

*Textures of the Ordinary:
Doing Anthropology after Wittgenstein*
by Veena Das

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Veena Das' *Textures of the Ordinary: Doing Anthropology after Wittgenstein* is a major testament and overview of a thinker's long-term intertwined engagement with readings of Wittgenstein and anthropological fieldwork, in low-income neighborhoods and slums of Delhi, among other places.¹ Bringing together a substantial body of Das previously published essays in a novel framing, it contributes to a growing literature where researchers in fields beyond philosophy draw on Wittgenstein's work. Such work is not always of philosophical interest, having its main applications elsewhere. In Das' case, however, the philosophical implications of her work, especially concerning her understanding of the nature of ethics, seem to me significant.

Das' work can be read in the context of contemporary anthropologies

of ethics/morality, where a growing number of contemporary anthropologists – drawing on a range of different theoretical and philosophical inspirations – have sought to make the study of moral life their own. There she shares with Michael Lambek both the anthropological interest in Wittgenstein's work and a perspective on ethics where the ethical is seamlessly integrated in all human action, thought, language and interaction.

Das inherits Wittgenstein's work through Stanley Cavell's readings to the extent that the latter's name too could have had a place in the title. The rhythms and tonalities of Das' writing are in many ways closer to Cavell's than Wittgenstein's. And yet, her text is driven by its very own concerns and can – with its ethnographic orientation – work to enrich readings of Cavell as well as Wittgenstein.

¹ Page references in this review are to Das if nothing else is indicated.

The relations between the three thinkers can be illuminated through Wittgenstein's own metaphors of seed and soil: "My originality (if that is the right word) is, I believe, an originality that belongs to the soil, not the seed. (Perhaps I have no seed of my own.) Sow a seed in my soil, & it will grow differently than it would in any other soil." (CV: 42e)

Wittgenstein prepares a soil of understanding language as a dimension of our lives, part of our natural history, and cultivates it through observations that help us avoid some misunderstandings of our living in and with language.

Cavell uses this soil to (among other things) cultivate attention to the ethical intensities and potentialities in our shared lives: quests of self-development, the experienced realities of philosophical problems in our lives, the heightened moments of ethical and existential import that sometimes extend over time to become persistent problems or life-long quests.

Das' seed is work in field sites that often seem to offer little room for substantial existential quests and fine ethical distinctions. Small houses crowded with in-laws and relatives, intensely felt practical difficulties, neighborhoods ridden with conflict, and violence domesticated through selective speech or silence, are materials of the everyday lives of her informants. Yet, she follows them as they negotiate their day to day lives with nuance and complexity. The ethnographies add meat to the bones of Wittgensteinian conceptual investigations and shows

that such investigations are not to be seen as contrasting with, but rather as dependent on anthropological and historical insights into human lives.

She inherits from Cavell an understanding of "the ordinary" or "the everyday" as something not given but always to be discovered. On the one hand people live lives of habit, custom, norms and duties, and know very well what the ordinariness of their lives consists of. On the other hand, accurate descriptions of this everydayness often elude the people living it. Thus, for philosophy of Cavell's kind, as for anthropology of Das' kind, the everyday is posed as a question rather than an answer.

More importantly, in Das' work, the everyday also poses itself as a range of very practical challenges. She brings forth how the maintenance of everydayness and communal bonds require active effort from people living their day to day lives.

In a critical exchange with anthropologist Talal Asad, Das observes that thinking "of the everyday in terms of the potential, the actual, and the eventual should free us from the default position that many scholars often unthinkingly fall into—viz., that the everyday is nothing other than the site for routine, repetition, and acquired habits." (274)

Ethics is something active that permeates people's lives together, and comes to expression in gestures, offerings, silences, words, strivings, compromises.

This ongoing activity of care and negotiation constitutes a work of

maintaining a livable human world; a work, also, of managing or containing the violence and madness inherent as potentialities in the everyday lives of many people. She dwells on the distinction between violence that can be spoken and contained in everyday life (in one of her examples, the everyday grievances of domestic violence), and the “inordinate knowledge” of the dehumanizing violence (of rape and degradation in military conflict, for example) that causes the weave of ordinary life unravel. Through such distinctions the everyday and the ordinary come forth as achievements.

Everyday life is dense with contestation, and thus also possibilities, which brings us to what could be described as the ethical task of anthropology, in Das’ somewhat dramatic formulation: “I am suggesting that anthropology perhaps teaches us how to reinhabit a broken world more than it teaches anything else.” (319) This thought draws much of its energy from the challenging lives in her ethnographies, but its relevance is not limited to worlds that are visibly broken. The challenges of both wording the world and making it inhabitable extend also to more sheltered lives, and if attended to, reveal aspects of those lives that would perhaps not otherwise be overt or obvious: the vulnerability and precarity, as well as the creative resourcefulness of human beings and communities.

The conceptual tasks of the academic and people’s everyday attempts

at making sense are for Das necessarily intertwined. Wittgenstein wants to “bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” (PI: §116). The “bringing back” of anthropology – understood not just a work of comprehension, but of making life livable – places quite specific demands on the conceptual work of anthropological theory. “Its concepts, then, do not and cannot live in some rarefied, frictionless space of pure thought.” (Das: 319). There is “no sharp boundary between experience and concepts [...] experience clings to concepts rather than being eliminated in the process of generating purity of thought.” (320)

Theoretical concepts are permeated with the specificities of the lives out of which they have grown, and, if felicitous, they feed back into those or other lives, helping people to negotiate their existence.

References

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- Wittgenstein, L., 1998. *Culture and Value*. G. H. von Wright, ed., P. Winch, transl., Oxford: Blackwell. (CV)

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