

Drew Carter

Part of the very concept: Wittgensteinian moral philosophy

Philosophical Investigations, 2013; 36(1):37-55

© 2012 Blackwell Publishing Ltd

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: Drew Carter

Part of the very concept: Wittgensteinian moral philosophy

Philosophical Investigations, 2013; 36(1):37-55

Which has been published in final form at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9205.2011.01467.x>

This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with [Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving](#).

PERMISSIONS

<http://olabout.wiley.com/WileyCDA/Section/id-828039.html>

Publishing in a subscription based journal

Accepted (peer-reviewed) Version

Self-archiving of the accepted version is subject to an embargo period of 12-24 months. The embargo period is 12 months for scientific, technical, and medical (STM) journals and 24 months for social science and humanities (SSH) journals following publication of the final article.

The accepted version may be placed on:

- the author's personal website
- the author's company/institutional repository or archive
- certain not for profit subject-based repositories such as PubMed Central as [listed below](#)

Articles may be deposited into repositories on acceptance, but access to the article is subject to the embargo period.

The version posted must include the following notice on the first page:

"This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: [FULL CITE], which has been published in final form at [Link to final article using the DOI]. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with [Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving](#)."

7 June, 2016

‘Part of the Very Concept’: Wittgensteinian Moral Philosophy

Drew Carter, The University of Adelaide

Introduction

The phrase ‘part of the very concept’ is a leitmotif in Raimond Gaita’s moral philosophy. X is part of the very concept of Y – this formulation recurs throughout his work. An analogous formulation recurs throughout Christopher Cordner’s *Ethical Encounter: The Depth of Moral Meaning*.¹ Cordner often writes that one understanding is ‘part of the background’ of another. In this paper I aim to appreciate the meaning and nature of the formulation ‘part of the very concept’ – as it recurs in Gaita’s work, as it informs Cordner’s, and as it stands to inform any work similarly influenced by Ludwig Wittgenstein. I inquire into the kind of necessity the formulation posits. I explain how, for Gaita and Cordner, the following obtain. Conceptual relations are necessary only internal to a particular logic, or grammar, or language we find alive in us. Thereby, with respect to moral life, we should consider efforts to elaborate conceptual relations to be not so much either descriptive or normative but rather descriptive of a particular normativity. Elaborations can thus be both conceptual and moral in kind, insofar as a moral claim is also always a conceptual claim. Furthermore, moral judgements made from within a particular grammar are no less genuinely moral judgements, and

¹ Christopher Cordner, *Ethical Encounter: The Depth of Moral Meaning* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2002).

conversations with those who adhere to a radically different grammar constitutionally risk ending in silence.

Along the way, I distil some of those elements central to the moral philosophies of Gaita and Cordner. Our conception of a common humanity is conditioned by an appreciation of individuals as irreplaceable. One must value a thing in order to suffer its violation. Remorse can fully constitute our understanding of the wrong we have done and not merely accompany understanding. Remorse risks being corrupted when it is consoled by the remorse of others.

I conclude by critically questioning Gaita's distinguishing between two types of claims. One cannot love evil. One cannot love cow dung. For Gaita, these claims differ in type. The first testifies to a conceptual (or grammatical) relation, while the second testifies to a 'mere fact', or to a part of our form of life. I can see no clear basis for assigning to claims one type over another, which fundamentally challenges the footing of Wittgensteinian moral philosophy. Why do there exist no *moral* 'mere facts', defining our form of life? In my view, this is the central question to ask of all Wittgensteinian moral philosophy.

Manifold applications of the phrase

Central to the work of both Gaita and Cordner is the following formulation.

The individuals we love are irreplaceable to us. This kind of individuality is part of the very concept of a common humanity.²

Similarly, Gaita suggests that the diversity of peoples, namely racial and cultural diversity, is part of the very concept of humanity.³ Further applications of the phrase in the work of Gaita and Cordner variously include the following. A certain seriousness is part of the very concept of morality⁴ and of religion⁵. The possibility of remorse is part of the very concept of evil or wrong-doing. The possibility of pity for evil-doers purely in view of their being evil-doers is part of the very concept of evil.⁶ An understanding of what it would be to wrong *anyone* is part of the very concept of what it is to love *this* person well. Part of the very concept of love is a concern to distinguish real love from mere semblances of love, real forms of love from false forms. Such a concern is also part of the very concept of being fully human: human beings “must be capable of exploring the real and the counterfeit in their inner lives if they are to be seen as fully human”.⁷ For Gaita, part of the very concept of remorse is a ‘radical singularity’. That is, in real remorse, we find not the least consolation in the like remorse of others: “someone cannot share their guilt, like a loaf of bread, a little for one and a little for the other”.⁸

² See Ibid.: ch. 8 and Raimond Gaita, *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception* (2nd ed.) (London: Routledge, 2004): ‘Preface to the second edition’.

³ He follows Hannah Arendt. See Raimond Gaita, ‘Breach of Trust: Truth, Morality and Politics’, *Quarterly Essay* (16: 2004): 37–8.

⁴ See Ibid.: 36–42.

⁵ See Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity: Thinking About Love & Truth & Justice* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 1999): 239.

⁶ This follows Socrates. See Plato and Walter Hamilton (trans.), *Gorgias* (London: Penguin Books, 1971).

⁷ *A Common Humanity*: 238. See also Raimond Gaita, *The Philosopher’s Dog* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2002): 74: “a life that is not answerable to such concerns is barely recognisable to us as fully human”.

⁸ *Good and Evil* (2nd ed.): 68.

The phrase finds application in less obviously moral contexts as well. For instance, “the distinction between sense and nonsense” is part of the very concept of a language.⁹

Expanding on Wittgenstein’s observations, Gaita writes “it belongs to the concept of a pain that it cannot be in one’s pocket”.¹⁰ Gaita often uses, to equivalent effect, the formulation ‘X is internal to Y’ or ‘X is internal to the concept of Y’.

Variants of the phrase ‘part of the very concept’ are also recognisable in the work of other philosophers, especially those influenced by the later Wittgenstein. Hilary Putnam, for instance, writes that what makes for good thinking is not mob rule, and that this is more or less part of the very concept of good thinking (or warrant):

Rather than viewing the fact that warrant is independent of majority opinion as a fact about a transcendental reality, one should recognize that it is nothing but a property of the concept of warrant itself; or ... let me say simply that it is a central part of our picture of warrant.¹¹

Putnam adds the crucial qualification ‘our picture’. Its significance I return to.¹² For the time being, let us foremost observe the likeness of ‘a property of the concept ... itself’ to ‘a part of the very concept’.

⁹ Raimond Gaita, ‘Language and Conversation: Wittgenstein’s Builders’, *Philosophy: The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy* (Supplement: 1990): 101–115: 103.

¹⁰ *The Philosopher’s Dog*: 56.

¹¹ Hilary Putnam and James Conant (ed.), *Realism with a Human Face* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990): 22.

¹² See below the section, ‘Finding a language alive in us’.

Sharpening the question

Appreciating a dramatic work *as tragic* may well depend on, to put it crudely, some valuing of life, love and justice.¹³ One must value life, love and justice, and hope for their fulfilment, if any dramatic portrayal of their frustration or defeat is to impress upon us its specifically tragic force. Such a valuing of life, love and justice is tragic drama's necessary, if obscured, backdrop. Tragic drama can then affirm that backdrop, if negatively. Tragic drama propels itself by pushing against its backdrop like a swimmer on a turn: the feet know the wall.

Tragic drama *depends* on a backdrop of value. This varies a theme that Gaita and Cordner develop: only something of value can be violated.¹⁴ Writing of a love of country, Gaita puts the point thus: "Only something precious can be defiled or polluted".¹⁵ Reformulating, we might wish to say that value is part of the very concept of violation. If it seems strange to use the word 'concept' here – over something like 'experience', for instance – then let us register that. This paper wrestles with that strangeness.

Value is part of the very concept of violation. To say this is precisely to say that the relation between value and violation is at least partly conceptual in nature. In other words, the relation is guaranteed by a certain logic. But *is* the relation so guaranteed? If

¹³ See S. L. Goldberg, *An Essay on King Lear* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

¹⁴ For instance, see Cordner on murder and rape in *Ethical Encounter*: 4–11.

¹⁵ Gaita has in mind the false semblance of a love of country, which we might instead call rank nationalism. 'Breach of Trust': 27.

we think that it is, then we must conclude that the relation is indisputable, at least under pain of failing or bucking the logic that guarantees it. But it is just here that a certain scepticism may arise: ‘Can I really not dispute the relation?’.

Tragic drama and violation *depend* on a backdrop of value. One may proclaim flatly not to see that. Tragic drama – indeed, all of life – may strike one purely as some grim march toward calamity, and one may say:

I do appreciate the tragic force of a drama – and the terrible nature of those violations it portrays – but by virtue of that appreciation I find myself brought no closer to recognise any backdrop of value, which you say my appreciation must depend on.

Likewise, one may proclaim that individuals and peoples being irreplaceable is *not* part of the very concept of humanity. One may proclaim that remorse need *not* be corrupted by consolation in the like remorse of others. Certainly many have thought mob rule to be a good enough basis for good thinking (or warrant). If such sceptics are mistaken, then on precisely what fronts? In other words, if we are moved to label their talk nonsensical or perverse, then in what respects do we think it so? Do the sceptics merely contradict themselves, misusing their concepts, even to the point of utter intelligibility? Or do they demonstrate less confusion about their concepts than, say, moral waywardness? Is disagreement here about concepts or morals?

The beginning of Gaita’s answer

I aim to demonstrate the manner in which Gaita considers conceptual relations to be necessary *only internal to the particular logic in which they occur*.

One might suggest that the concepts of, for instance, ‘bloated’ and ‘gaunt’ are interdependent insofar as each helps to give the other meaning. Are the concepts of value and violation interdependent in precisely this way? More generally, do we make sense of what stands on one side of the connective phrase ‘part of the very concept’ partly by making sense of what stands on the other? I am attempting to sketch why Gaita would answer yes or, more precisely, as follows:

In a *particular* logic, yes. Value and violation are interdependent, like bloated and gaunt.

That is precisely to say that one is part of the very concept of the other.

The particular question of whether or not value is part of the very concept of violation I am less interested in than the broader questions. These include the following. What does it mean to say that value is a *conceptual* condition of violation? What does it mean to say that such a relation is *conceptual* in nature? How might one go about establishing or, conversely, disputing such a relation? If an interlocutor claims that a relation is ‘conceptual’, then how do we test that claim? Furthermore, how do we *contest* that claim? In answer to this, Gaita suggests that sometimes we might debate ‘conceptual’ relations only insofar as we might debate, almost wholesale, the broader logic of which they are a part and, furthermore, solely internal to which are they necessary. For ‘broader logic’ I will henceforth use Wittgenstein’s term, ‘grammar’. Like Gaita and others, I take

it to encompass and to variously invoke: a broader logic, understanding or orientation; a network of conceptual relations; an entire way of speaking, responding and valuing; our life with and our way with words; the ways in which it makes sense to us to speak and go on with things.

Appeals to conceptual necessity can seem unproblematic, even obviously true. For instance, consider the concept of wanting. We might say that caring whether or not you get *X* is necessary to wanting *X*; that it is part of the very concept of wanting *X*. If you want something but do not care whether you get it, then we might well ask:

Well, what do you mean by 'want', then? I do not understand you. You have stretched the concept to breaking point. Are you using the word differently, perhaps? If not ironically, are you using it as part of a different grammar? A different word might be better then, certainly less confusing for me; I might understand you then.

There is a sense in which Gaita commits to little more than this. When Gaita claims that *X* is part of the very concept of *Y*, in effect he claims that any objection against him marks one of two things on the part of the objector: either (1) some confusion or inconsistency *internal* to a particular grammar; or (2) allegiance to a different grammar. In the second case, confusion arises by dint of some difference between grammars. Which case do we have when a person: declares that they want something but do not care whether they get it; insists that they love someone but remains indifferent to their fate; insists that they appreciate tragic drama but fails to value life, love and justice?

An interjection: ‘That is not merely conceptual!’

One person may proclaim that value is a condition of violation. Another may openly disagree. The first person may then respond:

What is it that you mean by violation, then, if value is nowhere in sight? You are speaking nonsense. I just do not understand what you mean.

How literal is this last sentence? We might think that it is perfectly literal. If we do, then we figure a relation between value and violation that is at least partly conceptual in nature and which, as such, reflects a condition of intelligibility. But what of the following interjection?

I never considered value to be a *conceptual* condition of violation; I never thought of their relation as merely *conceptual* in nature. I suppose that I considered their relation to owe more to morals than to concepts. I thought that a claim like ‘value is a condition of violation’ was more substantively a moral commitment and not merely an observation of conceptual relations.

This paper largely aims to grant that interjection a hearing, to describe its answer as implied by Gaita and Cordner, then to critically reflect on that answer. The claim ‘value is a condition of violation’ can be reformulated as ‘value is a part of the very concept of violation’. The above interjection suggests that doing this masquerades or mistakenly

presents the nature of claims: what is morally normative is presented as (more neutrally) conceptually descriptive. The above interjection at least expresses some concern that formulations like ‘value is a part of the very concept of violation’ risk fidelity to an important ambiguity concerning precisely what, in kind, is merely conceptual and what is more substantively moral.

A moral claim is always a conceptual claim

Amid any interjection like that offered above, Gaita and Cordner seek to remove the need to say ‘*merely* conceptual’. One radical feature of their work is to suggest that a moral claim is also, always and importantly a conceptual claim. For instance, in claiming that something is tragic, one voices what she considers ‘tragic’ to mean and invites others to share in that way of speaking, which is simultaneously a way of valuing (a grammar). Any hard distinction between speech and life is put under pressure. Attendantly put under pressure is the distinction between the merely nonsensical and the morally wayward.

Part of what motivates the above interjection – ‘That is not merely conceptual!’ – may also be a certain suspicion. One may suspect that making and contesting claims like ‘value is a condition of violation’ engages in us parts deeper than those normally identified with the conceptual (namely, the mere analytical mind, in contrast with the valuing heart). The work of Gaita and Cordner suggests that we ought not to be so quick

in dividing a human being and locating the conceptual solely in one half. Like the later work of Wittgenstein, it suggests that we ought to resist, or at least question, picturing the conceptual, and some corresponding part in us, as some pristine and removed domain to be neatly distinguished from others.

Finding a language alive in us

Any divide between the conceptually descriptive and the morally normative is bridged in what Gaita calls our finding a language alive in us. (For 'language' we might also read Wittgenstein's 'grammar'.) The two halves of that formulation – 'finding a language' and 'alive in us' – might be thought to respectively correspond to the conceptually descriptive and the morally normative in the work of moral philosophy. There may seem to be two moments. First, we 'find a language'; we identify as 'ours', as making sense for us, a concept or, indeed, an entire network of concepts and practices (a grammar). Then, we find that language 'alive in us'; we endorse it, reaffirm it, commit to it. But Gaita and Cordner question how easily and sensibly we might distinguish these moments. We find not merely names for 'tragic drama' and 'love' but tragic dramas and loves *worthy of the name*. The rest is language that is dead to us, or concepts that lie beyond our working understanding, these being one and the same.

Sharpening the question still

The following question may then arise. Indeed, it may motivate the interjection above ('That is not merely conceptual!'):

If moral philosophy restricts itself to the observation and description of *conceptual* relations, then from where can any morally normative force finally come? Whence comes, and accordingly what becomes of, the capacity to commend a certain moral judgement, outlook or commitment?

Even if one distinguishes the (mere) description of conceptual relations from the (fuller) commendation of moral norms, one may still deem to be useful philosophical activity that more closely resembles the first. Such activity may provoke responses that remain in nature moral, not merely conceptual, and in so doing better enable their evaluation. For instance, a friend once engaged the services of an astrologist. Curious as to why, another friend remarked: 'Well, at least you'll find out what you really want'. That is, by your *responses* to diagnoses and fortunes told will you know what you truly want (or value). In descriptively tracing conceptual relations, is this all that moral philosophy is good for: a laboratory for our moral responses? Can moral philosophy only test our responses in order to know them; can it not improve them?

If we persist in distinguishing the conceptually descriptive from the morally normative, then we might well ask into which of the two falls the bulk of the work conducted by Gaita and Cordner. Does their work in fact offer a great deal in the way of moral judgement and commendation, over and above the merely conceptual (and finally

cultural) description to which it largely confesses? Indeed, does much of what is best in their work abide in just such moral judgement and commendation, which all the while demures under the auspice of mere conceptual description? Cordner writes that even the worst afflicted and cruellest among us remain no less of a kind that is typically and properly loved as mysteriously irreplaceable.¹⁶ ‘Well, which is it?’, we might well ask: ‘Typically or properly? For there is a massive difference! The first is merely descriptive, while the second normative.’

Ethical Encounter, like much of Gaita’s work, might seem to remain merely at the descriptive level. Yet this may also constitute something of the wonder of the book – to reveal what is ‘proper’ (or morally good) purely through description of what locutions and responses are ‘typical’. This accomplishment comes either despite the book’s failure to bridge a divide between the conceptually descriptive and the morally normative, or precisely by means of its success in this regard. Cordner and Gaita suggest that if we are moved by their books, and moved to affirm their contents, then by this we show ourselves to be members of the community from which they have sprung. We show ourselves to adhere to the same grammar that is described. We show *this* more than the universal truth of what is described. Cordner writes of *King Lear* that it is part of the marvel of the play to enliven us to a potential for loving responsiveness which its protagonist never quite manages to fully realise.¹⁷ Does Cordner’s book share this feature, enlivening us to what is ‘proper’ merely through exploratory description of what is ‘typical’, without ever

¹⁶ See *Ethical Encounter*: ch. 8, especially 161: “compassion for a human being can be the *form taken* by our sense of him or her as properly belonging to that domain [of meaning denoted by ‘fully human’], and as having only contingently been deprived of participation in it”. Cordner’s emphasis.

¹⁷ Lear does not wholly disrobe himself of ‘fallen *pomp*’: even on the heath he reckons with his common humanity as no less that of a fallen *king*. See *Ethical Encounter*: 70.

quite realising the source of moral normativity? Might this represent a limitation to his work? Cordner writes of Peter “Singer illicitly invoking convictions of whose power his own philosophy can make no sense”.¹⁸ Does Cordner’s work do the same, trading on a power that it does not evince? For instance, for its ‘life’ in us might a language depend on more expansive roots than Cordner’s account can readily accommodate? I conclude the paper by returning to this important question of precisely which languages *can* find life in us and why.¹⁹

Descriptive of a particular normativity

What is the grammar of, for instance, evil? That is, what might we say of evil? More than this, how might we *respond* to it, in action and in orientation? Put another way, which of our *practices* relate to it? In all, what is our “human commerce with the word”, as Cora Diamond puts it?²⁰ How is our use of the word “interwoven” with the rest of our lives?²¹ Wittgenstein advised not only to ask such questions but, in answer to them, to never simply *assume*: instead, “look and see!”.²² Speaking of evil, the vocabulary that we use may differ according to the particular case, as we grasp for its details and for precisely what has been done: “I am in blood / Stepp’d in so far that, should I wade no

¹⁸ Christopher Cordner, ‘Life and Death Matters: Losing a Sense of the Value of Human Beings’, *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics* (26: 2005): 207–226: endnote 5.

¹⁹ See below the section, ‘What can be love? Concluding criticism’.

²⁰ Cora Diamond, ‘Rules: Looking in the Right Place’ in D. Z. Phillips & Peter Winch’s (eds) *Wittgenstein: Attention to Particulars: Essays in Honour of Rush Rhees (1905–1989)* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1989): 14.

²¹ *Ibid.*: 15.

²² Ludwig Wittgenstein and G. E. M. Anscombe (trans.), *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2001): §66.

more, / Returning were as tedious as go o'er".²³ *The Brothers Karamazov* depicts a man who, throughout life, moved through an array of responses to the murder he had once committed:

As his children were born, he thought: 'How can I dare to love, instruct and educate them in the ways of man, how can I talk to them of virtue: I have spilt blood.' His children grew up and were beautiful, he wanted to caress them, and he thought: 'But I cannot look upon their serene and innocent countenances; I am not worthy of it.'²⁴

Prior to confessing his crime, the man could not *dare to love* his children. We speak of evil and otherwise respond to it in a multitude of ways. This multitude of locutions and responses constitutes a grammar. Gaita and Cordner suggest that, with respect to moral life, we might consider efforts to elaborate a grammar to be not so much *either* descriptive or normative but rather *descriptive of a particular normativity*.

Why should one bear any allegiance to merely 'a particular normativity'? The first half of the answer that Gaita and Cordner offer is this: 'We cannot but find ourselves with such an allegiance; we find our moral lives already conforming to a certain grammar'. But why should that grammar bear any relation to what is truly morally good, we might ask. We could change what we meant by friendship or love, but could that change constitute a genuine *enrichment*, or impoverishment? More pointedly, do we make such judgements *merely* internal to our grammar, merely by the lights of a particular normativity? Gaita and

²³ William George Clark & William Aldis Wright's (eds) second edition of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1869): 3.4.135–137.

²⁴ Fyodor Dostoyevsky and David McDuff (trans.), *The Brothers Karamazov* (London: Penguin Books, 2003): 398.

Cordner seek to dissuade us of any felt need to say ‘merely’. Above I emphasised that, for Gaita and Cordner, the conceptual and the moral are not to be quickly and sharply divided. Concomitantly, Gaita and Cordner suggest that *moral judgements made from within a particular normativity, or grammar, are no less genuinely moral judgements*. Moral judgement occurs not beyond some particular normativity, but rather from within it, even if at its open, fraying or changing edges.

Gaita and Cordner do not merely make uninvested, detached observations. They interrogate and elaborate the concepts – and attendant ways of speaking, responding and valuing – that are *alive* in them and their fellows. In their experienced aliveness Gaita and Cordner find reason enough for preserving concepts, or the particular normativity that they partly constitute. (Gaita writes of preserving a ‘conceptual space’ for the things we value.²⁵) Gaita and Cordner implicitly ask ‘What further reason do you want?’.

Remorse and the loss that evil incurs

Gaita wants to emphasise the conceptual over and against the merely *psychological*. He wants to challenge those interpretations of moral experience that would reduce genuine forms of understanding to mere by-products, to but an inessential fizz and fury. For instance, in remorse, one’s inability to find consolation in the like wrong-doing and remorse of others can mark a barrier that, in kind, is not merely psychological but instead

²⁵ Cordner characterises his work as a “reminder” and a “recuperation”; Gaita characterises his as a “reclamation”. *Ethical Encounter*: 44. ‘Breach of Trust’: 65.

conceptual. In other words, the inability need not merely accompany some more central understanding. Instead, it can partly constitute an understanding. Indeed, more than this, it can betoken and partly constitute a whole way of speaking, responding and valuing (a grammar).

Let us suppose that an experience of such radical singularity in remorse were merely psychological, in the sense of being extricable from genuine understanding. Let us also suppose that we found the experience painful or otherwise unwelcome. Then logically we would take a pill to dull or annul the experience, without fearing any loss of understanding concerning the wrong we had done. We would also acknowledge as obvious the sense in another's advice to 'just get over it; look around – you're not the only one!'. Gaita argues that few of us would judge ourselves to be truly remorseful if we were to leap for such a pill or to accept such advice. Few of us would consider our understanding of the wrong we had done to survive undiminished. Therefore, radical singularity in remorse is no mere psychological by-product of some deeper or more central understanding of the wrong we have done. The singularity is more central to understanding than that. Indeed, Gaita would say that our experience of radical singularity is precisely the *form* of our understanding.

Gaita suggests that if we *were* to leap for the above pill or to accept the above advice, then we would do so at a cost: those things conceptually related (that is, partly dependent for their meaning) would be changed or lost. That change or loss would occur not subsequently so much simultaneously – the relation is conceptual, or logical, not

chronological. The leaping or accepting would *constitute* a change or loss, not merely occasion further change or loss. If one murders a person but, in remorse, finds consolation in so many others having murdered likewise, then at what cost comes this consolation? What becomes of all that it is to wrong another and to know it? For that matter, what becomes of all that it is to love another and to know it, these things too being conceptually (grammatically) related? What becomes of even one individual as distinct from another? For why, and precisely how, do we now differentiate an individual, if not partly by their conscience *qua* some capacity for *radically singular* remorse?²⁶ What do all these things, and many others, now come to? What do they now mean? ‘If you give up this, then you give up that.’ ‘If you abandon this, then you lose your grip on that.’ Such formulations summarise the notion of conceptual necessity that Gaita and Cordner advance in relation to moral life.²⁷ Here is another example. If you pursue certain pleasures grimly enough, then in that pursuit you may give up the “miracle” of compassion for another.²⁸ You may no longer care for another’s tears, nor even do so little as to let another change the way you address the room.²⁹

²⁶ On Gaita’s account, part (‘of the very concept’) of being human is to have an individual voice, that is, a capacity to speak for oneself of the things one deems most important in life, be that in the mode of remorse or otherwise. Being human is to resist any abdication of one’s own voice and one’s own responsibility to others, who are constituted likewise. This conception of what it is to be human is central to Gaita’s argument against utilitarianism: the collective exists only as a collection of consciences capable of individual differentiation and accountability, as demonstrated in a radically singular remorse. ‘Never mind the sums, never mind how many prosper at the expense of only a few; are *you* yourself prepared to prosper at the expense of these others?’ See *Good and Evil* (2nd ed.): ch. 5.

²⁷ I am reminded of the prominent 1970s and 80s television advertising campaign belonging to one Australian women’s fashion retailer, ‘*This goes with that* at Sussan’ (my emphasis). I particularly recommend its beginning, viewable at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t17P5v2KE64> (accessed 5 October 2011).

²⁸ I borrow the word “grimly” from Cordner. Gaita quotes Simone Weil on this “miracle”. *Ethical Encounter*: 7. *Good and Evil* (2nd ed.): xviii–xix, 194.

²⁹ Gaita also quotes Weil in her drawing attention to the way in which another human being is capable of this in a way that nothing else is. *Good and Evil* (2nd ed.): 173–4.

One may protest as follows:

All that is not to describe a ‘grammar’. It is not to plot ‘conceptual’ relations. It is rather to plot the loss that evil incurs. This better describes our lives, and not merely ‘the lives we live with our concepts’.

I continue to clarify the way in which, for Gaita and Cordner, to plot conceptual relations can be precisely ‘to plot the loss that evil incurs’. I also continue to clarify the way in which Gaita and Cordner consider borderline unintelligible any effort ‘to plot the loss that evil incurs’ which does not plot conceptual relations. Gaita describes a certain “cultural phenomenon” – in which ethics is increasingly considered more “regulative” than “constitutive” of a practice – in terms of “a quite general conceptual loss”.³⁰

A ‘cultural phenomenon’ and ‘quite general loss’ it certainly is, but ‘a quite general *conceptual* loss’?!

That protest allies with the one above (*All that is not to describe a ‘grammar’*). I continue to present the way in which Gaita and Cordner consider them unnecessary.

‘Are you serious?!’

³⁰ ‘Breach of Trust’: 19.

For Gaita, to be moved is to find alive in us a particular language (grammar). It marks a recognition or discovery that is no less conceptual than moral in nature:

discovering whether we can strike a non-rhetorical note when we speak of vocation, or honour, or character, for example, is not a matter of discovering whether we *believe* in the vocations, or honour character. It is more like coming to see which of the concepts whose structure we can abstractly articulate are still available to us in living and authoritative speech, in natural language ‘used at full stretch’, as the American philosopher Cora Diamond put it. That discovery and striking the right note, finding the right form in which to express it, are interdependent. It is rather finding – indeed it is an instance of this – which ways of living we admire are real options for us without sentimentality or bathos or some other form of inauthenticity.³¹

The converse of ‘living and authoritative speech’ is a language that we find ourselves able to use only emptily or cynically. It is also one whose speakers we may find ourselves unable to converse with and admire.

Gaita writes: “those who think it obvious that one should be shot to save ten have no serious sense of evil”.³² He often appeals to a notion of seriousness. Indeed, following Socrates, he asks whether his interlocutors are indeed being serious. What does Gaita

³¹ Ibid.: 19–20. See also Raimond Gaita, ‘Critical Notice’, *Philosophical Investigations* (17:4 October 1994): 613–628. Gaita argues that a form of “conceptual analysis” conceived as impersonal and general does not sufficiently draw on individual speech and the whole, individual mind, on the “qualities of mind, imagination and character” that genuine moral thinking involves. Philosophy can fall short of, and inadequately engage, moral thinking when it limits itself to a form of conceptual analysis that is limited in this way, mistakenly believing that forms of expression and their content are separable when it comes to moral life. That forms of expression and their content are *not* separable when it comes to moral life is largely what locates moral life in “the realm of meaning” and not “the realm of fact”. *The Philosopher’s Dog*: ‘The Realm of Meaning’.

³² Raimond Gaita, *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception* (1st ed.) (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1991): 66.

mean by ‘serious’? What is the grammar of ‘serious’ to which he subscribes? In answer, we might venture the following reformulation of Gaita’s assertion:

There are real limits to any conversation I might have with a person who thought it obvious that one should be shot to save ten. There would be points at which we would each ask the other ‘Are you joking?! Are you crazy?! Are you serious?!’.

What is the nature of that question, ‘Are you serious?!’? What is the nature of the failure I impute in those whom I ask it? Is the failure conceptual or moral in kind? If, for Gaita, it is both, then it is so precisely in the silence in which conversation ends (or almost ends):

Even using the same words as I, you mean such radically different things. I cannot have a serious conversation with you.

Worthy of the name

‘You say you love her but remain indifferent to her fate – that is not a love.’ Register here the way in which to append ‘in my judgement’ would be both apt and inadequate. It would be inadequate because the appendix, ‘in my judgement’, would fail to capture the sense in which a contrary judgement would barely even make sense to the first speaker. Put another way, the appendix would fail to capture the *conceptual* nature of the initial proclamation, ‘that is not love’.

Consider the differently appended proclamation ‘That is not love, *or at least not a love worthy of the name*’. The word ‘worthy’ adds so much more than a rival description like ‘consistent with a particular grammar, in whose maw we happen to find ourselves’. Gaita and Cordner do imply more than this. They speak of finding a language not merely ‘in us’ but ‘*alive* in us’, resonant and sustained by endorsement. That word, ‘alive’, is doing a lot of work. For ‘worthy of the name’ we might wish to substitute simply ‘worthy’, or ‘worthy of respect’³³, or ‘worthy of that to which others have testified with an authority that, by the quality of their individual voices and lives, we are drawn to register’³⁴. Gaita and Cordner broadly equate all of these substitutes. We might also wish to speak of a love ‘worthy of love’ or a love ‘the way God wants it’. Gaita and Cordner might extend their equation of substitutes out to the first. More religious thinkers might extend theirs out to the second. Cora Diamond begins one of her essays thus: “Moral philosophy is concerned with the *character* of moral concepts”.³⁵ Might the character of a concept (or entire grammar) be assessed like that of an individual or act: to what kind of life does it belong, and is that life worthy of our admiration and allegiance?³⁶

What can be loved? Concluding criticism

³³ See Christopher Cordner, ‘Foucault and Ethical Universality’, *Inquiry* (47: 2004): 580–596: 590.

³⁴ See *Good and Evil*: 4.

³⁵ My emphasis. Cora Diamond, ‘Moral Differences and Distances: Some Questions’ in Lilli Alanen, Sarah Heinämaa and Thomas Wallgren’s (eds) *Commonality and Particularity in Ethics* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1997): 197.

³⁶ Both Diamond and Gaita take the question of whether something is worthy of our allegiance to be distinct and different from the question of whether something is morally good. That is, what is morally good is not *all* that is worthy of our allegiance (or of our love). Failures to acknowledge this they accuse of moralism. See *Ibid.* and *A Common Humanity*: 27.

I now return to the question of precisely which languages can find life in us and why. Are there limits to what can be ‘worthy of the name’? Are there different kinds of limits? I press these questions by investigating Gaita’s claim that “Not anything can be” loved.³⁷ What cannot be loved and why?

(1) One cannot love evil.

On Gaita’s view, this impossibility is guaranteed grammatically. It is guaranteed by a love worthy of the name. If one means by ‘love’ that one can love even evil, then one is either decidedly confused in relation to one’s own grammar or in possession of a concept of love and attendant grammar that will seem to others monstrously strange. Frank O’Hara ended one of his poems: “I love evil”.³⁸ I first found that line funny, thinking ‘one can’t love that; that wouldn’t be real love’. My having found that line funny supports Gaita’s claim of a distinctively *grammatical* impossibility here. Surely Wittgenstein had in mind just such humour when he imagined that a whole book of philosophy could be composed of nothing but jokes.³⁹ But consider the invitation to “Love your enemies”.⁴⁰ I do not find that funny. For me, it does not flag a nonsense *qua* grammatical impossibility of the kind that I first found funny in ‘I love evil’. Perhaps it came closer to doing this for those who first heard it. For me, it makes sense as part of what Gaita would characterise as the grammar (or “language of love”) in which I

³⁷ *Good and Evil* (2nd ed.): xxiii.

³⁸ Frank O’Hara, ‘Wind’ (poem) in Donald Allen’s (ed) *The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

³⁹ See Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001): 27–8.

⁴⁰ Matthew 5:44 (King James Version).

participate.⁴¹ The author of *The Brothers Karamazov* considered having his elder monk invite us to “Love sins!”⁴² Does this invitation flag an impossibility? If so, an impossibility of what kind and origin?

Gaita makes a remark that might be dismissed as a comic throw-away but which I find intriguing and significant: “a lover can treasure a flower but not a piece of cow dung”.⁴³ Indeed, it does seem that it could only ever be a piece of black comedy to lovingly pronounce ‘This is the last turd he ever stood in’. For Gaita, this comedy owes to an absurdity whose origin exceeds that of the nonsense achieved by contradictions internal to a particular grammar. The absurdity is rooted further down, in what Wittgenstein referred to as our very “form of life”.⁴⁴

Gaita’s point is to suggest that, just as “individuals are not inter-substitutable”, so too “a lover can treasure a flower but not a piece of cow dung”: in both cases, this being so

is not so much an *idea* as it is a *feature* of our relationships with one another and of our sense of ourselves ... the kinds of things that can be [treasured as truly irreplaceable in the case of other individuals, and as sentimentally so in the case of objects] are marked out by the place they have and can have in human life.⁴⁵

⁴¹ *Good and Evil* (2nd ed.): xxiii.

⁴² He decided not to: the invitation was drafted but not included in the final text. *The Brothers Karamazov*: xix.

⁴³ *Good and Evil* (2nd ed.): 152.

⁴⁴ *Philosophical Investigations*: §241, 148°.

⁴⁵ Gaita emphasises ‘idea’; I emphasise ‘feature’. Gaita does not specifically elaborate on that word, ‘feature’. I am tempted to think that we might also read in its place ‘natural feature’. Indeed, Peter Winch examines Wittgenstein’s observation that “pity ... is a form of conviction that someone else is in pain”. According to Winch, “Wittgenstein characterizes such observations as this as ‘remarks on the natural history of mankind’. His point is that thought and understanding have to be looked at in a ‘natural

In all this I read that the mooted unpleasantness of cow pats is a part of our form of life.

Our form of life is made up of those creaturely conditions we share which shape our grammar but are not, in turn, shaped by it. For instance, partly constituting our form of life is the fact that we cannot doubt we are in pain: pain “*as a mere fact* cannot be doubted by creatures like us”.⁴⁶ Gaita writes that, far from us ever empirically *observing* that we cannot feel pain in particular places, “it belongs to the concept of a pain that it cannot be in one’s pocket”.⁴⁷ We do not ‘establish’ this fact through empirical *observation* (or therein *justify a belief*); rather, we more or less ‘inhabit’ this fact, amid many others, as a form of life.⁴⁸ That form of life is defined, or dictated, by precisely such ‘facts’ or ‘features’. It would seem to function as that (mostly shared and unchanging) ground on which stands the house of cards, namely our grammar, the language alive in us, whose every concept and response gains its meaning partly through relations to others, like so many cards leaning on one another for stability.

Gaita identifies elements of a common background against which differences among human beings can be observed and can make the sense that they do. Together, these elements constitute our shared form of life. For instance, Gaita writes: “It is *a fact utterly*

historical way’: as concepts characterizing the kinds of life lived by human beings”. Observe the recurrence of ‘natural’ here. *Good and Evil* (2nd ed.): 152. Peter Winch, *Trying to Make Sense* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987): 164.

⁴⁶ My emphasis. *The Philosopher’s Dog*: 51–2.

⁴⁷ More precisely, Gaita writes: “Were the concept of a concept, and the distinction between belief and concepts, not so difficult and riddled with controversy, I would say that it belongs to the concept of a pain that it cannot be in one’s pocket”. *Ibid.*: 56.

⁴⁸ The following might be taken to flag one of those many other facts: “that which we call a rose, / By any other name would smell as sweet”. William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* (London: J. Pattie, 1839): 2.2.890–1.

basic to human life that we are consoled by knowledge that others suffer as we do and must die as we must”.⁴⁹ Gaita goes on to suggest that what we mean by ‘human’ is, in part, informed by precisely such facts. Likewise, what we mean by ‘love’ is informed by what we are capable of loving as ‘a fact utterly basic to human life’.

(2) One cannot love cow dung.

‘Is even the stink of cow dung a part of the very concept of love?!’ Is what we mean by love in some elliptical way conditioned by, among other things, the smelly nature of cow dung? In effect Gaita answers as follows:

Yes. Though this is more a feature, or part of our form of life, than yet another *concept*, related to others as part of some particular grammar or language of love.

My criticism is twofold. First, who is to say what ‘stinks’ and what does not? Hermann Hesse evokes the following idyll:

Dasa gladly joined the band of herdsmen. He helped to guard and drive the cows, learned to milk, played with the calves, and idled about in the mountain meadows, drinking sweet milk, his bare feet smeared with cow-dung.⁵⁰

In effect, this passage threatens to introduce new places that cow dung can have in human life. With what authority do we foreclose on certain possibilities? Who determines what

⁴⁹ My emphasis. *The Philosopher’s Dog*: 72.

⁵⁰ Hermann Hesse and Richard and Clara Winston (trans), *The Glass Bead Game* (New York: Picador, 1990): 521.

places a thing can have in human life? Even if we “look and see!”, whose determination do we accept and why?⁵¹

Second, and relatedly, precisely what constitutes our form of life? If even the malodour of cow pats is part of our form of life, then what is not? For instance, can one simply not love a disfigured person? Is that part of our form of life? Gaita would answer ‘no’ and, moreover, say that this is simply so, indeed, that we ought to guard against any blindness to what can be loved (particularly callous blindness). We might learn from those who do so love; we might learn from the love shown by ‘saints’, together with that ‘language of love’ which has developed partly through their love, both of these being capable of ‘revealing’ to us the full humanity of others (or, put another way, of showing what ‘full humanity’ and ‘love’ can interdependently mean).⁵² Questions remain. If there are any limits to what can be loved, rooted not in our grammar but in our very form of life, then where do they begin and end? More broadly, if our form of life does condition our grammar, then where does such conditioning begin and end? In the form of life that conditions, can features of a moral, or spiritual, or divine nature also be seen to delineate what can be loved? Might such a vision better account for the fact that one can love evil even less than cow pats?

Closing question

(1) One cannot love evil.

⁵¹ *Philosophical Investigations*: §66.

⁵² In particular, see *Good and Evil* (2nd ed.): ‘Preface to the second edition’. This represents the best summary of Gaita’s moral philosophy.

(2) One cannot love cow dung.

On Gaita's account, these represent different cases. The truth of (1) is guaranteed by our grammar. Precisely what you mean by love is something whose object can never be evil. By contrast, the truth of (2) is guaranteed by our form of life. That one cannot love cow dung is just a part of our form of life, a fact utterly basic to life. My question is this: why is (1) guaranteed by our grammar and not instead by our form of life? Conversely, why is (2) guaranteed by our form of life and not instead by our grammar? 'After looking, we see that this is *just the way things are.*' Does this answer satisfy?

(3) One cannot do evil without incurring great loss.

Gaita would claim that, like (1), (3) is guaranteed grammatically, that is, its truth is internal to a whole way of speaking, responding and valuing. But if there *are* basic facts, like those that guarantee (2), then precisely why is (3) not one of them? If (1) *is* in fact guaranteed by our form of life, then might (3) and, indeed, all the rest of morality be? In this case, morality would no longer lie in a particular grammar (or normativity) but in a grammar that is at least as extensive as our form of life.

Why do there exist no moral 'mere facts', defining our form of life? In my view, this is the central question to ask of all Wittgensteinian moral philosophy.

Key words

Raimond Gaita, Christopher Cordner, Ludwig Wittgenstein, moral philosophy, morality, ethics, concepts, grammar, form of life, necessity, modalities

Acknowledgements

For proofing an early version of this paper I thank Fiona Ryan, and for formative discussion I thank Joshua Bain, Christopher Cordner, Raimond Gaita, Andrew Gleeson, John Maloney, Michael Power, and Craig Taylor. Olli Lagerspetz provided helpful comments as a reviewer. Drew Carter is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow on the ‘Health Care in the Round’ Capacity Building Grant in Population Health (NHMRC Grant ID 565501).

School of Population Health and Clinical Practice, Mail drop DX 650 550, The University of Adelaide, Australia 5005, drew.carter@adelaide.edu.au