

ARTICLE SECTION

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“Give Me an Example”: Peter Winch and Learning from the Particular

Abstract

The text deals with the role of particular examples in our understanding, especially in the encounters with unfamiliar cases that may require us to expand our concepts. I try to show that Peter Winch’s reflections on the nature of understanding can provide the foundations for such an account. Understanding consists in a response informed by a background network of particular canonical examples. It is against this background that the distinction between appropriate differentiated reactions and misplaced ones makes sense. To accommodate applications of known concepts (such as love, or humour) to unfamiliar cases, particular examples are needed that invite the recipient in a certain direction of understanding, while providing a “closure” against arbitrary mis- or re-interpretations. This capacity has to do with a capacity or incapacity to convey the sense of seriousness of an example dealing with the *lives* of the persons (or characters) concerned.

How does one encounter an example of humility or humour; what happens here? What enables me to recognise and prevents me from misrecognising, or misresponding to what I have in front of me? I will try to discuss these questions in the light of Peter Winch’s work. Other authors working in a similar philosophical spirit, informed by Wittgenstein’s philosophy, such as Rush Rhees or R. W. Beardsmore (as well as Wittgenstein himself), will at times join the discussion as

well. What I thus offer can be called *a* Wittgensteinian inquiry into the role that examples play in some philosophically interesting contexts.

Certainly, there are other philosophers who are aware of the peculiar role and importance of examples in philosophical discussions. Onora O’Neill (1986) reacts directly to the Wittgensteinian contention that meaningful encounters with moral problems can often take the shape merely of orienting oneself within particular situations. She argues that “[e]xamples can have a point only if they illustrate a principle; illustrations must be illustrations of something” (O’Neill 1986: 9). A clear idea of (in fact, a clear agreement on) what it is that the introduced example is an *example of* must precede or frame its introduction. O’Neill follows the Kantian intuition that reflection on examples or casuistry may sharpen the acuity of one’s judgement in the process of education, but examples as such cannot really guide one’s actions in situations that are unclear or that present a dilemma. First, it must be clear what principle is at stake.

D. Z. Phillips points out, in his reply to O’Neill (Phillips 1992b), that while for O’Neill it seems as if examples can only be useful *for moral judgements* when a theoretical outline of the moral problem is already available, many examples that we introduce are already examples *of a moral judgement* inherent in an action. Phillips is critical of the idea of the primacy of the theoretical outline; he stresses that “[p]eople not only show different priorities in judging between alternatives, but often differ in what they take the alternatives to be” (Phillips 1992b: 70). Winch’s own view is close to that of Phillips in this instance.

Martha Nussbaum’s discussion of examples (literary examples in particular) is similar. She, too, insists that engagement requires “the particularity, the emotive appeal, the absorbing plottedness, the variety and indeterminacy” that we find in “good fiction” (Nussbaum 1990: 46). She suggests that the “schematic examples” that philosophers like to use (I mention below, as a representative of this phenomenon, the Trolley Problem) lack these qualities, which is why they obfuscate rather than clarify.

What makes Winch's approach – in the use I make of him here – rather unusual is his open distrust of generality. Not only does he suggest that some questions cannot be meaningfully discussed other than in the form of a particular example (such as the Good Samaritan simile; see section 4 below). (Anscombe [1958: 16] makes a similar observation.) Perhaps more importantly, he is cautious about the idea, propounded by O'Neill, that one has to know what the example is an example of, preferably in advance, or independently of the example. For Winch, this is an idea rather difficult to make sense of. Our notion of, say, ridiculousness – the case that I will work with – changes and develops as we encounter various people (in real life or in fiction) that we come to understand as “ridiculous”. In general, it is only in very specific contexts that we seem to be in a position to approach lucidly and with insight a general notion, and separately a bunch of examples, in order to freely consider whether or which of them can be subsumed under what. I could imagine here mathematical formulas which, once understood, one uses for performing calculations with particular numbers, rather than psychological or characterological concepts (“foolish”).

In the first section of this paper, I draw on Winch's suggestion that understanding can take the form of a response that may draw on a background of particular (canonical) examples. Against this background, the distinction between appropriate differentiated reactions and misplaced ones makes sense. Section 2 explores how particular examples can help us accommodate the unfamiliar by refocusing our concepts. In section 3, I discuss the “closure” that sufficiently fleshed-out examples provide against arbitrary mis- or re-interpretations. In the concluding section, I specify this working of examples in relation to their capacity or incapacity to convey the sense of seriousness as regards (the lives of) the persons/characters concerned.

1. Peter Winch on Understanding

Many suggestions that I make in relation to the opening questions relate to Peter Winch in one way or another. However, my aim is not to provide an interpretation of Winch's writings; I rely on a number

of his texts, which diverge considerably in their focus, and often the remarks I make use of do not stand at the very heart of the articles or relate centrally to their topics. To be sure, Winch did not aim to offer a *theory* of understanding, nor of examples, nor of the relationship between the two. The issue of understanding enters his texts in different forms, most often in the form of a sharpened focus on what it means to understand something (something particular) in a context dominated by an overly general, half-implicit intuition about what understanding is. That is his starting point in the late text “Can We Understand Ourselves?” (Winch 1997) in which he touches perhaps most directly upon my opening questions.

The point of departure for Winch’s reflections in this paper concerns the following problem: there is a deeply ingrained temptation, both among philosophers and laypeople, to assume fundamental differences between understanding oneself and understanding other people, as well as between understanding elements of one’s own culture and understanding elements of an alien culture. On the one hand, I know what *I* experience because I see it, as it were, directly in my own mind, thanks to introspection. On the other hand, if I am to say what another person experiences, I have to conduct inquiries. I have to observe her behaviour. I have to subject things she is saying to interpretation procedures. If I am perceptive enough, eventually I am capable of seeing that these are signs of amusement, love, etc. What she experiences is *hidden behind* these signs, being only directly visible to someone who can peek into the person’s mind. But that is, again, only the person herself.

Similarly, it might seem that I have a certain unmediated appreciation (sense) of the Czech sense of humour (if there is such a thing): I am Czech and nobody has to explain Czech jokes at length to me. They are a part of the fabric of *my* culture. On the other hand, I sometimes feel completely at sea face-to-face with what is supposed to be a humorous anecdote, but whose origin lies in a culture distant to mine. I may have to interpret the joke, to acquaint myself with its historical and cultural contexts, and so on. I do not understand it “directly”, unlike the way I would understand a Czech joke.

Winch tries to make these oppositions problematic. Regarding the first opposition, he points out that normally, understanding of other people is unproblematic for us. We do not have to undertake the job of interpretation to see another as a person who is amused, as a person with a sense of responsibility, as a person suffering from sorrow or anxiety – usually we simply see that the other is amused, anxious, etc. On the other hand, it is perfectly possible to misunderstand what is going on in oneself. I can be simply confused, or overlook something important (for example, that thinking constantly about someone can mean that I am in love with the person), or labour under complex self-deception. Another person can often see more clearly than I do what I am going through. Think of the roles spiritual advisors, therapists or good and reliable friends play in our lives.

I can experience similar estrangement and disorientation when it comes to elements of my own culture. I may know that I have a supposed joke in front of me. I may even be able to identify the elements that make it funny for an appreciative audience. But the joke simply doesn't "speak" to me. I do not really understand people who find it funny; I cannot, as Wittgenstein puts it, "find my feet with them" (*Ich kann mich nicht in sie finden*”; PI II § 325).

A part of Winch's explanation is that one's own culture represents no immediate, automatic reference ground, principally because it is not homogeneous. Recognizing, understanding or embracing elements of a culture as one's own also take very diverse forms. As an example, he mentions football as something certain people are willing to kill for, and some may find this intelligible. He himself finds it completely unintelligible, though national football teams, their fandom, etc., are a part of the culture that was, in a relevant sense, his own. However, I will leave heterogeneity aside and focus on a related issue.

Winch's point here is that one does not have privileged access to oneself or to one's own culture, as opposed to another person or to an alien culture. The mechanisms of understanding are analogous. I do not rely on primitive introspection. Whatever helps me to understand, must be, in both cases, something I can also *fail to have*. Winch indicates that understanding – such as distinguishing between

things sinister and funny – naturally proceeds in terms rooted “in the context of a reservoir of knowledge of indeterminate extent” (1987b: 25). The inequalities and failures of understanding, or of self-understanding, have to do with inequality of access to, or orientation within, that reservoir, or indeed with its richness and complexity.

What is in this reservoir? There may be lots of different things in it. Pieces of general, definition-like information about humour and sinisterness: “Humour is what is funny, so that one laughs”; “sinister is what makes you sense the evil.” However, it will also be full of *particular examples*: stories, fairy tales, pictures, parables, jokes. Our understanding develops as we encounter various examples of situations, problems, explanations. Certainly, to the extent that *finding* someone ridiculous amounts to laughing spontaneously at them, this does not require much background context. Small children laugh readily in such a way (when their parents make funny faces, for instance). However, the *understanding* that develops, does so hand in hand with the developing reservoir of examples that one is familiar with. (And I am not sure whether even the most spontaneous reactions of laughing at someone/something we find funny in our adulthood are independent of, or uninfluenced by, what we gradually come to understand as ridiculous.) Mapping idiosyncrasies in the personal perusals of the reservoir of examples would be a vast empirical enterprise. I would just like to point out here that, as far as people relate to the world as people of *a* culture, there is probably a degree of agreement as to the examples that count as canonical. (In childhood, these are – naturally – found in fairy tales or children’s cartoons.)

In Wittgenstein’s words, examples serve as “objects of comparison” (PI § 130) that direct “how we look at matters” (§ 122) by displaying clearly central aspects of the phenomenon in question. Does the person strike me as ridiculous? Who do I recognise as ridiculous? It has to do with examples such as Mr Collins, characters from *Winnie the Pooh* or *The Good Soldier Švejk*, perhaps – for some – also the fashion of the 1980s, etc. Similarly, we grow more familiar (and familiar in a more nuanced way) with the concept of “love” as we acquaint ourselves with many examples. These include *Romeo and Juliet*, fairy tales involving the clause “and they lived happily ever

after”, romantic comedies, public campaigns that feature stories of people talking about their lives (such as “Humans of...”), real-life relationships of people close to us (“look at Grandma and Grandpa, how happy they still are after 50 years together”), etc. Certainly, the grammar of the word “love” is not exhausted by a list of examples, but it could hardly be what it is without the connection to familiar examples. This familiarity need not take the shape of explicit knowledge or an ability to produce a particular example. Their presence tinges and transpires in the ways I *react* spontaneously to the cases I encounter. Why do we feel uneasy about suggestions that love can be reconciled with simply leaving the other once he/she grows older and less sexually attractive? It relates to the above examples that we “internalise”, as we grow up surrounded by them. If it was the *Decameron* instead that played such a central role in what we learn to recognise as “love”, then our reluctance might be much weaker.¹

How does this reservoir operate within my experiences of the world? Typically, I do not refer to it explicitly. Long-term familiarity makes this reservoir of images a part of the way I see the world. With every new encounter with a new example, I spot some new aspect and I tune my sensitivity more finely. The internalised reservoir of examples, or the encounters that I remember, make me more perceptive towards certain aspects of situations, they make me spontaneously access these situations from specific different angles (cf. Dreyfus’s [2002] analysis of skill acquisition in chess or in driving a car).

I do not want to suggest that we understand real people as such and such (e.g. funny) because we have been taught canonical (fictional) examples of what is funny. After all, the appreciation of fiction can (and, surely, commonly does) derive from real-life encounters with funny people. And even an example (a fictional example) that will someday play a central (canonical) role for me, is

¹ Rorty (1986) talks about the historicity of the concept “love”, connected to the examples that are, in respective time periods, canonically expressive of its changing contents. The historicity brings along the heterogeneity: what theorists of love distinguish into *eros*, *agape* and *filia* can also be read as differently positioned emphases connected to the simultaneously occurring examples that illustrate the interconnected concepts and increase or decrease in their strength (Roman poetry vs. the New Testament, etc.).

at first a new example for me. Consider statements such as the following: “I can’t help laughing whenever Henry talks to me about his boss. It’s just like listening to Mr Collins’ praises of Lady Catherine de Bourgh.” As Winch (1996: 171f) points out, elaborating on Wittgenstein’s remarks, these descriptions do *not* serve as a *justification*: I did not provide reasons that guided my reflections about Henry. I did not decide to be amused by Henry. I did not conclude it to be appropriate, based on Collins-related *arguments*. The reference to the example is a *picture* of my position or condition that I can offer to another, as well as to myself. The appeal that the example of Mr Collins has to me is not a *foundation* for the manner in which the abovementioned Henry strikes me. Yet, the reference to Mr Collins can elucidate Henry’s appeal to me and make it more visible even to myself. The most that I can state about any order of precedence is probably – in this particular case – something like: the acquaintance with Mr Collins is a part of the history that has led me to my present self – the person capable of having this kind of experience with Henry.

This sensitivity of sight and judgement is established through long-term experience. If it involves the capacity for certain actions, which are not performed simply on command. Compare the following three statements: “Go to the window and look out”; “Calculate 7 plus 8”; “Judge the character of Mr Bulstrode”. There are very few *special* conditions, the absence of which would make the first demand misplaced. There are more such conditions in the second and third cases, but they are not of the same kind. The second command only works with people who “get the knack of the technique”, which corresponds to the grasp of the mathematical rule of addition. There is no underlying general knack in the third case.

Wittgenstein comments on the skill of judging characters as follows:

Can one learn this knowledge? Yes; some can learn it. Not, however, by taking a course of study in it, but through ‘*experience*’. [...] What one acquires here is not a technique; one learns correct judgements. There are also rules, but they do not form a system, and only experienced people can apply them rightly. Unlike calculating rules. (PI II § 355)

Experienced people simply see something that others cannot see, but not because the inexperienced overlook it or because it is not

“objectively” there. The experienced notice the “imponderable evidence” to be seen only by someone who “gets an ‘eye’” for it (PI II § 358ff). Wittgenstein also suggests that finding “the *fitting* word” (*das zutreffende Wort*) requires a similar capacity: “How do we find it? Describe this! In contrast to this: I find the right term for a curve, after I have made particular measurements of it.” (RPP I § 72; but see *contra* § 362) The capacity to employ a poignant example, or to appreciate the poignancy of an example, comes in here as well.

The evidence is *imponderable*. The words into which one who can see puts what she sees can easily, as Winch (1972b: 190) remarks, “fall flat on [the listener’s] ears” – but not because the listener does not listen or does not know the meaning of the words. Intimacy with pictures (role models, examples, words, texts) of a certain kind provides the material out of which the understanding for the imponderable “grew”. As one grows up, surrounded by bodies of cultural contents, one’s understanding develops towards the capacity to perceive more clearly certain problems as serious and certain solutions to them as such that offer themselves more naturally. For example, understanding the likes of Mr Collins as ridiculous can amount, in practice, to learning to distance oneself from ridiculous people, because there is corruption in them inherent to their ridiculousness. Winch’s comments on the role examples play in this “growth of understanding” (1972a: 84) probably owes something to Rush Rhees’s extensive, if not always easy and clear, reflections on that topic.

Rhees (2004: 40) suggests that understanding provided by confrontation with examples is analogous to understanding (recognising) beauty, that is, it is something one has learnt, but it is not a piece of information about a particular thing, the knowledge of which would be cumulative. It makes no sense to measure who knows “objectively” more about it than someone else, or even who knows “everything”. After all, “‘understanding things’ does not mean ‘knowing more about them’” (Rhees 2006: 73).

If the example of Mr Collins has been a part of this development, forming my recognition of and sensitivity to ridiculous people, it provides me with – in Rhees’s words – the ability “to follow what they are doing” (2006: 92). If I have learnt anything from particular

encounters – real-life and fictional – with ridiculous people, then my whole demeanour will express a certain sense of how to relate to people that I recognise as “ridiculous”. These people are “like” Mr Collins, in that it makes sense to react to them along roughly the same lines. To my understanding, it matters greatly that, in certain respects, I feel the same way about them. I acknowledge that their advice and life wisdom, when it comes to authorities, are practically worthless and possibly dangerous (for example if I overlook that their advice is worthless). An analogously cautious response to people I see as “ridiculous” is exactly the ability to follow what those ridiculous people are doing.

I have mentioned the difficulty of putting what we have learnt from an example into words – words that would speak equally to everybody. When it comes to learning from narratives, the exact words that surround us in this encounter matter even more, including the diversity in the lesson learnt from them by individual recipients. For what we have learnt has, as Rhees puts it, the nature of wisdom rather than instruction. Whatever I can learn from *Middlemarch*, I might not equally learn from direct, explicit statements, such as “Mr Bulstrode is a priggish old codger.”

This wisdom is not a tool that we can simply use repeatedly, as a defined particular procedure that can be applied every time. In that respect, *Middlemarch* differs from words that constitute regular instructions for procedures (skills). The correctness of the latter does not depend on the moment being the right moment – consider a statement such as “This is how the IKEA cupboard should be assembled”, accompanied by pointing at a picture. However, this is not to say that the instruction cannot be misplaced. *That* would not depend on whether it describes accurately how to assemble the piece of furniture or not. It has to do with the *timing* of its utterance. See various versions of this point made by Ryle (1953: 179f) (who suggests calling such misplaced utterances “stupid”), Cavell (2002: 41) and Rhees (2006: 81ff).

Though perfectly correct, the words “This is how ...” can be uttered in a situation in which it is clear that the speaker does not understand what is going on. Imagine that you find your child in the midst of scattered components of a piece of furniture, in deep

despair, crying. Her despair *is* connected to the difficulty of assembling the piece of furniture, but for you to react with “This is how the IKEA cupboard ...” may be to misunderstand what the situation calls for. The IKEA cupboard may be the last in a series of events that have made her feel tired, lonely and unhappy. If you react in *that* way, you fail to understand the situation.

If you do not understand the situation (what it is “about”), you struggle with problems of a very different kind, probably much greater, than just lacking a piece of information about the situation in question (cf. Rhees 2006: 205). The former lack (of understanding) may have to do with a lack of experience and thus having missed opportunities to learn from examples.

2. The Grounds of Familiarity

It is with regard to these considerations of that from which we learn that we should think about the impact of examples on our understanding of situations, people and phenomena. I will now shift focus away from Winch in order to look at the working of examples in some detail. Let me return to ridiculousness, now in relation to cruelty.

Jane Austen discloses Mr Collins as ridiculous, but she does not connect this disclosure to an appeal to “destroy” him. Imagine this scenario: after his failure with Elizabeth Bennet, Mr Collins leaves Longbourn, he is engaged to Charlotte Lucas, but does not plan to marry her any time soon. In the meantime, Elizabeth meets Colonel Fitzwilliam and bewitches him and he helps her persuade Lady Catherine that Mr Collins wants to seduce Lady Catherine’s daughter Anne. The aim is to prevent Charlotte’s marriage to Mr Collins, for Lady Catherine reacts to the misinformation by expelling him from his parish and he ends up in poverty and despair. The ridiculous aspects of his character might fit this scheme and be turned against him. An author of an alternative story could choose to elaborate and highlight Mr Collins’ ridiculousness in this way. She could run a scheme that, if employed in real life, would exhibit a certain cruelty. At the same time, it is clear that the storyteller *could* expose Mr

Collins' ridiculousness without resorting to cruelty towards him. Austen chose the more benign option.

There are, obviously, different ways of working with the ridiculous in talk – both employing the connections to cruelty and avoiding them. Now, some ways of presenting the ridiculous may fail to convey the comic effect to me. (More often than not, for instance, the employment of cruelty may kill the comic effect.) I may wonder: “How is this funny? I don't see it.” I simply cannot appreciate the other's idea of a joke, the form in which she uses language to relate the supposedly funny thing.

In the minds of the ancient Romans, a humorous anecdote could, for instance, look like this:

Gnaeus Flavius, son of Annius, is said to have come to call upon a sick colleague. When he arrived and entered the room, several young nobles were seated there. They treated Flavius with contempt and none of them was willing to rise in his presence. Gnaeus Flavius, son of Annius, the aedile, laughed at this rudeness; then he ordered his curule chair to be brought and placed it on the threshold, in order that none of them might be able to go out, and that all of them against their will might see him sitting on his chair of state. (*Attic Nights* VII: 9)

Rhees points out that one could not know what love is and get orientated in contexts where love plays a role without familiarity with the *language of love*. In the clashes between people who have different conceptions of love, it turns out that these people speak different languages of love. This familiarity does not only concern the ability to love but also the recognition of love in another, the ability to pretend love or to comment with insight on another's love, etc. (Rhees 1997b: 43). Similarly, we might talk about different languages of the funny. One example of such language that might strike many people today as relatively alien is the above anecdote told by Aulus Gellius. Most of our contemporaries could not find their feet in contexts of practice informed by this kind of humour.

If I encounter a joke rooted in a different systematic “language of humour” (to paraphrase Rhees' term), my intuitions about what “funny” means are challenged by an unfamiliar use (or aspect) of this concept. The meaning of this concept is, if not taken for granted, at least implicitly assumed different from the one that the particular

example (the joke) presents to me. Different ways of being funny – so to speak, different languages of humour – represent different, perhaps incompatible grounds of familiarity for their respective speakers. Consider examples such as Sun Wukong, the Great Sage Equal to Heaven, and on the other hand rape jokes by some contemporary stand-up comedians (Sam Morril). Each defies my imagination by speaking in a language unfamiliar to me (by this I do not mean Chinese or English), though they differ in whether the unfamiliarity is enchanting and invites one to try to understand it (in Sun’s case), or not.

A clash with the boundary of one’s “ground of familiarity” can take various forms. The concepts that I have grown up to understand have certain central as well as peripheral aspects. Surprise or unfamiliarity can concern both. I will not try to list what is central and what is peripheral for common ingrained, referential conceptions of humour; that would be an extremely complicated empirical investigation. What is of interest to a philosopher is the difference between responses to the unfamiliar with respect to the central and with respect to the peripheral.

An illustration: a father plays with his little daughter. He lets her chase a ball that he repeatedly snatches away just before she can reach it. The father uses (some may say abuses) his more developed fine motor skills, his longer arms and legs, etc. There is an element of frustration in how the child experiences the game. A game of a different kind: a father plays with his little daughter. They throw a ball to each other, and the father uses his fine motor skills to prevent the ball from escaping too often from circulation, so that the game proceeds smoothly and is as entertaining and as little frustrating for the little girl as possible.

Now, when we consider these descriptions and ask the question “Would you say that a game can be fun even when one intentionally causes frustration to another?”, could the answer be “Yes, I suppose so, why not?”? Probably. Though personally I would not suggest that frustration is one of the features that make a game funny, I can imagine the child bursting out in laughter in *both* cases, without needing to know the whole story of the family.

This also suggests, I believe, that the conception of “having fun” or “funny things happening”, which underlies the positive answer proposed above, is not *centrally* related to the presence or absence of elements of frustration. The absence of frustration is rather a peripheral part of our conception of what is funny.

Let us consider another, analogous question in relation to cruelty: “Is it funny when one person is cruel to another?” I think this question would *not* prompt the same easy, non-committal answer as above, in the connection to frustration. Cruelty seems *centrally*, and rather negatively, related to a certain non-peripheral conception of what is funny.² Consider the lyrics of The Smiths’ “That Joke Isn’t Funny Anymore”: “When you laugh about people who feel so / Very lonely / Their only desire is to die / Well, I’m afraid / It doesn’t make me smile / I wish I could laugh / But that joke isn’t funny anymore / It’s too close to home / And it’s too near the bone ...”

This difference is marked by the difference in responses. This time, the hypothetical, *abstract* admission (“Is it funny when one person is cruel to another?” – “Yes, I suppose so, why not?”) would not work. At least, not after going through the song and its emotional atmosphere in a way that would help one see the topic in terms allied to Morrissey’s cause. One thing worth mentioning here is that the lyrics take off as a reaction to a person who *can laugh* at lonely people, etc. The song, however, aims at a certain aspect shift: those who *can* laugh fail to see fully what the life of the lonely and the afflicted is like. They are not laughing, as it were, with a full awareness of the fact that they are being cruel to lonely people.³ For those who have recognised, guided by the song, this cruelty (including, perhaps, their own former cruelty), the reaction to the question “Is it funny when

² Slapstick comedy is full of physical jokes, rather violent in their nature, yet it is questionable whether the violence used – violence of the kind that would, in real life, involve serious physical harm – is supposed to express a spirit of *cruelty*. I am indebted to one of the reviewers who drew my attention to this connection.

³ My emphasis on the full, or real, recognition of the reality of the other’s suffering is analogous to Gustafsson’s (2009) insightful critique of such notions that consider “empathy” as something that can be used for more efficient cruelty.

I would not, however, want to explain away all the unpredictable variety of the cases of seeing the same thing in different lights, including cases that involve violent or criminal actions. Cf. Rhees’s (1997a) discussion of Wittgenstein’s remark that the use of Wagner’s music as background for a documentary on the Luftwaffe’s bombing of Poland may make the pilots’ actions look like the actions of tragic heroes.

one person is cruel to another?”, given the above lyric excerpt, would likely be genuine confusion (or even a simple “no”).

One thus cannot accept the proposition of possible funny cruelty *ohne weiteres* – not this time. There are various options; an obvious course would be to attempt a definition of cruelty that would unequivocally draw the boundary. Another possibility is to try to accommodate or expand the concept of cruelty, which one then brings into the discussion. This latter option may not be the most common reaction in situations of confusion or controversy. I will, however, look more closely at this option of refocusing our concepts, for this is where examples can enter powerfully into the game. Often, it is an example sufficiently fleshed out that shows as possible something previously considered impossible or unlikely. Examples enter as objects of comparison that arrange and emphasise visible and convincing aspects of an issue one wants to decide or of a thing one wants to characterise. Note that, in the case of fun and mere frustration, the internalized reservoir of examples need not be *explicitly* invoked and sifted through. The way I am accustomed to “looking at matters” can include the frustrating fun rather immediately, without the need to let oneself be *persuaded* by an example.

On the other hand, the willingness to rethink the concept of cruelty may presuppose an active reflection on available examples that justify the status of “fun”. In general, I do not think this excludes the possibility that a “centrally unfamiliar” concept of fun – one that banks on cruelty and provokes (at least initially) confusion or aversion – *can* be vindicated as fun. However, we need available examples powerful enough to make us *see* the conceptual connection between the familiar and the unfamiliar. It occurs to me here that if there is nothing “centrally” unfamiliar in one’s encounter with a case, there is not much need to work actively with examples. It is then relatively easy to establish the connection, without having to focus on it explicitly.

3. *The Closure of Examples*

Now, what is the difference between general acceptance of an abstract scenario and persuasion by an example? How does it work?

“Give me an example,” we say when we do not know what to think of a statement. Let us consider the following story: the steward of a rich lady’s estate is secretly in love with his mistress. At the same time, the estate suffers from debauchery of parasites, fools and jesters, for they clearly see that nobody is really in charge of the estate and that the lady is not really interested in running the everyday matters of the household. The steward wants to restrict the gang’s behaviour, which incites their anger. They concoct a plan: they forge love letters to the steward, signed, as it were, by the lady, which leads him to delusion and finally to disgrace. They view this result as well deserved and funny, because he was spoiling all the fun and because he clearly didn’t see where his place was.

Should we describe what they did as funny? There are elements of cruelty in their actions. Their plan harmed the steward (perhaps permanently), while his actions were, at worst, annoying to them.

What I provide here as material for answering the question is not significantly more than what I offered above in outlining the father-daughter games. As I already indicated, unlike “frustrating fun”, this does not contribute much to opening up space for the intelligibility of “it’s cruel, but funny”. It rather corroborates the initial scepticism: when presented with this anonymised, hypothetical outline, there is little motivation to re-evaluate the ready-to-hand reaction: this is really poor fun and these guys are a gang of brutes.

What I outline here is an anonymised plot of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, or, more precisely, the part of the play that centres round the character of Malvolio. It is true that fun at Malvolio’s expense is a somewhat controversial topic in Shakespeare scholarship.⁴ However, the whole play is powerful enough to make us less certain, and to show that real fun *can* be involved contrary to

⁴ There is something tragic about Malvolio’s story and there are interpretations to that effect (Willbern 1978, Cahill 1996). On the other hand, one can also simply call Shakespeare a callous and awful author who enjoys the suffering of the characters his audience dislikes (under his guidance). Murdoch (1992: 97) notes that “[a]n ironical character (Iago) can endanger a tragedy just as much as a pathetic character (Malvolio) can endanger a comedy.”

initial appearances suggested by my biased outline. Generations of theatre audiences cannot suppress their *schadenfroh* laughter. So, yes, the parasites are cruel to Malvolio, but it is also fun for them *as well as* for the reader or the audience in the theatre. After the encounter with the play (the whole play, the work), this view may no longer be as confusing as it was before. Apparently, something like the encounter with the whole play may be needed, otherwise it is difficult to come to terms with the proposal of a centrally unfamiliar concept of fun. (If anything, the anonymised abstract summary can *follow* the encounter with the play as a whole and can help one re-evaluate one's initial spontaneous amusement: "Hold on for a sec – how could I laugh at *this?*")

It is tempting to think of giving an example as producing evidence, or rather *further* evidence, for a statement one has already made before, in the abstract. Diamond (1991b: 378) criticises such a view as suggesting that it is only the storyline of a novel that provides the evidence (disregarding the complexity of *how* things are told in a novel). This view seems to presuppose that the way we think in the abstract would be unaffected by examples we are already deeply familiar with (cf. Murdoch 1956). Consider jealousy and *Othello*: many particular examples we are likely to produce as "evidence" for our statements have long been with us.

That a novel can strike me as a good example of the intricacies of human relationships may have little to do with the amount of philosophy I was exposed to before reading the novel. I may say that friendship and compassion manifest themselves in one's attention to trivial details. If asked for an example, I can refer to a minor episode from Somerset Maugham's *The Razor's Edge* where the narrator forges the invitation to the Princess's party for the dying Elliott Templeton. I read the story recently; it was not a part of my "reservoir of knowledge". Yet the story extends it, or elaborates on it. If the story was not responsive to that reservoir, and I only considered it, suggested perhaps by another person in my search for evidence of an abstract account of "the nature of compassion", the idea of using it as an example might not have come to my mind quite so naturally.

From this point of view, an example is not, at heart, just another theoretical argument of a slightly different form. It is active in convincing an individual to change her mind, if it, so to speak, invites her engagement. Diamond (1991a: 304ff) comments, using similar terms, on the workings of literature: a process of persuasion, or of conviction, motivated by a story, consists in employing the recipient's *diverse* capacities as a thinking being ("more than just the capacities of the head") to bring about a change in one's moral outlook. The "moral" dimension of this interaction concerns a certain seriousness with which one responds to (or cares about) the example, be it a piece of fiction or something from "real life". Obviously, there are differences: Interactions with a character from a novel (such as Elliott Templeton) are marked by interest and enlightenment. Responses to real people in a corresponding situation, such as advice or help, make no sense here. Yet, an example offered by a novel should have the capacity, as R. W. Beardsmore (1984: 62, 70ff) points out, to "bring people alive", as opposed to being "mere abstractions". Very few people's dealings with moral problems in their real lives is based purely on a Benthamian calculus. They tackle the situations under descriptions that employ highly personalised concepts and contents. A great author, in Beardsmore's view, can elicit the same response – a disregard for calculation in moral issues – to his or her characters.⁵

Some may feel uneasy about the apparently heavily loaded way in which I use the term "example". They could object that there are all sorts of examples, including quite simple and quite abstract ones. Consider the following: "It would be cruel – wouldn't it? – to, say, laugh at someone who produces grunting sounds when he thinks. These sounds are ridiculous, but it makes him sad when people laugh at him." Or: "Cruelty is, for example, doing things that detract from other people's self-esteem". Or, again, the above anonymised plot of *Twelfth Night*. Or: the brief descriptions of the father playing with his daughter. Why should we say that such examples are not real examples, being deficient in a respect that the full play is not?

⁵ Some authors dismiss the suggestions that there should be anything confused or corrupt about having very real (standard) emotional responses to fictional characters (cf. Cohen 2008: ch. 4).

Well, they need not be deficient as examples – “example” being a rather heterogeneous family of concepts – but they do not all convey equally strongly the sense of the seriousness of the particular. My suggestion is that some kinds of examples lack a certain air of *closure*. In these examples I do not feel I am confronted with a segment of life, which can only be understood in a certain way, while “understanding” them in a different way would mean a serious failure. Consider the anonymised summary of *Twelfth Night* standing alone, with no connection to the rest of the play or to the *reality* of the play. Reactions to this might be “Well, what if the steward was master over the life and death of all the people at the estate, abusing his power in all manners imaginable?” or “What if he was sadistic towards the jester and deserved the revenge?”, and so on.

Up to a certain point – as I presented the storyline above, in abstract – these elaborations seem *legitimate*. However, they will appear misplaced once we are confronted with the play. Then they will show only that one does not understand what the *story* is about, and, more importantly, what it means to read or watch a narrative and understand what it really depicts. (“Story” is used here in Rhees’s [1999] sense: conveying the seriousness.) Winch says that one can laugh at Bach’s *St Matthew Passion* as if it were a comic opera, but that only marks one’s lack of understanding (1987b: 31). To laugh at a work of art “with understanding” means to laugh in the “right places”, but there seem to be no such “right places” in the *St Matthew Passion*.

Responses of the “what if” kind betray that one does not discern – probably does not, or is unable to, care about – what scenes, situations, or characters are funny or moving. They mark one’s engagement in a battle of wits, an attempt to cheat one’s way out of a trap into which the example lures us. Imagine a response to the Trolley Problem: *what if* I break the lever, block the railway switch point and save everybody? Of course, this shows that one does not want to accept, or is unable to agree to, the terms of the exercise and to “play along”. One reason for this unwillingness to comply with the Problem may be one’s worry that the Problem seriously distorts what it purportedly is about (the complexity and messiness of the situations of a moral dilemma).

There is a sense in which this refusal to play along seems misplaced or unintelligible as a response to a literary narrative. Partly because it is unclear what it would mean to see a literary narrative as the author's trick designed to lure the reader into a one-sided reading by presenting an account of the characters that would be a distorting simplification of who they really are.

Consider a reader of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* who, upon finishing the book, refuses to see Fanny as a mean person and reacts to the dialogue between Fanny and John in chapter 2 as follows: what if Fanny needs the money, because she has good reasons to expect she is going to be blackmailed soon? These reactions seem misplaced because we are dealing with *characters* here, rather than with elements of an abstract example as in a kind of test question (often named in an *ohne weiteres* manner "X" or "Peter" or the like). Reading a story, and perhaps learning from it, is different from trying to outsmart someone who tries to outsmart me.⁶ (A story is not a test question with a right or wrong answer, nor is it carefully crafted to leave one in a dead end. On the other hand, a test question is not supposed to consist centrally in its moving, sensitivising quality.)

In relation to this, the difference between a reader laughing at a character and another character laughing at the character becomes somewhat blurred. That distinguishes laughing at custard-pie battles in silent movies from laughing at Malvolio. For in this latter case, the audience is laughing at him *along with* Feste and company and along analogous lines of intelligibility.⁷

An example in the stronger sense, provided by a full narrative dealing with characters, contains a closure against the above

⁶ Compare Captain Kirk's approach to the *Kobayashi Maru* test: it was specifically designed, by Mr Spock, not as a real combat situation to solve, but as a no-win scenario that *could not* be solved (which is why Kirk considered cheating appropriate). I am not saying that there are not kinds of literature that consist primarily in an attempt to outsmart the readers. Yet this description hardly fits novels as such, or even most novels. To be sure, having a sense of what a story is about (if what one reads is a story) or having a particular emotional reaction to what one reads, or seeing the world differently in response to what one reads, are reactions to reading – reactions that can be judged as better or worse. Not better or worse in the sense of a competition, though. Certainly not so that the competing parties would be the author and the reader.

⁷ Cf. Hobgood's (2006: 10) remarks about the complicity between Malvolio's tormenters and the play's audience.

suggested “what if” responses. There is an internal relationship between an example that has such a closure and understanding it. This closure makes one see the inappropriateness of reacting in a “misplaced” manner, and that to react in certain ways would amount to missing what the example is truly “about”. Winch makes an even stronger point and talks about necessity or *impossibility* as *internal* to understanding the example for what it is. Therefore, it was, as he says, impossible for the Good Samaritan just to pass by the injured man. *As far as he understood* what he saw, he could *not* pass by. This is not the same as when a broken leg makes it impossible to walk. A broken leg does not make walking misplaced. It is not a closure that would make walking unthinkable (Winch, 1987c: 157ff).

Though there is necessity or impossibility involved, it is not of a causal kind. I cannot force someone to understand and stop in the way I can force her to stop walking if I break her leg. The impossibility perceived by the Samaritan, to which Winch repeatedly refers, is not something that simply happened to him – in the manner of a failure or weakness. (It is not as if one – here, the Samaritan – suddenly cannot catch one’s breath, while others – here, the priest and the Levite – around her breathe perfectly easily. Nor is it as if one is hopelessly lost in an unknown city and confused by its labyrinthine character – “It’s just impossible to find your way here!” – while the locals orient themselves spontaneously.) It makes sense to see this as a moral achievement, one that has to do with what kind of person the Samaritan is, which, in turn, may have to do with the life that he has led and the moral effort he has made on other occasions. The impossibility emerges as such within the Samaritan’s *vision* (as characterised by Murdoch 1956: 39), which has developed over time, partly by virtue of him having cultivated his own outlook. That passing by the wounded man is impossible for him now does not mean that it was impossible for him in the past. In the terms in which Winch depicts this case, the Samaritan is struck simply and immediately by the situation as involving certain possibilities and

impossibilities. But, that is not to say that to be, or to become, such a person is equally simple and immediate.⁸

Whether an example strikes us in such a way or not – whether it invites us to appreciate the impossibilities involved – has to do with the words used. An example with a closure expresses *fittingly* what we want to say. There are, of course, no words fitting in and by themselves; the way in which we employ and understand them makes them apposite, fitting what we talk about.

This is not a quality induced causally or by a procedure that works uniformly and mechanically in every case. Consider the following commands: “Correct this miscalculation of 7 plus 8”. “Arrange these jumbled colour chips so that they form a chromatic transition.” “Find fitting words to express how the woman in that painting feels”; or even “That won’t do. Find *more fitting* words.” Or consider comments such as: “I have five free minutes now, so let’s do the job. I will now correct the miscalculation/arrange the colour chips/find words fitting the picture.” That I would probably fail to carry out this task is not because I lack a specific required skill. And, unlike with the colour chips, when I am struggling and failing to find the fitting words, I cannot retrace my steps and try another option I was considering. Wittgenstein (RPP: I, § 572; but cf. § 72) refers here to “[the] misleading [...] comparison of searching for the appropriate expression to the efforts of someone who is trying to make an exact copy of a line that only he can see.” (There is a difference between tasks of a practical nature and those of, say, an existential nature, or between engaging with objects and engaging with life. The task of finding a moving word that fits a situation may be closer to the latter.)

If we are to provide an example that can vindicate a centrally unfamiliar concept (of love, justice, morality...), the example has to contain such a closure. Otherwise, it could not invite someone to come to terms with the unfamiliar. Again, let us remember my anonymised summary of Shakespeare’s plotline. The example in *that* form does not contain such a closure. On the other hand, the whole

⁸ Nor does this account cover hypothetical (but perfectly possible) Kantian Samaritans who might have to force themselves every time to do the right thing, being perfectly capable of taking the example of the priest and the Levite.

play does, and one may come to see: yes, fun *can* take unexpected forms. Yes, now I *can* imagine an example of fun not eliminated by the presence of cruelty towards another.

4. Concern for the Particular

Winch once referred to the element of surprise elicited when responding with a story to a question that philosophers expect to be answered by a general statement. In the story of the Good Samaritan, the suggested answer to the question “who is my neighbour?” telling who my neighbour is does not list general criteria of “neighbourliness”; it describes a neighbourly action in a particular context. The surprise is not only a result of being confronted with an example with which the countered general philosophical approach fails to come to terms (for it *shows intelligibly* an attitude more primitive than any philosophical position that would have to be *justified*; see Winch 1987a: 152f). The surprise also relates to the fact that the example is a particularised answer to a general question. For, as Winch puts it, “[this] question is not one that can be answered in that [general] way” (1987c: 155f). Why not? One reason, I suggest, is that it is difficult to learn anything from an account put in general terms. That would invite one to engage in a battle of wits rather than to learn.

Not even this holds without exception. Let us recall The Smiths’ song: “When you laugh about people who feel so / Very lonely / Their only desire is to die / [...] that joke isn’t funny anymore”. Or their “Meat Is Murder”: “This beautiful creature must die / [...] death for no reason is murder”. There are some very general terms employed in the lyrics, and I can only speculate that the emotional impact the music has relates to the fact that it is *not only* lyrics but also *music*.

The effect is, anyway, the same: the point is to achieve a “similarity of concern” (Hertzberg 2010: 27) between the characters “inside” the example and the people who are presented the example and understand it. I am not, as a reader, in the position of Dr Watson, listening to Holmes’ strategy of infiltrating Milverton’s household. Yet my understanding of the story and its characters is compatible

with my finding certain thinkable twists in the narrative unintelligible, such as if Watson suddenly advised Holmes to take advantage of Milverton's maidservant. It would be as if I watched someone add an incongruous "what if" to a story (Dirk Peters shedding tears for Pym at the end of Verne's *An Antarctic Mystery*). With abstract, general examples, no "what if" is really incongruous or unintelligible.

The similarity of concern consists in a similarity of reactions between a reader's response to a narrative and the character's response to the events. To return to Winch's "Can We Understand Ourselves?" once again: he points out that we cannot understand medieval alchemy if we do not appreciate the role of spiritual purity in the alchemists' endeavour. We can clearly describe what alchemists did and the results of their experiments as a kind of stupid, infantile chemistry. Spiritual purity really makes no difference to modern chemists and to the results that matter to *them*.

A reader of a story or a treatise about alchemy is, obviously, not in the position to perform the action in question herself. She has to have a similar concern, though. There is a similar sense of difference between what one should take *seriously* and what is open to arbitrary choice or whim. Winch thus admits that Evans-Pritchard describes quite accurately the way the Azande run their households. Yet, even though Evans-Pritchard decided to run his own household in the same way, his attitude lacks seriousness (Winch 1997: 197, 199f). For unlike himself, the Azande never *decided* for that as one of many *possible options*. They never weighed alternatives of "perspectives" which 'refract' a common reality" (Winch 1996: 171).

There is probably an analogous problem with particular examples. If we treat them only as derived from a more foundational general standpoint, or document them as evidence, then we are considering several possible options of supporting, or connecting to, the general point. Two examples, then, can only illustrate a contradiction or a conflict, if we consider them as evidence for two contradicting general standpoints. We reserve our attention for the general lesson, because it is only the general account that provides a statement. When we look for "evidence" for a general point, it means that we have already made up our mind. We do not try to *learn* from

the examples, as we do when a puzzling encounter drives us to sift through our “reservoir” in an honest and genuine endeavour to see more clearly what to make of the encountered case.

D.Z. Phillips’s (1992a) discussion of Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* can illuminate something about the nature of such contradictions. Phillips treats the passage that shows a lack of understanding between Newland Archer and his son as an irreducible and primitive example of the contradiction or disconnection of values between generations. We are not first confronted with general statements of the opposing value standpoints. We appreciate the seriousness of the disconnection through reading the story. We learn about it *from within* the particular. Certainly, Archer’s motives could be summarized in an anonymised form, as the one I gave for Malvolio. However, it is telling and reading his whole story that allows for a far richer range of possible and legitimate responses rather than just “late 19th-century New York must have been a stupidly difficult place to live”. The required expansion of one’s concepts also means appreciating problems inherent to the example’s environment. It means understanding certain kinds of solutions as natural and tragic (because they come naturally), rather than as just idiotic and absurd. This is also a form of learning from the particular.⁹

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