

# The Will to See

## Ethics and Moral Perception of Sense

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**We would like to suggest** here an approach to ethics inspired by Wittgenstein's second philosophy. We'll begin by introducing the project of ethics "without ontology," which is concerned with exploring the practices and immanence of ordinary life. We'll then show that this exploration can only be achieved by making use of, or even forming, an ethical competence: the capacity to grasp the meaning of an action and situation, the perception of what matters. Finally, we'll emphasize a fundamental difficulty of moral perception, the constant risk to "miss it," because of inattention or out of carelessness.

In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein asks himself where his work derives its importance, given that it seems "only to destroy everything interesting . . . and important."<sup>1</sup> But what is important? The aim of philosophy, according to Wittgenstein, is indeed to redefine and shift the emphasis of our idea of what is important, of what matters: what we take to be important is nothing but air (*Luftgebäude*). What is really important is hidden from us, not because it is concealed, private, or missing, but precisely because it is right there before our eyes. We have to learn how to see, how to pay attention, or be considerate. Moral perception and, as we'll try to show, the moral dimension or texture of every experience is defined by *the will to see*. The capacity to perceive the details of ordinary life—to grasp "what matters" against the background of a form of life—lies at the center of moral competence. We'll use this definition of moral perception as a *leitmotiv* to examine how one can conceive of ethics as a perceptual investigation, therefore as attention, inextricably sensory and conceptual, to details and moral expressions, in order to emphasize the "adventurous dimension" (to borrow a phrase from Henry James) of every ethical exploration.

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## 1. Ethics without Mythology and without Ontology

Let's begin with a redefinition of morality suggested by Cora Diamond, drawing on Wittgenstein. According to Diamond, there is no object or subject specific to morality:

I begin by contrasting two approaches to ethics . . . We may think that there is a thought and talk that has as its subject matter what the good life is for human beings, or what principles of action we should accept, and then philosophical ethics will be the philosophy of that area of thought and talk. But you do not have to think that; and Wittgenstein rejects that conception of ethics. . . . [J]ust as logic is not, for Wittgenstein, a particular subject, with its own body of truths, but penetrates all thought, so ethics has no particular subject matter; rather, an ethical spirit, an attitude to the world and life, can penetrate any thought or talk.<sup>2</sup>

With no particular subject, this ethics is an ethics of perception, of what our moral life is like. "I had attempted," Diamond adds, to "describe features of what moral life is like, without saying anything at all about what it must be like,"<sup>3</sup> however, without simply describing our practices or what we do.

Communication about moral things, like that about many other things, includes exploration of what will enable the participants to reach each other; that is not 'given' by the existence of a 'practice'. Our practices are exploratory, and it is indeed only through such exploration that we come to see fully what it was that we ourselves thought or wanted to say.<sup>4</sup>

Diamond borrows this approach from a certain reading of Wittgenstein. Ethics cannot be described by mere reference to common practice: our idea of morality (our ideal) also contributes to molding our moral practices, so that common practice is not enough. Our practices cannot be foundational because we don't know them. Diamond writes that our practices are *exploratory*, as opposed to given; they have to provide us with a vision of what we think, say, or mean. It is a matter of exploring more than arguing, a matter of "changing the ways we look at things" (WM 27). It implies a transformation of our concept of justification, as justification goes on within a form of life we share with others. Hence Diamond's interest in the examination of literature, examples, enigmas, and short stories in ethics; the use of literature is not simply illustrative but, as every *example*, it makes us see more clearly what we expect from ethics, what we mean by it.

Hilary Putnam, like Diamond, follows in the tradition of Iris Murdoch and promotes a similar approach that consists of paying attention to what we say, to the ways our common expressions guide or

deceive us—which definitely differs from referring to “our practices” or conventions since, as Diamond notes, it concerns also, maybe even more, our disagreements and our misunderstandings. Putnam therefore **writes [AQ: Is this a published text? See footnote 5]:**

We have to break completely with a narrow image of what an ethical problem is. In mathematics, it can be said that for Wittgenstein mathematics do not consist in descriptions. But it cannot be said of ethics, because there are ethical problems that are both descriptions and more than descriptions. I’ve used the words of “entangled fact” and here we’re “entangled” by descriptive words such as “cruel,” “impertinent,” “inconsiderate.” Entangled words, both evaluative and descriptive, lie at the heart of our true ethical life.<sup>5</sup>

Putnam, like Diamond, stresses that this isn’t an “anti-theoretical” approach, that ethics is available to a variety of descriptions (making ethics a mess, a “motley,” as in mathematics—and even “a squared motley,” a big mess). It doesn’t mean that there’s no arguing in ethics. Reality is just far more “entangled”; it requires deeper work from imagination and perception, an education of our sensitivity.

Wanting to refer to “our practices” only makes sense by examining the heterogeneous set of practices of language, what we say from within the bustling of our forms of life, our form of life in language. To be realistic thus consists in returning to ordinary language, in examining our words, in paying attention to them, in caring about them (about our responsibility to our words and expressions, about not “letting them down”). Diamond criticizes a fascination in ethics comparable to that of Frege and Russell in the field of logic, for a mythological and abstract ideal: the ideal of ethical rationality “underlying moral arguments.” Quite differently, in ethics, not everything requires arguments.

Just as mathematics can be done by proof but also (as Wittgenstein mentions) by drawing something and saying, “Look at this,” so ethical thought goes on in argument and also *not* in argument but (e.g.) in stories and images. The idea that we have not got *Thought* unless we can rewrite the insight as argument in some approved form is a result of a mythology of what is accomplished by argument.<sup>6</sup>

We imagine, like Frege, that “it would be impossible for geometry to set up precise laws if it tried to recognize threads as lines and knots in threads as points.”<sup>7</sup> In a similar way, we imagine that morality couldn’t be thought without norms and without necessity, only on the basis of ordinary reality and its knots and threads, on the basis of the tapestry of life that Wittgenstein brings up on several occasions: “A [particular] pattern on the weave of our life [*Lebensteppich*]” (PI II i).

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

This is what characterizes “the realistic spirit”: understanding that what matters, what must be looked at, are the knots and threads, the weaving of our ordinary lives. Henry James and Wittgenstein have this simile in common, that of the image in the tapestry, revealing the weaving together of the conceptual and the empirical.

Seeing life as a weave, this pattern (pretense, say) is not always complete and is varied in a multiplicity of ways. But we, in our conceptual world, keep on seeing the same, recurring with variations. This is how our concepts take it.<sup>8</sup>

This allows us, among other things, to reconsider Wittgenstein’s famous claim in the *Tractatus* that there cannot be ethical propositions. For Wittgenstein, the aim of philosophy is the logical clarification of propositions. Philosophy itself is not a body of doctrine, but an activity: making our thoughts clear. This description of the philosophical task entails that there can only be a moral philosophy if there is a body of propositions in need of clarification. For Wittgenstein, there is no part of philosophy identified as “moral philosophy.” Even though the *Tractatus* denies the existence of ethical propositions, Wittgenstein describes his book as having an ethical purpose—which is not to say, however, that his book contains moral judgments. His position (then and later) is that a piece of work, a novel for instance, can have a moral purpose despite the absence of any moral content or theory. Such is the effect of the *Tractatus*, its value (*Wert*), and its relevance: helping us to see the world aright.

Wittgenstein’s second philosophy develops the theme of moral perception as well as the criticism of the very idea of moral philosophy. In the Cambridge lectures of the 1930s, for instance, Wittgenstein is interested in what links together the meanings of “good” in various contexts. There are gradual transitions from one meaning to another; things called “good” in different contexts can be linked together by a series in which each member shares a likeness with contiguous members of the series: there is *nothing* common to all good things. This reflection on the word “good” applies the general critique of the idea that there should be *something* common to all cases in which we employ a general

term (*good*). Wittgenstein, thanks to the notion of family resemblance, equally rejects the ideas of ethical concepts and of moral philosophy. It is an ethical “exploration”—not of an ethical reality to discover—of the way our ethical concerns are part of our language and our life, in a set of words larger than ethical vocabulary, and of its complex relations with a variety of institutions and practices that remains to be seen aright. To describe ethical understanding, one would have to describe all these uses of particular words, which are *unaccountable* by any general definition, and, in order to describe our linguistic practices, one would have to describe the whole background of the form of life.

It is not so much a matter of moral judgment and understanding as it is one of perception and a synoptic view: an *ordinary* perception, by an “objectifying” philosophical *ersatz*. [AQ: **Can you verify this sentence? Our translator was wondering if the “par” in the original was possibly a typo that should have been “pas,” making the last clause “not an objectifying philosophical ersatz”?**] In his second philosophy, Wittgenstein suggests a *Gestalt* approach to morality, the necessity of bringing a situation out against a narrative *background*. Here is how Diamond defines it:

Our particular moral views emerge from a more general background of thought and response. We differ in how we let (or do not let) moral concepts order our life and relations to others, in how concepts structure the stories we tell of what we have done or gone through.<sup>9</sup>

Elements of ethical vocabulary only make sense within the context of our common practice and a form of life or, rather, are brought to life against the background (that of praxis), which “gives words their meanings”—a moral meaning that is never fixed, and always depends on “our” common practices. “Only in the practice of language can a word have meaning.”<sup>10</sup>

Meaning is not only defined by use or context (as several analysts of language have acknowledged), but it is also a part of and only perceptible against the background of the practice of language, which is modified by *what we do with it*. “‘Beautiful’ is bound up with a particular game. And similarly in ethics: the meaning of the word ‘good’ is bound up with the act it modifies. We can only ascertain the meaning of the word ‘beauty’ by seeing how we use it.”<sup>11</sup> It is thus tempting to bring ethics closer to a particularist ontology—which would set abstract particulars (taken from perception, for instance) at the center of a theory of values or a realism of particulars. But that would still amount to missing the meaning of family resemblance, which is precisely the negation of ontology. Wittgenstein criticizes the craving for generality:

The tendency to look for something in common to all the entities which we commonly subsume under a general term. . . . The idea of a general concept being a common property of its particular instances connects up with other primitive, too simple, ideas of the structure of language.<sup>12</sup>

In “Vision and Choice in Morality,” Iris Murdoch attends to the importance of care in morality.<sup>13</sup> Murdoch introduces differences in morality in terms of differences of *Gestalt*. She criticizes the standard idea of the perception of an object by a concept:

Here moral differences look less like differences of choice, given the same facts, and more like differences of vision. In other words, a moral concept seems less like a moveable and extensible ring laid down to cover a certain area of fact, and more like a total difference of *Gestalt*. We differ not only because we select different objects of the same world but because we *see* different worlds.<sup>14</sup>

There are no univocal moral *concepts* ready to be applied to reality in order to determine objects, but our concepts depend for their very application on the *vision* of the “domain,” on the narrative or description that we give of it, on our personal interest and our desire to explore (what is important to us). With the idea of what is important, we have another formulation of the ethical care: what matters to us, what counts.

## 2. Ethical Competence as Perceptual Capacity

The relation of the definition of ethics to what matters has been emphasized by Harry Frankfurt in *The Importance of What We Care About* and, in a quite different field, by Stanley Cavell, who discusses the cinema and movies that *matter* to us:

The moral I draw is this: the question what becomes of objects when they are filmed and screened—like the question what becomes of particular people, and specific locales, and subjects and motifs when they are filmed by individual makers of film—has only one source of data for its answer, namely the appearance and significance of just those objects and people that are in fact to be found in the succession of films, or passages of films, *that matter to us*.<sup>15</sup>

The care that Wittgenstein advocates is also the specific care for the *invisible* importance of things and moments, to the concealment of what matters in our ordinary life. Redefining morality on the basis of what matters and its relation to the vulnerability of our experience could help constitute, in a new sense, an ethics of the *particular*. One can refer to a cluster of words, the language game of care and impor-

tance, of what matters. Our ability to care becomes for Murdoch “unsentimental, detached, unselfish, objective attention.”<sup>16</sup> It results from the development of a perceptual capacity: to see how a detail or a gesture stands out against a background.

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

which show continually in their reactions and conversations. These things, which may be overtly and comprehensibly displayed or inwardly elaborated and guessed at, constitute what one may call the texture of a man’s being or the nature of his personal vision.<sup>17</sup>

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

We cannot see the moral interest of literature unless we recognize gestures, manners, habits, turns of speech, turns of thought, styles of face as morally expressive—of an individual or of a people. The intelligent description of such things is part of the intelligent, the sharp-eyed, description of life, of what matters, makes differences, in human lives.<sup>18</sup>

These differences must be the object of “the intelligent, the sharp-eyed, description of life.” Human lives echo Wittgenstein’s form of life, which is also a texture. Let’s also note the *open texture* defined at the same time by Waismann, which concerns the sensitivity of our words and statements to their uses.<sup>19</sup> Texture refers to an unstable reality that cannot be fixed by concepts or determined objects, but by the recognition of gestures, manners, and styles. The form of life turns out, from the ethical point of view, to be defined by perception—the care for moral texture or patterns (described by Diamond and Nussbaum in their essays devoted to the work of Henry James). These patterns are perceived as “morally expressive.” What is *perceived* is not a moral object or reality (e.g., values), but a moral expression that can only be read against the background of the form of life. Literature is the privileged field of moral perception, through its creation of a background that makes moral perception possible, bringing out *significant* differences.

Martha Nussbaum takes up the definition of ethical competence in terms of sophisticated and active perception (as opposed to the capacity to judge, argue, and choose).<sup>20</sup> For Nussbaum, morality is a matter of perception and care, not of argument. An objection that can be made to this approach is that one is brought back to the caricatured opposition between feeling and reason. But what matters here is the redefinition of ethical questions as a form of moral psychology grounded on an acute and intelligently educated perception, associating—as in Jane Austen—sense and sensibility.

Moral competence is indeed a matter of knowledge or affect, but it is also a matter of learning the right expression and educating our sensitivity: for instance, the education of the reader's sensitivity by the author, who makes such and such situation or character perceivable to her by placing (describing) it within the right frame. Education produces meanings. Think, for instance, of Hobart Wilson's life as told in the *Washington Post* article quoted by Diamond in "Moral Differences and Distances: Some Questions,"<sup>21</sup> or think of the characters described by Henry James, who teaches us to see them aright. In his preface to *What Maisie Knew*, James writes: "The effort really to see and really to represent is no idle business in face of the *constant* force that makes for muddlement."<sup>22</sup> The whole novel is a critique of perception based on the description of "a social world in which perception of life is characterized by incapacity to see or to value Maisie's vivacity of intelligence."<sup>23</sup> It explains why the idea of description or vision is not enough to account for moral vision: it does not consist in seeing objects or even situations, but it consists in seeing how possibilities and meanings emerge from things; it consists in anticipating, in constantly *improvising* (says Diamond) our perception. Perception is therefore active, not in the Kantian sense of its being conceptualized, but as a constant change of perspectives, as a moral improvisation of the other's gestures, as an invitation to expression. "Seeing the possibilities in things is a matter of a kind of transforming perception of them. The possibilities yield themselves as it were under pressure."<sup>24</sup>

Diamond takes over from Wittgenstein the idea that we are not dealing with phenomena but with "the '*possibilities*' of phenomena" (PI I §90). Our capacity for moral expression, as Charles Taylor says, is rooted in a plastic form of life and exposed to our good and bad uses of language. The form of life (in the natural and inextricably social sense defined by Cavell) determines the ethical structure of expression, which in return reworks and informs it. The kind of interest, the kind of care that we have for others, the importance we attach to them, only exist in the possibility of self-disclosure in moral expression (which can succeed or fail).

Without this recognition, we would never have the predicament of mutual communication which all of our expressive activity presupposes, in which alone verbs of utterance have sense. But in order to recognize reciprocally the disposition to communicate, we have to be able to 'read' each other. . . . Our desires have to be manifest to others. . . . This is the 'natural' level of expression, on which genuine expression builds. . . . Mime and style take this up. . . . But there would be nothing to take up, if we weren't already open, if our desires weren't embodied in public space, in what we do and try to do, in the natural background of self-revelation, which human expression endlessly elaborates.<sup>25</sup>

What is described in a skeptical mode by Cavell (the difficulty and the avoidance of expression) is described in a hermeneutic mode by Taylor, but both are led to a moral questioning of expression, the constitution of style, the education of oneself and others by learning to pay attention to the expressions of others: "the human expression, the human figure, to be understood, must be read."<sup>26</sup> Reading expression, allowing one to *respond*, is a product of attention and care. It results from an education of our sensitivity.

One can prefer, over the perceptual and too static theme of the background, the themes of texture, pattern (Wittgenstein mentions a "pattern in the tapestry of life" [*Lebensteppich*]), and the hurly-burly of life or, as in *Zettel*, the *position* and *connections*. ("Pain has *this* position in our life; has *these* connections" [ZT 533].)

The background of a form of life is neither causal nor fixed like a setting, but alive, changing. One can underline forms of *life* (Cavell says "*life forms*," instead of *forms of life*): forms that our lives *take on* under careful examination. We're concerned with the swirl of life in language as opposed to, for example, a body of meanings or social rules. One could contrast here two ethical representations and two approaches of moral perception: that of the background (see Searle, for whom institutions constitute the fixed background allowing us to interpret language, to perceive and to follow social rules) and that of the perceptual texture of life. For Wittgenstein, the word "background" (*Hintergrund*) refers to a background of description, which reveals the nature of actions and not, as Searle suggests, to any *explanation*. The background cannot play any causal role because it is language itself in its instability and its sensitivity to practice:

How could human behavior be described? Surely only by sketching the actions of a variety of humans, as they are all mixed up together. What determines our judgment, our concepts and reactions, is not what one man is doing *now*, an individual action, but the whole hurly-burly [*Gweimmel*] of human actions, the background against which we see any action. (ZT 567)

We perceive action, but set in the midst of the hurly-burly, in the swirl of the form of life against the background from which it stands out and becomes sensitive, important. Saying that a background causally *determines* the application of the rule does not amount to saying that the application must be *described* against the background of human actions and connections.<sup>27</sup> This point makes all the difference between a *Gestalt*, a descriptive, and a “conformist” conception of ethics, which would like to justify our action by a prior agreement on rules.<sup>28</sup> The background neither provides nor determines an ethical sense (since there is none), but enables one to have a perception of what matters and counts for us (of the important moment). In *Culture and Value*, Wittgenstein mentions, “the background against which whatever I could express has its meaning.”<sup>29</sup> The meaning of action is given by perception against the background of a form of life. The background, accepted and given, does not determine our actions (there is no causality) but allows us to see them clearly.

### 3. Moral Perception as a Sense of Adventure

Martha Nussbaum thus locates in morality the search for a “perceptive equilibrium,” which is similar to John Rawls’ reflective equilibrium. She assigns to James a “moral vision,” which becomes in her work a universal: “The novel constructs a paradigm of a style of ethical reasoning that is context-specific without being relativistic, in which we get potentially universalizable concrete prescriptions.”<sup>30</sup> Every particular situation should be brought back, in the tradition of virtue ethics, to a “general idea” of successful life. This is the only way to make sure that a reasoning specific to novels, which could not be achieved by theory, can be valid: moral philosophy requires the “experience of loving and attentive novel-reading, for its own completion.”<sup>31</sup>

Through this careful and, so to speak, “caring” reading, we perceive moral situations differently, actively. Through literature, Nussbaum advocates the acquisition of a fine-tuned vision. Diamond adds that the care for others supplied by literature does not give us new certainties or the literary equivalent of theories; it confronts us with an uncertainty and makes us wrestle with a perceptive imbalance. And yet, as Nussbaum remarks, “human deliberation is constantly an *adventure* of the personality, undertaken against terrific odds and among frightening mysteries.”<sup>32</sup> By focusing on a narrow concept of ethics, one risks *missing the adventure*, that is to say, missing a dimension of morality out of carelessness. Or, more precisely, the *face* of moral thinking, “what moral life is like” (WM 27).

In this context, conceptual adventure comes into play as a component of moral perception. Adventure is found in any situation mixing uncertainty, instability, and “a quickened sense of life.” Henry James makes explicit the adventurous *form* that moral thought takes on:

[A] human, a personal “adventure” is no *a priori*, no positive and absolute and inelastic thing, but just a matter of relation and appreciation—a name we conveniently give, after the fact, to any passage, to any situation, that has added the sharp taste of uncertainty to a quickened sense of life. Therefore the thing is, all beautifully, a matter of interpretation and of the particular conditions; without *a view of* which latter some of the most prodigious adventures, as one has often had occasion to say, may vulgarly show for nothing.<sup>33</sup>

This means perception is activity, mobility, and improvisation. It is as sensitive as well as an intellectual mobility. Wittgenstein writes about a “spiritual mobility.” This refers less to equilibrium, right vision (advocated by virtue ethics), than to imbalance and intensity pushing the frontiers of ethics to the limit. “The inattentive reader then misses out doubly: he misses the adventures of the characters (to him, they ‘show for nothing’), and he misses his own possible adventure in reading.”<sup>34</sup> The negative side of care makes us better understand the (non)sense of ethics. Inattention, carelessness, the lack of perception of *what matters*, makes one “miss the adventure.” Hence, moral life can be seen as an adventure that is both conceptual (one extends one’s concepts) and sensitive (one is exposed to the adventure).

Literature, according to Diamond, gives us the occasion to push the limits of our capacities for understanding, to put ourselves in the other’s position. While making this point—the capacity to understand others and, for instance, the one who speaks nonsensically—Diamond introduces a now famous interpretation of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* by reading the penultimate paragraph:

My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up on them. He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright.<sup>35</sup>

Diamond draws our attention to the strange phrase, “anyone who understands *me*.” It is not a matter of understanding nonsense (which is, of course, impossible), but of understanding the one who utters it, the author of the *Tractatus*. What does it mean “to understand a person who talks nonsense?” “You are to read his nonsensical propositions and try to understand not them but their author; just so, he takes himself

to have to respond to the nonsense uttered by philosophers through understanding not their propositions but them” (EIM 156).

The understanding of ethical nonsense implies understanding the *one* who utters these propositions. It requires another question, that of understanding someone (in general). We know what it means to understand someone (and, in general, this is not different from understanding what one says). But understanding does not amount to grasping the content of one’s mind or gaining access to the inner. “There is, as I said, no inside. But what it is to understand a person who utters nonsense is to go as far as one can with the idea that there is” (EIM 157). Here is again the sense of adventure: we’re not concerned with empathy or with something purely emotional, as Wittgenstein says in his “Lectures on Religious Belief.”

Suppose someone, before going to China, when he might never see me again, said to me: “We might see one another after death”—would I necessarily say that I don’t understand him? I might say [want to say] simply, “Yes. I *understand* him entirely.”

*Lewy*: “In this case, you might only mean what he expressed a certain attitude.”

I would say, “No, it’s not the same as saying I’m very fond of you”—and it may not be the same as saying anything else. It says what it says.<sup>36</sup>

In our relation to literature we are concerned to go as far as we can in order to make sense of the words and behaviors of the other that are perceived as incomprehensible. There is a use of literature that consists in taking “moral life as the scene of adventure,” and also makes our reading itself part of our adventure. Such an adventure requires specific qualities, qualities Nussbaum identifies as moral improvisation. It is opposed, writes Diamond, to moral inattention, obtuseness, and the refusal of adventure. At this point, skepticism may enter the picture. What’s at stake—what is represented or transposed in philosophical skepticism, the doubt about the possibility to know another mind for instance—is our basic difficulty to know other minds and to let others know us. Cavell describes the difficulty when he mentions the temptation of inexpressivity and isolation, our inability to go beyond our natural reactions so as to know others, to put us in the other’s position, to move beyond the limits of our understanding and common sense.

Our ability to communicate with him depends upon his “natural understanding,” his “natural reaction,” to our directions and our gestures. It depends upon our mutual attunement in judgments. It is astonishing how far this takes us in understanding one another,

but it has its limits; and there are not merely, one may say, the limits of knowledge, but the limits of experience. And when these limits are reached, when our attunements are dissonant, I cannot get below them to firmer ground. (CR 115)

Cavell is interested in the emergence of radical disagreement in morality. The possibility of radical misunderstanding defines moral perception: the moral question implies not only our agreement “in language”<sup>37</sup> but also basic disagreement and misunderstanding, distance, a *feeling of nonsense* (as natural reaction, indignation, or rebellion). “For not only does he not receive me, because his natural reactions are not mine; but my own understanding is found to go no further than my own natural reactions bear it” (CR 115). Diamond is interested in our capacity to acknowledge when one’s words betray a way of leaving our common conceptual world. This capacity relates to our ability to lose—and reciprocally to extend—our (moral) concepts, to use them in new contexts. Such an extension, as well as the measure of its limits, is the work of moral imagination, of our (in)ability to put ourselves in a situation and to understand another’s words, which becomes manifest when we measure our distance from the other’s moral vision.<sup>38</sup>

The question is not just that of imagination and sensitivity as sources of knowledge, but the—skeptical—elucidation of the loss of our concepts, the difficulty to put them to work in further contexts, in another conceptual world. Diamond studies this point in her essay “Losing Your Concepts”:

A responsiveness to the conceptual world of someone’s remarks is part of an ordinary human responsiveness to words. . . . Cavell himself was interested there in our *sharing* such things; I am interested now also in our capacity to recognize when someone’s words show, or seem to show, some departure from the shared conceptual world. . . . To recognize yourself and the person with whom you are speaking as sharing the same moral world is not to think of him as someone with whom you will be able to reach agreement on moral issues. You take yourself not to be sharing the same moral world if your response to something he says is, for example, “How can he have adduced *that* here? How can he so much as think that relevant? . . . What life does he live within which such a discussion goes on?”<sup>39</sup>

For Diamond, this capacity is specific to ethical reflection, to thought experiments specific to ethics (experiments in which one puts oneself in the other’s position, for instance). It concerns the whole of thinking: the ability to project our words and concepts in new contexts, to be ready to lose our concepts, to see new differences and distances. It is sensitivity to “conceptual forms of life.” There is no point in separating intellectual life and feeling, as Nussbaum sometimes does. Rather, it shows the

sensitive character of moral concepts and the improvised character of conceptual activity.

In one of her recent articles, “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,” Diamond mentions an aspect of ethical life having place or expression only in literature: the fact that some aspects of reality are unbearable, that they cannot be thought of without great difficulty for philosophy.<sup>40</sup> Skepticism is then the expression of our refusal—not just our inability—to think certain things, to put us in the position of the one who utters nonsense. To make this manifest, Diamond cites an essay by J. M. Coetzee, “The Life of Animals” (included in his novel *Elizabeth Costello*), in which a network of texts—Kafka’s *Report to an Academy*, Köhler’s account of experimenting on apes, Nagel’s bat, Descartes’ *cogito*—are gathered around an Australian writer, Elizabeth Costello, who is coming to the United States to deliver a **conference [Jonathan: can we use “lecture” here?]** on animal rights. Coetzee and Diamond investigate our ability to understand the other and show that Kafka’s text—by giving voice to a monkey, Red Peter, who is introduced and speaking to a scientific academy, reporting on his “simian past”—allows precisely the placing of oneself in the position of a radically different other. Elizabeth Costello claims in her **conference [lecture]** to the American public (putting herself in the rather ridiculous and uncomfortable position of a monkey reporting to the Academy) that the experience granted by literature is that of sympathy, the possibility to imagine what it would really mean to be in a strange being’s position. She draws a parallel, scandalous and hard to understand in appearance, between the “life of animals” and the Holocaust. To understand this strange comparison (not to be offended by it or willing to distance oneself from it) is to become able to live the adventure and the suffering of this woman and so to understand exactly what Coetzee wants to highlight. We refuse to think some elements of reality, to imagine ourselves in the other’s position, not because of a conceptual inability or flaw, but because of our refusal to understand the other who utters nonsense.<sup>41</sup> However, says Costello, we are able for a moment to consider something as unimaginable as our own death, to be struck by it. Why not imagine that one is Red Peter, a monkey? Coetzee does not speak through Costello’s mouth, but he enables us to “get into her mind,” to understand her, however strange and distant she might be.

The question raised by Elizabeth Costello is—radicalized—that of the possibility to extend our concepts, up to the understanding of nonsense.

There are people who have the capacity to imagine themselves as someone else, there are people who have no such capacity (when the lack is extreme, we call them psychopaths), and there are people who have the capacity but choose not to exercise it.

Despite Thomas Nagel, who is probably a good man, despite Thomas Aquinas and René Descartes, with whom I have more difficulty in sympathizing, there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination.<sup>42</sup>

The adventurous character of moral perception allows her to “lose her concepts” and to extend them at the same time. We understand therefore the nature of experience itself, which turns out to be defined by our capacity for attention: to take over Iris Murdoch’s phrase, for “unsentimental, detached, unselfish, objective attention.” This attention is an ability to notice a detail, an expressive gesture, even if it is not a clear or comprehensive vision—paying attention to what matters, to what counts in the other’s expressions and styles—what makes or expresses differences between persons and the relation of each one to one’s own experience that has to be described. These are the differences that have to be the object of “the intelligent, the sharp-eyed description of life.” This human life echoes Wittgenstein’s form of life, seen not as a social norm but as a context where gestures, ways, and ordinary styles can be read. Attention to the ordinary is, therefore, perception of moral texture or patterns (those of Henry James, for example, such as the “international” pattern). Literature is the privileged scene for this perception of expressions. It creates a background that highlights relevant differences between the experiences and expressions that are introduced, and new moral configurations and textures.

To conclude, it is a matter of a competence relating not only to knowledge and reasoning. It also of learning the particular and relevant expression, and it is also a matter of an education of sensitivity, the education of the sensitivity of the reader by the author, who makes such situations or such characters perceptible by placing them (by describing them) within the right frame. Novels teach us to see life as “the scene of adventure and improvisation.” What we learn from novels is an initiation into adequate modes of expression, whether linguistic or otherwise, an initiation into a form of life: a sensitive formation through exemplarity. Novels inform our capacity for (reading) moral expression. Our power of expression is conceptual and linguistic—a capacity to make good use of words to describe experience. What is at stake is the expression of experience: when and how to trust one’s experience, to discover its own value. The attention to expressions offered and aroused by James’ literature does not give us certainties but makes

uncertainties emerge: it transforms the very experience of reading into an adventure in the strict sense of the term (or to use the words of Emerson, who inspired Henry James and his brother William, into “true romance”<sup>43</sup>). There is some adventure, according to James, in every situation, mixing uncertainty and “taste for life”: reading literally, not just metaphorically, belongs to the order of adventure. Experience itself, if one trusts it, becomes an adventure. To reject this trust, this life, is to miss the adventure—that of the characters and one’s own. Inattention to experience, the lack of perception of what matters, makes one miss the adventure.

As a result, experience can be seen as an adventure, both conceptual and sensitive; in other words, as both passive (one accepts to be moved and transformed) and active (spiritual mobility and active perception). There is no point in separating conceptual life and affect, as there is none in separating, within moral experience, thinking (spontaneity) and receptivity (vulnerability to the real and to others, taking the risk of perceptive imbalance and misunderstanding). This is what, James says, constitutes experience.

The power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern, the condition of feeling life, in general, so completely that you are well on your way to knowing any particular corner of it—this cluster of gifts may almost be said to constitute experience.<sup>44</sup>

James adds that nothing should be missed or lost. In the end, this will to recollect one’s experience and to make it one’s own defines moral experience.

Translated by Jonathan Chalier

## NOTES

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958), §118; henceforth PI, followed by section number.
2. Cora Diamond, “Ethics, Imagination, and the Method of the Tractatus,” in *The New Wittgenstein*, ed. Alice Crary and Rupert Read (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 153; henceforth EIM, followed by page number.
3. Cora Diamond, “Wittgenstein and Metaphysics,” in *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and The Mind* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), p. 27; henceforth WM, followed by page number.

4. Ibid.
5. **Dans un “Entretien avec J. Bouveresse,” 2000 (texte inédit; trad. de M. Coelho). [A.Q. Is this from a forthcoming publication? Do you have any more information such as the press or the date of expected publication? If this was an interview, do you have the source?]**
6. Cora Diamond, “Philosophy and the Mind,” in *The Realistic Spirit*, p. 9.
7. Gottlob Frege, “Letter from Gottlob Frege to Giuseppe Peano, 29 September 1896,” in *Philosophical and Mathematical Correspondence of Gottlob Frege*, trans. Hans Kaal, ed. Brian McGuinness (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 114–5; cited in Cora Diamond, “Frege Against Fuzz,” in *The Realistic Spirit*, p. 36.
8. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, trans. and ed. G.E.M. Anscombe (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), §568; henceforth ZT, followed by section number.
9. Cora Diamond, “Henry James, Moral Philosophy, Moralism,” *Henry James Review* 18:3 (Fall 1997), p. 251.
10. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Wittgenstein’s Lectures: Cambridge 1930–1932*, ed. Desmond Lee (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1980), p. 344.
11. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Wittgenstein’s Lectures: 1932–1935*, ed. Alice Ambrose (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 35.
12. Ludwig Wittgenstein, “The Blue Book,” in *The Blue and Brown Book* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1965), p. 17.
13. See Patrica Paperman and Sandra Laugier, *Le Souci des autres: Éthique et politique du care* (Paris: Éditions de L’EHESS, 2005).
14. Iris Murdoch, “Vision and Choice in Morality,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, “Dreams and Self Knowledge,” supp. vol. 30 (1956), pp. 40–1; emphasis added.
15. Stanley Cavell, “What Becomes of Things on Film?” in *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 182; emphasis added.
16. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Routledge, 1970), p. 64.
17. Murdoch, “Vision and Choice in Morality,” p. 39.
18. Cora Diamond, “Having a Rough Story about What Moral Philosophy Is,” *New Literary History* 15:1 (1983), p. 163.
19. See Friedrich Waismann, “Verifiability,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supp. vol. 19 (1945), pp. 119–50.
20. See Martha Nussbaum, “The Discernment of Perception”; “Finely Aware and Richly Responsible”; “Moral Attention and the Moral Task of Literature Perception”; and “Flawed Crystals: James’s *The Golden Bowl*

- and Literature as Moral Philosophy,” collected in *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).
21. See Cora Diamond, “Moral Differences and Distances: Some Questions” in *Commonality and Particularity in Ethics*, ed. Lilli Alanen, Sara Heinämaa, and Thomas Wallgren (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), esp. 202–11.
  22. Henry James, preface to *What Maisie Knew* (New York: Scribner, 1908), p. xiii.
  23. Cora Diamond, “Missing the Adventure: Reply to Martha Nussbaum,” in *The Realistic Spirit*, p. 309.
  24. *Ibid.*, p. 313.
  25. Charles Taylor, “Action as Expression,” in *Intention and Intentionality: Essays in Honour of G.E.M. Anscombe*, ed. Cora Diamond and Jenny Teichman (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 89.
  26. Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 363; hereafter CR, followed by page number.
  27. See Cora Diamond, “Rules: Looking in the Right Place,” in *Attention to Particulars*, ed. D.Z. Phillips and Peter Winch (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989); Sandra Laugier, “Où se trouvent les règles?” in *Lire Wittgenstein, les Recherches Philosophiques*, ed. Sandra Laugier and Christiane Chauviré (Paris: Vrin, 2006).
  28. There is a parallel here between Rawls’ procedure, agreement from the original position and reflexive equilibrium, and perceptive equilibrium.
  29. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 16.
  30. Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), p. 8.
  31. Nussbaum, “Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature,” in *Love’s Knowledge*, p. 27.
  32. Martha Nussbaum, “Flawed Crystals: James’s *The Golden Bowl* and Literature as Moral Philosophy,” in *Love’s Knowledge*, p. 142.
  33. Henry James, preface to *Daisy Miller* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1920), p. xxiii; emphasis added.
  34. Cora Diamond, “Missing the Adventure,” in *The Realistic Spirit*, p. 315.
  35. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* (London: Kegan Paul, 1922), 6.54.
  36. Ludwig Wittgenstein, “Lectures on Religious Belief,” in *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966), pp. 70–1.

37. See Sandra Laugier, "Wittgenstein and Cavell: Anthropology, Skepticism, and Politics," in *The Claim to Community: Essays on Stanley Cavell and Political Philosophy*, ed. Andrew Norris (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 19–38.
38. One can get an idea of this by looking at the quotes from *The Washington Post* article written by Chip Brown on the life of Hobart Wilson and the response letters cited by Diamond in her essay "Moral Differences and Distances: Some Questions," in *Commonality and Particularity in Ethics*, pp. 197–215.
39. Cora Diamond, "Losing Your Concepts," *Ethics* 98:2 (1988), pp. 273–4.
40. Cora Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," *Partial Answers* 1:2 (2003), pp. 1–26.
41. As an example, one could cite here J.M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1999).
42. J.M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons* (New York: Vintage, 2004), pp. 79–80.
43. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Experience," in *Essays: Second Series in Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: The Library of America, 1983), p. 492.
44. Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," in *Theory of Fiction*, ed. James E. Miller Jr. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972), p. 35.