But, of course, one could still attempt to justify them on the basis that the scriptures permit them: they are morally right as long as the bible says they are. The idea that there are no good

reasons to suppose such actions to be morally acceptable already precludes the very thing Hand was supposed to be attacking: the idea that scriptural injunctions do in fact constitute good reasons.

I am not so much defending the inerrancy of scriptural authority here, but wanting instead to use this point as a way of showing how reason operates for Hand, and also for raising the following related question: for whom, then, does Hand's supposed *reductio* have a force? It is, after all, only a *reductio* if we agree that it is wrong or superfluous, morally speaking, to do these other things supposedly advised by the scriptures. Hand does not offer any reasons against these activities precisely because it is supposed to be self-evident that such things are wrong or otherwise absurd. The reasons, in a sense, *make themselves* and their *force* evident. What this might amount to is interesting: Hand does not have to make the reasons evident to us because we already, in some sense, *know* them. We do not, one assumes, know of this by intuition, in the sense that they simply feel wrong to us, or otherwise merely on the basis of consensus, in that my society or your society happens to view them as morally unacceptable. Nor do we take them as wrong simply because we as individuals cannot, at present, think of any good reasons to offer in their support, or because we have thus far been unable to discover any in the relevant philosophical or theological literature. It is not enough that we, personally speaking, find the moral rightness or relevance of any of these actions unthinkable. Hand, and those of us who would credit him with having performed a *reductio* of the scriptural basis of condemnations of homosexuality, would seem to suppose something far stronger. This would be something akin to the following: that there are not, have never been, and never could be, any good reasons to suppose that such actions are morally acceptable (or, in other cases, morally relevant).

In spite of what the scriptures, or, say, various members of past societies might have imagined, the moral wrongness (or the sheer moral irrelevance) of such actions is, now, both *known* and seemingly irrevocable. This is not supposedly because of Hand's - or of our own - place in human history, but a matter of

epistemology alone. To argue for them would be not simply to assume one set of historical values over another, but to contravene that which provides the proper foundation for any set of values whatsoever: *reason itself*. One might say, however odd it sounds, that it is *reason* that finds them unthinkable. Hence, in arguing against various, usually religious, 'arguments' about the wrongness of homosexual sex, Hand concludes that no such argument was found to be compelling. It is on this basis, of course, that he wants to teach the 'issue' as settled: reason quite simply favours those who argue that homosexual sex is morally legitimate. In fact, not only does he see himself to have discovered no compelling argument against its permissibility, but no argument that does not also contravene reason. There is simply nothing in such a case that could even have constituted a rationally defensible argument. For if there were, then the legitimacy of homosexual sex would have to be, on Hand's position, understood (and taught) as a controversial moral issue: a matter of legitimate, rational debate and disagreement.

What interests me is what a compelling, or even a rationally defensible, argument could have looked like here? This might seem a rather odd question, precisely because to even talk of such a thing would seem already to contradict, and thus beg the question, with Hand. What I am suggesting, however, is that it is not simply 'a moral discovery' by Hand that there are no rational arguments against the moral legitimacy of homosexual sex, but something that constitutes a (structural or foundational) precondition of his very understanding of reasoning about morality – a reasoning that is, in essence, *value free*. There was never going to be an argument against homosexuality that was not criticisable according to this approach to reason, at least in part because the sorts of views that attacked its legitimacy do not begin by placing Hand's notion of rationality at the centre of their moral universe. The sorts of reasoning he attacks begin, one might say, with the authority of the scriptures, with the idea of a universe purposefully created by a God, or whatever else. It is these just ideas, rather than a particular notion of abstract, critical reasoning, that provide the ethical starting point for such 'theories'. It is they which are absolutely or ultimately valuable; it is they which guide any subsequent thought on such 'issues'. For Hand, of course, it is reason which seems to occupy the

position of ethical starting point. And yet, in occupying this position, reason itself seemingly cannot also provide a foundation (a neutral starting point) for the notion of ethical *value*: of something's being treated as having value, and of being valued.

#### **(iv) Conclusions**

If it is clear that the accounts of controversial issues offered by Hand and Dearden differ from each other, then it could be considered misguided simply to lump both together as displaying shared 'rationalistic' tendencies. It was not, however, my intention to suggest that insofar as both thinkers reveal various rationalistic features, they have to agree with each other on every matter. Nevertheless, while it is also true that Hand's account of reason is more abstract, more centred on critical argumentation than is Dearden's, both accounts still reveal a concern to approach controversial moral issues epistemically. This means, effectively, to privilege the role of objective rational standards in deciding what ought to count as settled or definitely 'known', and what ought to be treated as merely contested and controversial.

Although Hand also places greater emphasis on the selection and teaching of moral issues, particularly on the discovery of epistemically settled or uncontroversial issues, Dearden also seems anxious to show that at least some moral values can count as definitely known e.g. through his example of the baby who was subjected to cigarette burns. In both Hand and Dearden, then, the important point is that it is reason, so to speak, that decides the status of these issues. It is the correct application of standards of reasoning that provides the epistemic foundations to settle an issue; to allow us to properly grasp the moral wrongness or rightness of various beliefs or actions. The role of the individual in making moral decisions is to be a representative of reason: a mouthpiece through which the objective dictates of reason can be pronounced. An individual human being is, as far as morality is concerned, largely understood as an individual *reasoner*; a rational being who partakes in and applies various impersonal standards of rational assessment.



This sort of thinking also seems to be at work in the rather odd idea, adopted by both Hand and Dearden, of something's not being 'contrary to reason'. For both, it appears to function in the following sorts of way: 'One may disagree with this idea but not *that* strongly', or perhaps, 'One may come to think this idea wrongheaded, but yet acknowledge that it is not intolerably so'. However, that such things appear wrongheaded to any particular individual is also in an important sense irrelevant here. In declaring that something does not contravene reason one appears to be saying something quite separable from: 'It is not contrary to my general style of thinking', or 'I can't see that it is obviously or wilfully distorted.' To be contrary to reason does not seem to be equated with it is contrary to *my* reasoning, *your* reasoning, and so on, but with certain agreed rules of proper thinking that we all ought to acknowledge. Perhaps, then, we are supposed to acknowledge that in not contravening reason a given viewpoint does not break any of the very important, general rules of thinking, or at least, doesn't break them too often or too bluntly. Of course, even this would remain, at the very least, ambiguous.

Another important similarity between Hand and Dearden that I would also describe as rationalistic can be found in the very idea that various ethical concerns and questions are best treated as 'moral issues', controversial or otherwise. The very idea of the existence of epistemically settled and controversial moral issues allows Dearden to deal with the positivistic suspicion that all ethical language was devoid of factual content and, for that reason, was not amenable to rational assessment. If, however, various ethical concerns and problems can be broken down into issues on which there exist various competing positions whose claims can be assessed epistemically, then ethics (or more correctly, morality) can itself be brought under the jurisdiction of rational standards. This move is taken seemingly without question by Hand, in whose account we see the further reduction of ethical phenomena into moral issues, along with the idea that moral education itself will be comprised largely of encouraging students to critically assess various claims pertaining to these more or less contested issues.

Hand's and Dearden's accounts of understanding and teaching controversial issues are also underpinned by a broadly shared, and rationalistic, vision of the basic educational endeavor. As we have seen, Hand spells this out explicitly, claiming that the development of rationality ought to occupy pride of place among the aims of education. We have also seen how Dearden's attacks on the educational adoption of the behavioural criterion as a way of identifying controversial issues, is also underpinned by a similar concern that pupils will not come to acknowledge the central place of reason in governing human thought and action. Moreover, both Dearden and Hand are united by what could be described as a fear of relativism, at least insofar as it takes a grip on education. Hence, two related questions I want to investigate more fully in the next chapter are: why is relativism so threatening to these adherents of rationalistic aims? And what exactly is it in relativism that they seem to fear?

It might appear that I have partly dealt with these questions already. I have after all suggested that Dearden fears the coming of a 'sociological carnival' where the young would simply think and do whatever they feel like, while Hand is concerned that young people will cease to be impressed by argument and become, say, overly swayed in moral matters by extra-rational considerations. This is, however, only part of the story. It is not at all clear that the sociological carnival, if it were to come, would involve people behaving any worse towards each other than they do already: that the number of muggings, rapes and murders, for example, must thereby increase<sup>11</sup>. It is not at all certain that all young relativists, simply by virtue of being moral relativists, will suddenly become utterly 'morally' ambivalent. It is, in fact, far from clear that an inevitable increase in immoral behaviour is actually what is most feared by those who talk of the likely damage done by any epidemic relativism. This links to what I will go on to suggest in the next chapter about the sort of *threat* moral relativism could be understood to present.

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<sup>11</sup> Nor is it clear whether Dearden was in fact making such an empirical claim or assumption.

# Chapter 5

## Rationalism, Relativism and Deep Concerns

### (I) Introduction

That there is often contrariness in the reactions of various philosophers towards moral relativism should at least strike us as worthy of comment. On the one hand, as we have seen in the accounts of Dearden and Hand, relativism is treated as something to be feared; something that will likely lead to a profound and pervasive loss of moral confidence. On the other hand, however, it is just as frequently dismissed out of hand as an incoherent and self-defeating moral 'position': nobody could, in fact, ever hold relativistic views *consistently*. The relativist is often supposed to simply overlook the logical precariousness of her position; her denials of the existence of non-relative values are effectively turned against herself. Her own position is often thought to reveal at least a tacit commitment to what it purports to be denying. And yet, if relativism is such a blatantly unpromising moral position for these sorts of reasons, it is at least legitimate for us to ask why it is also still so feared. A related question concerns why relativism, if it is so easily dismissed as hopelessly incoherent, remains as much, if not more, of an issue for us as it was for the ancients two or so thousand years ago? In other words: why is it still with us, saying many if not all of the same things, and yet being subject to all the same seemingly damning criticisms?

In what follows, however, I should make it clear that it is not my intention to (a) defend or attack moral relativism, or (b) to produce a detailed study of a range of moral relativists and their philosophical critics. My exploration of relativism in this chapter has more modest aims. It is more concerned with the *perceived* consequences of relativism (its threat, if you will) for an understanding of the place of reason in the ethical life, than it is with delineating various accounts of moral

relativism that exist in the philosophical literature. In particular, I want to account for what I have described as the 'fear' of relativism revealed in the accounts of both Hand and Dearden, and to tie this disquietude with the rationalistic views they hold about the place of reason in the ethical life. I do this by arguing that relativism may be approached as a form of *scepticism*: an expression of doubt which is dependent on a more substantive host for its existence. That host, I will claim, need not be 'the ethical' as such, but may be something akin to the rationalistic approaches to the ethical life which, as we have seen through the work of Dearden and Hand, are themselves marked by a fear of relativism. The relativist, as I imagine her here, should be understood as not so much as sceptical about the possibility or the need to lead an ethical life, as she is dubious about certain ways of articulating and justifying such a life.

I want also to take seriously the fear of relativism revealed through the accounts of Dearden and Hand. The potential problems presented by relativism *as scepticism* may indeed be substantial: for as I will picture her, the relativist is a sceptic about the place (and the power) of rational argument in thinking and living ethically. In taking the fear of relativism seriously, however, I am not suggesting the rationalist accounts of Dearden and Hand about the nature of reason or its place in the ethical life are, after all, correct. The subsequent chapters of this thesis will suggest and explore an alternative picture. What I will concede, however, is that the fears about relativism expressed by the likes of Hand and Dearden, roused by the relativist's doubts about rational argument as an ethical force, concern something that is understandably disconcerting. It is in just those (ethical) matters where we most want others to listen, and to be open to persuasion, that the power of compelling rational arguments would seem to be most welcome and, indeed, most sorely missed. To adapt Bernard Williams' related point about the amoralist in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, it would indeed seem to be a good thing *for us* if the relativist were to listen; if our reasoning about ethics engaged her, and found resonance in her life in ways that we might instead have to abandon all hope of achieving (Williams, 1985: 26).

## (ii) Moral Relativism or Relativisms?

There is, and perhaps there always will be, some philosophical disagreement about what exactly is entailed by moral relativism, or whether we are not perhaps better off speaking about relativisms instead.<sup>12</sup> Such finer distinctions need not interest us here. It seems straightforward enough to appreciate what, at least in essence, accounts commonly described as relativistic appear to be doubting or denying. According to Ruth Cigman, then, “A relativist is in thrall to an idea...”, the idea that, “...there is no such thing as ‘value’, there are only your values, my values, Uncle Tom Cobbleigh’s values.” (Cigman, 2000: 646). You, me and Uncle Tom Cobbleigh could be living next door to one another, we could be living in very different geographical locations, we could even be living at different historical eras. Our respective views on, say, the rightness or wrongness of various actions may well be shaped by many different factors. The point, however, seems to be that the relativist is doubting whether any one of us can say that we *really* have the right values. We each lack some sort of independent, non-relative, measure against which such values could be identified; the most that any of us can say is that we are ‘right’ according to one set of standards or another. Cigman is also correct, I think, to suggest that, “...there is a lot of theory packed into this idea”. Although she understandably does not try to unpack it all in her paper, she does nevertheless conclude that, “...relativism cannot be sustained”. That said, the question of what it might mean for relativism to be, or not to be, sustainable, is an interesting one that demands further investigation (Cigman, 2000: 646).

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<sup>12</sup> Even a fairly small sample from the literature in the Philosophy of Education reveals such a divergence of opinion. When Dearden, for example, fears that the behavioural criterion might give ‘undue encouragement to relativism’, Hand is at pains to point out that it is not relativism that Dearden describes, but the related idea that “consensus is the proper warrant for belief” (Hand, 2008: 122). Relativism, or so it seems, is marked by something subtly different. Another example finds Paul Standish questioning Nick Tate’s view that moral relativism is marked by the assumptions that, “...morality is largely a matter of taste or opinion”, and that, “there is no point therefore in searching for the truth about moral matters” (Standish, 1997: 42). Such a view, for Standish, is more properly described as ‘subjectivist’, no doubt because it speaks of morality being relative to individual tastes, rather than say, to more broadly social or cultural norms and values. What seems clear, however, is that underlying these disputed positions is a common set of doubts about the possibility of establishing rationally that any set of values are simply ‘true’ (as opposed to their being or feeling true for one or more human beings.)

Cigman's idea here seems to be that human beings in general need to be able to "...distinguish good guys from bad guys", which is something that relativism is supposed to preclude. She continues by explaining how, "...people become relativists in order to disassociate themselves from Hitler," and yet end up with no way of being able to distinguish "...the moral beliefs of Hitler from those of the mild mannered man in the post-office" (Cigman, 2000: 646). In other words, if people, actions, beliefs and so forth are merely describable as bad or good, right or wrong relative to some particular moral standard or other, then we lack any way of identifying one person, one belief, one action, as *really* better than another. Hitler may indeed become 'no worse' than the postmaster. However, the question of whether one thing can *really* be thought better than another thing also worthies some unpacking. In one sense, it is not at all clear that the relativist could not, in the course of her life, distinguish good guys from bad guys. Neither is it clear that the relativist is denying the existence of any standards whatsoever. What she seems to be doubting, instead, is something like the absolute correctness of any particular set of standards.

She may, perhaps, feel that Hitler was an evil man and prefer without hesitation the moral views of the mild-mannered postmaster. She might indeed be repulsed by all that Hitler stood for, and again without hesitation say that his values are wrong *for her*, and that she could never imagine herself adopting them. If it at least seems conceivable for someone to claim to be a relativist and yet still be willing to lay down their life for their moral beliefs, what would we want to say about such a case? Would it be that the person was, at some level, being insincere, misguided, or even deluded? Would we say that their commitment to a cause betrays the fact that they were not, after all a relativist; that relativism itself is inherently wrongheaded and unsustainable? Another way of thinking about this is to ask why it is that any relativist is thought to be ethically uncommitted, and any ethically committed person must be supposed not to be a relativist.

The nub of the problem here seems to be that the relativist is supposed not to be *entitled* to hang on to the notion of truth in moral matters. In saying that something

can only be true for me as an individual, or, perhaps, as a member of one society or another, the relativist is seen to have abandoned the idea of truth *in toto*: it is tantamount to suggesting that no truth can be had in these matters. One seems to want to say here that in order to be committed to an ethical belief, one also needs to believe it is *right*, and not simply right for me. It would appear that one could hold something to be true only if one thinks that others ought to acknowledge this truth too: that its compellingness applies in an important sense to their lives as well. The idea of getting things right, or being wrong, ethically, seems to require that various values can be compared and contrasted directly, rather than simply declared to be different from one another.

If the relativist's continued talk of truth and commitment seem to amount to little more than empty gestures, she may still want to say something along the following lines in reply. 'Of course I am committed to X because it is my belief, I have given it importance in *my life*. Nevertheless, it is ultimately a matter of indifference to me if others accept it too'. She could continue to talk of trying to persuade others about it, in a similar way that she might when discussing whether a particular football team is better than another. She may also say that although it would be nice or pleasing if others agreed with her, she would certainly not think less of them ('judge them'), or of her belief in X, if they failed to do so. She may again add that this is because there does not exist any way of establishing the value of X as something others ought to be compelled to recognise. There is still much that is ambiguous here. Nevertheless, it seems that what we are often tempted to say in reply to the relativist is something akin to the following: that relativism cannot be sustained *existentially* because it cannot be sustained *theoretically*. It cannot be lived consistently because it cannot be held consistently as an idea or position: it simply makes no sense, for instance, to speak of something's being a value which is true or right only for me.

What, however, if the relativist is doubting precisely the centrality of reasoning or theorising to the living of an ethical life? What if she were to greet our objections about consistency with a mere shrug of her shoulders? This would indeed go some

way to explaining why the relativist is often supposed to present such a danger: she may in fact be proposing to sustain an ethical life (existentially, as it were) that cannot at the same time be sustained rationally, certainly insofar as rationality presupposes adherence to a notion of truth that goes beyond what I have simply decided, or otherwise feel, is true *for me*. She has not, one might then say, so much lost all confidence in her ethical life, as lost confidence in the role of reason (as she sees it) in shaping such a life and providing it, say, with theoretical foundations. What is also important to understand, I think, is that this loss of faith does not simply stem from the fact that reason is seemingly unable to furnish us with the right answers ethically speaking, but from the idea that to conduct a quest for the 'right answers' is already to go wrong ethically. The relativist suggests a radical fracture between personal belief and commitment (truth for me) and the possibility (and desirability) of establishing that 'truth' in a way that should also compel their commitment. It is, one might say, for the sake of the ethical that the notion of non-relative truth in ethics has, for the relativist at least, to be abandoned. It is to the task of elucidating this apparent paradox of relativism that I now turn my attention.

### **(iii) Relativism *and* Scepticism**

In order to shed further light on these concerns, I want to look now at two philosophical sources. One is Alan Bloom's idea, presented in his book *The Closing of the American Mind*, that relativism is not offered as a theoretical position by many of the student exponents he encountered in his classes, but as an ethical one. The other is the sceptical 'chronicles' of Sextus Empiricus, written in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, about the attitudes and practices of the Pyrrhonian school<sup>13</sup>. I will begin, albeit briefly, with Bloom, and the idea that modern manifestations of relativism grew out of a certain internalisation of so-called liberal attitudes, including tolerance, respect for difference, freedom of choice and expression etc. For the student relativists encountered by Bloom, then, "The danger they have been taught to fear from

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<sup>13</sup> Sextus, in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, describes himself as a 'chronicler' as opposed, perhaps, to a philosopher, or even a historian of scepticism. In doing so he seems to want to distance himself from any theorising about scepticism. He wants us, perhaps, to see his work as an exercise in merely reporting the 'facts', as he sees them, about what sceptics commonly say and do.



absolutism is not error but intolerance...the true believer is the real danger”(Bloom, 1987: 26). The problem with non-relativistic ethical thought, it would seem, is one of being sure that one has got it right ethically: one becomes over-confident; hubristic, even. For Bloom’s young relativists, then, the study of human history is also supposed to reveal how:

...men always thought they were right, and that led to wars, persecutions, slavery, xenophobia, racism, and chauvinism. The point is not to correct the mistakes and really be right; rather it is not to think you are right at all. (Bloom, 1987: 27).

Immoderate attachment to any lifestyle or set of beliefs has, for the relativist, always seemingly led to unethical behaviour. It is certainty that leads to dogmatism, a lack of openness and humility, and ultimately to intolerance. If the same might be said, in reply, about the relativist’s apparent attachment to the wrongness of war, persecution, slavery, xenophobia, racism, and chauvinism, along with her apparent confidence in the virtues of openness and tolerance, the question is what we should now say about this possible oversight. Must we suppose that the relativist, buoyed perhaps by unquestioned commitment to various liberal values, simply would not notice (or otherwise admit) the precariousness of her ‘position’ – her own seemingly ‘immodest’ ethical commitments? I want at this point to draw attention to some similarities between how Bloom is apt to characterise relativism, and what Sextus Empiricus said, in antiquity, about the origins and nature of Pyrrhonian Scepticism.

According to Sextus, the ancient sceptics, who began to philosophise about the nature of the good life in order to obtain *ataraxia* – the cessation of the mental perturbation they initially supposed to result from their lack of certainty – ended up winning the prize of tranquility not through settling on the ‘right’ answers, but by something akin to coming to terms with uncertainty. As Sextus puts it: “...the man who determines nothing as to what is naturally good or bad”, in other words, the Pyrrhonist, “neither shuns nor pursues anything eagerly; and, in consequence, he is

unperturbed” (Outlines of Pyrrhonism; I: XII). Whereas the so-called dogmatist, or “...the man who opines that anything is by nature good or bad” is supposed by the sceptic to be forever disquieted, for “...when he is without the things which he deems good he believes himself to be tormented by things naturally bad...”, and when he supposes himself to have obtained the good:

...he keeps falling into still more perturbations because of his irrational and immoderate elation, and in his dread of a change of fortune he uses every endeavor to avoid losing the things which he deems good. (Outlines of Pyrrhonism; I: XII).

Here we can see one of the more clearly controversial claims of the Pyrrhonist: that the dogmatist – he who believes that he has settled on the ‘truth’ in any given area of enquiry – never escapes a sense of mental perturbation or *tarache*. He is troubled by the very search for the settlement of an enquiry into a particular matter; he is also troubled when he supposes that he has in fact settled it, for fear that certainty might again slip through his hands. In other words, once the truth about a particular matter is established, the dogmatist is troubled in case he might ‘lose the sense’ of certainty attached to his alleged discovery; he becomes worried that he is, perhaps, wrong about the matter. One wonders, however, why the trouble is supposed to return with such inevitability, and with what certainty this is known by the sceptic? Why should the dogmatist, then, always feel troubled about his solution, rather than, perhaps, a sense of relief? Is it due, perhaps, to the fact that in human affairs doubt is supposed always, at some point, to make a return? In this case, Dogmatism is presented as a particular ‘side’ in the battle with unease: fuelled by a promise to end doubt, one might say, by denying its power, or at least its necessity and ubiquity. If settling the enquiry never fully ‘deals’ with doubt, then dogmatism is, for the sceptic, a mismanagement of doubt. Opposing doubt is *not* indeed to end it.

In Sextus’ account, it is important to notice that the sceptic and the dogmatist share the same end: the achievement of *ataraxia*; the ‘state’ of being mentally

unperturbed. The dogmatist assumes that correct theorising about the nature of things, and the termination of his enquiry in the discovery of the truth about these matters, will help to end his anxiety and thus lead to *ataraxia*. The sceptic, as we have seen, disagrees. It is for the sake of the ultimate end of peace of mind that one must effectively give up the quest for knowledge of the ultimate nature of things. Although the sceptic is also described by Sextus as *Zetetic*, as one who continues to search and enquire, this should I believe be read in the light of what he also says about the ultimate *telos* of scepticism – *ataraxia* – as that for “...which all actions or reasonings are undertaken” (Outlines of Pyrrhonism, I: XII). Settling the enquiry on any matter involves cutting it short, and this means to fail to achieve the ultimate end of one’s endeavours: it is to remain mentally troubled. Instead, *ataraxia* is something which can be achieved only through continued openness, continued suspension of judgement (*epochē*) on whatever ‘matter of opinion’ happens to arise. In other words, if it is peace of mind that ultimately matters to the sceptic, then the search for ultimate truth must be abandoned, and in its place, is a life lived, “...in accordance with appearances”, and “...conformable to the customs of our country and its laws and institutions, and to our own instinctive feelings” (Outlines of Pyrrhonism, I: VIII).

What then has all this to do with relativism as (in)famously described by Bloom? What I want to say here, although clearly speculative, concerns how the relativistic distrust of theorising about the ethical life might also be approached in the light of the sceptic’s own generalised distrust of the need to settle questions of ultimate value or reality; to reach and establish a conclusive position. Here one might well say that if living ethically is what matters to the relativist, it is for that reason that one must abandon the idea of settling on the truth about ethical questions, e.g. which ethical ‘values’ to adopt. In a similar way to how the dogmatist’s search for peace of mind was thwarted by his need to settle the issue about which was really good or bad; so to the desire to live well ethically is seen to be thwarted by the need to establish the non-relative truth of any set of ethical ideas or values. As we have already seen, this position has according to the relativist, led to a lack of openness to difference; to narrow-mindedness, intolerance and, in short, *unethical*

behaviour. One might also say that for the relativist living ethically is also to live in a way that was 'comfortable' with custom, law, intuition and instinctive feelings, but not living according to such things because they are seen as unquestionably correct.

By way of further comparison it is also interesting to observe that Pyrrhonism too, since its origins in Ancient Greece, has faced various accusations of theoretical inconsistency. Doubts of the following sort are hardly exhaustive, but nevertheless are not uncommon: on what basis does the sceptic claim to know that *ataraxia* is the ultimate end of human endeavor? How does he know with confidence that scepticism will bring it about? Isn't the sceptic also troubled by the question of whether he will be able to continue to suspend judgement? The more interesting question for me, however, concerns why the sceptic is supposed to take such questions seriously<sup>14</sup>. This again relates to the idea that philosophical argument can be some sort of ethical force. As far as his own theorising is concerned, Sextus is at pains to point out how:

In the case of all the sceptical slogans, it must be understood right from the start that we make absolutely no claims as to their truth. We even say that they can be self-defeating, since they refer to themselves as well as to other things. They are like laxatives, which not only expel fluids from the body, but also expel themselves together with the fluids (Outlines of Pyrrhonism, I: VIII).

The sceptic, then, admits that what he says is self-defeating. The important point is that this doesn't, in and of itself, appear to matter. Such concerns are themselves the marks of the troubled mind that the sceptic aims both to avoid, and also to heal in the dogmatist via his use of argumentative 'purgings'. The ideal of consistency, one might say, always plays second fiddle to the desire for peace of mind, for *ataraxia*.

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<sup>14</sup> The resonances here with Bernard Williams' discussion of the amoralist in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* are again quite clear. In particular, one thinks of Williams' question about whether the amoralist *ought* to be convinced by something that the rest of us would count as an ethical justification, and whether or not he need be much concerned at the charge of inconsistency levelled against him if he did not. (see Williams, 1985: 26)

As such, scepticism only exists insofar as the urge to dogmatise exists; it is not supposed to offer yet another positive, and thus dogmatic, doctrine. The dogmatist's questions that aim to undermine scepticism as a doctrine also aim to undermine it as the 'way of life' that Sextus is at pains to describe it as, yet, if scepticism is not intended to constitute a positive or substantive philosophical position, why, one might ask, should he worry if it isn't supposed to stand up as such a position? In fact, the formulation of such positions is precisely what he thinks he needs in order to escape mental perturbation. As Sextus again points out, Scepticism is rather 'an ability, or mental attitude' – merely 'a way of doing things' conducted for the sole purpose of obtaining that very end.

In a related way, if simply living an ethical life is what seems to matter to the relativist *as an end*, then theorising about it might need to be abandoned in a similar way to how for the sake of *ataraxia* the sceptic abandons theorising about the 'truth' which is supposed to lie beyond, or beneath appearance, custom, feeling, and the like. That both sceptic and relativist may be seen by their critics as presupposing, theoretically speaking, the 'absolute' value of these various ends; that their lives will betray an unwarranted commitment to these ends, will mean of course that they are accused of being inconsistent. This, however, could well be greeted by another, this time mutual, shrug of the shoulders, and the reply: 'Things just seem to me to be this way', or perhaps even, 'Your *concern* to see me as inconsistent reveals exactly the state of mind that it appears desirable for me (and indeed *you*) to avoid'.

In the light of the comparisons drawn between relativism and scepticism here, I want to revisit Cigman's suggestion that there is a lot of theory packed into the idea of relativism. If Cigman seems broadly correct to say this, in what way, then, might she be correct? I want again to emphasise here the idea that relativism is, as Cigman herself suggests, based on doubt and *denial*: a denial of the existence of Values, appropriately capitalised. I want now to suggest that if relativism is understood as a form of scepticism about Values, the theory packed into it is the same sort of theorising that is packed into what the relativist denies: the idea that

the correctness of moral beliefs and values can be established or grounded through a process of reasoning, or through some other form of *authority*. The idea or 'theory' here is that truth in questions of values could be settled; that there exist ways of demonstrating, through rational argument for example, that one set of values, say, ought to be straightforwardly preferable to another. The relativist is doubting, and thus reacting to, the idea that such rational foundations can be supplied which will ground and justify moral beliefs and values, and that it would be a good thing – ethically speaking – if they were so established.

#### **(iv) Rational Force and the Fear of Relativism**

It is instructive to remind ourselves again at this point of the nature of Dearden's concerns about relativism through the adoption of the behavioural criterion as a tool to identify controversial issues for teaching in schools. Broadly speaking, its use could lead to a situation where young people lose trust in reason and argument; they could thus be led to believe that issues are settled or unsettled simply because of the existence, or lack of existence, of agreement. People may even come to trust more in preferences, in instincts and feelings, rather than in reason and argument, when reaching decisions on various moral matters. What one can see here, I think, is that the fear of relativism comes not simply from the fact that it is wrongheaded or theoretically unsustainable, but from the notion that such considerations might simply not matter to relativists. In other words, a deeper concern about relativism seems to be that it could, and perhaps would, be sustained (and lived) in spite of its perceived theoretical flaws; even *because of them*. Epidemic relativism, Dearden's sociological carnival, may well be feared because it promises to usher in not so much a life of moral 'anarchy', but one of irrationalism, and thereby, of intellectual chaos. The more profound worry, one might say, is not about its mistakenness *per se*, but that such mistakenness simply won't be acknowledged as chaotic, but will perhaps be viewed as exciting, even liberating. It is also interesting to note in this respect how Dearden's image of a carnival does not necessarily connote increased crime or violence, but unbridled frivolity, a lack of order and control, the *loss of reason*: the coming of the Lord of Misrule.

With the perceived stakes set that high, it is perhaps a little unsurprising that the relativist is often pictured in many works of moral philosophy as, to borrow again the words of Bernard Williams, "...an alarming figure, a threat" (Williams, 1985: 25). Here again Williams' own discussion of the 'threat' presented by the amoralist or ethical sceptic (he names him Callicles after the character in Plato's *Gorgias*), provides another interesting comparison with the picture I have been sketching of the moral relativist, and of the threat she appears to pose for at least some moral philosophers. What is of particular interest is that the Callicles in Plato's dialogue seems to stand, in respect of his attitude towards the role of philosophy in informing the ethical life, closer to the relativist than to the 'ethical sceptic' Williams describes using his name. Plato's Callicles lives, one might say, at the edges of the ethical life, rather than outside it, as an 'amoralist'. It is fair to say that Williams does recognise something of this ethical involvement in his own picture of the amoralist, in that, "...we should not assume that a sceptic is someone who leads a life that goes against ethical considerations". He then goes on to clarify that, "...to be sceptical about ethics is to be sceptical about the force of ethical considerations" (Williams 1985: 29). Williams' own amoralist (Callicles) is thus pictured with the potential to be moved by 'limited benevolent or altruistic sentiment'; not as necessarily driven to acts of wilful sadism on account of his scepticism. The point remains, however, that for Williams, the amoralist's doubts are supposed to be centred on the compellingness of ethical considerations. This is not straightforwardly the case with Plato's own Callicles.

It is not clear that Plato's Callicles is an *ethical* sceptic in Williams' sense. It is not the force of *any* ethical considerations that Callicles doubts; he seems, for example, quite prepared to suggest that it would be a good life for a man, "...to have all his desires about him, and to be able to live happily in the gratification of them" (*Gorgias*, 483-4). While his praise of self-promotion and of the absolute 'right' of the 'strong', may certainly strike us as 'unethical', what Callicles is *explicitly* denying is the compellingness of what he describes as restrictive, conventional, moral codes. Moreover, one thing that I find particularly striking about Callicles as he

appears in the *Gorgias*, is his conspicuous refusal to 'play ball' with Socrates: he does not so much refuse to engage with the question of how one should live, as he refuses to engage with it philosophically. His scepticism about philosophy, and its place in the life of an adult male citizen, rests on what we might describe as *ethical* grounds. That again is not to say that Callicles is not prepared to speak about the preferability, or the justifiability, of living one sort of life rather than another. Instead, he is conspicuously dubious about the approach that philosophy, certainly as it is practised by Socrates, takes to probing, questioning, and justification. It is at least noteworthy that Socrates is actually accused by *Callicles* of flouting certain important 'values': of 'running riot' in argument; of being 'sly', of 'entangling' Polus and abusing his modesty ("...he was too modest to say what he thought, he had his mouth stopped"). Despite his request for Socrates (*the man*) not to be offended by such accusations, which are spoken out of 'good-will', he persists in attacking Socrates *the philosopher*. Here he describes how a man, "...if he carries philosophy into later life," will become, "...necessarily ignorant of all those things which a gentleman and a person of honour ought to know." In short, to remain a philosopher is also to remain a child (*Gorgias*, 484-5).

Socrates *as a philosopher* is nevertheless described by Callicles as a 'tyrant' and a 'bully', which further links his sentiments to those of the moral relativist as I have described her. In questioning whether Callicles should be described as an ethical sceptic in Williams' terms, however, I am not suggesting that he must now be pictured as a moral relativist. The point is not simply to replace one label with another. The proposed overlap between Callicles and the moral relativist is, rather, confined to their shared distrust of what both appear to perceive as the tyrannical role given to 'reason' in thinking about the ethical life. For Callicles, Socrates uses reason during his attempt to undercover the essential nature of his ethical quarry as a tool to beat his opponents into submission. By engaging with him (which Callicles himself refuses fully to do) they are brow-beaten under the name of consistency to follow reason where Socrates takes it (or as Socrates might have put it: to follow reason where *it* wants to go). For the moral relativist too, as we have seen, the attempt to establish the rightness of any one set of values, exemplified by



a philosophical use of reason (although not unique to it) may be similarly tyrannical. What is disputed is something akin to the (ethical) legitimacy of any attempt to propose an overarching authority which might justly inform us *all* about the proper shape of our ethical lives.

#### **(v) Conclusions: Reason beyond Relativism and Rationalism?**

I certainly do not want to give the impression that relativism as I have depicted it here constitutes the only alternative to the rationalistic picture of ethics and education present in the works of Dearden and Hand. The relativist, as I have pictured her, might see things in that way, but she is I think misguided in doing so. In opposing the idea that a so-called 'faculty' of reason can, and ought, to be called upon to provide *foundations* for the ethical life, the relativist is, however, right to be sceptical. She is also broadly correct, I think, to be dubious about the idea that ethical beliefs, feelings, intuitions etc., must somehow be subjected to particular sorts of intellectual scrutiny before they could count as properly 'grounded', ethically. Where the relativist goes wrong (although it is not clear whether she would care much for this accusation) is in supposing that the notion of ethical rightness necessarily presupposes the provision of rational foundations, and that to deny the possibility or the desirability of such foundations must lead to the admission that the only truth worth preserving is 'truth for me'. It is here, I think, that she demonstrates her own dependence on a similarly rationalistic notion of the role of reason and argument in ethics, and of what might constitute their ethical force. She would be right, one might say, to reject rationalism as a foundational philosophy, but not thereby to abandon any role for reason in ethics. According to the sorts of views I go on to explore in the rest of this thesis, we need not endorse relativism once we have abandoned a particular (rationalistic) vision of reason, and the dominant, justificatory role it is supposed to play in establishing the shape of the ethical life.

If relativism, as I have described it, need only be understood to *directly* oppose a rationalistic and foundational account of the role of reasoning in our ethical lives, at least the following related questions remain to be addressed: (1) How can one

propose a role for reason in helping to shape the ethical life, without also succumbing to the sort of rationalism I have been describing? And, (2), how is a denial of rationalism possible without one's also succumbing to relativism? As already indicated, I will attempt to unravel the various problems that surround these questions in the course of the remaining chapters of the thesis. In addressing the second question, I will not, however, seek to 'establish' the falsity of relativism. For one thing, we might well ask what would be the point? Why, again, would one suppose that those attracted to relativism would (or indeed *should*) attend to such a critique, rather than responding with the accusation that any attempt to discredit relativism rationally simply provides further grounds to prefer relativism ethically<sup>15</sup>. What we might do instead, I think, is to investigate through the provision of examples, what a life lived as a relativist might actually involve. Here we may offer some insights into the potential pitfalls presented by such a life, and into what may have to be sacrificed in order to live it. We will also be in a better position to ask whether this is, in fact, a life that we would wish for ourselves, or would recommend to others.

This is not, of course, that I expect the moral relativist to be converted by any of these examples, or indeed, be convinced by the alternative, Wittgensteinian, account of ethics that I go on to consider in Chapters 7 and 8. Any attempt to probe the intelligibility of her ethical doubts would also risk being dismissed as just another piece of intellectual bullying; of not honouring the 'respect' that we 'owe' ethically to alternative sets of values. This sort of danger may, however, be something we simply have to accept and live with. It is interesting in this respect to notice how Socrates seemed to recognise the impossibility of winning round Callicles, through argument itself, to an appreciation of the ethical force of reasoning and argument. Instead he pled for Callicles' consent to be allowed to end their discussion by telling a story, supposedly as a 'proof' of what he has said. This move is interesting on a number of fronts. For now, however, I will consider only the sense that it could constitute a form of resignation in the face of a determined

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<sup>15</sup> Again, see Williams (1985) on the provision of an Archimedean point in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, for a discussion of exactly these sorts of questions.

and unmoved interlocutor. Callicles has thus far shown himself resistant to Socrates' reasoning, and is more than likely to continue to be so.

This form of resignation - if that is indeed what it is – is understandably difficult to carry out. As I indicated at the beginning of the chapter, the urge to confront the moral relativist with something akin to the inconsistency of her theorising about ethics, her own dependency on the authority of 'reason', can seem both urgent and necessary (as seems to be the case with both Hand and Dearden). The greater fear of course is that she will not listen, and that such selective deafness to 'reason' will spread to the epidemic proportions that Dearden feared. Yet, try as we might, the relativist may continue to see any attempt at reasoning in ethics as unduly authoritative; as merely comprising an attempt to establish the truth of some ethical beliefs at the expense of others. We too, at some point, may nevertheless have to be prepared to shrug our shoulders.

# Chapter 6

## Rationalism and Deflection

### (i) Introduction

Strange to know nothing, never to be sure  
Of what is true or right or real,  
But forced to qualify or so I feel,  
Or Well, it does seem so:  
Someone must know.

--Phillip Larkin, 'Ignorance'

If this chapter marks the conclusion of my account of rationalistic approaches to ethics and moral education, a brief recap thereby becomes necessary. So far, then, we have seen how - for at least some philosophers - Phillip Larkin's sentiments would appear more than a little pessimistic. For such thinkers, it is both possible and reasonable to *feel sure*, and to *be right*, about many moral matters. In the chapters devoted to Dearden and Hand, I have examined the idea that certain moral issues could be designated as uncontroversial or settled, epistemically speaking. Once identified, the rightness or wrongness of these issues could, particularly for Hand, be taught directly to young people as an integral part of the 'substantive moral guidance' that schools would be required to offer them. I have also identified how it is the faculty of reason that is supposed to provide the means of settling certain moral issues, and thus of inspiring levels of moral confidence far beyond that of Larkin's unduly hesitant, 'or so I feel'. It is this emphasis on particular approaches to reasoning and argument as being able to establish foundations for the ethical life, along with some unassailable imperatives, that marks (at least in part) what I have characterised so far as the rationalism in the accounts of Hand and Dearden.

In contrast to the confidence of the rationalist, we have also heard from those who would likely suppose that Larkin does not go far enough with his doubts about truth and being sure, certainly insofar as they relate to ethics. The relativist, then, might be more than comfortable with Larkin's 'it does seem so' or 'so I feel', but would likely balk at his hope that 'someone must know', certainly if that involves their pretending to know what is best for all of us. Neither would there be much sympathy with the confessional tone of the poem, whereby for Larkin it seems not only 'strange', but also somehow disappointing, that our lives are marked by such a lack of certainty. For as we have also seen, it is certainty – and the quest to establish firm philosophical foundations for our ethical lives - that may, for the relativist, be the primary danger to overcome for the sake of the ethical. The rationalistic notion that it is philosophical reasoning that effectively gives us the ethical proper, that sets our ethical lives on firm and justifiable grounds, is effectively turned on its head. To understand the notion of 'getting it right' ethically as being in the possession of the right answers to ethical questions, of ideally knowing how to solve or settle ethical issues, is already to go wrong, ethically.

In moving away from the problems or challenges raised by relativism, and on to different philosophical territory, it is important to note from the outset that this movement does not constitute a complete shift of emphasis. What one might conceive of as the deeper concerns of the relativist: the suspicion that a rationalistic approach to ethics constitutes, or involves, a sort of ethical failure, remain present for the philosophers that are the focus of this chapter, even if it is manifested in different ways. Here, one might well say that for a thinker such as Stanley Cavell, philosophy ought to begin with the human lives that we lead; the dramas we enact and endure. Our separation from others - our separateness as human beings - is indeed part of this life. Consider, then, something said by the early Cavell in this respect, that: "...skepticism concerning other minds is not skepticism but is tragedy" (Cavell, 1999: 453). Here, we are presented with the idea that what in literature is called tragedy, in philosophy is called scepticism. Literature, one could also say, is often for Cavell better placed to deal with the deeper, more personal, concerns that in philosophy are so-often *deflected* into general, abstract 'issues' or problems,

such as scepticism about other minds. Significant in this respect is Cavell's notion of 'deflection', which describes the avoidance, through the ways in which philosophy is often practised, of life's deeper anxieties. Philosophising, to put it bluntly, can itself become a way of bypassing the ethical; at the very least, of distorting and narrowing one's ethical focus.

What is denied by Cavell, broadly speaking, is that one should begin one's thinking about the ethical lives of human beings with a particular 'faculty' called reason. The contrast between beginning such a task with one's *humanness* as such, and the rationalistic focus on supplying arguments, is one of the main subjects of this chapter. In exploring it, however, my focus here is not on Cavell himself, but on Cora Diamond's development of his idea of deflection. In her seminal paper, *The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy*, Diamond, one might say, presses Cavell's point about where philosophy begins, and emphasizes that our humanness means our flesh-and-blood lives as human animals. In developing the notion that certain kinds of philosophy are deflective, she explores the tendency to deflect our thoughts, and our attention, from our lives *as animals*. In doing so she prompts various questions relevant not only to my continued engagement with philosophical rationalism, but also to my subsequent exploration of the possibility of non-deflective, yet non-relativistic, philosophical approaches to the ethical. For example, if Diamond is clear that what she says in her paper ought not to be reduced to a series of 'typically' philosophical claims or arguments, an important question nevertheless concerns how one might engage critically (and, indeed, philosophically) with her ideas, and also do justice to what she has to say about, and indeed against, the deflectiveness of philosophical practices. This is important, not least because Diamond, like Cavell, but quite unlike the relativist, wishes to move us beyond a radical scepticism about philosophy, and preserve a role for philosophy in helping us to think well ethically.

### **(ii) Diamond's *Difficulty of Reality***

In order to appreciate, firstly, how Diamond's paper bears on my exploration of philosophical rationalism in ethics and education, we need first to understand the

'coming apart of thought and reality' that she calls, after John Updike, *the difficulty of reality*. This difficulty, Diamond wants to say, is one of "...the mind's not being able to encompass something which it encounters" (Diamond, 2008: 44). It is also described as a sort of 'experience' in which:

...we take something in reality to be resistant to our thinking it, or possibly to be painful in its inexplicability, difficult in that way, or perhaps awesome and astonishing in its inexplicability (Diamond, 2008: 45-46).

This difficulty, or indeed, perplexity, is supposed by Diamond to be of deep significance in the lives of human beings as 'flesh and blood' animals. It is exemplified in her paper through, among other sources, a poem by Ted Hughes and the character of Elizabeth Costello in J.M.Coetzee's novel bearing her name. I will explore some of these examples in more detail shortly. For now, and by way of an introduction to Diamond's use of this concept, it is crucial to recognise the following related, yet separable, points. Firstly, that for Diamond such experiences enable us to come into direct contact with the 'reality' of what it is to be human; secondly, that philosophical thought and enquiry does not tend to enable us to have direct access to this reality. In other words, one might say that for Diamond, philosophy tends often to pass-by the deepest problems of human reality which can, importantly, be encountered and experienced in other ways.

A direct experience of the difficulty of reality is something Diamond sees expressed in the final stanza of Ted Hughes' poem, 'Six Young Men', which concerns the poet's encounter with a photograph of a group of young men who died in the First World War, six months after the photograph was taken. Here Hughes' writes:

That man's not more alive whom you confront

And shake by the hand, see hale, hear speak loud,

Than any of these six celluloid smiles are,

Nor prehistoric or fabulous beast more dead;

No thought so vivid as their smoking blood:

To regard this photograph might well dement

Such contradictory permanent horrors here

Smile from the single exposure and shoulder out

One's own body from its instant and heat. (Hughes, T., in Diamond, 2008: 44).

Here the poet (or at least the speaker in the poem) describes being struck by the sheer aliveness, and the undisputable deadness, of the six men in a single photograph. Their smiles reveal their aliveness, their closeness, and one is thus drawn to react to them as to smiling men in the flesh. One is, however, reminded of what else is known about these men: they are indisputably dead, they are as distant from one as is any 'prehistoric or fabulous beast', and hence, one's seemingly natural reaction to their aliveness couldn't in fact be any more misplaced. Ted Hughes describes the horrors smiling out from the photograph as contradictory and permanent: one can, so to speak, cope with life *or* death, with life *versus* death, but not, perhaps, with life in death or death in life. The speaker in the poem becomes aware of both aspects at the same time, and of their inability as opposites to capture fully what he has experienced. This strangeness, this unfamiliarity, is indeed a horror, as opposed perhaps to an instance of doubt, or mere puzzlement. If one can speak of our familiar concepts failing here, then it seems to be less an example of uncertainty or of a temporary 'mental cramp', and more something captured by the Greek word *aporia*: of feeling oneself to be at a complete loss. Here at once is both a mental and a physical *shaken-ness*. The speaker's body is 'shouldered out' from its own 'instant and heat'; his sense of aliveness, of presence, of the here and now, is knocked out of him by a failure to understand his experience in familiar or everyday terms.

Diamond wants us to recognise the sheer physicality of the experience described by Hughes: of how the awareness of a difficulty is felt by the poet as by one who



inhabits (or rather, who *is*) a vulnerable living, yet mortal, body. What is also important to recognise here is how the 'difficulty of reality', insofar as to experience the difficulty involves not only perplexity but also a sense of bodily 'thrownness'<sup>16</sup>, is something that, for Diamond, philosophy tends to encounter only *indirectly*: as a series of more or less abstract problems, or 'issues'. And yet, Diamond also acknowledges how it is, "...plainly possible to describe the photo so that it does not seem boggling at all", for after all, it is only an old photo of young men who were once alive and are now dead (Diamond, 2008: 45). There should, or so it seems, be little that is shocking or unusual about an old picture: in a similar way, one may well be quite ambivalent about the fact that various artefacts in a museum were once worn, handled, looked upon, by people now long dead. Diamond is not, it seems, suggesting that the experience of the difficulty described in Hughes' poem is universal, or even necessarily commonplace. She also imagines, in terms of Wittgensteinian talk of language games, how a child might be taught how we commonly speak about relics from the past, such as old photographs; of how, for example, she is to make sense of a picture of a Grandfather who was alive and smiling *then*, and is *now* dead. In learning the language game the child learns the place of such things in our (and her) world, and is no longer inclined to ask questions such as 'Why is he smiling if he is dead?' Her concepts become adequate to the task of describing, say, the old picture of the young man. And yet, the 'horrible contradiction' described by Hughes is, for Diamond, "...that of someone who can no longer speak within the game...", for language, "...is shouldered out from the game, as the body from its instant and heat" (Diamond, 2008: 45). In this sort of case it would seem fruitless to remind the speaker of the familiar language games, or otherwise try to articulate something akin to their 'rules' more explicitly, as if one were pointing out something that he did not already know, or of which he

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<sup>16</sup> This idea of bodily 'thrownness' is nevertheless puzzling. What Diamond *seems* to be referring to is an experience of renewed attentiveness to, and awareness of, one's body: a profound experience which 'throws' one, so to speak, back 'into the body'. One thinks here of William James' 'What is an Emotion?' - '*Can one fancy the state of rage and picture no ebullition of it in the chest, no flushing of the face, no dilatation of the nostrils, no clenching of the teeth, no impulse to vigorous action, but in their stead limp muscles, calm breathing, and a placid face? The present writer, for one, certainly cannot...*' Perhaps we could, then, understand Diamond as referring to a particular sort of (Jamesean?) emotional reaction when she speaks of bodily thrownness.

was not already aware<sup>17</sup>. He is only too well aware of how we ordinarily speak of life and death, of the sorts of places they occupy in our everyday lives, and yet he has still experienced a 'coming apart' of thought and reality; a profound dissatisfaction with these concepts, here and now.

Awareness of physicality or 'embodiment' is also emphasised by Diamond in her second example of the difficulty of reality, that of Coetzee's fictional novelist Elizabeth Costello. Diamond pays particular attention to chapters three and four of Coetzee's novel, which are published in their own right as part of *The Lives of Animals* (Coetzee, 1999). These tell of how the elderly Costello has been invited to the United States to deliver the annual Gates lecture at Appleton College, and to speak at a seminar organised by the English department at the same college. It is not simply the character of Costello or what she says about animals that helps to illustrate the problem of reality for Diamond, it is also the way some other philosophical commentators on Coetzee's novel understand (or *fail* to understand) Costello, and through her, Coetzee's 'own views and intentions'.

The readings offered by, among others, Amy Gutmann and Peter Singer (in Coetzee, 1999), miss something vital for Diamond because they tend to approach Costello's lectures as a forum for Coetzee the novelist to comment on various ethical 'issues' surrounding the treatment of animals. What they overlook is what Costello herself describes as her woundedness. She is, for Diamond, "A woman haunted by the horror of what we do to animals." And we should see her as marked and isolated by this haunting, and "...by the knowledge of how unhaunted others are" (Diamond, 2008: 46). The depth of her isolation is revealed by the apparent ease with which she draws controversial, even highly inflammatory, comparisons between our treatment of animals and the evils of the Nazi extermination camps. In spite of this, for the thinkers who comment on Coetzee's novel:

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<sup>17</sup> Of course, one might do this *therapeutically*, hoping again to return him to satisfaction with the way things ordinarily are, to carry on living *with us*, but this would resemble *a gesture*, a consoling hand on the shoulder or such like, and not a piece of new information or a convincing argument (although, of course, it may still *convince*).

...the wounded woman, the woman with the haunted mind and the raw nerves, has no significance except as a device for putting forward (in an imaginatively stirring way) ideas about the resolution of a range of ethical issues, ideas which can then be abstracted and examined... (Diamond, 2008: 49).

None of the commentators, then, seem to notice that the life of Elizabeth Costello is itself, "...one of the 'lives of animals' that the story is about...": an animal hiding her woundedness under clothing but at the same time revealing it to her audience in "...every word she speaks" (Diamond, 2008: 47). And yet, for Diamond, the difficulty of reality is again revealed through Costello's own inability to live with the knowledge of what we do to animals, and by the way she sees her fellow human beings bearing such knowledge with equanimity, even indifference. For Costello this seems to constitute a sort of failure in the human animal, a failure of humanity which makes her feel like a stranger in her own skin: could she even be said to share the same animal life as these other members of the human species?

For all of this, one could find oneself inclined to say that what Diamond accuses Singer and Gutmann of is little more than an inadequate reading of Coetzee's novel; of paying, for example, too little attention to characterisation. One might point out here that Singer is hardly famed for his contributions to literary criticism, but to philosophy, and particularly to ethics. What is more, Costello does seem to offer various 'arguments' in her lectures, and says as much (c.f. Coetzee, 1999: 68-9). Why, one could also quite reasonably ask, does Diamond herself want to make 'a mountain out of a molehill' by treating philosophical assessment of Costello's arguments with such suspicion? For Diamond, however, the fact that these commentators approach the lectures, as it were, in spite of Costello *herself*, constitutes a sort of failure of 'feelingness'. They lose sight of this particular woman as a 'feeling' as well as a 'thinking' animal; they overlook not only what else she says in her lectures, but *how* she says these things, and *why* she might say them.

If Costello offers what might be called philosophical arguments in her lectures then it is perhaps because, a little like Red Peter, Kafka's educated ape in *Report to an*

*Academy*, she views herself as having little choice: to speak to a gathering of scholars without adhering to the conventions of such argument would be to appear to "...gibber and emote and knock over my glass of water and generally make a monkey of myself..." (Coetzee, 2003: 68). She has, or so it seems to her, no other voice available to her in this setting; she is all too aware of herself as another performing animal, required to jump through various - in this instance, intellectual - hoops, in order to satisfy the audience's expectations.

This interpretation might still be quite hard for some to accept. One may very well feel tempted to say that Costello herself ought to be understood as over-sentimental (e.g. feeling far too strongly, perhaps, for her 'own good') to the point of being misguided or confused; and if we are to take anything at all genuinely interesting from her lectures, then we need somehow to leave the wounded and 'raw-nerved' speaker behind and assess only the wider significance of the speech. Some commentators, perhaps those with a particular sort of philosophical bent, may indeed have a certain sympathy with this assessment. Yet, in accepting it as a reason to avoid paying much attention to Costello herself, they would likely reveal, for Diamond, the tendency in the human animal to understand itself in a 'diminished and distorted way'. To suppose that we can simply put Costello to one side, and better view her lectures as simply contributing to the 'debate' on how to treat animals is, for Diamond:

... to fail to see how 'debate' as we understand it may have built into it a distancing of ourselves from our sense of our own bodily life and our capacity to respond to and imagine the bodily life of others (Diamond, 2008: 53).

I will now say a little more about the role this supposed intellectualisation, this deflective 'distancing of ourselves from bodily life', is supposed *by Diamond* to play in much that passes for the post-Enlightenment practice of philosophy.

### **(iii) The 'Difficulty of Philosophy'**

If a renewed awareness of embodiment (through 'bodily thrownness') is key to understanding at least the first two of Diamond's examples of the difficulty of reality (i.e. Hughes and Costello), it is also seen as something that much philosophy tends not to get near, at least not without the benefit of a safe, intellectual, distance. This approach indeed reveals Diamond's indebtedness to Cavell, and in particular, the use she makes of his notion of 'deflection'. What are often imagined to be the core problems of philosophy tend not to touch directly on the reality of human engagement with the world, and with the sorts of 'deeper' or more exacting difficulties this can present. In a related sense, Diamond speaks of how such deflection of deeply felt concerns into, say, 'debates' about moral 'issues', is, "...a deflection which makes our bodies mere facts – facts which may or may not be thought morally relevant in this or that respect" (Diamond, 2008: 59). In direct contrast to such deflectiveness, Coetzee is understood by Diamond to be asking us in his Elizabeth Costello lectures to, 'inhabit a body'. In other words, he is encouraging us, perhaps, to *think* more *feelingly*.

There seems little doubt, then, that recognisably philosophical attempts to make deeply felt experiences or difficulties thinkable, by abstracting from them or by re-applying familiar or everyday concepts are, for Diamond, doing something inappropriate. One might even say that inappropriate is too bland a word to capture what Diamond is attacking, and yet, it does enable us to attend to two separable aspects of her thought. Such a response is inappropriate, then, not only because it seems to miss 'the experience', or fall short of reality, but also – and this is something that Diamond does not make fully explicit in her critique of the 'intellectualising' tendency of philosophy – because such a response is also insensitive or shallow. It constitutes a sort of ethical failure.

I want to pause at this point to examine, even to get a feel for, what is placed 'on the table' by Diamond's account. It certainly appears that what is at stake is nothing less than the status of philosophy as a recognisable 'practice'; at least as a way of enabling one to understand, and engage appropriately, with one's ethical life. One seems to be invited to acknowledge how the supposed reduction by philosophers of certain difficulties into 'issues' and 'debates', could well constitute a means of

shielding oneself from the concerns that belong to human life as the life of a flesh and blood animal: an embodied 'soul'. If, as T.S. Eliot wrote, "...humankind cannot bear very much reality", then such deflection could itself be viewed as a quite natural human reaction to such troubling difficulties of the 'soul', but then again such an idea hardly sits easily with the (still) familiar image of the philosopher grappling frankly and fearlessly with the deepest problems of reality, and indeed, with the supposed ability of philosophy to provide solid, rational grounds from which to approach our ethical lives with appropriate, justified, confidence.<sup>18</sup>

It is, of course, highly unlikely that those who do hold such hopes for philosophy (including, of course, those whose philosophical approaches to ethics I have termed 'rationalistic') would simply recognise Diamond's suspicions to be compelling reasons to abandon, or even amend, their philosophical practices. I pause again, then, to consider some lines of questioning that could, from such a perspective, be pursued in response to Diamond. In raising them, however, I do not offer any particular philosopher - or philosophers - right of reply. They are intended, rather, to be suggestive of the lines of critical response that might be offered from within, or on behalf of, the sorts of approach to doing philosophy that are a target of Diamond's paper. I ought also to point out that in raising them I do not believe that there is an onus on Diamond to engage with them directly. They are included, at least in part, because of what they might help to reveal about certain patterns of unease present in the critic himself. This includes something akin to the desire effectively to silence Diamond's attempt to criticise certain visions of doing philosophy: to by-pass her critique without engaging with it, as it were, in its own terms; to deprive her of a dissenting voice altogether.

#### **(iv) The *difficulty* of Diamond?**

For example, it could be that one is drawn to pose the following (critical) questions of Diamond's account:

- ***What status do her claims about reality and philosophy have?*** (Does she write, so to speak, from within the realms of philosophy, or somehow from

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<sup>18</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Burnt Norton*.

the outside looking in? Is philosophy problematic for Diamond simply because it is not literature? Does she want us to give up philosophy and, say, take up reading, writing and interpreting fiction instead?)

- ***Doesn't her suggestion that philosophers deflect, also require, or involve, a sort of deflection?*** (Isn't the very idea of deflection an abstraction from what we ought, instead, to acknowledge as the more complex 'webs' of human motivation? Aren't there, both within and between individuals, many and various motivations for undertaking philosophical questioning and analysis? And can't various deep human needs be encountered, acknowledged, and served *directly*, through such philosophical practices? )
- ***Isn't what is described as deflection an entirely natural, even desirable, phenomenon?*** (What would it be like, for example, never to have deflected from 'the difficulty of reality' as Diamond describes it? Wouldn't we all become emotional wrecks, a little like Elizabeth Costello? And, where would this leave our moral lives, not to mention our educational practices?)
- ***What if we deny that we deflect when doing philosophy? Wouldn't Diamond have to resort to a sort of self-confirming, psychological, theorising?*** (To suggest that underlying an attempt to think philosophically lies 'deeper animal needs and responses' that we attempt to deflect, could very well involve the further claim that any attempt to deny deflection is another form, or manifestation, of one's need to deflect.)

At least one thing that most of these lines of questioning have in common is a concern with the supposedly ambiguous status of Diamond's 'critique' of philosophising. They are concerned, one might say, with pointing out that Diamond *as a philosopher* seems to think the unthinkable (or says the unsayable) in her paper. One thing, then, that concerns our imagined critic is how problematic it is for Diamond to suggest that there are articulable difficulties which philosophy does not, and perhaps cannot, tackle head-on. One might then want to see her 'claims' as self-confirming, or indeed, self-defeating - in much the same ways as the moral relativist is supposed to presuppose the very philosophical approach she attempts

to doubt. For perhaps the difficulty of reality described by Diamond as an experience of the tension between 'thought and reality', as a failure to understand and express, must also extend to her own (presumably philosophical) account of what the difficulty of reality itself is. This would clearly be seen as a shortcoming in Diamond's account, but an interesting question concerns what sort of shortcoming it is supposed to be. If it is indeed a shortcoming in her thinking about the nature of philosophy, then presumably Diamond ought to take this accusation seriously insofar as she writes as 'a philosopher'. If she supposes herself to be doing philosophy proper, then she ought - a rationalistic critic might then suggest - abide by its conventions and see her critique for what it is: inherently limited, even unsustainable. That is, of course, unless she views herself - and wishes to be viewed by others - as critiquing philosophy from the position *of an outsider*.<sup>19</sup>

The risk here is that what can be described as the 'positional poles' will be erected thus: Diamond is seen either as doing poor philosophy, or as doing anti-philosophy. On the one hand, her claims could be viewed as inadequate because in criticising philosophical practice they are seen as self-defeating, in a similar way to how the relativistic viewpoint is supposed to be blinded to its own status as philosophy, its own dependence on conventions of philosophical thinking and argument. On the other, if her account is not really an exercise in philosophy at all, but an approach towards philosophy, then why, one could ask, should philosophers even attend to it, let alone take it seriously? The critic might then feel inclined to point out how 'us philosophers' have heard all this before. One might even be reminded of how attacks on philosophy have poured forth in recent decades from the pens of literary theorists, sociologists, and other ideological 'trendies': those who have sought to pronounce the demise of philosophy with so much 'gaseous' chatter about meta-narratives, logocentrism, ethnocentrism and the rest, but who have offered in its place little more than 'jargon-soaked' relativism, packaged as if afresh for 'our' postmodern era. If there is more than an element of caricature in my articulation of the positions here, it is because I want again to emphasise the risk of polarised

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<sup>19</sup> The possibility that Philosophy might in fact more readily resemble a 'family' of practices does not seem to occur here.



responses to what Diamond might be up to in her paper, a risk that seems particularly acute when it is a popular or prevailing tradition of thought (in this case thought about the nature and purposes of philosophy) that is placed under attack.<sup>20</sup>

#### **(v) Heart and Head: Philosophy and Feelingness**

If I have so far offered only a suspicion that a 'critique of philosophising', such as Diamond's, risks being understood in ways that distort its nature and purposes, it is useful to press the point by exploring a related, and in this case concrete, textual example. This is offered through some papers in another of Diamond's works, *The Realistic Spirit*, and in particular, through how she approaches the philosophical attacks made by Onora O'Neill on Stephen Clark's book *The Moral Status of Animals*. In a chapter entitled, 'Anything but Argument', Diamond portrays the thrust of O'Neill's critique of Clark's work as "...exemplifying a view of how philosophical discussion in ethics can be carried on, and how it should be carried on" (Diamond, 1991: 291). Through O'Neill's reaction to Clark we are also permitted, I think, to detect not only an approach to (moral) philosophy which Diamond is questioning, but also the same sorts of doubt that are expressed in the questions posed by my imagined critic about Diamond's own writings.

If Clarke's book, for Diamond, seeks to change the way we think about animals - to 'convince' us to look upon them as 'our kin' by 'enlarging our imaginations' - then O'Neill's response to this attempt is perhaps predictably dismissive. For O'Neill, if we are not already 'attuned' to Clark's vision, and require him to supply us with "...reasons for accepting his view that animals are kin...", we will find to our dismay that there are no such arguments, but only various 'appeals' directed at 'the heart'. For O'Neill, Clark's book is limited in scope and value as a work of moral philosophy precisely because he, "...seeks to do morality without metaphysics", and as such,

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<sup>20</sup> That Diamond's doubts about some of the claims of one variety or tradition of philosophy would likely be treated as an attack on philosophy *per se*, is perhaps unsurprising. The problem, one might say, is that Diamond is attacking what she views as one (ethically limited) tradition of thought. Others, however, may well not view their approach as simply belonging to one tradition, but consider it to constitute philosophy *proper*. The almost reflexive response then made against the attacker is to lay claim to the territory inhabited by the attacker, and to the weapons used in her attack. Thus one deprives the 'enemy' of both the grounds, and the means, to conduct their offensive: they cannot, so to speak, mount an attack without at the same time attacking themselves. Diamond, then, cannot critique philosophy, *philosophically*, without critiquing herself.

“...his appeals can reach only the audience who share his commitment to animals” (Diamond, 1991: 291-2). It is worth pointing out that when Diamond describes O’Neill’s response as underpinned by the idea that “...when someone is reasonably convinced of something, the convincing will have to proceed by arguments (or what could, at any rate, be set out as arguments)”, she is also describing at least one hallmark of the philosophical thinking about ethics I have described in this thesis as rationalistic (Diamond, 1991: 292).

A rationalistic tendency is also revealed through the idea that Clark’s attempt to do morality without metaphysics (or, perhaps in the terms of Hand and Dearden, morality *without epistemology*) means that one cannot make plain what Diamond calls ‘the grounds of moral standing’. Hence, if one does not supply the rational *grounds* in favour of a given moral position, then one is supposed to engage in mere assertion, and an effort to persuade the reader with extra-rational considerations. It is only a certain vision of ‘reasoned argument’ that is supposed to be properly convincing (rather than ‘merely’ persuasive) because it alone is directed at ‘the head’. Whereas our ‘hearts’ are moved only by emotive appeal and assertion; our ‘heads’ can be convinced only by the provision of general grounds proceeding from facts and principles. In short, for O’Neill, Clark as a philosopher ought to have aimed for the head, but aimed instead at the heart, and has failed thereby to provide a genuinely convincing account.

The critical questions raised by my imaginary ‘rationalistic critic’ do indeed appear to aim at similar (perceived) weaknesses in Diamond’s own account in the *Difficulty of Reality*. For such a critic, Diamond provides lengthy quotations from works of literature, makes various disparaging comments about the deflection of philosophy, and seems simply to appeal to the reader to acknowledge certain ‘experiences’ and thus ‘see’ things her way. They could well continue by pointing out that unless one is already ‘attuned’ to Diamond’s account, there is nothing here that ought to convince the philosopher of the need to change his ways. There is, in short, little that aims directly at his ‘head’. Indeed, Diamond seems to provide no compelling arguments against, say, the centrality of abstract argument in approaching the ethical lives of human beings and their relationships with non-

human animals. ('Indeed, how could she, without confirming what she seems to want us to deny!' – a rationalist would once again seem to be on comfortably safe ground here.)

I want to close this discussion by pointing out what Diamond has to say in response to O'Neill's reading of Clark, and how her response relates more generally to the questions I raised earlier about the 'problematic status' of her own work in *The Difficulty of Reality*. In doing so, we will be better placed to begin to understand Diamond as seeking to examine and critique philosophy insofar as it is underpinned by rationalistic ambitions, rather than as wanting to do without the notion of philosophical reflection and reason altogether. On the one hand, then, Diamond can be viewed as attempting to effect a shift of attention so that we might better notice the shortcomings of certain approaches to philosophical argument, certainly insofar as they are supposed by their proponents to occupy a privileged position in the tackling of supposedly 'deep' questions of human life and value. On the other hand, and in addition to this shrinking of the foundational ambitions of philosophy in respect of the ethical lives of human beings, Diamond can also be seen as wishing to expand what might actually count as philosophical engagement with the ethical; an engagement that moves away from the desire to establish, for example through abstract argument, the proper shape of our ethical lives.

In so doing, it allows us to begin to grasp how a philosophical text such as Diamond's can effectively *reach beyond itself*: beyond the presentation of particular theories or claims, and yet enable us to reflect on our own ethical lives, and on the nature of our thinking about them<sup>21</sup>. Moreover, we are also given the first hint of a possible response to the question of whether there can, indeed, be a role for philosophy in both understanding and shaping the ethical lives of human beings. This response is indeed something I intend to flesh-out in the next two chapters, which are devoted to exploring how the philosophy of Wittgenstein might allow us to better grasp what a non-deflective philosophical approach could look like, along

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<sup>21</sup> I cannot help thinking in this respect of Raimond Gaita's preface to the second edition of *Good and Evil*, where he describes how the book, "...invites readers to see morality and philosophy from a new perspective; not so much by arguing for this or for that thesis, as by exposing assumptions, showing other possibilities and being sceptical about what we often think *must* be the case" (Gaita, 2004: II).

with how this would relate to thinking about various concerns in both ethics and education.

#### **(vi) Philosophy and the 'Literary Method'**

I return, then, to Diamond's responses to O'Neill, and to the *style* of her engagement with O'Neill's claims about Clark's failure to supply arguments to support the position he wishes to defend. Despite the familiarity of such accusations (e.g. 'X supplies no compelling grounds for us to accept Y') in philosophical texts, Diamond approaches what O'Neill says, and how she says it, with a renewed, and quite deliberate, sense of puzzlement. Rather than actively seeking to discover the 'missing' arguments in Clark's book, and thus accusing O'Neill of having ignored or overlooked them, Diamond's focus is more on the accusation itself - the notion of Clark's not having provided the necessary arguments in order to convince his readers - and on encouraging us to be *puzzled* about it. As such, Diamond pursues what one might well describe as a *philosophical investigation* of O'Neill's objection to Clark, one that is concerned in part with probing, from different angles, what it might mean for her to proceed in the manner that she does. She attempts to get clear, for example, about what sort of picture is being presupposed by O'Neill about the relationship between philosophical argument and ethical engagement, and what else might be involved in holding on to such a picture.

It should also be noted, however, that Diamond is not so much rejecting the place of any sort of argument in our thinking about ethical questions, but is attempting to investigate and problematise what O'Neill seems to treat as the unquestioned centrality of the sort of argumentation that is supposed to be uniquely convincing, rationally speaking. Diamond does indeed suggest that, "...someone who rejects a good argument does so at a cost: for example, at the cost of showing his own incapacity to think carefully" (Diamond, 1991: 295). However, the point, contra O'Neill, seems also to be that someone who rejects as mere 'persuasion' other articulated ways of looking at things, may show limitations of other sorts: for example, "...a very limited moral imagination" (Diamond, 1991: 295). To fail to be

convinced, say, by a novel (such as *David Copperfield*) written in part to lead people to share a concern for children, may well help to reveal in one the existence of other limitations or incapacities, rather than simply provide support for the view that a novel, unless it contains arguments, must always fail to be convincing. Diamond thus seeks repeatedly to probe the notion that there is only one way of attempting to move beyond assertion: that of argument; and that unless one already shares the commitment to animals by a writer like Clark, arguments are thereby required in order to win us over.

Diamond's puzzlement here at least in part centres on the question of why one with such a disinclined heart would be expected to listen to argument? If one's heart is not already inclined, how does O'Neill think an argument, as a 'heart indifferent' method, will result in a change of belief, or indeed, of heart? One key assumption here seems to be that a good argument will simply induce one to adopt a view *in spite* of one's heart. This itself presupposes a certain prominence of the workings of 'the head' over the supposed inclinations of 'the heart': something that the philosopher ought both to personify and aim to encourage in others. One may not like the view being expressed, but one's broader commitment to the power and scope of rational argument will be supposed to overpower such feelings of disinclination: one is thus able to operate with a certain disassociation, or dislocation, of heart and head; feeling and reason. Yet, at the very least, it can be viewed as odd for O'Neill to include in her critique of Clark any talk of disinclinations of the heart. Presumably, those who would require 'good arguments' to change their minds on a given issue, should (if they correctly privilege the place of 'rational arguments' in their lives) only be 'intellectually disinclined' to believe in the view we seek to promote. If they were indeed the sorts of people who would regularly privilege rational argument over other techniques of assertion or persuasion, then any disinclination they would have towards our preferred view would (it seems) already be a mere disinclination of the head (i.e. that one was already convinced by another, competing set of 'compelling' arguments).

There is, however, more going on in Diamond's approach both to O'Neill and in the *Difficulty of Reality* than probing and problematising. This is something that her discussion of *David Copperfield*, to which I alluded above, helps us in part to recognise. To bring this aspect of Diamond's style of doing philosophy more fully to the fore, it is helpful to consider a passage from another of her chapters in *The Realistic Spirit*, where she describes what she calls the 'literary technique' in philosophy. She begins with a passage from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, and moves to link Wittgenstein's approach here with her own. Hence, when someone says something 'metaphysical', Wittgenstein suggests that we should:

...demonstrate to him that certain signs in his propositions had been given no meaning. This method would be unsatisfying for the other person—he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy—but *this* method would be the only strictly correct one. [Tractatus, 6.53] What is to be learned by the reader of such a philosophical text would not be anything in the text; the person to whom such philosophy is addressed must take philosophically seriously the use of a literary technique, that of *not* enabling the reader to find what he expects in a certain sort of work. Just as Iser [a philosopher], reflecting on *Tom Jones*, emphasises that the novel teaches us how to think about human nature by making us think about it and not by giving us what to think, so a philosophical text may aim to make us think about things in a new way, not by giving us *what* to think about them, not by presenting new views or doctrines (Diamond, 1991: 371).

This passage is puzzling, and clearly demands unpacking. What, for example, could be meant by getting us to think without telling us what to think, or of our learning something from the text which is not itself in the text? We might point out that surely *the* text, *any* text, will be communicating something rather than nothing. We think: it must surely have something to say. Such responses are understandable, particularly if we think that a philosophical text will, in virtue of its being *a* philosophical text, attempt to get us to think about an issue precisely by telling us what we ought to think. That it must provide us with claims and theories, and with the arguments that are supposed to support them. Nevertheless, in the 'literary

technique' Diamond is describing, the intended effects on the reader of a philosophical text seem more closely to resemble those experienced by a person engaged with a substantial work of fiction, such as *Tom Jones*. Although the author may clearly guide our reactions to the characters in his novel, he does not explicitly teach us what to think about what, say, they are supposed to represent. Neither can his work simply be understood as constituting a series of claims about what must be the case with the 'human condition'. Rather, as readers of fiction, we come to reflect on such general themes via our engagement with particular examples; for example, with particular characters in a novel.

It is also important to recognise that reflecting on a novel is not simply a matter of being made to feel certain things, of simply being moved 'emotionally' – as if 'heart' and 'head' live in complete isolation from each other. Insofar as we are reflecting well, we will also likely be questioning, probing, wondering, making connections, drawing comparisons, and so on. We may also be discussing and even arguing with others. As such, Diamond's literary method provides a direct challenge to polarised thinking about the separateness of 'head' and 'heart'. It also helps to emphasise the differences between her approaches to philosophical thinking, and of the role of 'reasoning' in the ethical life, and those rationalistic approaches I have described elsewhere in the thesis. Indeed, Diamond's description of a 'literary method' connects closely with what Alice Crary describes as the possibility of a different, less narrow, conception of rationality. A conception on which 'rational thinking' is not conceived as essentially independent of various personal sensitivities and 'affective endowments', but inextricably wrapped-up with them. For indeed:

...a person's ability to make the connections constitutive of a rational line of thought necessarily presupposes sensitivities characteristic of her as a possessor of a language and on which modes of discourse that cultivate a person's sensitivities may therefore make direct contributions to rational understanding in virtue of doing so (Crary, 2007: 128).

The connections between Crary's notion of what we might describe as an 'embodied rationality', and Diamond's talk of a 'literary technique' are important.

They also help reveal that the style of Diamond's writing cannot be radically separated from the content of her philosophy: the style, rather, reveals ('shows' us) something about the nature of the subject of philosophy –and of its relationship with ethics - as Diamond sees it. This is not, as I have suggested, simply a matter of Diamond writing 'poetically', and as such, believing that we too ought to write philosophy in such a manner.

Her own use of literary works, such as Elizabeth Costello in *The Difficulty of Reality*, encourages our philosophical reflections to go beyond her own text, and to look more deeply at the works she discusses. And to look more deeply at them as the sorts of writings that can bear directly on our ethical lives, and on our thinking better – and more rationally - about them. Diamond's writings, and her talk of a literary method, appear to offer a way of expanding the idea of what can count as 'rational' engagement; of attempting to "...enrich our inventory of modes of discourse that are capable of directly contributing to rational understanding" (Crary, 2007: 119). Part of this is to encourage us to acknowledge that what for O'Neill (and indeed the rationalistic critic) might be described as merely 'persuasive' modes of discourse, ('modes...that aim to elicit affective responses') can as such make direct contributions to such understanding (Crary, 2007: 119).<sup>22</sup> It is, at least in part, to emphasise the role works of fiction can play in encouraging ethical development. I will say more about this in the final chapter.

### **(vii) Conclusions**

For now, and by way of a conclusion to this chapter, I want attend to something else that Alice Crary mentions in this connection, and which will also help us better to appreciate Diamond's notion of a text being able to point us in ethically relevant ways beyond what is said in the text. In discussing Tolstoy's short story, *The Death of Ivan Illich*, Alice Crary describes how the story, "...attempts to get us to look at death (and our lives as beings who will die) is a more appropriate way...", but does

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<sup>22</sup> See also Crary's description of her larger aim in *Beyond Moral Judgement*, which is: "...to show that once we recognize that the moral interest of certain literary works needs to be understood in widely rational terms, we position ourselves to see that literary works are frequently in the business of eliciting moral thinking that, while rationally fully legitimate, does not take the form of moral judgement-making" (Crary, 2007: 132).



not do so through the provision of claim or doctrine, for, "...the story doesn't aim to provide information about death that we are lacking..." (Crary, 2007: 156). Instead, the story resonates with the notion of deflection I have discussed in this chapter in connection with a rationalistic conception of what it might mean to lead an ethical life. Not only does it help us better to understand Diamond's own use of literary examples such as Ted Hughes and J.M Coetzee, it also helps to aid our appreciation of what may be the ethical and educative advantages of such examples over the arguments which the rationalist supposes will establish certain moral truths.

If Tolstoy's story teaches us about death, and in particular how it can be tempting to reduce its ethical significance into a matter of accepting a claim or a doctrine (Ivan himself recognises that he as a man is indeed mortal by extending the syllogism 'Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal'), then it is done in different ways. It comes, rather, through the development of, "...a narrative technique that is designed to invite identifications of different sorts with its various characters" (Crary, 2007: 156). By inviting identification of various sorts with its various characters: we are given, so to speak, a choice, or a number of choices, of 'emotional' identification with any or all of them. Rather than encouraging us to address the question of how we might make sense of death through abstract argumentation, we are encouraged by the author to look at how different people, different characters, actually understand and react to death. We are, on Crary's reading, also "...asked to feel repugnance for the empty life that Ivan lives with his wife..."; to "...feel a sort of horrified exasperation with Ivan's doctors and friends who lie to him while he is dying". In contrast, we are invited to feel 'relief' at the "...simple solicitousness of the peasant Gerasim...", who helps Ivan through his last days with compassion, and without any obvious condescension (Crary, 2007: 156-7).

This hardly constitutes mere manipulation of 'our hearts'. In short, we are able to understand what Crary calls the 'moral message' of the story only insofar as it enables us to "...make sense of certain features of Ivan's life that he has somehow forgotten or obscured", and that we have also been enabled to "...make sense of analogous features in our own mortal lives" (Crary, 2007: 157). This involves both

intellectual and emotional effort, even struggle. In particular, it seems to require an openness that involves our not seeking to obscure or deflect ethical problems into mere questions and debates to be settled through abstract patterns of argumentation. In the view that I have been sketching here, and seek to extend in the rest of this thesis, Tolstoy – and indeed, Diamond – are not offering us, as my imagined philosophical critic might suspect, an alternative to thinking hard, to doing philosophy. Instead, they are suggesting what we might describe as an alternative form of philosophical or rational engagement with ethical questions: an intellectual engagement which is nevertheless bound-up with our emotional responses.

# Chapter 7

## Wittgenstein: Philosophy without Deflection?

“Nothing is so difficult as doing justice to the facts.”

—Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough*

### I. Introduction

I begin this chapter with a rather bold claim: that is, for me, Wittgenstein’s philosophical writings can be read as fundamentally ethical in nature. The task of developing this idea will occupy much of my attention both in this chapter and in the next. It may, nevertheless, seem a rather an odd thing to be suggesting. Even a glance at the index of the *Philosophical Investigations* will reveal one solitary reference to the word ‘ethics’<sup>23</sup>; and this (at section 77), would seem simply to constitute a warning about the possibility of saying anything definite about ‘our concepts’ in aesthetics and ethics. This would, at the very least, seem strange if it were indeed Wittgenstein’s intention to write a book *about* ethics. Another way of pressing this point is to ask: if Wittgenstein was so interested in ethics why does he say so precious little about it, particularly in his later writings? What is more, it is perhaps not even clear what sort of distinction I am making with this claim: with what, or with whom, am I contrasting the supposedly ethical nature of Wittgenstein’s writings? For even my discussions of the ‘rationalistic’ writings of Dearden and Hand on teaching controversial issues reveal certain underlying, or underpinning, ethical purposes. Does not Hand in particular aim at establishing the right criterion for selecting such issues for teaching in schools, so that certain supposed ‘goods’ (the need for young people to receive ‘substantive’ moral guidance; the need to develop their ‘capacity’ for rational choice and action etc.) are best achieved? It would certainly be strange to say that these were simply educational goods rather than ethical ones, as if the two things could be cleaved neatly apart.

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<sup>23</sup> Along with no explicit entries for ‘value’, ‘values’, ‘moral’, ‘morals’, or ‘morality’.

In order to see how, in spite of appearances, Wittgenstein's writings might be described as concerned with the ethical, and how this separates them from that philosophising about ethics I have called rationalistic, I will again take seriously the idea introduced at the end of the last chapter in the context of approaching Diamond's talk of a literary technique. This is the idea that a certain style of writing philosophy aims to direct us beyond the text itself: that it gets us to think without telling us what to think; engages our minds without advancing novel theories or claims. 'That is all very well and good', one might still say, 'but isn't it also revealing that when Diamond talks of this, she quotes from the *Tractatus* (at Section 6.53) in order to evoke something like Wittgenstein's distinction between 'saying' and 'showing'?' 'And surely', one might continue, 'the Wittgenstein who wrote about that, was a quite different philosopher from the one who penned later works such as *Philosophical Investigations*.' It is interesting that one would likely have less of a problem in describing the *Tractatus* as revealing an ethical, even a spiritual, purpose. Wittgenstein seems to say as much in his letters to Von Ficker, when he speaks of the *Tractatus* as really consisting of two works: the one that he wrote and the one that could never be written. And it is the second that he supposed to be the important one.<sup>24</sup>

However we take such statements, and whether or not we see the 'claims' in the book as strictly nonsensical, the point remains that Wittgenstein does speak about ethics in the *Tractatus*. In fact, he seems to begin to expound certain ideas that are developed in what has become known as the *Lecture on Ethics*, a few years later, in 1929. The main task for this chapter, then, is to show how we might treat Wittgenstein's later writings as fundamentally ethical in nature, *in spite* of the fact that they say so precious little about familiar ethical themes or issues. The task of the next chapter is to clarify how the story I begin to develop here about Wittgenstein's 'ethics' can nevertheless be variously misunderstood and

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<sup>24</sup> To cite the relevant passage at length: "The book's point is an ethical one. I once meant to include in the preface a sentence which is not in fact there now but which I will write out for you here because it will perhaps be a key to the work for you. What I meant to write, then, was this: My work consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all that I have *not* written. And it is precisely this second part that is the important one."

<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1969/jul/10/wittgensteins-strategy-2/?pagination=false>

misappropriated. For now, I begin the task of elucidating what I see as the ethical nature of these writings through an exploration of the character or 'style' of his approaches to philosophy.

## II. On reading, and writing about, Wittgenstein

I want to confess from the outset of this chapter that I find reading Wittgenstein difficult. I speak, in particular, of the challenging process of 'finding one's feet' with him: of how, for instance, to approach the relationship between *what* Wittgenstein writes, and *how* he writes; between the 'content' and the 'style' of his investigatory, descriptive, and dialogic approaches to philosophy. Consider, in the first place, the following comments about Wittgenstein's style made by philosopher and psychotherapist John Heaton, in his book entitled *Wittgenstein and Psychoanalysis*:

He uses no technical vocabulary and is explicitly aware that any philosophical assertion he makes has an imprecise and dubious status. His remarks are hints to be applied to confusions and are not dazzling novelties of technical insight. (Heaton, 2000: 9)

Heaton hits upon what may indeed strike the reader on his or her first encounter with Wittgenstein's later work. There is this, of course, and the fact that there are no discernible chapters, no section headings, little sense of overall structure, or even of continuous prose: in all, there seems to be an almost flagrant disregard for academic conventions. We may even be similarly confused about Wittgenstein's intentions, or aims, in writing philosophy. Of course, one can discover a few passing references which suggest that his approach could be conceived of as a kind of 'therapy'<sup>25</sup>, and yet, one may also come across the idea that the "...sickness of philosophical problems get cured only through a changed mode of thought and life, not through the medicine invented by an individual (RFM, 23)"; or indeed, the recognition that his writings ought to be treated as "...nothing more than the mirror in which my reader sees his own thinking with all its deformities & with this assistance can set it in order" (CV, 25). Of course, the fact that all this can be rather

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<sup>25</sup> For some familiar examples, see *Philosophical Investigations*, 133; 254- 255.

startling for the Wittgenstein novice, does not prevent it from being completely familiar to the more seasoned reader. One may well want to say: 'the question of why such a reader ought to be reminded in this section of what she already knows, remains unanswered'. To this I would add that familiarity can cut both ways. It can of course tell of a progressively deeper awareness of Wittgenstein's philosophical intentions; but it may also mean that his ways of writing philosophy have ceased to be striking: perhaps even coming to blur with other, perhaps more familiar ways of thinking about and writing about philosophy.

One might, perhaps, find oneself troubled about where, say, the so-called private language 'argument' starts and ends in the *Philosophical Investigations*<sup>26</sup>, or about the status of Wittgenstein's 'claim' about the 'common behaviour of mankind' in section 206 of the same book (e.g. If certain behaviours transcend 'culture', which ones? What, then, about values? Are there for Wittgenstein universal moral or aesthetic beliefs? Universal virtues?) In other words, there is a risk that one's writings about Wittgenstein may, in spite of their undoubted scholarly credentials, become distinctly *un-Wittgensteinian*. What, exactly, am I saying here? There are at least two things that I am *not* saying. Firstly, I am not suggesting that one must seek to emulate Wittgenstein's investigative style of writing in order to understand and write successfully about his philosophy. Clearly, one does not have to write about a poem in verse in order not to misrepresent, say, the poet's 'intentions'. Prose is not peculiarly doomed to failure in this respect; likewise, essays or chapters on Wittgenstein are not rendered worthless in advance on the basis of their expected format. Secondly, I am not attempting to explain away, or to put down any possible misrepresentation of Wittgenstein's ideas or intentions (of how, say, one ought to understand his uses of the terms 'ordinary' or 'everyday' language) to over-familiarity with, or a lack of attentiveness to, his style of writing. I refer instead to there being *a risk* that one might cease to be struck by the ways Wittgenstein writes about familiar philosophical problems; and that it is possible to come to miss

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<sup>26</sup> There is some well-known puzzlement here: does such an 'argument' run from sections 243-315, or is it, as Kripke (1982) has suggested, 'contained' in section 202?

the novelty in what he is saying by overlooking what is novel about how he is saying it.

One might also be tempted to revert to familiar, sharp distinctions between style and substance: over here is the 'style', and over there is the 'substance' or 'content'. The style is there to deliver the content: a decorative envelope, however attractive or unusual, is still just a casing for the contents – the all-important Wittgensteinian message. 'And what', one may again insist, 'is wrong with this picture?' To so much as think of abandoning it is surely to risk getting bogged down in some sort of 'literary analysis', and to forget the proper business of exploring and assessing Wittgenstein's philosophical ideas. Part of my point here is that this sort of objection can itself reveal the sort of polarity into which it is easy to descend when doing philosophy; and reminding us about the allure of such extreme and misleading pictures seems to constitute no small part of Wittgenstein's philosophical remit. To put my point in a more positive, indeed Wittgensteinian, way: *allowing oneself to be 'struck' by Wittgenstein's style of writing about common philosophical problems can help to focus one's attention on what is peculiar about his treatment of these problems, and what it is that makes these problems 'problematic'.*

One thing that is initially striking, although not strictly unique, about Wittgenstein's later writings is the dialogic style of many of the passages. For example, consider passage 278 from the *Philosophical Investigations*, where Wittgenstein writes: "'I know how the colour green looks to me' – surely that makes sense – Certainly; what use of the proposition were you thinking of?" While one may be quite used to a philosopher considering, and dealing with, objections or counter arguments to her stated position, in Wittgenstein's use of an imagined interlocutor, one also gets the impression not simply of a dialogue taking place between representatives of different philosophical positions, but also of his own struggle with certain thoughts and ideas - an internal dialogue, if you will. Even, perhaps, of an attempt to free himself of certain temptations as he is writing philosophy. And so we do not simply have: 'here is my idea', and 'here is the expression of the idea'; 'here is the all-important thought' and 'here are the words that 'carry' it'. We find instead a more

intimate relationship between thought and expression; one that is in keeping with what may be described as Wittgenstein's 'de-polarising' writings about topics such as the 'inner' and 'outer'; 'thought' and 'language'.

At various times in these writings, it can even be difficult to tell who is saying what: Wittgenstein or his imagined interlocutor. Consider for example the following passage from *Philosophical Investigations*:

'But still, it isn't a game, if there is some vagueness *in the rules*'.—But *does* this prevent its being a game?—'Perhaps you'll call it a game, but at any rate it certainly isn't a perfect game.' This means: it has impurities, and what I am interested in at present is the pure article.—But I want to say: we misunderstand the role of the ideal in our language. That is to say: we too should call it a game, only we are dazzled by the ideal and therefore fail to see the actual use of the word 'game' clearly. (PI, 100)

One has, so to speak, to take one's time with such passages. It is not immediately clear who is insisting, here, on the idea that games cannot be games if they have only vague rules; on the seeming distinction between 'imperfect', and 'perfect' or 'genuine', games. Although this supposed lack of clarity may indeed be put down to a poor reading of Wittgenstein's prose (e.g. of his use of dashes and quotation marks), or even, perhaps, to his taciturn style of writing, it has also, I suspect, something to do with the sorts of problems Wittgenstein is dealing with: with how such problems arise, and with the forms they are apt to take. One might say here that Wittgenstein's dialogic style itself throws light on his ideas of bewitchment, being 'dazzled', being 'irresistibly' tempted — it provides, if you will, a certain personification of such ideas. One may, as I suspect did Wittgenstein, recognise such *temptations* in one's own thinking<sup>27</sup>. John Heaton again helps to bring out this point with the following comment about Wittgenstein's 'style' of doing philosophy, which:

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. PI 299: 'being irresistibly inclined'



...invites direct involvement in the text by the reader because it is a drama of self-interrogation inviting the recognition of wishes, temptations and entanglements rather than arguments for the passive acceptance of theses. (Heaton, 2000: 9)

One is intended precisely to engage with, to 'open oneself' to, Wittgenstein's text: the style of writing encourages one to see oneself as a participant in an investigation; not as a disinterested yet ever-critical reader who must remain poised to counter any 'challenge' made by Wittgenstein to one's hitherto favoured 'position'. One thinks, perhaps, of watching ('experiencing') a Brecht play: where, so to speak, one is 'invited' to view oneself as a participant, *as involved*, in the drama rather than being allowed to remain a merely passive spectator, sitting in a privileged or distanced position. One might say that for Wittgenstein, too, one must tackle and resolve philosophical problems not from a position of abstraction, as a detached and critical observer of various 'Problems', but by seeing oneself – one's own attitudes etc. - as part of the problem at hand; part of the drama. We might also say, then, that Wittgenstein's way of writing philosophy presupposes a certain *seriousness* on behalf of the reader; a preparedness to engage afresh with one's philosophical problems<sup>28</sup> - to 'plunge' again and again into the waters of doubt and to feel at home there (c.f. PO,7: 119).

To this end, another important and distinctive feature of Wittgenstein's later writings is his use of examples. Here, examples often appear to function as a sort of method of investigating, and tackling, particular philosophical problems from different directions, rather than simply as a means of providing supplementary 'evidence' to reinforce a stated point of view. This perhaps ought to be seen in the light of certain comments made by Wittgenstein in the preface to the *Philosophical investigations*, which are quoted below:

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<sup>28</sup> Although it is speculative, I would suggest that one might view this demand for 'seriousness' in the light of Wittgenstein's remarks about writing from 'good-will' rather than, say, from 'vanity'; and also of his dismissal of 'cleverness' in the types of articles that he saw published in academic journals. (e.g. CV, 57-58; PR, 181-182)

After several unsuccessful attempts to weld my results together into such a whole, I realized that I should never succeed. The best that I could write would never be more than philosophical remarks; my thoughts were soon crippled if I tried to force them on in any single direction against their natural inclination.—And this was, of course, connected with the very nature of the investigation. For this compels us to travel over a wide field of thought criss-cross in every direction... (PI, preface: vii)

Part of what interests me here is the idea of thoughts being 'crippled'; and why such crippling ought to lead to the provision of 'nothing more' than philosophical remarks or examples, and how this is supposed to be related to the nature of 'the investigation'. For being compelled to travel across a wide field 'criss-cross' in every direction may indeed give the impression not simply of being lost, but of being disorientated: of having utterly lost one's bearings. And, we would hardly expect a person familiar with a particular terrain to behave in such a manner, let alone to expect others to benefit from such a seemingly aimless tour. We might even suggest that Wittgenstein, like any good navigator, ought to take us the most direct way to the desired destination. For although we might accept that he had taken many wrong turnings before finding the 'right way' in philosophy, we would still want him still to spare others the need to take these various detours.

The impression of being lost and disorientated connects, however, with Wittgenstein's oft-cited comments later in the *Investigations* that, "A philosophical problem has the form: 'I don't know my way about'" (PI, 123); and that the aim in doing philosophy is to "...shew the fly the way out of the fly-bottle" (PI, 309). Here one might well suppose that the fly can see the world 'outside' the bottle: it can see, or has a sense of, where it needs to get to in order to be free. And yet, as it does not have a clear view of the nature of its trap - of what is barring its exit - it is liable merely to buzz and bump ever more frantically against the walls of its supposed confines. It may itself become incapable of escape; it may in the end be 'crippled' by so many failed attempts to do so. Wittgenstein's writings, too, give us this sense of 'buzzing about', as we are invited to journey with him around and

around numerous philosophical landscapes. Wittgenstein joins us - if I may continue to press the image - on the various journeys of a fly around a fly bottle. He does not simply hold up a map or picture of an exit that he alone has discovered at the top of the bottle (What, after all, would one do with such a picture? What, for example, would one suppose it to be a picture of?)<sup>29</sup> There are no short-cuts or simple 'best routes' here; and the risk of losing one's bearings - even for the navigator - are ever present. One must, however, be able to find for oneself the complex and criss-crossed nature of the philosophical problems being investigated: the possible wrong-turnings, the dead-ends, the ring-roads, the diversions etc. It would not be enough simply to be told that such problems are somehow 'multifaceted': one must, so to speak, be made to bump repeatedly against the walls of the bottle - to feel a certain discomfort *for oneself*.

For Wittgenstein, then, it would seem that if we are to investigate philosophical problems we are somehow 'compelled' to travel far and wide: to move from philosophical remark to philosophical remark; often from one example to another. Not to do so is to put oneself at risk of crippled thoughts, and thus of rendering one's thinking immobile: stuck, perhaps, in one comfortable position or another. The use of continuous prose and a linked paragraph structure, may too easily<sup>30</sup> give the impression of steamrolling a straight path through a deep forest, whereby one would miss so much else of interest, and still not find one's sense of direction<sup>31</sup>. It could add to the sense that some sort of extended, abstract argument was what was required in order to find one's way about in philosophy. Such 'structured' writing can easily make it appear, for example, that one point is simply more fundamental than another; that *this* is the *essential* issue, and *that* merely follows from it, qualifies it, etc. It can make it seem as if one were communicating a sort of discovery, the recognition of which should simply be acknowledged as one's

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<sup>29</sup> One may draw an interesting parallel by imagining Plato's escaped prisoner (from the cave in *The Republic*) returning simply to show the other prisoners a map he sketched of the escape route, and a picture he had drawn of the outside of the cave. Here he shouts excitedly: 'This is what I have seen... *this* is what is outside. Follow me and you too will see what I have'.

<sup>30</sup> But not necessarily, of course.

<sup>31</sup> The forest image is borrowed from Wittgenstein: "I ask countless irrelevant questions. If only I can succeed in hacking my way through this forest". (CV, 67).

distinctive theory or solution (a type of medicine) to what troubles us all when doing philosophy. So while there is a sense that Wittgenstein is walking with us in his writings, and providing examples, erecting signposts, offering reminders, even giving 'the right *tip*'. (cf. PI, II: xi), he does not walk for us; he does not want to spare us the trouble of thinking for ourselves. His approach to writing philosophy – the various examples, the interlocutor, the imagined situations, and all the rest – provide, I believe, a strong indication that there is no discovery or theory being provided: nothing that might be supposed to solve or bring to an end, once and for all, one's difficulties in doing philosophy.

It is time to take a pause, and to press the following question of the account I have offered so far: what exactly does this discussion of Wittgenstein's style of writing philosophy have to do with my aims in this chapter? In other words: what, if anything, can be drawn from it in terms of an understanding of the non-deflective, and ethical, nature of Wittgenstein's writings? If I have suggested that the nature of his investigative style of philosophy reveals something important about the nature of philosophical problems for Wittgenstein, my story remains, to say the least, a little sketchy on the (ethical) details. Apart from a seemingly casual reference to the 'seriousness' presupposed by his writings, and some further talk of temptations, lost-ness, the idea of therapy, the need for openness etc., little of substance has been said of these matters. To remedy this, I aim in the next two sections to make clear that Wittgenstein's conception of the role of philosophy, revealed or 'modelled' through the ways he conducts his philosophy, brings to light the idea of philosophy being conducted *for the sake of the ethical*, albeit in a radically different sense from how the philosophically rationalistic account I described earlier in the thesis would conceive of this relationship. In this rationalistic account, philosophy is called upon to give us the ethical proper: without its intervention, and without the bolstering of certain 'moral' beliefs and practices by means of reason, the ethical life threatens to fall apart, or more accurately, to collapse given its very lack of firm foundations. We would seem to be left with anything goes: with relativism, with

mere preference, consensus, feeling, supposition, conjecture, intuition, and all the rest of this seemingly inadequate company.<sup>32</sup>

This sort of approach seems, in an important sense, to assume that human beings by nature resemble ethical sceptics<sup>33</sup> who stand in need of something akin to a justification for the ethical life before they will (or should?) be prepared to accept and to live it. I want to say that Wittgenstein's approach seems to reverse, or upturn, the role philosophy is supposed by the rationalist to play in the ethical life, and also points to very different educational possibilities. We get a sense that the lives of human beings need no such philosophical crutches; no foundations in the shape of theories or explanations. Rather, it is the ethical, and not philosophy, that is in an important sense *the given* here: the taken for granted, often unnoticed, landscape on which philosophy itself stands and, so to speak, peddles its wares. I will expand this slightly cryptic idea later. For now, suffice it to say that the supposed relationship between philosophy and ethics, which sees the latter as somehow dependent for its flourishing on the former's use of reason is, for Wittgenstein, symptomatic of a deep-seated but misleading picture.<sup>34</sup> It is itself something that stands in need of 'philosophical' treatment of a quite different sort. If I may briefly digress into anecdote at this point, according to Norman Malcolm in his *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, one of Wittgenstein's favourite phrases when Malcolm was tempted to meddle with something (anything from a philosophical

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<sup>32</sup> As for 'moral education', perhaps it might be thought to exist only as the teaching of various competing ideas or theories without any possibility of choosing rationally between them. Or perhaps, rather, it would form part of various cynical attempts at 'mere' persuasion into the preferences of the teacher, the school, the community, the government etc. Without the possibility of Reason's firmly guiding hand, the choice might well be conceived to be between mere nihilism on the one side of the abyss, and sheer totalitarianism on the other.

<sup>33</sup> Bernard Williams makes a similar point in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985:30). However, it should also be noted that such an idea is not solely the property of the accounts of 'philosophical rationalists.' Albeit in a different context, it is still interesting how social theorist Zygmunt Bauman describes human beings as, by nature, 'morally ambivalent' (Bauman, 1993:14).

<sup>34</sup> It may be captivating, even irresistible, for its proponents, but it may still be described as a form of *cheating* oneself. Perhaps it is in a similar way to how a religious person (e.g. Father Copelston in conversation with A.J Ayer) who looks for arguments to support the fact of God's existence, is described by Wittgenstein, as cheating himself. (See *Recollections of Wittgenstein* 1984: 158) In Cavellian terms, one might speak instead of failing to take responsibility for oneself; a failure of acknowledgement.

idea to a toilet in Malcolm's house that they were mending<sup>35</sup>) was, "...leave the *bloody* thing *alone*". There is indeed *something* in this slightly irreverent exclamation that I could imagine Wittgenstein wanting to say to the rationalist about an attempt to set the ethical lives of human beings on supposedly firm rational grounds.

### III. On doing 'justice' to 'the facts'.

I quoted from Wittgenstein's *Remarks about Frazer's Golden Bough* at the start of this chapter in part because what is said here seems quite ambiguous. Doing 'justice' to the 'facts' certainly sounds *Tractarian* (*'The world is the totality of facts not of things'* etc.) Moreover, it also brings to mind the infamous modern distinction between fact and value. It sounds rationalistic; even positivistic. Yet this would, I think, be to misunderstand what Wittgenstein is suggesting about this supposedly profound difficulty, and what '*not* doing justice to the facts' might also imply in terms of a contrast. It seems clear enough that when these remarks were written,<sup>36</sup> Wittgenstein's talk of 'the facts' (*tatsachen*) seem to have lost something of the more technical meaning assigned them in the *Tractatus*. The great difficulty of doing justice to the facts would seem now to refer more generally to how extremely tempting it can be to extrapolate: to offer an explanation or hypothesis which is supposed to 'make sense' of what is 'presented' or 'given' (in Frazer's own case, what is presented is the various religious practices of the 'primitive' peoples he writes about). Yet, this still sounds odd; even radically sceptical. If doing justice to the facts requires that we curb our urge to hypothesise or theorise, it seems also to imply that we (and Frazer) ought to give up any attempt to understand the phenomena, the practices, we encounter. In rejecting this implication, I want to suggest that Wittgenstein is drawing our attention here to the types of understanding that can emerge from different ways, or forms, of engagement with what are called here, 'the facts'.

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<sup>35</sup> *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir* (1958:85)

<sup>36</sup> As Klagge and Nordmann (1993: 115) point out in the preface, it is difficult to establish an accurate date for these remarks. They suggest that some were written in or after 1931, whereas others "not earlier than 1936 and probably after 1948".

Of particular relevance is the distinction between description and explanation as it appears in his later writings. This distinction does, however, have certain clear connections with what is said in the *Tractatus*. I think in particular of the passage I quoted in connection with Diamond in Chapter 7, which suggests that the ‘correct’ method in philosophy would be, “...to say nothing except what can be said”, and to ‘demonstrate’ that any desire to say something metaphysical, will be to fail “to give meaning to certain signs” in one’s propositions (TLP, 6.53). Following from this observation, I want to do at least two things. Firstly, I want to say something about what I see as the overlap between this statement from the *Tractatus* and some equally familiar passages in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Secondly, I want to discuss what I see as the ethical implications of these passages: something I attempt to make explicit by approaching them via some of Wittgenstein’s related remarks in the *Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough*. If this seems a complex, even convoluted, process, it is nonetheless helpful in bringing out these connections more clearly. What Wittgenstein has to say about Frazer’s inability to do ‘justice’ to the ‘facts’ of the religious practices of ‘primitive’ peoples has, I think, strong resonances with what he supposed, in the *Tractatus*, was the proper task of philosophy, and also with what he describes in the *Philosophical Investigations* as the confusions and errors involved in the ways other philosophers often approach human language, and through it, the lives of human beings.

The first thing to notice about the passage from the *Tractatus* is its idea that the role of philosophy is clarificatory: as not concerned with advancing knowledge through the making of claims, but as being in the business of clearing-up confusions, of drawing lines between what can and cannot be expressed with sense. Although this idea is wrapped-up in the *Tractatus* with the idea that only propositions of natural science are sayable, the distinction between the sorts of roles, or methods, appropriate to philosophy and the natural sciences remains present throughout Wittgenstein’s later thought. “Philosophers...”, he says in *The Blue Book*, “...constantly have the methods of science before their eyes” (BB, 320). The questions, then, are: in what ways might this be the case? And what sort of problem (or problems) is this supposed to generate? The clues can, I think, be

detected in the following passages from the *Investigations* about what it might mean to Wittgenstein to do philosophy:

...we may not advance any kind of theory. There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. We must do away with all explanation, and description alone must take its place. And this description gets its light, that is to say its purpose, from the philosophical problems...The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known. Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language (PI, 109).

Consider also:

Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it (PI, 124).

Or indeed:

Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything. – Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain (PI, 126).

These passages are so often quoted that it might seem surprising that anything novel can be made of them. So much, then, seems so familiar here: philosophy should be 'descriptive' rather than 'explanatory'; it should not 'meddle' (to change, to 'improve' etc.) what is described as 'the actual use of language'; it should not be viewed as being in the business of aiming at anything more ambitious, anything 'beyond', conceptual clarification. To do philosophy is to battle against 'bewitchment', or the 'entanglement' we face because of our inability to "*command a clear view of the use of our words*" (PI, 122). Language use is essentially rooted in human practices, in forms of life, which as philosophers we overlook at our peril in our various attempts to penetrate beneath our everyday language use, rather than, say, 'surveying' it by 're-arrangement' (PI, 92), or of "...substituting one form of expression for another" (PI, 90). Unlike the natural scientist who proceeds by hypothesis to an explanation of phenomena, the philosopher should aim instead at



the achievement of various 'perspicuous' representations, of 'seeing connexions' between various forms of linguistic expressions etc. (PI, 122). If this seems acceptable enough as a rough sketch of Wittgenstein's continuing idea of philosophy as involving 'description' rather than 'explanation', the following remarks from *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough* allow a more interesting picture to emerge. Consider, then the following passages in which Wittgenstein reflects on Frazer's description of the ritualistic sacrifice of a human being:

The very idea of wanting to explain a practice – for example, the killing of the priest-king – seems wrong to me. All Frazer does is make them plausible to people who think as he does (RFGB, 119).

Or, indeed:

I believe that the attempt to explain is already therefore to go wrong, because one must only correctly piece together what one knows, without adding anything, and the satisfaction being sought through the explanation follows of itself.

And the explanation isn't what satisfies us here at all. When Frazer begins by telling us the story of the King of the Wood of Nemi, he does this in a tone which shows that he feels, and wants us to feel, that something strange and dreadful is happening. But the question "why does this happen?" is properly answered by saying: Because it is dreadful. That is, precisely that which makes this incident strike us as dreadful, magnificent, horrible, tragic, etc., as anything but trivial and insignificant, is also that which has called this incident to life.

Here one can only describe and say: this is what human life is like (RFGB, 121).

One thing that is again noticeable is the distinction between explanation and description in these passages. Another is the idea that what is being sought though an explanation, in this case of a religious practice, is a sort of 'satisfaction', which may yet be achieved by correctly piecing together what one already knows (what

already lies open to view). However, the desire to explain, to make such practices plausible to ourselves and others, seems to emerge from something deep within us: as an attempt to cope, 'deal' with, or do justice to what we have encountered ('the facts'). We can pick this up from Frazer's *tone*. For Wittgenstein, the tone of his writing reveals, if you will, something beyond what is being said; it betrays Frazer's feelings; his reactions to what he has encountered. Through it we can be put into contact directly with a man who feels that something 'strange and dreadful is happening' in the lives of these human beings, and who seeks to get us to feel as he does about the matter. One might even conjecture that he is seeking to express these feelings of dread and terror, and have these feelings affirmed, or 'justified', through an act of communication with others.

The more important point, however, is that any such communication takes the form of an explanation: an attempt to answer plausibly the question, 'Why does this happen?' through offering various claims. The form of such a question can also make it appear to demand the same sort of answer one might give when asked why, say, a bowler in cricket repeatedly rubs the ball on his or her trousers. It seems to require one to explain the practice through something like one's superior knowledge: 'e.g. it's because they believe it will make it spin in the air, or move off at an unpredictable angle when it hits the ground etc.' And yet, the behaviour of cricket players may indeed appear strange or baffling, but hardly ever shocking, frightening, or terrifying. The shining of a ball and the ritualistic killing of a man call forth different reactions from us, and the question, 'Why does this happen?' in the second case can more closely resemble an expression (a cry) of horror and disbelief, than a call for various reasons to be provided (More: *Why does this happen!* Less: '*Explain why this happens?*')

It is interesting that *contra* Frazer, the only answer Wittgenstein thinks suitable to the question 'why?' in the case of the fate of the King of the Wood is, 'because it is terrible.' And it is precisely because it is terrible that it strikes us as significant: it becomes the sort of thing that one might also feel deserves (or demands) an explanation. For Wittgenstein, however, the proper approach would seem simply to be to describe what goes on in these practices, and to say, 'this is what human life

is like'. This may strike us as completely unsatisfying, we *want* to say: 'Well, it really shouldn't be like *that!*' We might add: 'They *must* do this sort of thing for *a reason!*' But what sort of reason are we looking for here? What would (or could) it look like? And what purpose/s would it serve? When faced with something that strikes us as grave and serious we seem to be demanding a justification, a defence of some sort ('explain yourselves!'). And yet, it might also seem that what we require are *the grounds* to form some kind of definite judgement: to be able to disagree with how these people conceive of this practice. Frazer's desire to make this instance of human sacrifice plausible to us, is, one might say (again evoking Cavell), a form of deflection from the unease, the horror even, that he clearly felt at this activity. Explanation seems to promise refuge; intrigue a shelter from the emotional storm. In this case, then, a hypothesis may offer to quell the distress by allowing one effectively to distance oneself from these human beings. We might well desire to have them 'explained away', or 'resolved', so that they need tell us nothing about human life that we are prepared to recognise and acknowledge as 'ours' ('These primitives were, after all, not like us *at all.*'). Our connection with these people as human beings seems to be what we most desire to sever, yet we seek to do so through the provision of explanation or hypothesis.

And yet Wittgenstein seems to want to point out that the explanation itself isn't what satisfies us at all here. But who is *us*? Does he suppose that the explanation Frazer offers us does not, in fact, satisfy Frazer himself? Or is it that Frazer is supposed to be satisfied (expressed?), only not through the explanation he offers us? There are no easy answers here. However, at least part of what Wittgenstein might be getting us to think about is that the satisfaction sought through explanation in such a case is not akin to that achieved by solving some kind of puzzle: this is not a case we would readily describe as driven by curiosity, intellectual challenge, even 'wonder'. Although curiosity and wonder might well constitute attempts to 'deal' with shock and horror, they fail to get to the heart of what troubles us (or, in this instance, what unsettles Frazer). If Frazer seeks satisfaction through an explanation it will not be the explanation that provides it, although the possibility that his unease might abate through communicating that

explanation might indeed help him (“...if Frazer’s explanations did not in the final analysis appeal to a *tendency* in ourselves, they would not really be explanations.” RFGB, 127 *My emphasis*).

If we are somehow being warned against explanation here then it seems to be because it can fail to provide the sort of reassurances we need when we are affected deeply by something in our lives (“But an hypothetical explanation will be of little help to someone, say, who is upset because of love. –It will not calm him.” RFGB, 127). What also seems important to note here is that this distancing need not apply only to the religious practices of historically distant or ‘primitive’ people. Let us consider instead some of the ‘shock examples’ which we sometimes find in moral philosophy. I am thinking now, say, of Dearden’s case of someone’s stubbing out a cigarette out on a baby, or of Bambrough’s example of performing a surgical operation on a child without anaesthetic (Dearden, 1981; Bambrough, 1979). To say: ‘this is what human life is like’ in such cases would seem to betray a sense of moral dumbness, even powerlessness, in just those matters where we want most to say something forceful; something definite. They must not, we feel, serve merely to show how human beings can sometimes behave terribly to one another, but also must prove, reveal, establish, something fundamental, say, about the way we all ought and ought not to behave. They ought to help us to reveal, for example, the foundations of at least some basic sense of morality. But it seems they can do nothing of the sort, or at least those foundations could only be of the sort where we could expect most people to be horrified at hearing these stories, and not to reply, ‘So what!’ or ‘What do I care!’ As with Frazer, we want people to feel as we do about them, and it looks as if an explanation aimed at establishing their absolute moral wrongness will satisfy this need<sup>37</sup>. And yet, this sort of explanation or account in these cases will fail to satisfy: it looks as if we need justification, or certainty in the shape of knowledge, but we do not - it will again fail to ‘calm us’.

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<sup>37</sup> To establish, say, moral foundations might seem to be the ‘proper’ way to express one’s horror at the acts described. (‘How dreadful! *via* ‘How can *this* happen!’ is perhaps transformed into ‘This ought never to happen, and here is why...’). But what if this horror can already be described as ethical? ‘Well, surely’ one thinks: ‘we can defend or justify this feeling’. (As if *that* was what was needed.)

This is, at least part, what Cavell seems to have recognised in *The Claim of Reason* about the use of such examples: that they never achieve what they were intended to achieve because, “Mere morality is not designed to evaluate the behaviour and interactions of monsters...” (Cavell: 1999: 265). An explanation of such atrocities will, as with Frazer’s attempt to explain the killing of the King of the Woods, merely render them plausible to people who already think as we do. Few of us are tempted to do such things, fewer still would find them readily defensible, and yet the knowledge that these acts may still be perpetrated by human beings remains unsettling. We seem still to feel the need to mark-off these acts as absolutely unacceptable, and to separate ourselves from these people and their behaviours. What our explanation seems to do, however, is merely to tie them in to a vision of morality that they ought as fellow human beings to share (but which they have in fact transgressed or perhaps abandoned). We may feel that we do not want them *with us* as human beings, but our explanation merely serves to connect them with us once again. They remain, in a sense, problematic; unresolved. We may also speculate that to seek an explanation here stems in part from a need to be reassured that one, as a human being, will never act like this; that one is not *capable* of such misdeeds. We again need reassurance, and mistakenly suppose that the certainty provided by an account of the foundations of morality, or of, say, how moral weakness and failure arise, would seem to help us here<sup>38</sup>. This at least suggests why it might be so tempting for us to explain, to ‘go beyond the facts’ in such ethical matters, despite the suspicion that it is actually something more ‘primitive’, more rooted in reactive feelings of horror, disgust, insecurity etc., that can serve to spur this desire to establish and to justify.

#### **(IV) In the beginning was the deed...**

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<sup>38</sup> I am also interested here in J.M. Coetzee’s description in *Elizabeth Castello* of Elizabeth’s abusive sexual encounter, as a young woman, with a sadistic docker. By her encountering the evil in his actions, “...through the docker, all that time ago, the devil entered her: she can feel him crouched inside, folded up like a bird, waiting for his chance to fly” The knowledge, the experience of evil, can corrupt us. The following images now resonate: ‘to pick the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil’; ‘to fall from a state of grace’. What seems to be communicated here is how one can become most painfully struck by what *we* human beings *are* capable of (Coetzee, 2000: 167-8).

Writing about this reminds me of an experience I had as a young man, which I recall here with due fear of digression. I remember once going to a museum of 'Roman artefacts', and being made to feel deeply uneasy by one of the exhibits. It was a skeleton of a very young child, a little girl, whose teeth were discoloured by a coin that was placed in her mouth in order to pay the boatman who was to ferry her soul to the underworld. She kept intruding in my thoughts for quite some time after. The feeling in the pit of my stomach returns as I write this now. One of the 'visions', if that is the right word to describe these interloping thoughts, was of someone – a loved one - placing the coin in her mouth, and of what it *must* have meant for that person to have done this. It did not interest me so much as disturb me, and I tried always to stop myself from thinking about, and picturing, it. Yet, it was *never* at all a question of what the placing of a coin *could* have meant in terms of the beliefs the Romans had about the hereafter. The placing of the coin never struck me in terms of such beliefs at all, but in terms of love, pain, despair, hope, even. There was something definite, something concrete, in these experiences, that speculation seemed simply not to get near. Although I am not sure what exactly to make of this story (perhaps I was just a pretty strange kid!), it does seem that forming an exact explanation never seemed to be the point. An explanation, or so it seems, would not have 'calmed me'; it would not, to once more borrow the phrase, have done 'justice to the facts'.

I may, nevertheless, stand accused at this point of taking my own explanations or theories about Wittgenstein too far (or perhaps, even, not far enough in terms of explaining what is supposed to be 'ethical' about his writings.) For one thing, if I spoke earlier of making links between talk of description and explanation in the *Philosophical Investigations* and those in his *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, then those links still seem tenuous at best. The first set of quotations from the *Investigations* seem to speak of philosophical misunderstandings of 'language use', while the second set centre on how certain religious practices might be misunderstood. 'Surely', one might object with some justification, 'you have still done precious little to connect the two!' To finally draw out this connection more

strongly, I want to consider some further passages from Wittgenstein's remarks on Frazer. Firstly, consider:

Burning in effigy. Kissing the picture of one's beloved. That is obviously not based on the belief that it will have some specific effect on the object which the picture represents. It aims at satisfaction and achieves it. Or rather: it aims at nothing at all; we just behave this way and then we feel satisfied.

One could also kiss the name of one's beloved, and here it would be clear that the name was being used as a substitute.

And also:

In the ancient rites we have the use of an extremely developed gesture-language.

And when I read Frazer, I continually would like to say: We still have all these processes, these changes of meaning, before us in our verbal language (RFGB, 135).

What Wittgenstein seems concerned to do through these passages is draw our attention to the kinship we have with the very primitive people from whom we might desire to distance ourselves. It appears that one of the things we are being reminded of here, is that human life, including our lives as speakers of language, is a life rooted in various practices. Our uses of words are themselves tied to various practical purposes, and, what is more, he suggests that, "An entire mythology is stored within our language." (RFGB, 133). A 'mythology' that has grown up because, I suggest, human beings continue to act and react in certain recognisable ways: we continue to love, laugh, cry, suffer, fear, wonder, feel pain, and in the end, of course, die. Mythology is not something unique to primitive people. The idea of kissing the name of one's beloved, as a substitute for the picture itself throws some light on the idea that words may indeed come to replace, or stand in place of, certain gestures. "One could almost say that man is a ceremonial animal...", says Wittgenstein, and although he goes on to suggest that such a statement, "...is no

doubt, partly wrong and partly nonsensical”, there is, nevertheless, he thinks, “...something right about it” (RFGB, 129). For, as the following passage points out:

If a narrator places the priest-king of Nemi and “the majesty of death” side by side, he realizes that they are the same. The life of the priest-king shows what is meant by that phrase.

The meaning of the words ‘the majesty of death’ are shown in the living of a life: revealed by and communicated through the ritualistic actions of these human beings (RFGB 123).

If this sounds as if Wittgenstein wants us to accept *a claim* such as: ‘There is such thing as human nature after all. We share a common ‘ritualistic’ nature with the people Frazer describes’, then this implication would, I think, be mistaken. We are returned once more to the idea that establishing claims and providing explanations will remain unsatisfying: they will not calm the sorts of troubledness that led us to want to make them in the first place. Kinship here is not something that needs to be established once and for all, but instead acknowledged for a certain purpose or purposes: e.g. to rectify a misleading picture that we are inclined to accept e.g. Frazer’s need to explain these practices; to see them as primitive hypotheses, as ‘errors’ (‘pieces of stupidity’) that we in virtue of our scientific progress are no longer inclined to make (see RFGB, p.119).<sup>39</sup> We might in such cases need to be reminded that the words we speak in our everyday lives, and the range of ways that we use them, involve innumerable sorts of activities, and of course, various and diverse gestures.

The linguistic connection with gesture is, in so many cases, by no means as easy to detect as in the kissing of a name of one’s beloved, and we often fail to see clearly what is being expressed, or shown, through various acts of speech. Sensitivity to the range of ways that we use words, and the different although often more or less loosely related purposes that they serve, is instead required. But this hardly implies

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<sup>39</sup> Here I reveal, once again, a certain indebtedness to the early Cavell; particularly to the distinction he draws between knowledge and acknowledgement in his collection of essays *Must we Mean What we Say?* (1969)



the mandatory study of linguistics, or the immersion in some other domain of expert knowledge. For, “Commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting...” are, as Wittgenstein points out, “...as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing” (PI, 25). Sensitivity to words is always also a sensitivity to our lives as beings who use words. This is, at least in part, what Alice Crary seems to be getting at when she describes in her book *Beyond Moral Judgement*, Wittgenstein’s approach to ethics, as “...concerned with the full array of sensitivities that individuals possess as language-users”. And whereby:

An organizing preoccupation of his later writings is criticizing approaches to language that presuppose that we can survey and assess judgements, or moves in a language game, without relying on sensitivities we acquired in leaning to judge (Crary, 2007: 121).

For Crary, then, Wittgenstein’s later approach to philosophy, as concerned with untangling our confusions, is fundamentally, “...an ethical enterprise directed towards bringing us face-to-face with our responsibility for what we say and think” (Crary, 2007: 122). Philosophy seems, in this sense, to be placed in the service of the ethical; it is conducted for ethical purposes other than the justification of these human practices through the provision of certain ‘rational foundations’.

However, this may again appear misleading. For one thing, it is not clear what *not* taking responsibility for what we say and think would look like, or who (or what) else might be supposed to be able to do this for us. Of course, I am in a sense implicated in all that I say and do, but why should this be supposed to matter, ethically? Are we not simply stating the mere truism that my thoughts and actions are indeed my thoughts and actions (rather than someone else’s)? What Crary might be getting at, however, is best revealed by bringing out once more the connections with Cavell’s notion of deflection, and with Wittgenstein’s own writings in *On Certainty*. The idea of seeing language use as rooted in practices, in ‘forms of life’ which can resemble each other in some ways and yet not in others, connects with what Wittgenstein speaks of as *reasons coming to an end*. Consider, then, the following two passages:

Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; - but the end is not certain propositions' striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of seeing on our part; it is our acting, which lies at the bottom of the language-game (OC, 204).

We could doubt every single one of these facts, but we could not doubt them *all*. Wouldn't it be more correct to say: "we do not doubt them *all*". Our not doubting them all is simply our manner of judging and therefore of acting (OC, 232).

The emphasis on 'our acting' again resonates with the familiar Wittgensteinian image of a spade turning once bedrock has been reached: the idea is then, 'this is simply what I do'. My criteria are rooted in my living in certain ways and not in others; reasons and explanations, must terminate in these doings, these 'deeds'. Where Cray's point comes in here (and connects with a Cavellian reading of Wittgenstein) is via the idea that the question of justification could well still arise here, perhaps in the following way. Hence, a critic might ask: 'So, are you not now saying that for Wittgenstein all ethics is, at bottom, *unjustifiable*?' If this sort of question or objection seems understandable, the more important questions concern why it is understandable, and what exactly it might be supposed to be driving at.

Here, I think, we might raise a different set of related questions, for example: what would this absent justification be supposed to achieve? Why do we so much as feel that we need one? We are thus returned to the notion of *satisfaction* I mentioned earlier in connection with Frazer: a justification in the shape of some form of a defensible and compelling explanation is what would seem to pacify me; to placate my doubts. We seem again to stand in need of evidence, but once more have something akin to the methods of the natural sciences before our eyes. Our difficulties make it look as if we need to be able to prove something; to settle the matter to everyone's satisfaction. This explanation or justification would, in a sense, take responsibility for our practices (for the 'this is simply what I do'). We could in a sense defer to its authority; allow it to speak for us. In short, we seem to be

tempted to deflect our unease through the attempt to encounter an intellectual solution, and thereby reach satisfaction through 'certainty'. Although this deflection may, if I may put it like this, result in a philosophical or intellectual achievement, it can also involve a sort of ethical failure: a failure to engage honestly, and with proper seriousness, with what troubles us about a particular aspect of our lives.

#### **(v) Conclusions**

It sounds odd, but the fact that philosophical problems are indeed experienced as *somebody's problems* helps throw light on the general form they are supposed by Wittgenstein to take: i.e. 'I don't know my way about'. Wittgenstein's remarks on Frazer again resonate with this idea, for he speaks here of, "The awakening of the intellect..." occurring with "...a separation from the original soil, the original basis of life" (RFGB, 139). Philosophical problems too may arise from a sense of separation; of separateness from the 'soil' of our everyday lives as language users. The philosopher's treatment of a problem is 'like the treatment of an illness' says Wittgenstein in the *Investigations*, for we may indeed feel ill at ease, even at odds, with particular facts about human life (e.g. the seeming groundlessness of our practices) and seek to cure ourselves of this discomfort through intellectual effort - through the provision of certain grounds. And yet, in the midst of our puzzlement we may so easily lose sight of what can be problematic for us. Nevertheless - as we have seen before - it is not for Wittgenstein some medicine invented by an individual that will 'cure' us, although we may be nevertheless be treated (but not, as it were, in spite of ourselves; not without due ethical seriousness on our part). If explanation or theory will often fail to root out the source of the discomfort, we may yet be enabled to have a clear view of what it is that afflicts and troubles us: what it is that we find problematic about the 'original soil'.

Finally, then, I want to return to the claim I made at the outset of the chapter: that for me, Wittgenstein's philosophical writings can be read as fundamentally ethical in nature. In revisiting this claim here, I want to spell out more clearly the relationship I have been exploring between ethical seriousness and philosophical deflection. This is to say that I find Wittgenstein's writings ethically serious *because*

they are non-deflective. Philosophical problems in the sense that they are serious, or posed seriously, are for Wittgenstein problems in living; they are wrapped up directly with the senses in which living can be problematic for us. The claim is not, of course, that *all* philosophical questions concern recognisably ethical topics, nor that every person who asks every philosophical question is much troubled about, say, the direction of her life or her position in the world. It is to say, rather, that a philosophical problem is always someone's problem, and that to be captivated ('bewitched') by the problem can mean that one feels distanced, separated from the lives we lead as human beings. The experience of philosophical illness means that one could well be inclined to think: 'there is something wrong with us, with me, with the way we speak and act in relation to x or y'. In investigating these problems or feelings of illness, Wittgenstein returns us to 'everyday' life, to the 'rough ground' (the original source) that invites our doubts because it looks as if it stands in need of philosophical improvement (or as the rationalist supposed, justification). And yet, for Wittgenstein, our ethical lives which must nevertheless be lived in the midst of this supposed roughness, must also, in a sense, be allowed to speak for themselves; which is to say that I must also be prepared to speak for myself, to speak in the *first person*, to say: this is what I, or indeed we, do.

# Chapter 8

## Ethical Development after Wittgenstein

### (i) Introduction

Having in the previous chapter sketched what it is, for me, that makes Wittgenstein's approach to ethics *non-deflective*, I now aim to confront two related questions. The first concerns what ethical learning or development might look like on a Wittgensteinian account of the ethical; the second, is about how this sort of learning might best be advanced or promoted in formal educational settings. Tackling the first of these questions is the main task of this chapter; the second will occupy my attention in the next. If I am concerned here, in Chapter 8, to explore what Wittgenstein's attempts to return to the 'rough ground' of ordinary usage might mean in terms of ethics, I will also pay attention to what I think it *does not* mean. Hence, despite the *prima facie* plausibility of those views which suggest that Wittgenstein's return to 'ordinariness' leads to ethical conservatism, or to some related form of relativism based on the respective inviolability of competing 'forms of life', I will argue that such understandings appear to be based on a misunderstanding of Wittgenstein's philosophical intentions. Later in the chapter, I will discuss the importance of the idea of developing various sensitivities to a Wittgensteinian understanding of ethical growth. It is in this light that I also explore a comment made by Ray Monk in his richly philosophical biography of Wittgenstein, the *Duty of Genius*, which develops certain remarks made by Wittgenstein in the later parts of the *Investigations* (cf. PI, II; 227-8). Here I take it that Monk is correct insofar as the growth in our moral sensitivities for Wittgenstein will involve, "...alert and observant sensitivity to people's faces, voices and situations..." and also that, "...this kind of sensitivity can be gained only by experience" (Monk, 1991: 547-8).

### (ii) Common sense and the problem of 'Ordinariness'?

I start this section with a comment from Derrida, and what seems to be its direct challenge to the non-deflective approach I attributed to Wittgenstein in the

previous chapter. I include it, in part, because I do not disagree with the challenge it makes to the idea that ordinary or everyday language can be regarded as a sort of safe-house: a sanctuary where we may take shelter from 'philosophical error'. Nevertheless, I do regard it as mistaken to implicate Wittgenstein in the vision of ordinary or everyday language that it places under attack. The idea that Wittgenstein was in any straightforward sense a defender of common sense against philosophical abstraction is important for the direction of this chapter. As I will go on to show, such an approach seems to lie at the heart of certain misunderstandings of what it might mean to approach ethics in a Wittgensteinian manner. Getting clearer about what Wittgenstein intended in his talk of ordinary language is not, then, simply of esoteric interest as an issue in Wittgenstein scholarship, however needful it may also be to offer a fair and consistent reading of Wittgenstein's later philosophy.<sup>40</sup> Rather, it will enable me, as I have already indicated, to begin to dismantle the idea that Wittgenstein need be understood as an ethically conservative thinker; the sort of traditionalist for whom moral education may involve little more than encouraging the 'blind' acceptance of prevailing norms and values in any given culture.

To move, firstly, to the promised challenge to the very idea of 'ordinariness', I want to consider the following:

...'everyday language' is not innocent or neutral. It is the language of Western metaphysics, and it carries with it not only a considerable number of presuppositions of all types, but also the presuppositions inseparable from metaphysics, which, although little attended to, are tied into a knot... (Derrida, 2002: 19).

And "...the same", says Alan Bass in his introduction to Derrida's *Positions* (2002:19-20), "...can be said of Wittgensteinian talk of shared 'language games' or cultural 'forms of life'". Although the idea of the ordinary is sometimes supposed to provide

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<sup>40</sup>Even if I am misguided about the nature of Wittgenstein's intentions, the treatment of the ordinary/everyday that I attribute to him here nevertheless provides a way of distinguishing between an unhelpful approach to 'ordinary language' and a more promising one, *ethically speaking*.

an “...escape route from needless philosophic perplexities...”, it should, according to Derrida, be recognised as carrying “...all kinds of covert metaphysical baggage”. As everyday language is neither ‘innocent’ nor ‘neutral’, it cannot be relied upon to provide a sort of ‘non-metaphysical’ sanctuary: a ‘benchmark’ by which one might hope, say, to distinguish the meaningful from the meaningless; sense from nonsense. Furthermore, to those tempted to confront the philosopher with the accusation that she has taken ‘genuine speech-acts’ out of their ‘proper’ or ‘everyday’ context, Derrida introduces the notion of the generalised ‘iterability’ of speech-acts, which, as Bass explains, “...enables them to function in various roles or across an open-ended range of possible contexts...”; or of ‘grafting’ from one context to another (Bass, 2002: 19-20). It thus becomes important to recognise that some of these contexts may indeed be, “...maximally remote from any putative ‘normal’ or ‘everyday’ mode of communicative utterance...”, and that any attempt to avoid the errors of ‘metaphysical’ language by contrasting it with ‘ordinary’, or ‘everyday’ ways of speaking, is itself likely to collapse into the same sort of problem with regard to the ordinary.

One might say that Derrida is presenting something of an *et in arcadia ego* situation: the return from metaphysical to ordinary language promises some sort of honest, rustic purity, but closer inspection shows how the ‘rough ground’ has itself been cultivated with the very tools used by the metaphysician to tend his immaculate lawn. Any approach to philosophy that aims to contrast ordinary or everyday language with the speculative ‘nonsense’ of metaphysical discourse, looks highly unlikely to provide either a distinctive or a useful contrast. While Bass is no doubt correct to be suspicious of certain appeals to ordinary or everyday language that he brands ‘Wittgensteinian’, it is far from clear that his doubts rightly extend to Wittgenstein’s own uses of these terms<sup>41</sup>. While ‘everyday language’ is in a certain

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<sup>41</sup> This area, as with so many others in Wittgenstein scholarship, is subject to frequent, and sometimes passionate, disagreement. With one such flurry of indignation, philosopher Rupert Read (2010: 63) goes on to describe how what he calls ‘the prevailing wisdom’ in Wittgensteinian scholarship is ‘crucially’ mistaken on the issue of what ‘ordinary/everyday language’ is supposed, by Wittgenstein, to be contrasted with. Although I am not wholly convinced that Read’s ‘prevailing trend’ is not, in fact, a little ‘last-season’ as far as Wittgenstein scholarship is concerned, he is surely correct to flag-up the existence of a fairly prominent strand of thought (in some respects typified by

sense laden with 'metaphysical baggage' (it is, for example, home to all sorts of misleading polarities), the way Wittgenstein wants to understand it is as a source not simply of dissatisfaction but also of freedom: a means of escape from various misleading pictures, and as an opportunity to re-engage the gears of a working engine that, when idling, accounts for many difficulties in philosophy.

### **(iii) Wittgenstein and an *extra-ordinary* picture**

If attentiveness to the variety of ways in which words are actually used<sup>42</sup> ('The multiplicity of language games' PI, 24) holds an integral place in Wittgenstein's later philosophy, how, then, are we to understand what he means when he speaks of how, in conducting a philosophical investigation, one might "...bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use" (PI, 116)? It is easy here to read such comments as pertaining to a generalised method of reminding the troubled philosopher how one ordinarily or commonly uses words such as, say, beauty, knowledge or meaning, in the so-called weave of our lives, thereby enabling her to understand how her quest for de-contextualised 'essences' must give rise to so many forms of sophisticated nonsense. Even when the dialogic style of Wittgenstein's later writings, along with his suggestion that, "There is not a philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like different therapies" (PI, 133) are duly recognised, it nonetheless remains tempting to view him as offering a single, distinctive explanation of how every philosophical difficulty arises; what it is that makes each of them 'philosophical'; and how they may ultimately be 'eliminated'.

One might even begin to imagine Wittgenstein repeatedly chanting the following question at 'the metaphysician', as if it were a form of therapeutic mantra: "...is the word ever actually used in this way in the language-game which is its original home?" (PI, 116). Here, the idea of bringing words back from their metaphysical to their ordinary use becomes analogous to the releasing of a caged animal back into

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comments made by critics such as Bass) which seems to be fundamentally mistaken about the nature of Wittgenstein's engagement with ordinariness.

<sup>42</sup> See also: PI 592: "But let us really think out various *different* situations and conversations, and the ways in which that sentence will be uttered in them."



the wild. If the philosopher can be helped by Wittgenstein's 'therapy' to understand that he has removed a word from its everyday habitat, and taken it on a metaphysical holiday where it can no longer function 'normally' or 'naturally', then he will be inclined to show greater respect for the everyday linguistic environment in the future. He will be returned to something like the wildness of ordinary life and begin to feel at home there. Such readings of what Wittgenstein meant by talk of returning to ordinary usage do have their prominent champions among Wittgenstein scholars, albeit in more sophisticated forms than I have so far described. Eminent commentators such as Anthony Kenny and Peter Hacker both seem committed to the idea that, "Wittgenstein was ruling out various ways of expressing ourselves as untrue to our language...or as incompatible with sense" (Read, 2010: 71). Marie McGinn also speaks of how, for the Wittgenstein of *On Certainty*, words are used inappropriately if their use is outside the context of "...the framework of judgements which together constitute our view of the world" (McGinn, 1989: 119). On her picture, G.E. Moore was supposed by Wittgenstein to speak *nonsense* when he famously claimed to 'know' that 'here is a hand': he failed to talk with sense precisely because his use of the word know could not be squared with the everyday conditions that shape what is a meaningful application of the word.

On this interpretation, everyday uses of words are - to use Alice Crary's term - *inviolable*: they not only provide a stable bedrock from which one can distinguish legitimate usage from philosophical deviations and abuses; they are also seemingly immune to philosophical critique, which is necessarily advanced in a manner that transcends the framework of shared, everyday judgements which allow any sort of critique to make sense. As Crary also puts it:

McGinn thus invites us to understand Wittgenstein as championing the view that the judgements that make up the 'framework' of our language cannot be subjected to rational scrutiny (Crary, 2007: 108).

If this sort of reading of Wittgenstein is indeed mistaken, it is not because it is impossible to find support for it in Wittgenstein's texts. Certain passages in the

*Investigations*, and elsewhere, do seem to point in this direction: not least the remark I quoted earlier about the requirement to bring words back from their metaphysical to ordinary uses, or even Wittgenstein's reminder, seemingly aimed at the philosopher, that, "When I talk about language (words, sentences, etc.) I must speak the language of the everyday" (PI, 120). One might even consider the statement in the *Investigations* that I cited in the previous chapter, that: "If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: 'This is simply what I do.'" (PI, 217). For here, we might also begin to suppose that one's justifications, for Wittgenstein, have their terminus in the particular habits ('ungrounded ways of acting' OC, 110) of various communities, and these are what ground those 'basic judgements' that are supposed to 'stand fast for us', and establish the inviolability of the everyday from rational critique.

It is also fairly easy to see how this sort of reading can make Wittgenstein appear as a sort of moral relativist (moral bedrock is provided by 'the forms of life' of whatever wider linguistic community one happens to inhabit), and in a related way, a moral conservative (the ethical practices of cultures, communities etc. are immune from rational critique and, therefore, must simply be acknowledged and accepted). I return, nevertheless, to what I said earlier about how this approach to Wittgenstein's talk of ordinary language, which sees it directly contrasted with deviant 'philosophical' or 'metaphysical' uses of words, nevertheless fails to do justice to Wittgenstein's intentions. While it would, of course, be absurd to suppose that so-called inviolability interpretations fail to acknowledge Wittgenstein's talk of the existence of various therapies for various purposes, or that they simply do not recognise that his approaches to doing philosophy can, in fact, be quite varied, the idea of Wittgenstein's operating with a commitment to the inviolability of 'ordinary language' does, I would suggest, reveal (what could well be described as) a sort of lingering *bewitchment*.

In short, such readings suggest a rather alien, almost deferential understanding of Wittgenstein's uses of the term 'everyday language'. It is as if Wittgenstein refers to 'it' as a 'thing': a domain, perhaps, that can be kept substantially separate from others, and provide, as Read puts it, "...one's definitive guide to what is

legitimately...sayable" (Read, 2010: 70). In doing so, they seem to foist on Wittgenstein a theory that he would surely have striven hard to resist (c.f. Baker, 2004: 103)<sup>43</sup>. Alice Crary also convincingly takes aim at this sort of understanding as constituting a genuine legacy from Wittgenstein. Part of what she has to say in response to McGinn's inviolability interpretation of *On Certainty* takes the following form:

According to this analysis, Wittgenstein is supposed to be assuming both that Moore's utterances of "I know that such-and-such" are nonsense and that it is nevertheless possible to identify the meanings of the sentences to which Moore prefixes "I know" – at least well enough to inquire whether they can be made to 'fit' with "I know" (Crary, 2007: 113).

To suggest, with McGinn, that Wittgenstein understands Moore's uses of 'I know' as *nonsensical* because they deviate from the set of conditions in which we ordinarily speak and make sense of 'knowing', seems to involve the following absurdity: in order to dismiss Moore's usage as nonsensical, Wittgenstein holds that it is possible to make sense of what he wants to condemn as nonsensical usage. This looks to be quite damning; unless, of course, one amends the position (as does Crary) so that Moore's usage, insofar as it deviates from ordinary usage, is such that one *does not know how to make sense of it at all*. (Crary, 2007: 111). On this amended interpretation, one need not see Wittgenstein as committed to 'making sense of nonsense', in order simply to dismiss it, but as suggesting that one cannot in fact be sure of what, if anything, Moore means by his various uses of 'I know'. In short, it is simply not clear what type of judgement Moore is supposed to be making.

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<sup>43</sup> Rupert Read develops a legalistic metaphor for this sort of essentialist reading of Wittgenstein, whereby, "If one thinks that *the* everyday is something that can be mined, explored, made explicit..." then, he states, "...one becomes a word-policeman" (Read, 2010: 70). While I am suspicious that Read overstates the case, his talk of 'policing' does successfully draw-out a fairly familiar idea - one that has certain historical precedents in 'ordinary language philosophy' - that to be a follower of Wittgenstein means to be concerned with clamping down on any deviations from ordinary, 'lawful' usage; from preventing the hallowed order of the everyday from descending into something like a midnight chorus of metaphysical noise.

Although this interpretation does seem to provide a more fruitful approach to Wittgenstein's discussion of Moore's comments in *On Certainty*, as things stand it might still appear compatible with the idea that Wittgenstein is committed to the inviolability of everyday language and forms of life, and the associated idea of 'philosophical usage' as deviating from the vast, yet bounded, 'edifice' of ordinary (sense-making) language. In other words, the idea of viewing Wittgenstein as holding some sort of deferential view about 'the ordinary' appears to remain, even on this amended interpretation of what might be amiss with Moore's supposed defences of common sense. Clearly more still needs to be said about why this type of contrast between 'the philosophical' and 'the everyday' may not have been one to which Wittgenstein was committed. I turn, now, to an examination of some recent re-readings of Wittgenstein's uses of terms such as ordinary and everyday language, with the aim of exploring how far such accounts can take us in understanding the point of such uses in his later philosophy. This examination will then lead me directly to an assessment of the idea that Wittgenstein's 'picture' of ordinary language necessarily engenders morally conservative or relativistic implications.

#### **(iv) Rethinking Ordinary Language**

Following the lead of Gordon Baker (2004: 100), Rupert Read<sup>44</sup> develops a critique of the idea that "...the everyday is some secure area of language that we can look to for forceful guidance as to how logic will 'permit' us to speak." The phrase 'everyday language' he argues is often intended by Wittgenstein to be *pleonastic*: it is just language, or at least, language with which we do not struggle to find our feet. For Read then, as for Baker, Wittgenstein's talk of ordinary/everyday language does not constitute an "...attempt to categorize or theorize language...", but functions instead as a contrast which, "...serves a therapeutic purpose". The purpose is, "...to focus one's attention on one's target in philosophy... 'uses' of language that are *systematically* unclear, and that are not satisfying even to their purveyors." (Read, 2010: 72). When Wittgenstein speaks of what might happen when one is doing

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<sup>44</sup> Read, R (2010) 'Ordinary/Everyday Language', in *Wittgenstein: Key Concepts*, ed. Jolley, K. (Durham: Acumen)

philosophy (e.g. "...we may indeed fancy naming to be some remarkable act of mind, as it were a baptism of an object". PI, 38), he speaks, for Read, of various attempts to 'weave' uses of familiar words that "...we do not (as yet) find our feet with in our existing grasp/use of our concepts". On this picture, then, Wittgensteinian reminders that invoke various familiar or 'ordinary' uses of words serve a recognisable purpose *only* when someone has been enticed by strange or novel uses of words, and is yet prone to overlook this very strangeness or novelty. It is also thought that it forms no part of Wittgenstein's intention to provide a simple rule, or gauge, by which we might readily distinguish meaningful, ordinary word usage from novel, 'philosophical' uses *once and for all* (c.f. Read, 2010: 65).

If it seems clear that, for Read, Wittgenstein's reminding us of familiar or everyday uses of words is not a matter of his re-asserting the superiority of any established set of everyday word usage over meaningless, philosophical expressions, what may still be harder to grasp is what exactly they are supposed to be reminding us *of* or *about*. At least one thing that still seems to be lacking is an adequate account of what enables one to find one's feet with certain uses of words and not with others. For whether or not we use terms such as 'ordinary' to describe various uses of words with which one can indeed 'find one's feet', we still seem to be owed an account of what is it for Wittgenstein that provides this 'footing' beyond the mere fact of our familiarity with certain well-rehearsed ('everyday') uses of particular words. To put it another way, if Read is correct that inviolability interpretations lose sight of what it is that renders, say, G.E. Moore's uses of 'I know' profoundly unclear, we could still be left wondering what else for Wittgenstein separates meaningful from 'as-yet-meaningless' uses of words *beyond* the fact that some uses are indeed familiar. What, then, can finding (or indeed, not finding) one's feet with certain uses of words look like for Wittgenstein?

Alice Crary's idea that for Wittgenstein, "...the minimal unit of language is the complete judgement", becomes helpful here. According to Crary, Wittgenstein is rejecting the idea that one could identify "...the logical character of expressions or features of speech-situations outside the context of complete judgements." (Crary, 2007: 114). This idea helps us better to see how, on Crary's reading, Wittgenstein's

attacks on G.E. Moore's anti-sceptical uses of 'I know' are not, as inviolability theorists such as McGinn suggest, based on the notion that such utterances "...involve judgements such that no claim to know them can be squared with the conditions of knowledge". Instead, Wittgenstein is taken, correctly I think, to be suggesting that, "it's not clear what judgements are at issue at all" (Crary, 2007: 111). To state, straight off, that 'I know that I am a human being' is, for Wittgenstein, 'unclear' at least in part because we cannot imagine what sort of judgement this speaker is making; perhaps what sort of contrast he has in mind (OC, 4). Another way of putting this is to suggest that, for Wittgenstein, what is unclear about, say, Moore's uses of 'I know', is that their place in practice - in a human life - is not yet clearly grasped. What is common to uses of words with which we indeed find our feet is that they are – so to speak – embedded in types of doing: certain forms of living<sup>45</sup>. To borrow from Crary once again, Wittgenstein is thus rejecting the idea that "...it is possible to grasp what a set of words means independently of the practical point of using it on a particular occasion..." (Crary, 2007: 116).

What would, however, enable us to turn the particular collection of words, 'I know that I am a human being', into a complete judgement is - one might say - the possibility that we could come to imagine a situation with which it could be made to fit. The point, to reiterate, is that Moore's uses of 'I know' are not, as McGinn's inviolability reading supposes, inherently nonsensical: they *could* come to be understood as constituting judgements of various sorts. Consider, for example, the following passage from *On Certainty*, where Wittgenstein imagines a situation where one of Moore's anti-sceptical slogans could indeed come to make sense:

I could imagine Moore being captured by a wild tribe. And their expressing the suspicion that he had come from somewhere between the earth and the moon. Moore tells them that he knows etc. but he can't give them the grounds for his certainty, because they have fantastic ideas about the

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<sup>45</sup> Consider in this context the following comment from *On Certainty*: "My life shews me that I know or am certain that there is a chair over there, or a door, and so on. – I tell a friend e.g. 'Take that chair over there', 'Shut the door', etc. etc." (OC, 7).

human ability to fly...This would be an occasion for making that statement.  
(OC 264)

This would be just such an occasion where the claims to knowledge made sense because Moore is encountering others for whom certain doubts are reasonable; who live in such a way that the reasons for Moore's statement about knowing he has never been to the moon becomes clear to us.

Let us now pause briefly to pursue the implications of the forgoing discussion for inviolability interpretations of Wittgenstein, and for the related idea that Wittgenstein's thought leads to ethical conservatism. We have seen how inviolability interpretations such as McGinn's seem tied to the idea that 'ordinary language' is not subject to rational criticism because to do so would be to climb outside the limits of sense-making language: our objections would, on this basis, be rendered nonsensical. However, as I have attempted to make clear, there are – following Crary – good reasons to suppose that the limits of sense for Wittgenstein are not set in this way, as if once and for all. Here, I think, Crary is once again correct to argue that:

Wittgenstein repeatedly observes that learning to judge is ultimately a matter of nothing more than cottoning on to, or developing a sense for, what different judgements have in common (Crary, 2007: 115)

If this is indeed the case, then Wittgenstein wants to draw our attention to the possibility that we may indeed 'cotton on' to the sense in certain uses of words which initially strike us as unclear. To begin to see their place in forms of living is, among other things, a matter of enlarging one's imagination. The relationship between expanding one's imagination and effecting changes in certain language games can also be seen as the factor driving the following comment from Wittgenstein:

If we imagine the facts otherwise than as they are, certain language games lose some importance, while others become important. And in this way

there is an alteration – a gradual one – in the use of the vocabulary of a language (OC, 63)

This statement from *On Certainty* seems relevant to a wider assessment of the ethical implications of inviolability accounts of Wittgenstein when we read it in combination with the familiar idea that for Wittgenstein “...to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life” (PI, 19). In this respect, when Wittgenstein speaks of the possibility of language games changing as a result of imaginative engagement, as he does in the passage from *On Certainty*, it at least suggests that forms of life are themselves neither fixed nor stagnant, but are potentially subject to re-imaginings, and thus to various changes.

It could, of course, be objected that my account has not dealt adequately with the claim that any change to a form of life could not, for Wittgenstein, emerge as the result of external, *rational* criticisms. We should be clear, then, that an inviolability interpretation of Wittgenstein need not involve the denial that changes can and do occur within various forms of life. Their point, one might say, is that if such changes do emerge as the result of rational criticisms, then these criticisms must for Wittgenstein have been couched in the terms of existing (‘ordinary’) language games. There is no place outside or beyond such everyday language games which could provide an external point from which to engage in rational critique of a form of life (c.f. Crary, 2003: 119)<sup>46</sup>. Of course, the idea that any sense making language usage has for Wittgenstein to be embedded in language uses already existent within particular forms of life, again seems to imply that he is some sort of ethical conservative. For, if ethical grounds or justifications are supposed by Wittgenstein to come to an end, or terminate in ‘forms of life’ or ways of ‘acting’, then it does seem plausible to conclude that forms of life as they are embedded in various

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<sup>46</sup> Another way of putting this is as follows: the meaning of ethical terms is always relative to one form of life or another. To criticise the social practices of, say, culture X from the standpoint of culture Y, is to risk failing to make one’s criticisms intelligible, except perhaps in terms of the ethical lights provided by one’s own distinctive form of life.



'communities' or 'cultures' do indeed provide a particular ethical bedrock or foundation for each of these collectives<sup>47</sup>.

Moreover, we might continue to suppose that any community or culture wedded to a particular form of life cannot engage rationally with another form of life from *outside* that other way of living; we have no way, for example, of asserting the superiority of one set of conventions over another. We thus become, as Ernst Gelner (1979: 71) puts it, 'caged' by Wittgenstein within our own particular traditions; trapped in "...a cozy, self-contained conceptual cocoon" which renders us unable even to examine the traditions of our ancestors and neighbours (c.f. Crary, 2003: 122). The next part of my task, then, is to attempt to make clear that such a view of Wittgenstein: (a) seems to rest on a mistaken view of the sort of 'bedrock' forms of life are supposed by Wittgenstein to provide, and (b) presupposes too narrow a conception of what rational engagement with various forms of life might actually look like.

#### **(v) Could there be 'rational engagement' between forms of life?**

While it seems clear that Wittgenstein's philosophical approaches do seek to return us in various ways - and for various purposes - to the 'rough ground' of ordinary usage, this by no means implies that 'forms of life' are supposed to comprise the ultimate foundation or *justification* for anything. To suppose otherwise is to miss the wider impact of one of the key insights in Crary's 'anti-inviolability' reading of Wittgenstein: one where the bounds of sense are not set or secured in such a way as automatically to render novel uses of words nonsensical. Here, Wittgenstein seems to want us to 'grasp' or acknowledge that there is no such thing as a vantage point which could reveal that the meanings of our words are, as Crary notes, "...fixed in one way or another," or which will:

...enable us to bypass the (sometimes enormously difficult) task of trying to see whether or not a new employment of a given expression preserves important connections with other employments. His aim is [instead] to get

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<sup>47</sup> Talk of forms of life, as Crary (2003: 120) puts it, is often taken to be, "...equivalent to talk of social conventions governing our linguistic practices..."

us to relinquish the idea of such a vantage point and, at the same time, to relinquish the idea that what we imagine is to be seen from such a vantage point has some bearing on our ability to submit practices to criticism. (Crary, 2007: 138)

And if we give up the idea of such a vantage point whereby that the meanings of our words are fixed by certain practices or conventions, then the charge that Wittgenstein is championing some form of ethical conservatism begins also to look a little more vulnerable. The sorts of 'foundations' with which forms of life do provide us, do not cut us off from thinking or saying particular things (c.f. Crary, 2003: 139). If it is indeed, for Wittgenstein, "our acting, which lies at the bottom of the language game", and which determines the point at which our 'giving of grounds' must give way, then the 'foundations' provided by certain ways of acting more resemble a 'river bed,' rather than solid, impermeable, grounds (OC, 204). For unlike more concrete foundations there is, for Wittgenstein, frequent "movement of waters on the river-bed" and, albeit less frequently, a "shift of the bed itself" (OC, 97).

Nor, I think, do the sorts of ethical foundations offered by forms of life on Wittgenstein's 'river bed' picture *necessarily* cut us off from engaging with, and learning from, others whose worldviews are different. To make this point more clearly, I want to suggest that the Wittgensteinian picture of communication between different forms of life has important similarities with the following comments from Mary Midgely, who also speaks of the possibility of rational communication between those inhabiting quite different cultures. In 'On Trying Out One's New Sword on a Chance Wayfarer', Midgely argues that such communication is not impossible, but 'just hard work'; while the obstacles which are likely prevent it are not so much specialised or technical ones, but "...simply those of ordinary ignorance, laziness and prejudice" (Midgely, 2005: 222). On the reading of Wittgenstein I am endorsing here, he too can be seen to be suggesting that the possibility – or indeed the failure - of such communication rests on imaginative effort and the employment of various personal sensitivities. One might put the matter in the following way: we are, for Wittgenstein, cut-off from productive

communication with others by the limits of our ethical imaginations, and perhaps by our desire or will to expand them, and not by certain special features of the world, which include of course our unavoidable embeddedness in certain forms of life.

To develop this reading further, we need firstly to recognise that Wittgenstein is suggesting that those who share very different world views can come to adapt or change their views as a result of communication with one another. Consider, for example, the following passages from *On Certainty*. In the first, Wittgenstein imagines a hypothetical conversation between G.E. Moore and a tribal Rain King who believes that the earth began with his birth; in the second, he imagines conversing with another man who has also grown-up believing that the world has existed for only fifty years. Hence:

I do not say that Moore could not convert the king to his view, but it would be a conversion of a special kind; the king would have to be brought to look at the world in a different way.

Remember that one is sometimes convinced of the correctness of a view by its simplicity or symmetry, i.e., these are what induce one to go over to this point of view. One then simply says something like: "That's how it must be."  
(OC, 92)

And also:

I can imagine a man who had grown up in quite special circumstances and been taught that the earth came into being 50 years ago...We might instruct him: the earth has long...etc. – We should be trying to give him our picture of the world.

This would happen through a kind of persuasion. (OC, 262)

One thing worth noting is that in speaking of Moore's potential conversion of the Rain King, Wittgenstein ends by discussing how one may come to be impressed by the 'simplicity' or 'symmetry' of a certain view, seemingly in spite of the fact that it

could have its origins in a culture or world-view which hitherto seemed quite alien. Of course, these passages still tell us precious little about the means of persuasion being used; we may not yet be able to imagine the conversations that could take place here. Indeed, to bring either a tribal Rain King, or a man grown up in 'special circumstances' to look at the world in different ways, could make it sound as if the means of converting or persuading them would have themselves to be 'special', or indeed quite unusual. I will return to this idea a little later.

What now needs to be accounted for, however, is not simply the possibility that someone inhabiting a certain culture might *persuade* another from a different culture of the rightness of certain aspects of her world view. The following question needs also to be addressed: could any such uses of persuasive methods constitute *rational* critique or persuasion? Wittgenstein could, after all, accept that someone from one culture could come to persuade person from another to abandon view X in favour of view Y, and still hang on to some form of conservatism (or relativism).

This is something that Alice Crary also seems to acknowledge when she says:

Wittgenstein only appears to be a relativist if his remarks about how certain cultural gulfs need to be bridged by persuasive methods are construed as remarks about how certain gulfs can only be bridged by non-rational means. (Crary, 2007: 118)

In arguing that various 'persuasive modes of discourse' may instead serve as points of rational contact between people with quite different worldviews, Crary<sup>48</sup> points out how, for Wittgenstein, "...the exercise of rational responsibility requires a distinctively human form of activity in language." (Crary 2003: 140). If the sense of her point is not immediately clear, it is, I think, related to what I pointed out earlier in respect of how one might come to make sense of G.E. Moore's various uses of 'I know.' To make Moore's statements intelligible, I argued, requires that we discover the spaces that they could occupy in practice; in a human life. Attempting to 'find our feet' with any one of Moore's particular uses may, indeed, as Crary puts it:

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<sup>48</sup> Albeit in a different paper: i.e. 'Wittgenstein's philosophy in relation to political thought' (2003).

...require us to try to see it in a different light, to use our imagination in a variety of ways, to seek new experiences which help us to refine our sensitivities and so on (Crary 2003: 141).

Talk of drawing upon, and perhaps further extending, the range of sensitivities we acquired as language users, also connects with what I described elsewhere (i.e. in Chapter 6 in connection of Diamond's talk of the literary technique in philosophy) as Crary's development of an expanded, 'embodied' view of rational engagement. On such an expanded account, which Crary also detects in Wittgenstein, rational engagement, or 'getting our minds around how things are', necessarily presupposes the possession of various personal and affective sensitivities; where engaging rationally with others - including others who inhabit other forms of life - calls upon us, as Crary puts it, to "...use—and perhaps stretch—our imagination" (Crary, 2003: 140). In short, it is only through imaginative effort that we will be able to begin to know how 'things stand' with the other; how to make sense of her uses of words as the sorts of judgements with which we may begin to find our feet. This is as true of our attempts to make sense of G.E. Moore's anti-sceptical statements as it is of any effort to make sense of the words of the Rain King's chant when he invokes, say, the benevolence and mercy of his gods.

Here another comment from Mary Midgely chimes readily with this account of Wittgenstein. For in encounters with other cultures, Midgely points out that despite the fact that "...we must ask questions from where we stand, questions which we can see the sense of...", this hardly means that we cannot also "...extend our questioning by imaginative effort". And through this we may indeed:

...come to understand other societies better. By doing so, we may make their questions our own, or we may see that they are really forms of the questions which we are asking already" (Midgely, 2005: 222).

How constructive communication between representatives of quite different cultures (or 'forms of life') might be achieved *in practice* is not something Midgely, or indeed, Wittgenstein, seem to make clear. This raises the following objection: it all well and good to say that conversational participants will need to excerpt

imaginative effort, but we still have no *clear* idea of what this is supposed to look like. If we might, in Wittgenstein's case, not expect him to provide us with something akin to an inventory of readily generalizable communicative techniques, we may still feel a little short-changed; that we are owed at least an example or two<sup>49</sup>.

There are, however, at least two separate points or objections here. One is that Wittgenstein fails (for whatever reason) to offer adequate exemplification of what rational communication between two quite different forms of life is supposed to look like. The other is that Wittgenstein's account of forms of life as inviolable prevents, *on principle*, such communication from occurring. To be clear, it is countering the second objection which is relevant to my aims in this section. These are achieved via the suggestion that we should view Wittgenstein as endorsing a view of rational engagement along the lines of Cray's 'expanded' reading. On this account we are also permitted to see how Wittgenstein's talk of our unavoidably inhabiting various 'forms of life' does not also require his approval of a conservative moral 'isolationism'. We are not, by virtue of inhabiting one form of life, *necessarily* cut-off from purposeful, imaginative, and rational engagement with others. Moreover, in the rest of this chapter, I will look more closely at the sorts of sensitivities one might cultivate in order better to achieve such engagement, and what might also be involved in its cultivation.

#### **(vi) Imagination, ethical sensitivity and 'experience'**

After examining various wrong turnings in the first part of this chapter, such as the idea that Wittgenstein's philosophy leads us to ethical conservatism, I want to be more explicit about what ethical development might actually look like on the Wittgensteinian approach I have been developing. I want also to consider the challenge of fallibility, or the notion of what going wrong, or failing to develop, might look like here. In doing this, I want to look closely at a comment made by Ray

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<sup>49</sup> One may, perhaps rather uncharitably, suggest that the demand for such examples can itself be borne of the need to spare oneself the (ethical) efforts required in order to find *one's own feet* with others whom may indeed appear quite incomprehensible. Such a reply could, nevertheless, easily be seen as a piece of evasion: an excuse for offering nothing of substance to a person who, perhaps, denies that rational communication in such cases is possible.

Monk, which follows from a discussion of how one might, or might not, come to understand the variety of ways in which the statement, 'I am afraid', can be used:

Far more to the point would be an alert and observant sensitivity to people's faces, voices and situations. This kind of sensitivity can be gained only by experience – by attentive looking and listening to the people around us (Monk, 1991: 547-548).

What Monk describes here as the gaining of alertness and sensitivity can, I think, take us some way towards understanding what ethical learning or development might look like for Wittgenstein. Monk is also right to move on to connect this observation about the development of sensitivity with Wittgenstein's own comments in Part 2 of the *Investigations* concerning 'imponderable evidence', and also with Wittgenstein's own well-documented admiration for the writings of Dostoevsky<sup>50</sup>. We can see something of the role of imponderable evidence in the following comments from Wittgenstein in the *Investigations* regarding how one might come to judge the genuineness of expressions:

It is certainly possible to be convinced by evidence that someone is in such-and-such a state of mind, that, for example, he is not pretending. But 'evidence' here includes 'imponderable' evidence.

Imponderable evidence includes subtleties of glance, of gesture, of tone (PI, 2: xi).

If it is clear that Wittgenstein believed that dealing with imponderable evidence was wrapped up with the possibility of 'expert judgement' about the genuineness of expressions of feeling, it is equally evident that the sensitivities required to do so can be taught. However, if Monk is right to suggest that they can indeed be gained only through *experience*, the sorts of experience (or 'varied observation'<sup>51</sup>) that could contribute to their growth *need not* always involve 'looking and listening to the people around us': certainly if this is supposed to preclude any of these people from being characters in works of fiction. I will indeed look more closely at the idea

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<sup>50</sup> See Monk, (1991) pp.549-50.

<sup>51</sup> Also see *Philosophical Investigations*, 228.

of ethical learning from works of fiction in the next chapter. What is of particular interest to me at this juncture, however, is the question of how to understand the development of the sensitivities that Monk describes. It is interesting that in discussing the notion of sensitivity to the subtleties of glance, gesture, and tone, Monk cites Wittgenstein's admiration for the character of Father Zossima in *The Brothers Karamazov*. This character is described by Dostoyevsky as having:

...absorbed so many secrets, sorrows, and avowals into his soul that in the end he had acquired so fine a perception that he could tell at first glance from the face of a stranger what he had come for, what he wanted and what kind of torment racked his conscience (Monk, 1991: 548-9).

What makes this example interesting is that Monk sees Dostoevsky's description of him as representing "...Wittgenstein's ideal of psychological insight". While Monk is surely correct to suggest that, for Wittgenstein, Zossima's insightfulness, borne of a wealth of 'experience' of the fears and sufferings of human beings, has "...more to teach us about understanding ourselves than the experimental methods of the modern-day 'science' of psychology...", much more still needs to be said about this insightfulness (Monk, 1990: 549). For example, it is easy to overlook what else might be involved in what Monk terms 'psychological' insight, compared, say, with the sorts of insight that might be obtained through experimental psychology. I want to raise and discuss the following *three* questions in connection with this point: (1) What is it that Zossima is supposed to be able to *see* that so many others may easily miss? (2) What is it that he *does* and *does not* do with this insightfulness? And, finally, (3) What might it mean for someone to be able to detect this sort of insightfulness in another?

#### **(vii) Psychological or Ethical 'Insight'?**

In *The Moon and Sixpence*, Somerset Maugham famously writes about how, "It is not true that suffering ennobles the character; happiness does that sometimes, but suffering, for the most part, makes men petty and vindictive" (Maugham, 2012: 69). Whether or not we recognise something truthful in his observation, we may nevertheless accept that great knowledge of the sufferings of others could



potentially lead to something similar: to pessimism, coldness, irritability, resentment, even self-pity. Rather than remaining attuned and responsive to the misfortunes of others, one may become precisely de-sensitised to any further instances of human misery or suffering. I will take it that it is at least plausible that someone in roughly the elder Zossima's position could, because he had been so frequently 'pestered' by others, and so often subject to their emotional outpourings, develop a profound disinclination to listen attentively; to continue to advise and to help other people. What is more, he could if he were so inclined use his great psychological insight to serve his own ends, perhaps manipulating us lesser mortals for his own entertainment, or to further his own material advantage.

When I asked questions about the sort of knowledge Zossima might be supposed to possess, and what he is supposed to do with this knowledge, I wanted to bring to light just how different his psychological insights could be compared with those which might be obtained scientifically (e.g. experimentally). To see this more clearly, we need only consider the following comment made by Wittgenstein in a conversation with Drury. When discussing Zossima, Drury reports Wittgenstein as having said something along the following lines: "Yes, there really have been people like that, who can see directly into the souls of other people and advise them."<sup>52</sup> When we now reconsider Monk's idea that Zossima represents Wittgenstein's 'ideal of psychological insight', we can see that such insight might better be described as insight into the state of someone's *soul*. It certainly does not seem simply to involve knowledge of a human being as an object of scientific study, of the sort of being that one (as an expert in psychology) has discovered to be significantly more likely to react in way X under set of conditions Y. To see directly into one's soul seems to be, or at least involve, among other things, that one approaches the other as a human soul (in other words, with an *ethical* attitude.)

This talk of approaching a soul is not, however, a piece of metaphysical or pseudo-scientific speculation; peering into a soul is not a sort of empirical discovery of a

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<sup>52</sup> For the full quotation see Drury's 'Conversations with Wittgenstein', in Pascal, F., Leavis, F. R., King, J. & Drury, M. O'C. (1984) *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, Rhees, R. (Ed.), Bristol: Oxford University Press

'thing'. To look into someone's soul is not simply to have perceptively noted their age, sex, likely occupation, marital status etc., and be able to conduct something similar to psychic cold-reading: educated guesswork based, for example, on various statistical probabilities. It is not simply a matter of being, or appearing to be, insightful or clever. It would seem that for Wittgenstein Zossima is not straightforwardly a mind-reader, an arch-predictor of likely human behaviour, but a 'soul-reader': his insight would seem to be borne of an inherently ethical relation to the other. His sort of psychological insightfulness is, one might also say, a peculiarly ethical insightfulness.

If Zossima's wealth of experience of humankind has developed his psychological insight, then this insight has also continued to shape what it is that he continues to learn from experience, and how he learns from it. If this sounds a little confusing, even confused, it is because it is difficult to express without misrepresentation. The point, if I might try to put it this way, is that if he didn't continue to take an attitude towards others that was an attitude towards a soul, then the knowledge that he acquired of those people would no longer be knowledge of a soul. Yet, instead, he uses his knowledge of humankind precisely in order to help advise others, to guide them; and this is not in spite of the numerous sufferings he has had recounted to him in the past, but in part because of them. One might say that he preserves the view (the attitude) that these others are bearers of a soul: in other words that they are capable of deep suffering, of possessing a conscience that may well be 'racked with torment', and as such, demand and deserve his help and guidance. They are approached not only as beings who lead ethical lives, but as beings whose way of inhabiting, and engaging with, the world is fundamentally ethical. He responds to them as his own kind: as *en-souled*.<sup>53</sup>

One is, of course, quite at liberty to disagree with my reading of the character of Father Zossima as he appears in Dostoevsky's novel. In fact, as I will argue in the next chapter, the possibility of disagreement and discussion about what to make of him exemplifies a particular strength of using works of literature in facilitating

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<sup>53</sup> We might say that he 'connects' with them; for me, this has clear resonances with the sense of E.M. Forster's injunction: 'Only connect' in *Howards End*.

ethical growth and learning in a Wittgensteinian sense. Of greater importance at this stage, however, is Wittgenstein's comment about the existence of such insightful, ethically developed, and sensitive characters in everyday human life. This brings me again to another question I raised earlier, that of what might it mean for someone to be able to detect this sort of insightfulness in another. What might be involved for a person, Wittgenstein for example, to *so much as speak* of the ability to peer directly into the soul of another?

For Wittgenstein, it is the ability to 'read' - to develop a 'nose' for - evidence that is imponderable that would mark out the person who might see directly into another's soul; a person with well-developed ethical sensitivities. He says:

I may recognize a genuine loving look, distinguish it from a pretended one (and here there can, of course, be a 'ponderable' confirmation of my judgement). But I may be quite incapable of describing the difference. And this not because the languages I know have no words for it. For why not introduce new words? -If I were a very talented painter I might conceivably represent the genuine and the simulated glance in pictures (PI, 228).

If I recognise a loving look on someone's face as genuine (rather than feigned), I can no doubt point to something that can be discussed with, or 'pondered' by, others. They might disagree with my conclusions, and I could find myself incapable of communicating why *exactly* they should agree with me. Of course, I could also turn out to be wrong about my conviction of her love for me. But, even so, the question would then be the following: what is then suggested about human beings, as the sorts of beings about whom one could be mistaken in this manner? And perhaps, to pose the question again in a more Wittgensteinian manner: what do being certain or being mistaken *look* like here?

One thing that is suggested is that certainty and mistakenness in this area of human life is of a radically different sort from certainty or mistakenness about the properties of a physical object. However, suppose that my loved-one's brain is connected to a new, high-tech computer in a laboratory. After conducting the required tests on her brain activity, the scientist then turns to me and says: 'Listen,

there was a distinctive pattern of neural firing in her cerebral cortex when she looked at you in that way. Believe me: she's faking!' What would I think then? What *should* I think? In such a case, I can only speak in the first person: I would probably laugh and dismiss the scientific test as 'interesting' or as a 'bit of fun'. If it did help to change my attitude towards this person, if it filled me with fresh doubts about her love for me, then it would likely not be because I supposed the scientific test to know her better than I do - that it could provide certainty where I could only speculate (because, for example, I have never been privy to the patterns of electrical or neuro-chemical activity in her brain.) It would more likely be that I was not much convinced of the genuineness of her love; that my eyes, so to speak, were not fully closed in the face of doubt.

The important point here seems to be that I come to recognise, or otherwise acknowledge, the differences between the ways that I relate to my loved one, the ways that I talk about knowing her, and the ways that one might relate to, or come to know, a participant (or her brain) in an experimental setting. The fact that I am not in a relationship with a brain, but with a particular, complete, human being, will shape what it means to for me to 'have evidence' of this or that; about how I might go about being certain here ("If someone is love-sick, a scientific explanation will not bring him peace, but the right gesture might help" Heaton and Groves, 1994: 124). In many everyday situations, ways of coming to understand, and of continuing to be baffled by others, more closely resemble what I have been describing above. And yet, as we will come on to see, Wittgenstein wants to accept that 'better' and 'worse' apply here too, that there is such a thing as learning to understand people better, and of developing the sort of ethico-psychological insight personified by Father Zossima.

#### **(viii) The Problem of Fallibility?**

One important point which emerges from my account so far is that one could quite reasonably deny that such people, or such abilities, actually exist. Perhaps it's all just a case of wishful thinking, an inability to face certain painful facts about human nature; perhaps of attempting to salvage something religious in the material

universe so elegantly explained by the physical sciences. It may indeed be argued that if there are any Zossima's in this world then they will likely be clever, perceptive, and patient people, and that 'soul-talk' is just a florid and romantic way of expressing this. What is more, there may even seem to be a distinct 'blindness of faith' in what I've said in connection with Zossima: that I've treated him as if he is quite *infallible* in his assessments of others.

The idea that Zossima might always be fallible is, in one sense, related to the suggestion that Wittgenstein might also be wrong to stress the role of imponderable evidence in the *Investigations*, because all evidence in human affairs *ought* in fact be ponderable. Someone may then wish to push Wittgenstein's account harder. Surely, it could be objected, talk of imponderable evidence is simply evasive: it risks requiring one to accept certain things on trust without providing adequate grounds for this trust. The following sorts of questions are now readily invited: how can we *know* if the so-called ethically sensitive person – let's continue to call him Zossima – has 'read' someone correctly or incorrectly? How can we *know* if he, or indeed anyone, is developing or failing to develop in this respect?

I do not think Wittgenstein wants to answer these sorts of question directly<sup>54</sup>. When considering how we can know whether any assessment of another is correct or erroneous, or of how we can know if various people are better or worse at reading the 'souls' others, he would, I suspect, ask us again to consider the *practical consequences* of being right, wrong, better or worse here: in other words, ask us to explore what being correct or mistaken might look like in practice. An investigation could well reveal that certain people, such as Father Zossima, continue to have people ask for their advice and guidance; build a reputation for insightfulness; have friends or acquaintances who commend them on their good judgement etc. If these features hardly constitute an exhaustive list of criteria to determine infallibility, they nevertheless help to remind us of how terms such as 'good judge of character' might be used in everyday life. Of course, none of this could satisfy one who

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<sup>54</sup> For one thing, the sceptical challenge presented by such a question cannot be addressed in the terms in which it is set: it is as if what troubles us about our diagnosis of, say, another's 'real intentions', were always simply a matter of needing to *know* something that we do not already know (e.g. what is going on in her head).

continued to push for something (a proof?) more definite here. And yet, if sceptical doubts regarding fallibility are always remain possible in matters of, say, reading others' feelings, expressions and intentions, Wittgenstein's account need not leave us with 'blind' faith as the only response. We might try to imagine what human life would look like if people always doubted whether one's understanding of another could improve; what it would be for human beings to have abandoned all talk of degrees of quality in assessments of character or intention (perhaps on the basis that no-one could prove herself infallible in such matters.) In such a way one can indeed ask whether certain doubts are *sustainable*.

In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein speaks of how we might say that the 'reasonable man' simply does not have certain doubts<sup>55</sup>, but believes that, say:

...the earth has been there since long before his birth, that his life has been spent on the surface of the earth...that he has a nervous system and various innards like all other people, etc., etc. (OC, 327)

This talk of the 'beliefs of the reasonable man' need not imply that Wittgenstein is simply defending 'common sense' in such a way that will allow one simply to dismiss another's doubts as nonsense. Rather, the idea of reasonableness once again invites us to imagine the consequences of someone's doubting the very things that I *know* in just such a way "as I know that my name is L.W". If someone were repeatedly to raise doubts about such things, what we might simply have to say of such a person is that "...he will never learn this game" (OC, 329). If he persisted in doubting whether we could ever 'really' know better what someone else is thinking, feeling, intending etc., or whether there can indeed be better or worse judgements of character, we might say that such a person simply will never learn certain uses of the words better or worse. He will not be able to participate in certain of our language games which relate to understanding others.

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<sup>55</sup> C.f. *On Certainty*, 220. Also consider when Wittgenstein in the *Investigations* calls upon someone to try to doubt, in a real case, whether someone else is in pain, he does not mean that it is impossible for one to do this. Nevertheless, we might wonder what such doubt would look like other than crass, insensitive, or heartless.

In discussing the non-deflective insights offered by works of literature, I will in Chapter 9, say more about how insights into the 'souls' of others may be both deepened and improved in the manner I see as Wittgensteinian. Without wishing to anticipate this discussion here, there is something that can usefully be drawn from it in respect of my present discussion of fallibility, and how there might be better or worse readings of human beings. Here, I want to draw on Gilbert Ryle's image of 'wine tasting' which he uses to describe the sort of rational tutelage offered by the novels of Jane Austen. For Ryle, Austen seeks carefully to shape our emotional responses through her narrative techniques, whereby a character trait such as pride (in *Pride and Prejudice*) is not developed in a single character but through a range of characters in whom pride is manifested in different ways. Just as a wine taster might come to judge the quality of, say, the tannic structure of red wine by sampling it in various different bottles from different regions, Austen too invites the reader to investigate the quality of, say, pride in her characters by, "...matching it against the same quality in different degrees, against simulations of that quality, against deficiencies of it, against qualities which, though different, are brothers and sisters of that quality" (Ryle, 1990: 278).

For Ryle, then, Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* can help to teach us about appropriate or 'proper pride' by eliciting our emotional responses to her characters' various displays of this quality. We are drawn, for example, to see Jane Bennett as 'too diffident', Mrs Bennet as having 'no sense of dignity at all', Mr Darcy as 'haughty and snobbish', and Mr Bennett as having 'genuine pride' albeit pride which is 'inert' (Ryle, 1990: 278-9). We are thus, for Ryle, invited to place value on certain ways of behaving: some as being worthy of pride; some not, through our reactions to the thoughts and actions of various characters. We begin to see the consequences of various degrees or manifestations of this trait as it played out in their lives. As such, we begin not only to make better sense of the novel and the fictional world it creates, but also transfer this learning into our own lives; to our own assessments of character. Our palate, so to speak, can become more refined.

Importantly, we may disagree with Ryle's own reading of how pride is manifested in Austen's characters, but such disagreement can, it seems, go only so far. This

connects, I think, with the idea that although it may always be *possible* to doubt whether someone has 'read' someone correctly, it is not always *reasonable* to do so. Suppose, then, that after reading *Pride and Prejudice*, someone announced that Mr Darcy as he appears in the early chapters of the novel was a modest, humble and rather diffident sort of man. In such a case, I would want to say that this was a clear misreading of his character; I might even wonder if the other person were joking, and if not, whether we had in fact been reading the same book. I could offer to show him why I thought he had misread Austen's character – I could give evidence – but he could simply refuse to listen. He might maintain that all such readings are radically subjective, and there was no place for better or worse here. He might then insist that I could not *prove* he was wrong. Yet, the fact that I would not be able to change his mind or to meet his exacting criteria for proof, hardly ought to convince us that there are no better or worse ways of reading Jane Austen's characters. In a directly related way, the fact that one cannot prove that someone, such as Zossima, has correctly peered into the soul of another, should hardly imply that someone seeking his help may as well have, say, read the horoscope in the daily newspaper.

**(ix) Conclusions: developing an ethical 'nose'**

I want to end this discussion, and this chapter, by considering the following passages from the *Investigations* which again relate to the development of the sensitivities needed for ethical growth, and with what I have described as the ability to look directly into a *soul*. Consider, then:

Is there such thing as 'expert judgement' about the genuineness of expressions of feeling? –Even here, there are those whose judgement is 'better' and those whose judgement is 'worse'.

Correcter prognoses will generally issue from those with better knowledge of mankind.

Can one learn this knowledge? Yes; some can. Not, however, by taking a course in it, but through '*experience*'. – Can someone else be a man's



teacher in this? Certainly. From time to time he gives him the right *tip*. –This is what ‘learning’ and ‘teaching’ are like here. –What one acquires here is not a technique; one learns correct judgements. There are also rules, but they do not form a system, and only experienced people can apply them aright. Unlike calculating-rules (PI, 227).

It seems quite clear that the *knowledge* of ‘mankind’ of which Wittgenstein speaks cannot result from ‘direct’ instruction via particular sets of methods or techniques. Instead we find talk of a teacher from time to time offering a student the right ‘tip’, and of one’s learning various ‘correct judgements’. If learning of these judgements in various ‘concrete’ cases can help us to better see into the souls of others, it will not be because they form a system, and can simply be transferred without alteration - without *thought* - to any new situation.

If offering ‘tips’ is the only way teaching and learning can proceed here, then one may not read them correctly, or perhaps choose not to accept or heed them. A critical commentator will still *always* be at liberty to say: ‘Well, this is just not precise enough for me: it’s too vague, too unscientific.’ And, of course, he or she will be quite right to say this: the language games simply work in this way. It is always possible to see what Wittgenstein is describing as expert knowledge here as mere guesswork; as a poor, ‘folksy’ replacement for scientific precision. Yet, if such precision is hardly the point in the development of the expertise of which Wittgenstein speaks, what could help someone else to acknowledge this? What sort of evidence could we provide that would convince him? In short, it seems clear that he would have to allow himself to be ‘struck afresh’ by certain things; that he would have to be ‘open’ to acknowledging that it involves, we might say, breathing a different sort of air. An argument or demonstration of some sort might help him here, but it is unlikely that a piece of theorising aimed at establishing the truth of the matter will satisfy him. Perhaps the provision and discussion of certain examples – such as the literary of Father Zossima - might work better. But then again, perhaps not. This is not something where a fool-proof set of techniques seems possible, or indeed, desirable.

At this point, I want simply to point out that for Wittgenstein it is indeed possible to be another person's teacher in respect to, say, judging the genuineness of expressions; and that one's learning is nevertheless tied up with being better able to make use evidence that is 'imponderable'. If being able to make use of imponderable evidence also seems integral to ethical growth on a Wittgensteinian picture, I have also stressed that we will need to acknowledge that it is not open to the sorts of testing that could establish the truth or falsity of a hypothesis in the natural sciences. If one can indeed learn better to develop a 'nose' for reading the souls of others, the comparison with a connoisseur of wine is useful. For unlike how one might come to distinguish, say, a French Cabinet Sauvignon from a New World version by its nose, we have no independent way of checking whether we have got our judgements of human beings correct: we cannot simply check the label; remove our blindfold. We can in this sense 'prove nothing'. Nevertheless, as I will argue in the final chapter, particularly in connection with educational uses of literature, the suggestion that ethical development involves dealing with imponderable evidence, does not imply that such evidence may not be rendered *discussible*, and be discussed in the classroom. In such a way, one may still grow to become more competent in one's judgements (as will the novice wine taster with her wines), and indeed, become more *confident* in one's 'dealings' with people – and better see into their souls.

# Chapter 9

## Literature and Encouraging Ethical Confidence

### (i) Introduction

I now turn my attention to the question of how best to encourage the sorts of ethical development I discussed in Chapter 8 as following from Wittgenstein's philosophy. My focus here will be on its encouragement in the school setting: in particular, in the sorts of settings with which as a teacher I am most readily familiar i.e. secondary schools and sixth-form colleges. Two separable yet related aims will run throughout this chapter. The first is to make a case for the use of literature - particularly but not exclusively works of fiction - in helping to promote the sorts of ethical learning and development that follow from a non-deflective, Wittgensteinian approach. After considering other possible approaches to promoting such learning, I argue that the use of literature may have various advantages in the classroom. These advantages also connect with the problems of doubt and scepticism which have exercised my thoughts at various points in this thesis. Moreover, I spoke in Chapter 7 of the *dialogic* quality of Wittgenstein's philosophical writings; of how his concern with self-interrogation, of engaging with doubts raised by an imagined interlocutor, are intimately connected with an overriding ethical concern of exploring, probing, and if possible getting clear about the sources of one's troubles in philosophy. I contend that the dialogic opportunities offered by literary texts are also one of the peculiar strengths of their use in helping to encourage the forms of ethical learning. I also want to emphasise, however, that the dialogic nature of literary texts can enable *rational* engagement with pupils, not simply, as we saw in McGinn's comments cited in Chapter 6, various ways of appealing to the 'heart' and bypassing the 'head'.

The second aim is a more explicitly pedagogical concern, and relates to the fact that my proposed use of works of literature in facilitating moral education hardly constitutes an original suggestion. Here I am concerned to point out how some other approaches to the use of literary works can appear rather prescriptive and even didactic. I argue this point through a recent article by philosopher of education, Paul Standish (2009), which begins by imagining a sequence of lessons devoted to discussing human relationships with animals, using J.M. Coetzee's novel, *Elizabeth Costello*, as a stimulus. Standish's paper is selected not because it is unique in discussing the morally educative roles of works of literature, but because his approach can be read as a challenge to the sort of non-deflective moral education I imagine as being possible *in the classroom*. For although we seem to be in agreement about the possibility that works of literature can generate non-deflective ethical insights, Standish seems far more sceptical about realising or developing these in schools. In considering Standish's 'suggested' approach to teaching *Elizabeth Costello*, I go on to imagine some less didactic, and as I understand them, more Wittgensteinian uses of works by the same novelist in a similar classroom setting. The chapter, and indeed the thesis, will then end in exactly the same place as I started it in Chapter 1: in the same classroom; in the presence of Emma, Jeremy, and their peers. Nevertheless, when we meet them again it will be with a different teacher: one who approaches ethical concerns with the class in a different manner from that of Ms Comberton.

**(ii) Depth, doubt and *discussibility***

Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt;  
Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd;  
Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the bright flow, I was refresh'd...

--Walt Whitman, *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*

Truly a futile way of passing the time, some of you may say, and not altogether creditable to a grown-up man. And yet, from the deepest point of view, who knows more of truth, and who knows less, - Whitman on his omnibus-top, full of inner joy with which the spectacle inspires him, or you, full of the disdain which the futility of his occupation excites?

I begin with a question, *a doubt*, that arises from William James's comment that I cited by way of an epigraph. It is also something that I want to connect with my concern with developing ethical learning in schools. What, one might well ask, is this *deepest* point of view that James mentions in connection with Whitman's poetry? How does one know it is the deepest, and that there isn't, in fact, a deeper one? I do not want to try to answer this directly. Instead, I think of Francis Bacon's confident assertion that a little philosophy inclines a man to atheism, while still more returns him to religion. Now, what if someone else were to say, perhaps with a sly grin playing over his face, that still more philosophy returns one yet again to atheism? What should one say then? What *could* one say, and what could it achieve? One might equally imagine the person filled with disdain at Whitman's 'futile' poetic musings wanting to say, *contra* James, that it is *he* who knows more of truth; who has a better idea of how things really go in this world. He might, then, be inclined to a version of Callicles' response: that poetry, much like philosophy, is not a proper enterprise for a grown man or woman. One should be aiming to better bend the world to one's will, rather than remaining content to gaze in wonder at rivers, lakes, daffodils, or any other quite everyday, mundane, things. Could James then say *nothing* in reply? Say *nothing* in support of the depth of poetic imagination that he detects and values in Whitman's verse? Well, of course there is much that he could choose to say, but as was the case with the relativist in Chapter 5, there is no guarantee that the other will listen; that he will be at all persuaded.

Given this, perhaps the question ought to be whether James should bother to reply *at all* in support of Whitman? In a related sense, perhaps we should not bother speaking with a sceptic who is similarly dismissive of the ethics, or the deepening of the sorts of ethical learning that might follow from Wittgenstein's philosophy. Why not, as did Nietzsche's Zarathustra when he met the old saint in the forest, simply walk off in the opposite direction; agree to part and to have nothing further to do with the other<sup>56</sup>? Another question that might not immediately occur, but is

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<sup>56</sup> Nietzsche gives us the evocative image of two people, the saint and the prophet, for whom conversation is no longer possible; for whom words are replaced by laughter. It is, I think, a mutually

nevertheless of some importance, concerns why one might suppose that *speaking*, and the possibility of speaking - or, indeed, of not speaking - is of such great importance here? In other words, why do I write as if a crucial consideration were whether or not James, *or* indeed we, can say something to the doubter? There are at least two reasons which might help to account for this.

Firstly, when I spoke in Chapter 5 of what I saw as the need, at some level, to be able to shrug one's shoulders in the face of the persistent doubter, I also spoke of how this could be an almost impossibly difficult gesture (for some of us) to make. Something of this difficulty no doubt lies beneath or behind my desire that William James, in his imagined confrontation with the modern Callicles, is able to *say* something: not simply to resign; to walk off as if in *defeat*<sup>57</sup>. This seems to matter because what we disagree about with a sceptic truly matters to us: if Whitman's poetic attitude, or indeed, a Wittgensteinian inspired ethics, can reveal or otherwise point to something deep or truthful, then one would want the sceptic to *see* this, if not to share in our enthusiasm, then at least to acknowledge it as *worthwhile*.

The second reason has more to do with what I see as the connections between education and the idea of *discussibility*. I refer, in part, to the importance for *any* education of transmitting, of passing on, what we think is valuable; to share it with others precisely because it is valuable. As far as ethics is concerned, "It is", as Bernard Williams rightly observes, "...a mark of our having ethical values that we aim to reproduce them" (Williams, 1985: 192). One might say that it would be good not only *for us* if those of a sceptical bent came to see things our way, but that it could also be good for them too. That this attitude may lie behind any attempt to 'indoctrinate' another into what one happens to find good or worthwhile, hardly

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mocking laughter; one borne of acknowledged incommensurability of both attitude and purpose: "And thus they parted from one another, the old man and Zarathustra, laughing as two boys laugh" (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1969: 41).

<sup>57</sup> Once again, I think, we can see just how compelling it might be to be able to engage the sceptic, whilst also supposing oneself to know the correct *basis* from which it *ought* to be possible to argue him round. If what I have described in this thesis as the rationalistic attempt to ground or provide foundations to which one might appeal in ethical disputes, is in fact the mark of ethical *deference* rather than proper *confidence*, it does at least seem to promise the possibility of making such a defence: of not being struck dumb in the face of doubt.

entails that it is not also central to the nature, and to the possibility, of education. We will scarcely be passing on anything to those who show resistance to our efforts without our also being prepared to engage with their doubts, to treat them as at least open to discussion. To give up on the possibility of speaking to the other, of engaging in some form of dialogue, seems tantamount to giving-up on education. As far as schooling is concerned, if teachers were to pass on anything of value, the risk is that they would do so by resembling preachers to the converted, or at least to the readily convertible; preachers who were also too ready to excommunicate the non-believer<sup>58</sup>.

We also might do well to acknowledge that not all sceptics are grown men such as Callicles, and that as teachers we find them in almost all of our classes. We can even detect something of the presence of doubt in various familiar exclamations: e.g. 'What's the point of studying this!', 'Isn't this a waste of time!', 'Why are we discussing 'made-up' characters!', 'Why should I believe it!' While these comments hardly constitute an exhaustive list of pupil objections, or even relate exclusively to the ethical uses of literature in the classroom, they do seem to express doubts of certain sorts. They are, at the very least, marks of resistance to *something*, perhaps to the chosen subject or the approaches to teaching it. From the point of view of moral education, we would perhaps also need to acknowledge that forms of moral relativism (of relativistic *doubt*) are likely as deeply-entrenched (if not more so) in the student population as they were when Bloom wrote *The Closing of the American Mind* nearly thirty years ago.

If the need to treat ethical doubt as *discussible* is, as I've suggested, of at least some importance for moral education, this does not entail that every doubt simply *has* to be discussed in schools. I am not suggesting that there will not be times when a teacher has to respond by saying something along the lines of: 'Well, we're doing

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<sup>58</sup> This cutting-off may take many, even many quite subtle, forms. One thinks of how I pictured Emma in Chapter 1 as educationally 'cut-off' (even 'singled-out' and 'cast aside') on account of her puzzlement; for not making the sorts of responses that were required by the teacher in order properly to address 'the demands' of a moral dilemma. Of course, in her case we might say that she was not cut-off directly because of her doubts, but because these doubts manifested themselves as the sort of confusion that one ought not to have displayed in order to be recognised as having understood *the point* of an exercise (the value of which itself remained largely unquestioned by the teacher).

this because we *have to*.' Not all pupil doubts will need to be discussed explicitly; some may not even be readily discussible. The point is not to remove the need for a teacher to make various judgements about what is, and is not, an appropriate or discussible doubt. What I am suggesting instead is simply that pupils can be doubters too, and that for their schooling to be *educative*, the shrug of one's shoulders in the face of doubt should not come *too soon or too often*. Another thing that I am not claiming in this respect is that there is only one approach to discussing ethical doubt, or indeed to encouraging non-deflective ethical development more broadly. If it hardly needs to be said that discussion in the classroom does not need to take only one form, I say it because it is still easy to picture discussion through the lens of a teacher seeking to address various issues *directly*, either through engaging in some form of argument, or through 'whole-class discussion', where a range of voices make points, raise objections, formulate counter-arguments etc. One's view of discussion may too easily become fixed on a vision of offering and inviting critical appraisals through the provision of various abstract arguments. This matters, not because there is no place for such an approach to discussion in the classroom, but because it is by no means the only, or always the most effective way of 'discussing' ethically questions and concerns.

I now move on to consider two further ways that ethical considerations may be rendered *discussible*, and be *discussed*, in the classroom: through the use of examples from personal history, and through fictional examples.

### **(iii) Discussion and discussibility: Examples from Personal History**

At the conclusion of my lecture on ethics I spoke in the first person. That, I believe, is something very important. Here nothing further can be substantiated. I can only step forth as an individual and speak in the first person. (Wittgenstein, PO, 116-117).

If it seems important for Wittgenstein that one is able to 'step forth' and 'speak in the first person' about the ethical life, how might this idea relate to moral education? It is in this context that I want to discuss moral philosopher Raimond Gaita, and his well-known example of the nun he met as a young man working in a psychiatric hospital. There are two reasons for my including Gaita's example in this



chapter. Firstly, Gaita's approach to ethics, and his writings about ethical matters, clearly resonate with the Wittgensteinian approach I have been discussing. One way of putting this is to suggest that Gaita writes about ethics in a *spirit* that is non-deflective<sup>59</sup>. He provides an example of what Wittgenstein might have meant by 'speaking in the first person' about ethics: of drawing with a sort of perceptive sensitivity on his personal experiences, and of communicating directly what these experiences showed *him* about leading an ethical life; about what a human life could mean. Secondly, I focus attention on Gaita's nun because I want to explore both what he makes of her example, and also what we might make of it in terms of promoting ethical learning in schools. My major contention is that although Gaita's account of the nun may be deeply moving, even compelling for some of us, the fact that it is based on personal testimony can actually make it less helpful in school-based moral education than various uses of works of literature, especially (but not exclusively) given what I have described as the need for educators to deal with, and discuss, ethical doubts of various sorts.

In *A Common Humanity*, then, Gaita discusses his encounters with the nun who was to make such a powerful impression on him. He is also keen to point out that although her treatment of severely afflicted psychiatric patients inspired 'wonder' in him, it was not because he had lived a life cut-off from emotional warmth, or because he was hitherto a stranger to displays of deep concern for the welfare of others. In his *Romulus, My Father*, Gaita speaks of how his father and his friend befriended the immigrant labourer, Vacek, who had also 'lost his mind', and that they had both behaved towards him 'without condescension'. This enabled the young Gaita to acknowledge that this man, despite the often palpable strangeness

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<sup>59</sup> "The secular philosophical tradition", says Gaita in *A Common Humanity*, "...speaks of inalienable rights, inalienable dignity and of persons as ends in themselves. These are, I believe, ways of whistling in the dark, ways of trying to secure to reason what reason cannot finally underwrite" (Gaita, 2002: 7). This is clearly 'non-rationalistic' in the manner of standing in opposition to what I have described as rationalistic, where the need for reason to 'underwrite' ethics is indeed of paramount importance. We might indeed describe it as non-deflective. For in speaking, instead, of the 'preciousness of human beings' and of the connection between this idea and that of love, Gaita is acknowledging – in spite of inviting accusations of being 'sentimental or soft-headed', - the ethical importance of what we might describe as 'feelingness', and of the role in our ethical lives of what Hand might well describe as 'extra-rational' considerations (such as the variety of ways that human beings show love for one another.)

of his behaviour, was simply, "...living yet another form of human life...", and that it took "...his sort to make all sorts". In case the behaviour of Gaita's father strikes us as unremarkable, and simply connects with the more pervasive concern in recent times with the moral and social status of the mentally ill, Gaita is quick to point out what he sees as the difference. For although, "Most of us would agree that people like Vacek should be treated as fully our equals", then more often than not "...we believe it...in the way young people believe they are mortal, more in our heads than in our hearts" (Gaita, 2002: 18). There can exist important differences between statements of belief about, say, the need for equality, and the compassion and lack of condescension that marked the actions of Gaita's father and his friend. Yet, even with this preparation held in mind, it is striking that the behaviour of the nun was, for Gaita, 'astonishing', and quite unlike anything he had experienced before. What is more, this astonishment does not *seem* to spring from simple naivety on his part, or indeed from any lingering cynicism about human nature from which he yearned to extricate himself.

Unlike the situation with Vacek, the patients at the psychiatric hospital where Gaita worked are described as 'incurably afflicted', and 'constantly and visibly in torment'. It would be hard, says Gaita, to see them, "...as living a life of any kind" (Gaita, 2002: 18). Yet, despite the fact that the lives of these people seemed to have lost all meaning, all dignity, the nun behaved towards them (according to Gaita), without, "...a trace of condescension". Although Gaita and the psychiatrists with whom he worked believed that they also treated the patients with unconditional respect, the nun's behaviour showed ('revealed') to Gaita that they were in fact wrong; that "...in our hearts we did not believe this" (Gaita, 2002: 20). For Gaita, then:

...everything in her demeanour towards them – the way she spoke to them, her facial expressions, the inflexions of her body – contrasted with and showed up the behaviour of those noble psychiatrists. She showed that they were, despite their best efforts, condescending, as I too had been (Gaita, 2002: 18).

It was indeed she who treated the patients with unconditional respect; her saintly love showing ('proving') to Gaita the patients' preciousness or dignity. It was only her love, and not the best efforts of the psychiatrists, which made their humanity readily visible. Gaita's nun seemed to embody the reality of a Goodness, with a capital G, which before his meeting with her was still little more than a word. Thus, he continues to explain how:

I felt irresistibly that her behaviour was directly shaped by the reality which it revealed... There is no clear application here for the concept of a mistake (Gaita, 2002: 20).

What Gaita describes here connects not only with what I spoke of in Chapter 8 in connection with Wittgenstein's talk of looking directly into someone's soul, but also with the notion of imponderable evidence which I mentioned in relation to ethical learning. It is on the second of these connections that I wish to focus for the time being. What is interesting in this respect is Gaita's description of how he became aware of the nun's complete lack of condescension, and of how her expression of love was in fact *genuine*. This seems certainly to include the sort of attentiveness to the "...subtleties of glance, of gesture, of tone" that Wittgenstein speaks of at the end of the *Investigations* as marks of imponderable evidence (PI II ix). One could suggest that Gaita's being compelled by the power and genuineness of the nun's love arose because although he had in fact been developing a 'nose' for such things, he was still unable to explain his experience in terms of ordinary, or 'ponderable', evidence. What is more, the purity he saw revealed in her compassion forced itself upon him in a manner that, "...ruled out for me speculation about whether it was justified" (Gaita, 2002: 21). It was not, then, a matter of his needing to provide an account that would convince someone else, for what she revealed to Gaita about the preciousness and inalienable dignity of the patients could not itself be formulated *independently* of the love that she revealed. In the face of a love which was for Gaita *sui generis*, the notions of doubt and mistakenness are supposed not to apply.

I, for one, cannot help but be moved by Gaita's account, and by what *moved* him, but I also cannot help thinking him in some way *fortunate*. I am not sure if I mean fortunate to have met someone who made such a powerful and lasting impression on him, or fortunate because he was able to allow the nun to make such an impact: that the necessary background preparations (experiences) for recognising her behaviour as revelatory were, so to speak, already in place.<sup>60</sup> Perhaps I simply mean fortunate in that he was able to drop his guard *that* low, or, to shift metaphors once more, that he did not at some later point become prey to the gnawing suspicions that might afflict one with a more sceptical turn of mind.<sup>61</sup> I think here of the passage from another of Coetzee's novels, *Disgrace*, where the central character, the 'disgraced' English professor, David Laurie, reveals his shock at the friendship professed to him by a man with whom he had barely been acquainted. He says:

Has Bill Shaw...seen so little of the world that he does not know there are men who do not readily make friends, whose attitude towards friendship between men is corroded with scepticism? (Coetzee, 1999: 102).

For Laurie, or at least for someone with whom his 'corrosive' scepticism resonates, the young Gaita could also, perhaps, be described as not having seen enough of the world; as not having the required experience to 'realise' that mixed motivations, and not pure ones, are what inspire so many human actions. Perhaps the seventeen-year-old Gaita would be seen as too impressionable, or too idealistic to be trusted to teach 'us' anything indubitable about the Goodness-revealing properties of the nun's love. For such people, Gaita's account of the nun's behaviour will be, and indeed ought to be, a matter of doubt and evidence; a matter where the possibility of mistakenness is writ large.

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<sup>60</sup> E.g. Gaita's experiences of Romulus and Vacek. I also think of William James' talk of 'unconscious incubation' in connection with sudden religious conversion experiences in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

<sup>61</sup> When speaking of Gaita's 'being fortunate', I do not myself intend to sound condescending. It is nevertheless likely that this is *exactly* how it will come across, especially to one for whom its air of scepticism is not an air that they are inclined to breathe.

It needn't be only the hard-boiled sceptic who could demand something more from Gaita; who might, for example, press the familiar distinction between feeling certain and being right. Gaita is, it seems, making some sort of claim here: a claim about the existence of a variety of human love that the nun's behaviour forced him to acknowledge, a love that was hitherto outside of his own direct experience. Many others will, I think, want to say: 'OK, I hear you, but now *show me*'. If a friend is in raptures about a man she has recently met, and she says to me, 'Well, he is just the most amazing guy. His kindness and generosity are without question in a league of their own', then it is unlikely that only corrosive scepticism could spur me to ask further questions, to want to meet this person, to find out for myself. I may be delighted for my friend, that she was so singularly impressed, but I would be no doubting Thomas on account of wanting to satisfy myself as to whether his qualities were indeed *that* special or unusual. This is no reflection on my friend, for I could well acknowledge that she is usually an excellent judge of character, it is more a reflection of the epistemological and educative *limitations* of this sort of personal testimony: of being prepared to grant that another's depth of certainty is alone a sufficient basis to command our own assent; with the idea that we should simply rest content with nothing more than the feelings inspired by the reported experience itself.

Perhaps a wider problem with Gaita's nun is that she remains, and must in a sense remain, something of an enigma. Other than a few bare facts (e.g. she was middle-aged), we know precious little about her. That is not to say that we could not, much like diligent historians, try to dig around and find out more: more facts, further biographical details, perhaps even new stories from those who knew her, or knew of her. We could compare and contrast these various bits of information, and build up a more detailed picture of her character using due discrimination. But what sort of picture *could* this be? And how might it appear to the sceptic? It may well be one of a quite remarkable person, it may even be consistent with Gaita's being awe-struck at her behaviour. Consistency, however, will hardly do in such a case; it will likely fail to satisfy us. One thing that our research will not allow us to do is to encounter her, to experience her, as Gaita did. This possibility seems forever

removed from us: the length of time that has elapsed since Gaita's meetings at the hospital will likely prevent us from ever meeting her; from seeing for ourselves. Even if we wanted to share Gaita's commitment and certainty, there is a risk that we may feel left with only the cold comfort of historical evidence, of educated guesswork, of merely plausible narrative.

We may, a little like the mythical Pandora, also be left with hope. There is always, it seems, the possibility of our meeting someone like Gaita's nun for ourselves. In this respect, another of Diamond's examples of the 'difficulty of reality', of our being shaken and uncomprehending in the face of the unthinkable, also focusses on an experience of 'incomparable and inexplicable' goodness. In this case, Ruth Klüger describes her meeting, as a young child prisoner in Auschwitz, with a young woman - a stranger - who lied to save the young Klüger's life, and got her through selection procedures at the camp. (Diamond, 2008: 61). And yet, it is interesting that Klüger herself describes how others now often wonder *at her wonder* about this woman; how they fail to recognise that this was an encounter with the sort of goodness that Klüger herself saw as transcending familiar talk of altruism. One might say that they had never experienced anything like it themselves, and this of course is the point. They were not there. Moreover, if we were to go in search of someone like Gaita's nun or Klüger's young woman in our own lives - lives which mercifully do not involve avoiding death in Nazi extermination camps - how would we be supposed to recognise them if we met them? And how could we be sure that we will not be mistaken or deluded in our recognition? Do we simply have to trust in the strength of our feelings? If there are indeed people who can reveal to us the existence of a saintly love which transcends more everyday moral sensibilities; if we too are looking to be struck with wonder at its existence, then it seems that we might have prepared the ground (opened ourselves, or have been opened) in ways about which Gaita in his own case is, perhaps, less than explicit.

If developing the sort of 'nose' that enables one better to 'look' into the souls of others is important to ethical development on a Wittgensteinian account, it is at least questionable whether Gaita's experience of the nun would be of much help to those beginning to develop in this way. If one has to get the right 'tips', be pointed

in the right direction, and learn correct judgements rather than methods and techniques, then it is still far from clear that this could best be achieved by simply accepting such personal testimony without question. To return the discussion back explicitly to the school context, if Gaita may himself be someone who can teach us a great deal about ethics, his story of the nun could hardly be used straight-off in the classroom.<sup>62</sup> She would likely prompt more questions, more doubts, than she could help to resolve. For many she would simply be *unbelievable*. For all this, in Gaita's 'real' meeting with a 'real' nun, we meet problems for education that are perhaps, somewhat ironically, less troublesome when we turn to works of fiction. I say ironic because fiction inevitably involves 'made-up' characters; people who strictly speaking have never lived outside an author's imagination; whose lives are in a sense wholly subject to the purposes of their creator. This fictional status, I will now argue, matters less for moral education than do their dialogic possibilities: the sort of *discussibility* that they can indeed allow in the classroom<sup>63</sup>.

#### **(iv) Discussion and discussibility: Examples from Literature**

"Separateness can be felt as horror; such a response is what puts Othello beyond aid"

(Diamond, 2008: 65).

"We read to know we are not alone"

from *Shadowlands* (1993), screenplay by William Nicholson.

I mentioned in the previous section how Ruth Klüger has faced a certain disbelief from others to whom she tells *her* story of the young woman at Auschwitz. What I want to focus on here is not so much their doubts, but Klüger's own plea for her readers, "...not just to look at the scene but to listen to her and not take apart what

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<sup>62</sup> His more much detailed, literary, and eminently *discussible* picture of his father, Romulus, in *Romulus, my Father* seems, at least to me, to be better suited to deepening ethical reflection of students'.

<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, I could imagine the nun being introduced to a class as a 'discussible person', rather like a character in a novel, whose strong impression on *me*, say, might move some students to think and wonder. However, as I will go on to argue, *unlike* a fully-drawn character in a novel she seems still to provide a lesser opportunity for deepening our ethical discussions. I could even imagine the need here to draw on a character in a novel (perhaps Dorothea in *Middlemarch*) in order prevent our conversation from being cut short by a lack of discussible information.

happened, to 'absorb it' (Klüger, cited in Diamond, 2008:62). She asks us, as Diamond puts it, "...for a kind of imagination that can inhabit her own continued astonishment..."; and requests that we do not intellectually dissect her story, for to do so would be – for Diamond at least - to 'deflect' from its truth (Diamond, 2008: 62). One thing that is not clear is for whose sake we are being asked not to 'take apart' the story – Klüger's? Ours? Both? If it were a matter of being sensitive or respectful to Klüger's story, then perhaps we ought to acknowledge that her experience must have been deeply moving in ways that we may not easily understand. Perhaps we would agree that there can be something inappropriate, even disrespectful, in our intellectualising such a significant personal experience. Yet, if it is supposed to be for our own sake that we do not 'take apart' the story, then things seem somewhat different. Is it, then, that *any* attempt to reflect on and fit the story to our own experience must, for Diamond, deflect from its truth, and result in *our* cutting *ourselves* off from a deeper moral reality? If so, then this is, I think, to push the connection between deflection and ethical failure too far.

The danger is that only silent acceptance could count as properly non-deflective in such cases, and that this would apply just as well to someone's reported experience of a miracle: that if you ask any searching questions then you are merely cheating *yourself* of an opportunity for belief. This also risks becoming anti-educational: of closing down any genuine conversation; of converting potential dialogue into the sound of two people of the same faith speaking in a single voice. Although I do not believe that Diamond herself thinks in such extreme, polarised terms (e.g. deflection is always *a bad thing* to do ethically speaking) there is a sense in which her treatment of Klüger threatens to come close to this. To my mind, to learn anything of deep ethical significance *for us* from Klüger's personal account, and to develop the sort of ethical imagination that Diamond correctly suggests is needed for us to connect with her experiences (and perhaps with Gaita's), we must nevertheless begin making that connection from where we stand: with our own lives and experiences. We must, so to speak, be helped to build a bridge from ourselves to various others, a bridge that cannot exist if its construction is not



begun from our own side of any supposed divide; from our own familiar ground.<sup>64</sup> This will require that the experiences of others, particularly ones that strike us as strange or unfamiliar, can be discussed and scrutinised; be held up for various sorts of inspection rather than simply 'absorbed'. Ethical development can hardly be furthered by osmosis or dictat alone.

This idea of finding, or building, connections is important to my account of the ethical uses of literature in education. It is also why I began this section with two quotations which focus on the very ideas of separateness and togetherness; disconnection and connection. In the first, we have Othello who (at least on the Cavellian reading suggested by Diamond in this short quotation), is driven to the desire for certainty, for 'ocular proof' of Desdemona's alleged infidelity on account of a tragic inability to cope with his very separateness from his wife. In the second quotation, from a film about the real-life relationship between writer C.S. Lewis and the American poet Joy Gresham, the idea of separateness (or aloneness) is also present, along with the suggestion that reading may offer some sort of antidote to this condition. But what might be meant by the idea that we read to *know* we are not alone? Surely we already *know* we are not alone - we hardly need to peer into a book to find this out! To again borrow a distinction from Cavell, what seems to be suggested here is not so much knowledge but *acknowledgement*: through literature we can find acknowledgement that we are not alone in our humanity, that others, too, undergo similar troubles, suffer similar doubts and worries, think unusual or even unkind thoughts, and can sometimes be moved by the sorts of desires that one would hardly dare make public for fear of censure. If characters in literature share the secrets of their hearts or otherwise have them shared, then we may well be relieved by this very frankness; for this opportunity to find ourselves in them and them in us; to have said what is so often left unspoken in our own lives.

This is not to say that we will readily relate to, or connect immediately with, all fictional characters. Some will strike us as distant, even strange: they seem to think

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<sup>64</sup> I think of how Coetzee begins his novel *Elizabeth Costello* with talk of a 'bridging problem': of the need to get us over to the 'far bank', and, perhaps, to the 'world' inhabited by Elizabeth (Coetzee, 2003: 1).

differently; feel differently. We may, nevertheless, come to see something of them in the people that we have ourselves met; be able to relate them to our own lives and experiences. Perhaps more importantly, even when they appear quite alien indeed, we at least have the opportunity to come to recognise what such differences might mean, and to explore them either by ourselves, or with others. In a substantial work of fiction, the motivations of characters at least seem discoverable, if not always transparent, or otherwise open to straightforward interpretation. The lives of fictional characters are also discussible in almost exactly the same ways that we might discuss the people we meet in our daily lives. Here we may disagree with a friend about whether a shared acquaintance is, say, kind or self-interested; honest or dishonest. In our discussions we may refer to experiences involving this person that we both recall, but account for differently; perhaps one of us remembers something about this person that the other has forgotten; perhaps the other will draw one's attention to this other fact, or that other detail, about their lives. The point is that more often or not there exists the possibility of a substantial dialogue in such cases; a conversation held on the basis of mutual familiarity with another person (or persons).

This at least seems quite different from the situation with Gaita's nun or Klüger's young woman, with whom we will probably never be acquainted, and of whom we will perhaps never be given enough of the right sorts of clues to quell the desire not to accept personal testimony at face value. The lives of literary characters, as with those of the people we meet elsewhere in our lives, can be interpreted and reinterpreted by any number of 'readers'. We do not simply have to accept the account of another. We can compare and discuss our responses to a fictional character, we can ask questions about them together, we can analyse the characters' behaviour over time and in different situations. We may read and re-read the novel, form new interpretations, question older ones on the basis of talking to others, find new leads, chide ourselves or others for overlooking what now seems obvious, for failing to take the importance of this or that event for granted. While it is true that we will never meet, say, Mr Darcy or Elizabeth Bennet in the flesh, we can indeed meet them in the pages of *Pride and Prejudice*, and

when we do, it is as fully-drawn characters who have a history, who develop, and who (albeit through the considerable abilities of their creator) reveal to us certain things about themselves in what they say, how they say it; through their demeanour, their silences, their avoidances. In our wholly sharable, discussible, meetings with these characters, we pick-up (assuming the work of fiction is similarly substantial) on exactly the sorts of clues that we may also pick-up on when reaching judgements about people we meet in our lives.

I ought to make it clear that discussion of examples from fiction hardly replaces the need in ethical learning of connecting with 'real' people: it's not the case that we must simply learn from fiction and not from personal experience. The important point, rather, is that the discussibility of works of literature, and particularly discussions relating to character, can open the possibility that we may better - more readily and more sensitively - make connections with various others: grow to become better, deeper, readers, not only of works of fiction, but of the lives - the 'souls' - of others. Through our fictional encounters, we may also be permitted to grow used to reading, re-reading, looking, looking again; to listening attentively to others' stories rather than - to borrow a line from another well-known modern film - simply waiting for our turn to speak.<sup>65</sup> The ways in which we encounter ethical dilemmas in works of literature also mirror the ways that we encounter them in our own lives: contextually, in various concrete situations, as happening to complex, multi-layered beings, not simply to reasoning machines: rational agents in pursuit of the best piece of abstract argument to fit to their own case. When we examine characters in literature, for example Vronsky in *Anna Karenina*, struggling with his love for Anna, her pregnancy, and with how all this fits with his sense of social standing and military ambitions, we see the struggles of an individual man, and can see better what ethical struggle might mean in a human life. I am not saying that there is nothing ethically speaking that can be abstracted from his particular case, for to think this would once again be to lose any possible connection with him, to cut his example adrift from our own lives. This is not a plea for some sort of ethical

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<sup>65</sup> I refer to David Fincher's 1999 film, *Fight Club*, itself based on the novel of the same name by Chuck Palahniuk.

particularism, but for us to acknowledge that fully-drawn literary characters can allow us better to grasp the ways in which ethical concerns matter to people, what they can mean, and how they are experienced, encountered, or endured.

I want to pause briefly to consider a potential problem with the account I have been developing. The problem is centred on the notion of subjectivity: that the judgements we reach about fictional characters will be simply our personal 'opinion'. Another way of expressing this is via the suggestion that 'anything goes' when it comes to understanding characters in literature, and perhaps, the characters of human beings in general. If there is no better or worse here, just different strokes for different folks, then things look decidedly gloomy for any education in such matters: no one could be another's teacher; or rather, *anyone could*, but then no one could really be expected to take much notice of what was being taught. It would, after all, be based on the opinion of just another somebody.

If it is fairly easy to speak of such things in the abstract, it seems much harder to imagine what life would be like if anything really did go in judgements of character. Consider the following short conversations between a mother and her teenage son concerning the 'bad' influence she sees exerted on him by another, slightly older, boy:

### **Conversation 1**

*"Mark my words John, he's a bad sort. Don't hang around with him, he'll get you into trouble. He's already been in trouble with the police"*

*"You're wrong Mum, you hardly know him."*

*"Well that's my opinion: take it or leave it. It's just that I've seen more of the world than you have."*

*"Yes, and it's just made you bitter. Distrusting"*

### **Conversation 2**

*"John, it's my opinion, and only my opinion, that Carl is what might be described as a 'bad sort'. If I were you, I probably wouldn't choose to hang around with him...but, of course...I am not you... so I am not really able to see things as you do."*

*"Are you trying to give me some advice about Carl, Mum?"*

*"No, dear, I would never be so...presumptuous. That would imply that I know him, or could ever know him, better than you. That would simply be disrespectful."*

*"Advice is so yesterday, so absolutist, don't you agree Mum?"*

*"I do, dear, but not absolutely, of course."*

If I may be forgiven for more than a hint of caricature in my picture of 'family relativist', it is because it is quite hard to take seriously the idea that 'better' and 'worse' in judgements of character could be straightforwardly replaced by 'same' and 'different'. It is even harder, when trying to re-create anything close to a real-life conversation about the character of another human being, to picture what a pair of relativists could actually say to each other, particularly given that both would seem committed to thinking that the other's view is just as good as their own. I find it almost impossible not to picture the discussion as rather forced and insincere, while also implying that the mother might desperately want to say something more to her son than her relativism would allow. Of course, the mother in the first conversation does indeed say something more, but could we actually say, for example, that she *knew* better than her son? That he somehow ought to have heeded her advice on account of her greater experience of human affairs?

To suggest that the notions of better or worse might actually apply to judgements of human character or behaviour, and that people may indeed get better at judging, is not a simple matter of one's being older or of having greater experience. This again links to Wittgenstein's talk of acquiring a nose, and of the acquired sensitivities which allow one to deal appropriately with the sorts of clues that could lead to the formation of 'expert judgement' in this area of life. Experience is important, but experience itself cannot tell us what to *take* from experience: one needs, at least at various points, to have been guided. John, in the first

conversation, could well be more sensitive or astute than his mother, and her claims to experience might be less important in developing an account of Carl's character than his openness and lack of cynicism. Yet, it may not be that way at all: John may simply have been stubbornly unwilling to take his Mother's sage advice, and is also quite unwarranted in dismissing her as bitter. The crucial point is that we know nothing else about these characters, so it would be hard to decide which, if either, of them is misguided. If we did know more about them, if we had been able to view their behaviour and attitudes over time, and in different situations, then we could well afford to be more confident about our judgements. We would be offered *better*, more discussible, grounds.

The same applies to judgements about other fictional characters. If we think that anything goes in our coming to understand them, then we will have closed our eyes and plugged our ears to what they say about themselves, and to what is said, and implied, about them by the narrator, or by the other characters in the novel. In such a case, we will, perhaps because we are blinded by theory, or even by a general lack of care or attentiveness, have simply *misread the book*, much as we would have misread Carl as a 'nice, honest guy' if I had described his demeanour as furtive or shifty; or that he had avoided all eye contact with the other characters, or indeed that he had walked-off stage left clutching John's Mother's handbag and purse. We will have completely overlooked the clues which, as it were, would have been picked up by a more discerning reader. Of course, if Carl were a character in a more substantial work of fiction, we might eventually – perhaps by seeing him as regularly mistreated, or misunderstood – come to describe him as, deep down, 'a nice, honest guy', but this will be because we will have attended to what else was said about him; to what else he went through during the course of the book. There is, nevertheless, a grain of truth in the idea that our view of him, or of any other fictional character, will just be 'our opinion'. This comes from the idea that readers of the same novel will often disagree with one another about, say, the merits of such and such a character, just as they might well disagree elsewhere about whether their neighbour Jim is a thug, or a lovable rogue. The point is not to make too much of the mere fact of disagreement, or to underestimate varying degrees of

cogency, of perceptiveness, that can exist in what we might call differing 'opinions'. The fact that different characters will, so to speak, sometimes come to different views about the same character, should hardly imply that any interpretation, of any character, is just as good as any other.

#### **(v) Fiction and Deepening Ethical Confidence**

I began the chapter by pointing to what I see as the educational importance of being able to make doubt discussible in the classroom. I then proceeded to emphasise the advantages literary examples could have over examples from personal testimony. In particular, I argued that they can provide examples which may be shared and discussed by different readers: readers who might resist one another's views of, say, a character in a work of fiction. If I have also been concerned to argue for the advantages of literature for rendering various doubts and disagreements discussible, it should not be thought that the uses of literature in promoting ethical growth are confined merely to engaging the doubter. I have also suggested that the dialogic opportunities afforded by the study of literary texts may, more generally, help us to develop more sensitive readings of people's lives and characters, and at least potentially encourage us to a more sympathetic attentiveness to the various threads that can both bind and move human beings.

This is important for the sorts of ethical learning and development that follow from the Wittgensteinian account I have been picturing in the last couple of chapters. Yet, if literature may be our teacher in these respects, and help to give us the right tips or nudges in order that we might become, for example, more discerning judges of character, it also seems clear that it might yet fail to do this. 'It', strictly speaking, could well achieve little without various interventions from that oft-overlooked figure: the classroom teacher. There is a risk that my account so far makes it appear that if a Year 10 class were simply handed a copy of, say, a Charles Dickens novel, then they would emerge from school at 3.30 on the same day sympathetically attuned to one another, as opposed to pushing and shoving to reach the ever-popular seats at the back of the school bus. The main focus of most of the rest of this chapter will, therefore, be to address the following related questions: (a) Which

uses of literary works might best encourage ethical development? And, (b), What role or roles could the teacher play in helping to make this possible? I turn, now, to consider a particular vision of the relationship between pedagogy and the morally educative uses of literature.

Paul Standish, in a recent article entitled, '*Food for thought: resourcing moral education*' suggests how Coetzee's novel, *Elizabeth Costello*, may be used as a "...rich potential resource for moral education". He imagines a course of study based on the novel designed for 'teenage students' or 'older people'; a course which would seemingly help to facilitate ethical thought and reflection (Standish, 2009: 31). Although he makes some interesting suggestions relating to the ethical insights offered by the novel into the ambiguous relationships human beings have with other animals, his article also brings to light further questions which are relevant to my purposes. My reading of Standish's article concerns not only what is said, but also an attentiveness to its tone and presentation. It is a paper presented in two seemingly distinct parts, with two distinctive tones. I leave it open as to whether these differences are present accidentally, or by design. It does not matter greatly for my purposes whether Standish is, in fact, modelling a 'typical' pedagogical approach to a literary text in the first half of his paper because he seeks to expose or reveal the ethical and educative limitations of such an approach in the next. It seems more important that the approach to moral education suggested in the first part, where Standish imagines an educational course devoted to discussion of *Elizabeth Costello* can, in fact, be seen to be in tension with what is suggested in the second about the novel's potential for generating what I have called, following Diamond, 'non-deflective' ethical insight. What, then, are my aims in discussing Standish's intriguing and provocative paper here? The main one is a desire to modify or add to his account: to suggest that a classroom teacher, through using works of fiction such as *Elizabeth Costello*, may still be able to encourage the sorts of non-deflective, ethical insightfulness, which other pedagogical approaches could hinder or frustrate. I begin, however, by discussing the approaches to teaching that Standish suggests in his imagined course of study.



One of the first things that strikes me about Standish's suggested uses of Coetzee's novel as a teaching 'resource,' is the language he uses. His use of what I would describe as familiar 'teaching-talk' in imagining a series of lessons is, as we shall see, quite dramatically dropped in the second, more overtly philosophical, section of his paper. Perhaps this is all quite appropriate. After all, if the first section is indeed intended to provide practical suggestions for classroom teaching, then we might well expect Standish to have written it to be readily accessible to a teacher. In Standish's own imagined lessons on Costello, then, we find talk of meat-eating as an 'issue' which can often provoke 'strong responses'; of the use of the novel to help 'address' this question or issue, and of the possibility of 'identifying' and 'extracting' passages that present 'crucial stages in the novel's 'argument'. Furthermore, the questions for class discussion he suggests at various points are also supposed to help "...draw out the salient issues...", and to assist students to "...make clearer and more robust their own positions and to ground these..." (Standish, 2009: 33-34). Students are, at various other points, to be encouraged by their teacher to, "...make a list of foods that some people eat that disgust you", and to "...explain the cause of their disgust...and consider how far their disgust is justified". Elsewhere, they will be considering 'objections' to the arguments offered by various characters in the novel, and encouraged to "...construct counter arguments of their own". They will also, in a manner quite familiar to students of literature, move on to consider the novelist's purposes, along with the ways he presents 'the issues to the reader', and the likely effects on the reader (Standish, 2009: 36).

It is also interesting to discover that Standish's suggested sequence of lessons ends with the following comment, which includes a prominent reference to the 'learning outcomes' popularised by certain modern trends in pedagogy. Thus:

It needs to be recognised that students may spontaneously raise questions that are out of order. For this reason it may be preferable to maintain some flexibility in the approach and not to settle too rigidly on specific learning outcomes for each lesson (Standish, 2009: 36).

The almost apologetic, 'It needs to be recognised', is particularly striking when it is linked with talk of student spontaneity. Here, we get the distinct impression that spontaneity is something to be apologised for, or at least to be anticipated, and dealt with in terms of thorough lesson planning: something that might otherwise prevent students from meeting pre-determined learning 'outcomes'. This, along with Standish's seemingly wry comment that it is desirable for the students discussing Coetzee's novel to have actually "...read the chapters in question", adds to the sense that he is in fact concerned gently to mock the current state of pedagogy rather than genuinely to encourage any continuation of its various methods.

This reading becomes more compelling when one attends to how Standish ends his paper with the following comment:

The fluent accomplished arguments of the moral philosopher, with the pedagogical equivalent imagined in the first part of this article, threaten to deflect insight and education into the human condition, while this is something Coetzee's novel achieves... (Standish, 2009: 41).

In this light, it again appears that Standish's suggested lessons are deliberately imagined in ways that would seem both 'fluent' and 'accomplished' according to the sort of pedagogical approaches currently enjoying something of a vogue in schools. Nevertheless, his concern that pedagogy might risk deflecting deeper ethical insights, may also readily extend beyond such modern, objectives-based, models of learning. Perhaps the very idea of deepening ethical awareness is fundamentally incompatible with *any sort* of formal education where outcomes need to be measured and assessed. If the tension between pedagogy and the desire to deepen pupils' ethical awareness is indeed exacerbated when teachers are not simply under immense pressure to 'get results', but to get them by using only certain prescribed methods and techniques, it hardly seems confined to such a situation. Standish's talk of the threat of 'pedagogic deflectiveness' thus stimulates a wider question for education: to what extent can teaching in schools, or indeed in any similarly formal educational setting, avoid the risk of descending into the

application of various techniques which thereby render it incompatible with encouraging the sorts of deeper, and fundamentally non-technical, ethical insights permitted through works of fiction such as *Elizabeth Costello*? In other words, if it were indeed possible for works of literature to help deepen ethical insight, must this only ever be realisable outside of the formal classroom setting? If there are no simple answers here, there are at least few things that can be said in response to this sort of challenge.

Regardless of the risk that Standish's lesson ideas could encourage the sort of deflectiveness to which he refers later in his paper, I would not want to deny that they *could* have educative benefits, ethically speaking. Such a denial could well mean that we risk succumbing to the sort of polarised thinking whereby *any* attempt to understand ethical concerns as 'issues', or to 'construct arguments' about such issues, would be dismissed as inherently reductivist, essentialist, intellectualist, and so forth. And where to create, consider, and criticise arguments would necessarily be to be deflective in such a manner that one must thereby miss, or be cut-off from, anything of ethical depth. There may yet be various ethical problems that, perhaps on account of their stubbornness and intractability, could appropriately be referred to, and discussed as 'issues' (perhaps even 'controversial' issues). Moreover, there may be *many* different types of arguments.<sup>66</sup> One could well, for example, easily overlook the fact that Milton speaks of the *arguments* of various books in *Paradise Lost*, as does Blake in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*<sup>67</sup>. It seems clear that neither writer seeks to produce an argument which, to borrow the words of Alice Crary, can be understood to be:

...a bit of reasoning in which one judgement or set of judgements (i.e., a premise or set of premises) permits a further concluding judgement to be made in such a way that there is no room for the fact that it does so to

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<sup>66</sup> Compare the following comment made by Wittgenstein in the *Investigations*: "But how many kinds of sentence are there? Say assertion, question, and command?—There are *countless* kinds..." (PI, 25). The point is that perhaps there could be 'countless kinds' of arguments, too. (I am indebted to Ruth Cigman for this suggestion).

<sup>67</sup> Alice Crary makes a similar point about Milton's use of argument in *Beyond Moral Judgement*, (2007: 129). In Blake's poem, too, the devil certainly formulates 'arguments'.

depend on any tendency in the judgements in question, either individually or together, to elicit emotional responses (Crary, 2009: 129).

If there seems little inherently amiss in the fact that students in Standish's lessons are asked to discuss arguments or issues, there seems little wrong, for the purposes of education, of deciding to split a novel such as *Elizabeth Costello* into certain 'teachable' sections (as does Standish), perhaps organised by reference to what a teacher considers to be the need for students to attend, in order, to various themes, events, or encounters. This structure would hardly preclude in advance the possibility of students' gaining deeper ethical insights into the 'human condition'. Coetzee's novel is, after all, itself split conventionally into chapters, and we as readers would hardly balk at the suggestion that we ought, perhaps, to begin at Chapter 1, and then proceed in order<sup>68</sup>. To do so would hardly involve our necessarily losing sight of the importance of taking the novel as a whole.

Perhaps the bigger problem with *some* of Standish's lesson suggestions is that they do appear to connect with a more narrow conception of what it means for a novel to contain arguments, or to deal with ethical problems and concerns. If Standish's point was indeed to satirise this narrowness, then it is, I believe, a point well made. Consider, for example, how Elizabeth's 'woundedness' is to be discussed with students by simply 'drawing' their 'attention' to "...the dynamic nature of the presentations of the arguments" (Standish, 2009: 33). Her character, presumably, makes her a more dynamic vehicle for Coetzee to drive home, albeit in a manner still veiled in fiction, his own philosophical arguments. Consider, also, how Standish proposes that students are encouraged to think about, and to separate, 'the arguments' from the 'emotional reactions' of various characters regarding the morality of meat-eating, and how they are then to be questioned about "...how far emotional responses should affect decisions about the morality of eating meat" (Standish, 2009: 34). The notion that a work of literature can be seen to 'deal' with ethical concerns *only* insofar as it can be made to yield recognisably abstract

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<sup>68</sup> It is also interesting in this respect that Coetzee refers to each chapter in the novel as a particular 'lesson'. Each lesson is, perhaps, another step on the bridge that leads us to Costello: to the territory of what might well be described as her troubled soul.

patterns of argumentation is a problem I have touched on before in connection with Diamond's *The Difficulty of Reality* in Chapter 6.<sup>69</sup>

Here it was suggested that such an approach may indeed miss much that can be morally educative about works of fiction. In short, it risks short-changing us, and doing little to prevent us from, say, missing the character of Costello as a 'concrete' individual; overlooking how important *she* is for an appreciation of the sorts of deep ethical difficulties that can arise in connection with the killing and eating of animals. As Ruth Cigman writes, it will be to, "...miss the 'reality', the 'example', from which Coetzee wants us to learn: that of a wounded woman evoking the horrific suffering of animals in our production facilities" (Cigman, 2014: 12). Standish's lessons also seem to presuppose the related idea that the features of a novel which 'engage our feelings' ought be treated as separable from the ethical thought in the novel and its 'rational' persuasiveness. For here, as Crary explains, when approaching a novel, "...it must in principle be possible to strip away such features from the moral thinking within it..." rather than seeing them as internal to, *as bound-up with*, what Crary refers to as the moral thinking itself (Crary, 2009: 136).

If Standish's approaches to using Elizabeth Costello as a teaching resource can sometimes suffer in the ways I have described, other ways of approaching, of teaching, a fictional work do at least seem possible. If it is possible for Coetzee's fiction to be capable of revealing ethical insights, of being able to uncover, "...the wound out of which we are all, wailing and crying, first exposed to the world"; of allowing the reader to undergo the 'real' educative experience of seeing human beings 'hinged' between animal and god, and "...inclined from time to time to

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<sup>69</sup> This also connects with the idea that there are, in fact, no 'concrete' individuals in fiction: an idea famously defended by R.H. Hare (c.f. Diamond, 1998: 40). For Hare, any 'moral' view that one derives from a work of fiction, e.g. from a fictional character, is precisely a view concerning a *type* and not a particular person. Diamond rightly points out that on such a view, moral philosophers need not attend carefully to fiction to know what it can offer us morally, for any "...moral judgement we are led to by a novel is necessarily universal." (Diamond, 1998: 40). So although we may learn much morally speaking from fictional works, fiction cannot teach us anything unique or distinctive about the nature of 'moral thinking'. When we read a novel, in a sense we know *in advance* how to recognise its moral messages; its moral thinking. If one accepts such a view, then if anything valuable for ethics or moral education could be revealed through my fictional account of their lesson, then it could – it seems - equally well have been realised outside of fiction.

become unhinged, exposed and out of position, ecstatic and capable of ecstasy...” then he writes, at least in part, in order to encourage us to recognise these possibilities. To see *what* he has seen; to see *as* he has seen. (Standish, 2009: 41). There is also a sense in which Standish, the writer, desires us to learn, to *progress* in our thinking about what sorts of things a work of fiction is capable of ethically speaking. In one sense, by writing at all, he also takes the place of teacher: one who aims to show us something we may not have recognised; one who holds out the possibility of communicating with us, of passing something on, of helping us to progress in our thinking. We may of course resist his efforts: I, for one, can make very little of the image of ‘our’ crying and wailing at a ‘first’ exposure to the world. The point, here, is not so much whether he will always be successful, but that his writings themselves reveal at least the possibility of one’s being another’s teacher in this respect; that his own ethical learning from literature can be rendered communicable, *discussible*, with others.

This is, however, just the beginning of the story. If Standish may persuade us in an academic article to acknowledge what works of fiction may be capable of ethically speaking, this is not the same as enabling us to experience what he has experienced in, say, reading *Elizabeth Costello*. If successful, Standish’s teaching - if I may continue to refer to it as such - will not so much (directly) deepen our own ethical insightfulness, but perhaps merely help us to acknowledge that such deepening, via works of fiction, could be there for the taking. Nor does any of this help us to establish the possibility of deepening the ethical awareness of pupils’ in schools through the use of fictional writings. If there are indeed ways of helping to pass on the non-deflective ethical insights of which Standish speaks in connection with works of literature such as *Elizabeth Costello*, then these *may* never be realised in schools (except, perhaps, inadvertently). If ethical learning, like any other, will involve some notion of progression, then the teacher will likely be required to articulate explicitly what this entails: to make it measurable, and indeed, gradable. There would likely be pressure for her to think and speak of ethical progress in terms of what Wittgenstein would have called ponderable evidence, whereas the sort of ethical deepening which arises from literature can often involve

imponderability: the seeming impossibility of spelling out, of formulating definitively, what one knows, and how one knows it. This is indeed a significant barrier, but not, I think, an un-scalable prison wall.

If works of literature can offer non-deflective ethical insights to some (such as Standish), then it is because they have acquired the capacities, the necessary attunement, to be able to attend to them as such. They were hardly born with these sensitivities fully developed; one can so easily overlook the stage-setting that had to take place. In a related way, when one watches the fingers of an accomplished pianist appear to dance over the keys, it is easy to forget how the same fingers spent countless hours walking slowly up and down; how they practised time after time the same tiresome scales and arpeggios. Nor does the thought that the pianist could have had a good teacher immediately spring to mind when one sits wrapped in the beauty of the music. In terms of ethical development, the possibility exists that one may well have been offered the right sort of 'tips' by another; had, at times, been pointed in the right direction.

In the final section of the chapter, then, I aim to model one sort of 'approach' to teaching and learning, using Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello*, which might help to deepen ethical understanding.<sup>70</sup> This will also involve trying to realise my notion of discussibility: of keeping open the conversation in ways that I understand as Wittgensteinian. There are, of course, various dangers here. One is that the whole account, perhaps owing to my own lack of literary abilities, will appear rather forced, even contrived. There is clearly little I can do to remedy this. What I would say, however, is that I am certainly not claiming any novelty in what I go on to describe: if much appears familiar, and already goes on in various schools, then so much the better - one might well say - for the prospect of 'moral education'. There is always another, related danger: that the 'approach' I suggest will be read as some sort of application of technique (or various familiar techniques). This will render it liable to be criticised, by some, as too narrow and prescriptive, and by others,

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<sup>70</sup> Perhaps 'model' is the wrong word, for it suggests something far more definite than I offer here. What I provide will be little more than a sketch, or a snapshot, of what might go on in a classroom in the hands of an 'experienced' teacher. I use the word experienced, at least in part, in the Wittgensteinian sense of having 'greater' – but not simply *more* – experience of humanity.

perhaps, as still too woolly and indefinite. This is, again, largely unavoidable. In a sense, the fact that I cannot establish ('prove') that my writing does not in fact gravitate to either of these poles is wrapped-up, at least in part, with the very nature of what I am attempting to articulate. It is indeed possible that it will raise as many questions as it answers. Perhaps this too is a situation where a shrug of the shoulders may eventually be the only appropriate response to make. It is with this gesture in readiness that I turn back to the classroom.

### **(V) 'Plenary' in the Classroom**

This thesis, perhaps like any good lesson<sup>71</sup>, will end with a plenary: a conclusion, albeit of a slightly unusual kind. Here, we meet once again with the same, or more or less the same, class we encountered in Chapter 1. We meet them at some later point in their school career. A few have left the school after their GCSE's, but Emma is still there. So too is Jeremy. They have been studying Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* for some time now. They have also, under the diligent tutorage of Ms Comberton, been following a scheme of work similar in some respects to Standish's suggested sequence of lessons. The *outcome*? Well, Ms Comberton was more than satisfied with the way things were going. The class discussions on the rights and wrongs of eating meat had even become quite animated: particularly following Emily's announcement that she had once eaten crocodile, and Sean's bold claim, made seemingly without any hint of bravado, that he would try pretty much anything as long as it was cooked right.

In the previous lesson, Ms Comberton, aware as ever of the need for a teacher to use a variety of different media in order to keep the interest of her class, decided to show the Channel 4 programme *Kill – cook – eat*. She was, however, more than a little taken aback by the reaction it generated, particularly during the more graphic scenes in the abattoir. If it were not for the occasional outburst of 'Urrr...Gross!' or 'Dis-guuus-ting!', and the fact that two or three of the girls periodically sunk their heads on their desks (Emma...*again*), most sat in silence, seemingly engrossed in

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<sup>71</sup> In much 'official' teaching speak, the three parts are as follows: starter, main activity or 'development', and plenary. This is also sometimes affectionately translated in gastronomical terms, as giving them (the pupils) their starter, main course and dessert.



the scenes of slaughter and butchery. 'Most will have already seen it,' Ms Comberton reflected, 'others are just trying not to look shocked for fear of ridicule.' Perhaps she was right. Of course, she never mentioned it to the class. Never talked with them about it. Instead, she carefully organised them into small-groups to discuss with their peers what they had learnt from the episode.

The next lesson in the scheme of work was, however, to prove quite different indeed. With Ms Comberton suddenly taken ill with a bout of food poisoning, the class arrived for their Wednesday afternoon session to find they had a replacement teacher: a certain Mrs Duwlig. They had never seen her before. 'She must,' thought Jeremy, whose own mother works as a teacher, 'have come from a supply agency'. Others in the class had somewhat different thoughts. For the likes of John and Hannah, entering the room and grinning widely at each other, the presence of a 'sub' teacher meant only one thing: a lesson off. And perhaps, if at all possible, an opportunity to raise a few laughs by offering up 'comedy' names when a sub asked them to introduce themselves. But for a while Mrs Duwlig didn't even look up. Not at all. She just kept her eyes, as if completely fixed, on the same page of the book she was holding. The chatter gradually died down. They sat in silence looking at her, wondering if she was ever going to speak, to move, to do *anything*.

As it was, it was Jeremy who first dared disturb the silence.

"Miss" he said, "I am sorry to interrupt you. But what's the LO for today?"

"I am so sorry" stuttered Mrs Duwlig, as if being woken abruptly from a dream, "I was away with the fairies. What did you say about a hello?"

There was a short, loud laugh. A laugh of relief? For some, perhaps. For others, the laugh was aimed directly at her being away with the fairies. It was just the kind of stupid, outdated thing someone of her age would say.

"The L. O. Miss" reiterated Jeremy, urgently, but with more than a touch of bemusement, "You know...The Learning Objective!"

"I am not sure we've got one of those," said Mrs Duwlig. "You *are* studying Elizabeth Costello, *right?*"

"Right," replied Jeremy, "But there still has to be an LO. Every lesson has one." 'What is wrong with this woman?' he thought, 'Miss Comberton always gives us a learning objective, in fact, nearly *all* teachers do'. He started to wonder if this one was from an agency at all. Was she even a *proper* teacher?

As if sensing something in his scepticism, Mrs Duwlig replied, "Well, what do *you* think it should be?"

The penny dropped. How *could* he have been so slow. 'She wants us to make up our own objective', he thought. 'Ms Comberton sometimes does this too, she says it's part of best practice or something. Helps to test for prior knowledge. Gets us to take charge of our own learning.'

"And does it," said Mrs Duwlig, her eyes fixed on Jeremy in much the same way as they had been fixed on her book at the beginning of the lesson, "Does it help you to learn better if you have a learning objective?"

"Well, ye...kinda...no, not really. It's just something we do. You know...part of the routine. But mostly Miss writes it on the board, or it's on a PowerPoint or something. She says only bad teachers don't put it there."

*Bad* teachers. It had finally been said. Now it was out in the open there seemed to be a palpable sense of relief in the classroom. Perhaps she was *just* a bad teacher. Past it. Away with the fairies.

"OK" continued Mrs Duwlig, purposefully, "Today the objective is to better understand ourselves and others. And that's what it will be the next time, and the time after that."

"So, we're having... three lessons on it, right?" interjected Jamie from the back of the class.

"Do you think we'll need *all three?*"

"You tell *us*, you're supposed to be the teacher!" he scoffed.

Sniggers were sniggered; knowing glances were exchanged. Things didn't seem to be going well. Mrs Duwlig smiled a curious smile, and spoke slowly and deliberately.

"Elizabeth Costello. What is *she* like?"

"Mad...Crazy!", shouted Jamie, confident after his former outburst went unchallenged that he had the better of this old sub.

"Mad," repeated Mrs Duwlig, calmly, "And who else agrees?"

One by one, hands were raised, until only a few remained down. There was yet another sudden, short, burst of laughter.

"I don't think she's mad," interjected Emma.

The laughter stopped. Emma hardly ever spoke in class. What had got into her?

"I think she's just very..." she continued, "very...confused."

"Yeah, *very confused!*" laughed Jamie sarcastically, "A very confused, *MAD*, old woman. That's what I said!"

Jeremy spoke up, as if rushing to Emma's rescue. "There is a big difference between being mad and confused" he exclaimed.

Mrs Duwlig gestured for him to continue with his thought.

"Everybody can get confused or puzzled, but not everybody who is confused is also mad. Mad is worse than confused. If she were mad, Elizabeth Costello couldn't go and give talks at universities about the morality of eating meat. She'd be a gibbering wreck. She'd be *sectioned*" he said.

"If she were mad she'd be a gibbering wreck. Gibbering like an ape? Like someone who had lost her reason, perhaps?" replied Ms Duwlig.

"I suppose so, yeah."

“We should come back to that idea later”, said Mrs Duwlig, and with that she looked once again at Emma. “I like your suggestion that Elizabeth is confused. Could you say something more about that?”

Emma thought about it. It really wasn't easy to know what to say about Elizabeth Costello other than that she was in fact confused, or perhaps plain confusing. This woman who could stand up and deliver talks to professors, but spoke about knowing what it was like to be a corpse, and of shying away in terror at the thought of her own mortality. This woman who collected prestigious awards but, at the same time, compared herself with an ape, and talked of her vegetarianism in terms of a need to save her soul. Emma couldn't forget the image of Elizabeth hiding a wound beneath her clothes, a wound that nevertheless touched on everything that she said and did. The thought of this wound – *Where was it? What was it?* - kept intruding when she tried to formulate a neat response to the teacher's question.

Mrs Duwlig waited, patiently, as if sensing Emma's struggle. After a short while Emma found what she felt were the right words. “Well, she is *wounded*. Her confusion is not the sort that I can really understand. She is a really confused and troubled person. In lots of different ways.” As she said it, she knew it wasn't correct. For a start she had *admitted* that she didn't understand Elizabeth. That couldn't be the right thing to say, could it? What would the teacher say now? She knew what Ms Comberton would say, and indeed do. She'd simply ask one of the clever ones. Someone like Jeremy.

To her surprise this didn't happen. Instead, Mrs Duwlig looked straight at Emma and said: “I am myself quite deeply confused about what to make of Elizabeth Costello...perhaps she *ought* to confuse us. She is not an easy character to pin down. Even her son can't do *that*. He too seems confused about what to make of her. She is described at various points as a 'tired seal', 'Daisy Duck', 'a cat devouring its prey', 'fish or fowl', 'a python' and even as 'a god incarnated in a child'. All images of different animals, but which is she, *really?* And yet, all the time he knows who she is: she is *his mother*. She herself *knows* who she is, what she is, where she

is, and yet she compares her situation to that of an educated ape in a fictional story. She seems to be confused about herself. She..."

She was about to add something else, but Jeremy interrupted. It was all getting a bit much for him. After all, if the teacher didn't know what to think about Elizabeth, what hope had they got? More to the point, what could she teach them if she was herself confused? They had exams coming up.

"I don't find her confusing at all!" he interjected sternly, "Just a bit...a bit...over-emotional".

"Go on" replied Mrs Duwlig, encouragingly.

"Well, it seems quite simple to me. You have this woman who wants to convince people that they shouldn't be eating meat. She doesn't really have any good arguments. So she resorts to using shocking images, like when she compares the factory farming of animals for meat to the Nazi holocaust. When anyone tries to question her, like her daughter-in-law, she just avoids giving them straight answers. Her moral thinking is just confused and unclear."

"Is she aware, do you think, that she is confused and unclear in this way? Why do you suppose that she wears leather shoes and carries a leather purse?"

"Like I said, she is inconsistent in her thinking about her morals. She can't actually think straight. I eat meat. I wear leather too. I can't see any good reasons not to do both."

Mrs Duwlig nodded. Then she asked, as if out of the blue, "Do *you* have any pets?"

Jeremy knew what she was up to. She was going to ask if he would ever eat dog meat. She was trying to see if he, too, was inconsistent in his thinking. He was not about to get caught out *that* easily, she would have to do much better.

"Yes, I have a dog. And before you ask, I would eat dog just as readily as any other meat. Dogs aren't morally superior to cows and pigs, they are all living and feeling beings, it's just that our culture doesn't eat them."

Sean, always game for an argument, butted in. "So, Jeremy, *could you* kill and eat *your own dog?*"

Jeremy thought for a moment. "Not happily, of course, but if I had to kill and eat *him* then I would."

"To be consistent in your thinking, or perhaps because you were starving?" added Mrs Duwlig. "What sort of situation did you have in mind?"

"If I were starving then I might, but that's an exceptional case. It doesn't prove anything about whether eating meat is wrong or right. I would *never* kill my dog just to prove a point or win an argument. That would just be...obscene!"

With that Jeremy slid down slightly in his chair, and fell silent. To his surprise he thought about when Alfie, his German Shepherd, was a puppy, and how he used to sleep at the bottom of his bed at night. He remembered how the tiny pup would keep trying to climb under the covers to lie next to him. Alfie wasn't even allowed to go upstairs. Jeremy's Mum expressly forbade it. He remembered *that* look on her face when he was caught returning Alfie downstairs early in the morning. He felt a deep sadness at the idea of Alfie no longer being there to greet him when he came home from school.

Sensing his discomfort, Mrs Duwlig did not push him further. Nevertheless, that word: OBSCENE. An Interesting choice of words. Not morally wrong, but obscene. Elizabeth Costello used exactly the same word when describing novelist Paul West's writing about the horrors inflicted by Hitler's executioner on the July bomb plotters. It was in Chapter 6, a chapter entitled: 'The Problem of Evil'. She read out loud from that chapter, scarcely glancing at the pages of the book as she did so. The class listened.

That is what Paul West, novelist, had written about, page after page, leaving nothing out; and that is what she read, sick with the spectacle, sick with herself, sick with a world in which such things took place, until at last she pushed the book away and sat with her head in her hands. *Obscene!* she wanted to cry but did not cry because she did not know at whom the word

should be flung: at herself, at West, at the committee of angels that watches impassively over all that passes.

She looked up slowly. She asked the class: "Why would Elizabeth want to describe *herself* as obscene?"

Silence.

She allowed it to continue. Silence.

Finally, Jeremy spoke. "Perhaps she felt guilty."

"But why? Surely that would be pointless? Wouldn't it be more confused thinking? After all, she hadn't killed or tortured anyone. She wasn't responsible for their deaths any more than she is responsible for the deaths of the animals used for meat, shoes, and clothing."

"She didn't stop reading" said Jeremy. "She was sick with herself for *that*. Something in her wanted to find out what the executioner did to those men."

"She felt involved in the obscenity?"

"Maybe." This time it was Emma's voice that once again spoke up in reply. "But she also said that she didn't know where to fling the word obscene."

Mrs Duwlig gestured for her to continue.

Emma Continued.

"She is confused because she doesn't know what do with the feelings she has. Perhaps she doesn't know if she is allowed to feel them. Perhaps she feels that there is something wrong with her?"

"Perhaps..." replied Mrs Duwlig, smiling and turning her copy of *Elizabeth Costello* to yet another page, readying herself to read once more.

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