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A New Departure in Ordinary Language Philosophy

Veena Das is an anthropologist of exceptional reputation, but for more than a decade she has also been a crucial commentator on Wittgenstein, especially as he is read in Ordinary Language Philosophy (OLP) and by philosophers such as Stanley Cavell and Cora Diamond. She is in fact the most important scholar to inherit Stanley Cavell's thought, whose variety of interests and themes covered the whole of human life, and it is only suitable that an anthropologist should be the one to do so. Das's interest in language, in the *life* of words, in what makes them *alive*, is what connects her work most deeply to a tradition she is reviving in the most powerful and innovative way.

Starting with "Wittgenstein and Anthropology," Das offers an original reading of Wittgenstein (and Austin), anchored in the concept of the ordinary and the "descent" into it. Das's use of Cavell's essay on passionate and performative utterances is significant for its analysis of human expressiveness throughout the book. Das writes that Austin offers us a way to think of the fragility of human action and that the categories of misfire and *abuse* (used by Austin in connection with the felicity/infelicity of performative utterances) work to qualify action and its failures. As Austin says elsewhere, "you cannot abuse ordinary language without paying for it."[1] And early on, Cavell too insisted on the abuse inflicted on language by philosophers.[2]

The relation of use to *abuse* (a word absent in Wittgenstein) is an important connection between OLP and anthropology. How can language itself be *abused* (*our* words and expressions) – who is the abuser? OLP turns out to be a philosophy of non-violence in/to language. Cavell opposes awareness and attention (care) to abuse of language. Connecting these thoughts to her ethnography, Das offers original analyses of Wittgenstein, by finding their articulation in ordinary situations and stories, including tragic and violent realities. In this way, the book is among the first major anthropological elaborations of an ordinary ethics as alternative to normative ethics.

Anthropology and Philosophy: New Alliances

Textures of the Ordinary proposes a new relation (some might call it a new *alliance*) between philosophy and anthropology. Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, analyzed in the penultimate chapter, represents a crucial stage in this evolving relationship. Given that philosophy has long claimed to subsume the task of anthropology (as a science of the human), Das questions how anthropology itself can claim to be philosophy— because it illustrates and exemplifies the philosophical method Wittgenstein proposes: resolute attention

to ordinary human forms of life in their unity and diversity, that is, to forms of life and to life forms.

It is no insult to anthropology to say that (as a discipline) it was born out of a philosophical concern. The epistemological difficulty is that philosophy and anthropology are related once philosophy begins to turn toward *the human* in general, as part of the "modern" turn represented by Kant. They grow apart precisely because philosophy, when it takes an "anthropological" tone, speaks of the human *in general*—without paying attention to the various *ways of being human* that exist or to the various ways in which humans may be living beings.[3] The Kantian break meant reintroducing the *human* as a philosophical question independent of metaphysics.

Kant distinguishes "physiological" and "pragmatic*"* points of view on anthropology, that of man "as a freely acting being," the science of humans as social and political beings, or of human forms of life. Elsewhere, he locates philosophy itself within the anthropology. Except that anthropology is here not conceived of as a domain of knowledge proper; its mission is still *a matter of philosophy*. Out of "anthropology from a pragmatic point of view" was born the vague domain of "philosophical anthropology," which *reverses* Kant's discovery and instead establishes the monopoly of philosophy over anthropology. Kant's turn to the human is followed and radicalized by Wittgenstein, by turning to particular human situations. Wittgenstein's immediate curiosity about *The Golden Bough* is due to the insight ethnographic material offers as a response to the mounting pretensions of philosophy. Wittgenstein takes the critique of metaphysics a step further, subverting the very concept of philosophical anthropology. And Das takes it yet another step, bringing anthropology home, reading Wittgenstein as a method for conceptual attention to the detail of ordinary human forms of life.

Forms of Life and Life Forms

Textures pursues an elucidation of the everyday and the various shapes the ordinary takes. One can understand this claim of anthropology through the concept of *forms of life* that she develops:

> Agreement in forms of life, in Wittgenstein, is never a matter of shared opinions. It thus requires an *excess of description* to capture the entanglements of customs, habits, rules, and examples. It provides the context in which we could see how we are to trace words back to their original homes when we do not know our way about: The anthropological quest takes us to the point at which Wittgenstein takes up his grammatical investigation.[4]

The task of anthropology is to delineate that which characterizes a human form of life, as it is woven into distinct forms of life. This is a matter of description, of saying "what is the case".

Das's earlier formulation started with the difference between violence that occurs within the weave of life and violence that is seen to tear apart the very fabric of life.

> What Cavell finds wanting in the conventional view of forms of life is that it is not able to convey the *mutual absorption of the natural and the social*—it emphasizes *form* but not *life*. . . . Cavell suggests a distinction between what he

> calls the ethnological or horizontal sense of form of life and its vertical or "biological" sense.[5]

The theme of forms of life has, in the twenty years since, become central to contemporary thought, especially with the attention now paid to human vulnerability and violence, where the limits of the human and *of the living itself* are blurred. Das takes Cavell's remark again a step further: her book provides a total *elucidation* of this concept of *forms of life* and a powerful criticism of those who use it as a synonym for "culture"; the violence exercised on women during the partition of India and Pakistan is not a cultural variation but raises the question of redefining what a human life is, the border between the living and the nonliving: in situations of extreme violence, war, or disaster or everyday horror, the very *concept* of life is destroyed. "The blurring between what is human and what is not human shades into the blurring over what is life and what is not life"[6].

Her attention to forms of life is a way of pursuing and accomplishing Wittgenstein's ambition of undermining philosophy's privilege, bringing it back down to the "rough ground" of ordinary life. It is a project of rearranging the conceptual and the empirical and exploring the limits of thought. The "texture of life" is neither given nor obvious; it is made of tragedy as well as domestic reality, which is constantly demonstrated in the book. This conception of ethics is close to an ethics of care[7], characterized by a reorientation of morality towards attention to moral textures and to the structural vulnerability of experience. It is in the use of language (choice of words, style of expression and conversation) that a person's moral vision, her *texture of being*, is intimately developed and openly shown[8]. Form of life – from the point of view established by Iris Murdoch, Diamond, and Das – is perceived through attention to moral textures or motifs; reality is morally expressive. The capacity to perceive the detail of ordinary life – to grasp "what matters, makes differences, in human lives"[9] against the background of the life form – is a central element of moral perception, which allows us to reconceive ethics as an exploration of details.

Thinkers who invite us to pay attention to attention try to help us find expressions that will bring out what counts, to account for the emergence of *new* importance and new meanings, founded in each person, in order to develop grammars better able to describe, hence to do justice, to the concrete reality of our forms of life and to enable us to say what counts ("to say," "to count," "to "tell").

Murdoch summarizes this ethical method: "How we see and describe the world is morals too."[10]

Descriptions

Description is not "an absence of morality."[11] It is essential to ethics. Philosophy itself becomes an ethnographic experience. Cavell speaks of the "the uncanniness of the ordinary" inherent in the anthropological tone. This intersection of the familiar and the strange is the location of the ordinary and of Wittgenstein's philosophy of culture. Both forms of life and life forms require description, even an "excess of description" – what must be described is no longer belief or opinions, or practices, but rather what life is *like*.

> The point of the allegory would then be that the explorer coming into an unknown country with a strange language is a figure of the philosopher moved to philosophical wonder by the strangeness of the humans among whom he or she

> lives, their strangeness to themselves, therefore of himself or herself to himself or herself, at home perhaps nowhere, perhaps anywhere.[12]

Das's reading of Wittgenstein is a remarkable expression of the willingness of anthropologists to work *with* philosophy in exploring, describing, and repairing textures of the ordinary. Describing a life form means looking carefully (as Wittgenstein said, "don't think, look!") at networks of relations and institutions and at the everyday forms lives take. Attention to the everyday is attention to what is before our eyes, what we don't see because it is too close. As Foucault also observed:

> We have long known that the role of philosophy is not to discover what is hidden, but to render visible what precisely is visible – which is to say, to make appear what is so close, so immediate, so intimately linked to ourselves that, as a consequence, we do not perceive it.[13]

After Wittgenstein, philosophy *must* become a mythology, a clarification and expression of the myths deposited in our language – archaeological and anthropological work. Wittgenstein's philosophy turns out, Das demonstrates, to be an effort to give sense and significance to a philosophy becoming anthropological. "Wittgenstein's anthropological perspective is one puzzled in principle by anything human beings say and do, hence perhaps, at a moment, by nothing"[14].

If "the whole mythology is deposited in our language," the philosopher's work is to unearth "the great treasure deposited deep down the tree of language".[15] Which means that *describing* is not only seeing but *plowing*. "We must plow over language in its entirety." There is violence in this idea, as in Emerson's motto, "Language must be *raked,* the secrets of the slaughter-houses and infamous holes that cannot front the day, must be ransacked, to tell what negro-slavery has been". [16]

Textures offers a perspicuous view of how anthropologists have come to appreciate and to read Wittgenstein. It is a remarkable illustration of Das's distinctive contribution to contemporary anthropology, and her style of thought, articulating the conceptual and the ordinary, an ethnography and an autobiography. Meanwhile, she brings together anthropology and OLP as the main subversive resources available in the twenty-first century. *Textures of the Ordinary* opens new avenues in philosophy and enables us to overcome the limitations of core strands of contemporary thought that have proved incapable of shedding light on forms of life or transforming them.

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[1] J. L. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia* (New York, 1962), p. 15.
[2] See Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969)
[3] See Sandra Laugier, "On an Anthropological Tone in Philosophy," in*The Mythology in Our Language,* ed. G. Da Col and S. Palmié. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).
[4] Veena Das, *Textures of the Ordinary: Doing Anthropology After Wittgenstein* (New York, 2020), pp. 38-39.

[5] Ibid., pp. 40-41.
[6] Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley, 2007), p. 16.
[7] See Laugier "The Ethics of Care as a Politics of the Ordinary," *New Literary History* 46 (2015): 217-40.
[8] See R. W. Hepburn and Iris Murdoch, "Symposium: Vision and Choice in Morality," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 30 (1956): 14-58.
[9] Cora Diamond, "Having a Rough Story about What Moral Philosophy Is", *New Literary History* 15 (Autumn, 1983): 163.
[10] Iris Murdoch, "Metaphysics and Ethics" (1957), in *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, ed. Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker (Chicago, 1996), pp. 259-60.
[11] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York, 1979), pp. 247-328.
[12] Quoted in Das, *Life and Words*, p. x.
[13] Michel Foucault "Méthodologie pour la connaissance du monde: comment se débarrasser du marx," in *Dits et ecrits* (Paris,1994), pp. 540-41.
[14] Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Chicago, 1989), p. 170.
[15] Heonik Kwon, "Wittgenstein's Spirit, Frazier's Ghost," in *The Mythology in Our Language*, ed. G. Da Col and S. Palmié. (Chicago, 2018), p. 95.
[16] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Address on the Anniversary of Emancipation in the British West Indies (1844)," archive.vcu.edu/english/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/emerson/essays/emancipation.html