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Conscience, Love and the Difficulty of Morality

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Abstract:

Moral philosophers often feel a need to underpin ethics with a metaphysical or supernatural law or principle, the idea being that would it be only for human beings, there could be no goodness. In this paper, I show the implausibility of this idea, by criticizing the fundamental role I assigned to supernaturality in my PhD thesis *The "I", the "You" and the Soul: an Ethics of Conscience*. In this paper, I show how the view laid out in the thesis gives a distorted picture of the meaning of both conscience and love. In the thesis, I claimed that the love in the light of which conscience presents my neighbour "cannot" be my love, as I thought that conscience announces itself even against my will. Instead, I argued that the love that "presents" my neighbour as someone to love is a supernatural love and that our moral task is to respond to that love. In this paper, I show how this account makes nonsense of both conscience and love, by making them impersonal.

1. What is a moral problem?

What is it that characterises so called moral problems? In what sense are they different from logical and empirical problems? What is it that is *moral* about moral problems? Is it just that moral issues are different *objects* of thought or is perhaps the *thinking itself* different from the kind of thinking that goes with logical and empirical issues?

These were the kinds of question I was asking myself when I worked on my PhD thesis in philosophy under the supervision of Lars Hertzberg in the late 1990s. I had come to adopt a view of ethics that was based on the accounts given by philosophers that can be situated in or associated with the Swansea school of philosophy, that is, philosophers like Peter Winch, Lars Hertzberg, R. F. Holland, and, especially, Raimond Gaita. I also found things of interest in the work of Simone Weil and, somewhat oddly, Martin Heidegger. The

things that struck me as right in these philosophers' accounts were of course different, but what they had in common was bringing out the meaning of moral concepts rather than theorising with abstract notions. This is true especially of Gaita, who discussed concepts like remorse, guilt and love.

But also these philosophers seemed to me to do away with the specifically moral character of moral problems – though I did not see what this specific moral character was about. It seemed clear to me that moral problems cannot be accounted for in terms of calculation, logic, grammar, empirical psychology, duty (not to mention utility) or in terms of "moral character" or "virtue". At some point I was struck by an insight that immediately seemed quite self-evident: a moral problem is characterised by the fact that we *do not want* to know what is morally right.

Moral problems are not problems that you can view from the outside as if the task would be to analyse the objective or grammatical features of the problem, and then reflect on different ways of solving the problem and, finally, judge which of the solutions, if any, is "moral". I realised that the question "Is it morally right to …" arises precisely when one is heavily tempted to wrong someone.[1] "Is it morally right to pressure my daughter to study law and prevent her from the art studies she plans to start with?" This question arises only when an inclination to such pressuring has already announced itself. And if one continues to be tempted to pressure one's daughter, one *will* "find" that, "all things considered", preventing her from entering art studies is for her own good. In other words: one fails to recognise the real problem – one's loveless exertion of power over one's daughter – and instead thinks that the problem is to assess the proportion of pros and cons with regard to the daughter's choice of study. One imagines that one is analysing the situation from the outside, evaluating the different possibilities and assessing, "according to one's best judgement", the best solution.[2]

In fact, this purported moral neutrality not only bypasses the moral issue but more importantly constitutes a way of avoiding it. The parent avoids the

[1]One reviewer objected to this, saying that one can sometimes be genuinely wondering whether an action, such as using Twitter/X that allows far-right views, is morally right. My short response is that one could not understand what being evil or good mean by referring to examples like that; they are only secondarily moral. It is quite possible that it turns out on the basis of new information that Twitter/X is the least problematic platform. By contrast, you cannot be *uncertain* about having evil intentions. Rather, you *deny* having them and that is something else.

[2]This illusion of impartial judgement is what I mean by "moral neutrality".

difficulty of addressing the daughter and discussing the issue with her in a spirit of love. The parent avoids this because she does not want/dare to encounter her daughter in the openness of love. Instead, she pressures her daughter to obedience, and deceives herself into thinking that her use of power is "actually" based on moral reflection with the subsequent conclusion as to what "must" be done.

The above-mentioned philosophers did question the idea that moral reflection could be objective or morally neutral. They thought that moral-philosophical reflection is unavoidably engaged.[3] However, they did not in my view see that such engagement also changes the character of the whole philosophical discourse. Nor did they see that the reason why Kantians and others so stubbornly cling to objectivity is that if it is abandoned then – *given that we are dealing with the typical, philosophical discourse* – relativism will inescapably follow. This could be illustrated with Winch's idea of particularity. In discussing what he takes to be an "internal moral conflict" (Winch 1972: 156), he claims that when two moral oughts run into conflict, two persons can act in opposite ways even if they are considering the same moral arguments, without this implying that the action of one of them must be immoral (Winch 1972: 169). In reflecting on what to do in such a situation, one finds out "something about oneself, rather than anything one can speak of as holding universally" (Winch 1972: 168). As we can see, the issue is according to Winch *either* about something universal *or* something personal, in the sense of "subjective". And as we see too relativism follows, for each action can be seen as being morally right on grounds of an inscrutable, subjective whiff. The difference between the actions consists only in one person being "disposed" to act in one way and the other person "disposed" in another way. The meaning of "universality" remains unclear here. It is as if universality would guarantee that a given ought is moral in the first place. Winch says that both oughts are "uncomprimisingly universal" (Winch 1972: 162), but this clarifies nothing and does not remove the threat of relativism: opposing principles, in being *principles*, are always universal as to their form. Moreover, efforts to justify one's evil acting always takes a universalising form, if only by way of claiming that "*everyone* – 'even all those who pretend to be so moral' – would have done the same thing in my position". More commonly one of course refers to just doing one's duty and,

[3]This is not true of Winch, who explicitly stated that philosophers cannot make any moral evaluation of different moral views. See Winch 1972: 200.

when duties conflict, "finding" that one of them overrules the other. Since doing such things is the universal recipe for evil acting, one would have hoped that Winch had clarified his position. One would also want to ask what one should make of an ought that is claimed to be "uncompromising", when it is also claimed that (some? all?) oughts not only can, but frequently (that is: in moral dilemmas) *have to*, be compromised on grounds that are assumed to be at once *moral* and *irreducibly subjective*.

However, and more importantly, the person who is the object of one's acting, the you, is *missing entirely* in Winch's account. What is *done to her* seems to be irrelevant! Is what you have done to another person really right or wrong, depending on what you *find out about yourself*? It is characteristic of philosophical discourse that the you is missing – does she even exist? – and in this crucial respect Winch's discourse is every bit as typically philosophical as Kant's.

Gaita, too, ignores the you. His idea of particularity hinges on the remorse that we feel for the particular human being that we have wronged. However, this remorse is qualified. We can respect and feel remorse only for persons who are "*intelligible objects of someone's love*" (Gaita 1991: 148). This sounds all right until it becomes clear, that this intelligibility is not tied to the human face and human gestures, etc., but to *concepts,* as if moral understanding would be dependent on concepts rather than human relations. Moreover, these concepts obviously express nothing more than the norms of a given society, for according to Gaita the slave girl is "not within the conceptual reach of the slave owner's remorse" (Gaita 1991: 159). It is as if the slave girl herself would not be enough for arousing a feeling of remorse without some kind of conceptual bolstering that according to Gaita was not available in the society of the time. What do such socio-historical eras look like that supposedly, for *conceptual reasons*, do not recognise the humanity of some human beings? What other examples besides, presumably, the American South, do we have of such curious, identificatory shortcomings? The "grammar" of the ancient Greeks obviously "provided them access" to "knowing" that their slaves were human beings. How is it possible that the slave owners of the American South did not have these "conceptual resources"? Is it really tenable to claim that their conceptual space was of a kind that prevented them from recognising the humanity of slaves? Is it not rather, that they were sanctimonious Christians who avoided the Christian idea of loving one's neighbour by claiming that the slaves were not human and therefore not neighbours?

The obvious problems with Gaita's account become even more troubling when he constructs an example where we are to imagine that a blacked face like those in the *Black and White Minstrel Show* plays the role of Othello. In such a case the words uttered by such an Othello *could* not be moving because "it is impossible for us to take them seriously when they come from a face like that: we cannot find it intelligible that suffering could go deep in someone like that" (Gaita 1991: 164).

In other words, Gaita compares the slave owners assumed inability to see suffering in the slaves, with "*our*" difficulty to take seriously theatrical scenes where derogatory caricatures of black faces play canonical roles! This comparison leads him to the conclusion that there is no way of *demonstrating* to the slave owner that black faces are just as human as white ones (ibid.). The conceptual space of the slave owner does not contain *conceptions* of black faces feeling the same suffering as whites can feel; they are beyond the "conceptual reach" of the slave owner.

Despite everything he says against objective morality and rationality in morals, Gaita still thinks in terms of a certain neutrality, which means that he inserts a discursive intermediary between the slave owner and the slave girl. This intermediary is supposed to decide, due to its grammatical features, the degree of moral understanding that is possible for the slave owner. (Whether the *slave girl* "understands" that the owner is a human being is not considered by Gaita). On Gaita's view, we can, by way of a purely grammatical analysis, assess that the slave owner *cannot* see the slave girl as a human being. Philosophical discourse, being morally numb, supports and *directs* thinking in *any* direction where the conclusion that follows from it excludes conscience and the lovelessness that it alarms of. Hearkening to one's conscience has got nothing to do with conclusions, except that drawing "moral" conclusions is a way of repressing conscience. When it comes to the moral substance of drawing moral conclusions, we see that the same arguments can lead to opposite conclusions, as Winch correctly states without seeing the problems of it. Objective and universalising moral arguments are no less fortuitous than subjective ones, and formally they cannot be distinguished from each other,

for, just as with principles, justifications have a universal form, for they profess to be objective. Subjective temptations are couched in universalising terms.

Here it could of course be said that "real" subjectivity is not something that can be stated in sentences and, it could be added, that this is what Winch is referring to. Yes, but this supposedly real subjectivity is an inarticulable, mysterious entity of which nothing can be said. And if nothing can be said about "it", this means also that we cannot say that "it" says (thinks, decides, intends) anything. To refer to Wittgenstein: "in the end, when one is doing philosophy, one gets to the point where one would like just to emit an inarticulate sound" (PI: § 261).

The confusion of the notions of subjectivity and objectivity becomes plainly visible also when one compares Winch's and Gaitas's accounts of particularity. The Winchian idea of finding out something about oneself involves that one's moral judgement goes beyond the universal "oughts" at stake, while Gaita thinks that the slave owner *cannot* go beyond the concepts at her disposal. Both accounts ignore the you.

However, Gaita is right in saying that it is not possible to *demonstrate* for the slave owner that slaves are human beings (Gaita 1991: 164). But he seems to think that *if* the humanity of slaves would be self-evident, then it *would* be philosophically and/or scientifically possible to demonstrate the humanity of slaves. From the point of view of conscience, the *whole question* whether slaves are human beings is plainly evil. *There is no such question*. It is by all means true that *in terms of philosophical (and indeed common sense) discourse* it is not possible to demonstrate to slave owners that their slaves are human beings like they themselves, but this fact does not cast any doubt at all on the self-evidence of the slave's being human beings. After all, philosophical discourse cannot demonstrate the existence of anything at all, besides the thinking subject herself.

It was the above discussed confusions that made me see the importance that *conscience* has for moral understanding. On a general level, the aim of my thesis was to show, firstly, how an ethics of conscience changes the meaning of concepts like moral problem, duty, moral necessity, and love. Secondly, my aim was to give an account of the concept of conscience. This was important because it seemed to me to have some features that explained why philosophical accounts of morality were so confused. It is this second aspect of my thesis that I will address in the present paper.

The first thing that struck me about conscience is that the awareness of your lovelessness arises in the form of a pang of conscience. In a loving togetherness with your friends there is of course no lovelessness and, therefore, no awareness of it. If temptation to evil arises, it will be accompanied by a pang of conscience, which is an awareness of your lovelessness towards some of your friends. I do not have the space here to comment on all the different aspects of how we respond to our conscience that I discussed in the thesis. One important thing to note is that if you acknowledge your conscience, you will not think of the situation as a moral problem. Instead, you want to ask forgiveness (which should not be confused with wanting to be acquitted or with compensating something).

If, by contrast, you are tempted by your loveless action, without completely ignoring your conscience, you will understand yourself as facing a moral problem. However, this problem arises only because your conscience has made you painfully aware of your lovelessness. (I cannot here discuss the suggestion that there are persons who lack conscience, but, shortly put, the suggestion is unintelligible on closer scrutiny.) This partly repressed awareness is what underlies what in philosophy and elsewhere is called a "moral problem". The very concept of moral problem comes about in *moral temptation*. If what you are about to do does not involve any mean intentions towards anyone, the question whether your action will wrong someone will quite obviously not arise. If the question does arise, it *means* that your conscience alerts you because what you are about to do *will* wrong someone, will be loveless towards someone. If you understand your situation in such a way that you think that you face a moral problem, this means that you are inclined, *tempted*, to proceed with your action nevertheless, because you think that you might, on reflection, find a justification for it. (Though it is obvious, I probably still should point out that this does not mean that you explicitly and systematically look for a justification, for in that case you have repressed your conscience even further – and you will quite certainly find "good justifications". One form of repression, self-deception, in temptation is precisely that you are "genuinely" trying to find out what is right.) In terms of conscience, you face a *moral* problem, while philosophers ignore this and think that you face a moral *problem*, an intellectual difficulty the subject matter of which is "morality".

Once the above outlined confusion is seen, this will change the role and understanding of the kind of moral reasoning that philosophers have taken as

a basic given, a kind of neutral kind of rationalizing. Philosophers routinely take it for granted that facing a moral problem is a predicament where one genuinely tries to solve, by way of moral reasoning, a problem about how to act morally. In an ethics of conscience however, moral reasoning is a self-deceptive response to conscience. In the thesis, I did not yet see the importance of self-deception or, as I in my later work call it: repression, even if what I say in the thesis constantly presupposes it. In this article I will however mainly discuss another problematic in the thesis: the question how such things as conscience and love are possible at all.

2. The question

While exploring the concept of conscience I ran into a problem that troubled me a whole lot: it seemed impossible to account for the concept of conscience in natural terms. The concept seemed to me to be inescapably supernatural and I, confusedly, took this to mean that I was dealing with a specifically Christian concept. I was not happy about this, but I could not abandon my presumed insight, so I continued my exploration.

The troubling features of conscience were, firstly, that conscience is *not an expression of my will*. It quite obviously announces itself whether I want it or not. Secondly, conscience does not present me with necessary moral truths, moral norms, duties, or anything of the kind, but with *love for another human being*. I am, in other words, placed in front of a love, (i) that is in some morally decisive way a concern of mine, but that (ii) still is not, so I thought, intended by me, and that (iii) I cannot simply erase even if I can repress it. Since love and conscience seemed to involve not only necessity of thought but also inescapability of experience, it seemed to me that they are not merely metaphysical but rather *supernatural* in character. The concept of supernaturality at stake involves the assumption that something that has a bodily aspect, such as experience, has a necessary character. "Metaphysics" by contrast involves assumptions about necessary presuppositions for *thought*. What conscience presents me with does not address my thought in the sense of "intellectual capacity" but my caring concern for another human being. This is something that can be understood only as love. Since "love" and "conscience" involve "bodily experiences", they are in a sense very much like natural responses, and

yet they cannot be accounted for in natural terms. Hence, they must be supernatural – or so I thought.

Reading works by R. F. Holland, R. Gaita, S. Weil, and to some extent Kant, weakened my resistance towards the concept of supernaturality. I endorsed one thing they had in common: the idea that things do not become good just by human being's judging them to be so. *Something more* is needed. However, also the philosophers mentioned above seemed to either ignore the concepts of conscience and love or in some way misdescribe them.

My criticism of Holland's and Gaita's views of ethics and supernaturality brought me to a notion of Christian ethics. My main reason for speaking about Christian ethics was that I interpreted, perhaps rightly, the parable of the Good Samaritan, which was discussed by the philosophers with whom I engaged in the thesis, as an elucidation of an ethics of conscience. Jesus turns down the lawyer's invitation to a, so to speak, Socratic analysis of the meaning of "being a neighbour" and instead points out the fact that the lawyer already knows what it means. The issue is thus not about knowing what is right but about heeding one's conscience.

The above listed "peculiar" characteristics of conscience seemed to imply that there is also a sense in which the love in which conscience presents my neighbour is *not* my love (p. 13). The love, so I thought, is in a way *presented* to me as a possibility that I can choose or reject. If one thinks that love has a source outside oneself, this means that the urgency of conscience must be accounted for in terms of *authority*. If love, given that it is not mine, is to have any relevance for me, it must be because I think that it has authority. Still further, since I face a supposedly good authority, I must also be *humble* and *obedient* if I am to affirm the authority – which is why I emphasised these concepts too (p. 44). Hence, my realising what my "moral duty" is cannot be about *me* seeing *you*, but instead about my seeing you *as sacred*, that is, me seeing you in a way which is not my understanding but an "other-worldly" understanding: I supposedly see you in the supernatural "light of the sacred" (p. 199).

Once the above picture has established itself, it may seem clear that acting morally is, in some sense, acting out of duty. The concept of duty contains the idea that I "must" do something. This perceived necessity is then metaphysically puffed up. Moral acting is to act according to a *necessity*. One does something that one *would not do of one's own accord*. Given this, it can

immediately be seen why philosophers have been so completely and hopelessly obsessed by the dichotomy of egoism and altruism. In the thesis, I reproduce this confusion in a slightly different form: I write that not to obey the external authority that presents for you your neighbour as someone to love is selfishness in the sense of lacking love for yourself as well as for the other.

When a central aspect of what is meant by goodness is supposed to have its source outside me, this inevitably also means that "being good" means that I put myself aside – that I am *unselfish* – and instead *obey* that external goodness. And in taking the concept of unity into the discussion, I took things even further, for "unity" became central in order to try to hide the alarming distance between I and you that characterises this whole perspective. *If* I obey the alien, "supernatural", authority and affirm the "love" in which it "presents" my neighbour, *then* I assumedly love myself as well as my neighbour in what I called "unity of love". However, the secret function of "unity" is just to hide the fundamental distance between me and you. How *I* understand and feel about *you* is in fact completely absent from the account. I am just supposed to affirm an external perspective and that is supposed to amount to love. The complete lack of relation between me and you is covered over by qualifying love with "unity", even if I in other places say, rightly, that love need not and cannot be qualified in any way. When I claim that "unity" means that both you and I feel and think that we are "illuminated by the same light – and also put under the same obligation" (p. 126), it is quite obvious that you and I are not addressing each other but, rather, the supernatural love. I thus used the concept of unity in the way it is usually used when it is used to repress and distort love: to hide the total lack of relation between you and me. One could ask why this qualified notion of love is any better than Kant's "moral law".

If one thinks that the love that shows itself for instance in conscience is in need of some sort of validating, or underpinning in order to have authority over us, and if one thinks that acting out of love is about obeying authority, then this means only that one thinks that there is an unbridgeable, metaphysical distance between love and one's own understanding. And given this distance and otherness, the moral understanding that is supposed to give the experience of conscience moral relevance *must* be shown to have some morally relevant *ground*. There must be some good reason for my blind obedience to an external authority. And there is in fact, so it seems, a moral experience that does fit the concept of authority. This is the "humiliating" feeling of moral guilt on which

Kant bases his entire moral philosophy. In my thesis, I was, despite my criticism, engaged in similar thinking, though in my case the foundations were not metaphysics, practical reason and moral law, but supernaturality, love, conscience, and authority.

3. The "proof"

I affirmed certain commonly misunderstood aspects of love and by using these confused meanings I misled myself in the direction of supernaturality. How often is it not the case that when we get hold of a new and fruitful perspective on things, we still view it from the point of view of the old perspective, without allowing the new insight to fully reveal itself. I largely did just this. In the light of traditional moral philosophy (and indeed ordinary thought) these new thoughts about love and conscience seemed weird. They seemed in fact so weird, that I found no other way of responding to these concepts than characterising them as supernatural. By this, I performed a typical philosophical gesture: I dealt with a hard-digested issue by making digesting it *impossible*. What a handy way of wiping difficulties of thought under the carpet! Of course, this gesture presupposes that the tool "supernaturality" is available, which it, being a quite ordinary concept, is. There are several such tools that philosophers use to prevent themselves from seeing: appealing to metaphysics; absolutising, transcendentalising, infinitising, eternalising, idealising, etc., perspectives; overlooking paradoxicality of accounts; belittling things; distorting things; ignoring things; etc. All these strategies are used in the midst of an alleged rationality and pursuit of truth and reality. In my thesis, the concept of supernaturality became my main tool for the above mentioned strategies of repression.

The characteristics of love and conscience that seemed to speak in favour of supernaturalism were precisely the places where belittling, distorting, etc., took place. What I took to prove the "necessity" of bringing in supernaturality were in other words precisely the instances where I was belittling, distorting, etc., certain things and making up others. Let us take a look at the most important cases of such "proofs".

It is important to see that when one is distorting and making up things in the way I am discussing, one is not doing it knowingly. One is neither dishonest nor honest. What we have is the typical mood of philosophical reflection, which, as I see it, is one form repression takes. To take an example that most

philosophers can relate to: the metaphysician who as a consequence of a series of rational conclusions "finds" that the external world is an illusion is neither honest nor dishonest and yet cannot take seriously the suggestion that she is in fact distorting and making up things.

The "proofs" that I found all relate to the "extraordinary" features of love, features that I took to reveal themselves in the experience of conscience. Let me list them once more: 1. Conscience turns up whether I want it or not and even against my will. 2. Conscience involves seeing another human being in the light of love. 3. Since conscience ignores my will, the love in question cannot be my love. 4. Conscience does not deliver me any specific rules, instructions, or advice as to how I should act, and yet there is no uncertainty as to what I should morally do.[4] 5. Unlike willing, intending, choosing, reflecting, judging, etc., love is not an instance of my natural, mental faculties. Love is not an affect, emotion or feeling that is generated by me, but a something that "appears" in me and which I can affirm or repress. Hence, it "must" have a source that is external to me. Therefore, it has a supernatural origin.

It seemed to me that all the above features point in the same direction, but in fact it is the third and the fourth points that are the problematic ones that caused me to distort the meaning of the other points. The frequent philosophical confusions concerning love: naturalising or romanticising it, also seemed to speak for the supernaturality thesis. In the literature of philosophy, love is almost always understood as some kind of "strong, subjective interest" which is directed at all sorts of things. In the thesis, I mentioned Levinas's talk of "love of books" as one example. He explicitly says that besides a person, a book can "likewise" be an object of love (Levinas 1991: 254). I thought, and still think, that it is absurd to equal "love" of books with loving a human being. This absurdity seemed to indicate to me that love is not a subjective affect but rather something supernatural. I did not see that with this conclusion I had accepted the idea that *if* love would "have its source" in *me*, *then* it would have to be the kind of subjective interest that for instance Levinas suggests.

[4]One reviewer questioned this description, noting that people can find their conscience telling them not to do something they are about to do. Sure, but that is a *response* to conscience. Conscience does not announce itself *as a prohibition*, but as love's painful worry about what you are about to do to another person. By contrast, responding to a norm involves responding to an instruction: "To … is forbidden/condemnable! I should not do it."

Part of my concern was to show that since conscience appears whether you want it or not, ethics cannot be *based* on willing nor, therefore, on reasoning. One central problem for me was to make sense of the experience that conscience presents my neighbour as someone to love. *How can there appear, in my mind, a loving attitude to someone – and even against my will?* Is it sensible to speak about a command to love one's neighbour? And to love her as one loves oneself?

The most hard-digested aspect of the thesis is without doubt the idea that love is not something that we somehow generate if we "feel" like doing it. Instead, love is already there but we can turn it down. I still hold on to this view. It makes no sense to assume that we could somehow confer love as a result of perceiving some kind of charm or attraction caused by another person.

If we assume that "love" is some kind of affection that I create out of nothing as a response to someone I like, then one wants to ask why violating this subjective affirmation causes me the worst "psychological" problems there are. Nevertheless, this subjectivist perspective is shared and variously elaborated by both psychoanalysts, evolutionary and other psychologists, and philosophers, though philosophers tend to be put off by a too direct equation of subjectivity with purely biological features. I believe this is partly for sentimental reasons and partly in order to preserve the autonomy of philosophy.

Subjectivist perspectives on love will completely misdescribe the "concept", and the way this distortion of love shows itself in connection to conscience is illuminating, namely as something I called "false conscience" in the thesis. This is a perception of social pressure that is falsely called conscience. At the time, I did not see how almost universal this repressive misconstrual of conscience is. In subsequent work, I have called this misconstrual *collective pressure,* and much of my later research gravitates around this concept, which, shortly put, signifies the way personal repressions from the start have a collective character ("*One* must obey common norms …"), and the way in which collectivity is formed by shared prohibitions and norms, which take the place of and repress conscience. One important issue here is to show how collective pressure is the other side of the subjective feeling of guilt and how both are repressions of conscience. What "works" here is, in Kant's words, *humiliation* – not love (Kant 1996: 99).

What impressed me when I wrote my thesis was that *we do not choose to respond* to another person in a conscientious way. Conscience appears whether we want it or not – and often we do not. This, I thought, is curious. And it makes the talk of love and conscience as subjective responses untenable.

I was surrounded by philosophical ideas where love was thought of either as one of the intentional stances that a person could chose to take or as a "natural inclination" in a broadly Kantian sense. Love was taken to be either some kind of choice (Kant's "practical love", see Kant 2000: 199), as an innate, affective response, sometimes puffed up by an aestheticising, romantic idyllisation and mystification (love as the mysterious, subjective "sensibility" underlying all art; see Nussbaum 1992), or a combination of these two, which means that one sees love, if not as an innate response, then as a case of "spontaneous reaction" of which one is "morally responsible". These ideas can be entertained only if the meaning of love is seriously distorted. Ultimately these different views boil down to different combinations of subjectivity and objectivity, the affective response of course being assumed to be an instance of subjectivity while the aspects that can be reached by common moral norms are seen as objective. While criticising such views, I still partly remained within the same metaphysics as those views. – Let us now discuss the problems with my thesis a bit closer.

4. Critique

When I now read my thesis, I can see how much confusion there can be even in points that are in many respects good points. (The danger of good *points*.) On philosophical terms, this happens because one does not, to paraphrase Wittgenstein, put the question marks deep enough. On moral terms, this happens because one is afraid and therefore has an "an urge to misunderstand" (PI: § 109), one is reluctant to see what is "always before one's eyes" and hence fails to be "struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful" (PI: § 129).

In my thesis, I had no elaborated idea of repression, even if my whole account of avoiding conscience presupposes it. Similar things can be said about collectivity and "collective pressure". Moreover, I did not see at all how our massive repression of love has created not only a *language* appropriate to it, but also a *view of language* appropriate to it. In fact, the whole idea that we cannot know the inner life of the other in any other way than by an *interpretation* of her

words, facial expressions and gestures is an aspect of this view of language. These three themes: repression, collectivity, and language, are basically lacking in my thesis.

Later on, I begun to see that my account of the will in the thesis was, without my realising it, really a flawed account of collective pressure. In the thesis, I also spoke of "worldly pre-occupations" (p. 165), contrasting them with love's supernatural care. I now see that in question were actually, on the one hand, collective values and norms and, on the other hand, love in a quite natural sense. But to speak of love as something natural presupposes a discussion of the concept of nature.

5. On the nature of love

We human beings, living beings, do have a possibility of showing a striking concern for each other, and this is not nullified by the evil things we do. After the thesis, I realised that this possibility is an aspect of life, and by this I mean that this concern is an aspect of the *liveliness* of life. Love is also love of life. It is not something external to life, entering it from some alien conceptual "space". Something similar to love can be traced in all living creatures. This is quite natural. To claim that love "must be" supernatural involves taking a covertly cynical position of a know-all person who is able to determine what is natural and what is supernatural. The arrogance of labelling something supernatural is not only about presuming that one knows that there "has" to be something like that, but also that one presumes to know what "natural" must and cannot mean, that one understands life well enough to make such determinations.

Moreover, one presumes to understand love well enough to say that it has to be supernatural because *human beings "could not" have such love*. But for all we know, only human beings (and, in a related sense, other living creatures) have this love! So this concern, this love, is in *this* sense quite natural. Is it not presumptuous to say that love is natural? *From love's perspective love is the* most *natural thing there is*. To be sure, it is not natural in the sense that for instance evolutionary psychologists and neuroscientist would have it. Or philosophers like Kant. In fact, most philosophers today want to call themselves naturalists in a sense in which there is no place for love and conscience.

I cannot go into the confusions of the naturalism that prevails in philosophy, but opting for the concept of supernaturality is equally confused.

The appeal to this concept shares with naturalism the assumption that *the significance of nature – more particularly: of life – is quite clear* and departs from naturalism only by claiming that morality in whatever sense: goodness, virtue, duty, love, conscience, "*cannot*" be, as it is often expressed, "merely" natural. The hubris of naturalism is to fancy that one knows that all human capabilities can be accounted for in terms of genes, neurons, natural selection, and cultural development. The hubris of supernaturalism is to fancy that one knows these things plus moral issues well enough to state that morality cannot be natural.

The obvious assumption that motivates the use of words such as the absolute, mystery, wonder, and other-worldliness, is that in order to account for goodness, morality and love, *something spectacular is needed*. More particularly, what is needed is something that is *absent from and even alien to human beings*. Human beings are taken to be such worms that if it were only for us, there could be no goodness and love. Now, we need not go into a discussion of what speaks for and what speaks against such a judgement of human beings. We need only realise that such a characterisation of love *goes against the very gist* – against the very meat and heart – of love.

6. Love, the I and the you

Apart from the fact that from love's perspective love is the most natural thing there is, it is also equally important to see that love is the "outlook" of *precisely* the loving *person*. To assume that love has some other, spectacular source, or that it is something "given" to the subject by a whim of grace, amounts, in terms of meaning, to *erasing* love, and in terms of moral dynamics, to *repressing* it. For in order for my relating to another person to be *love*, it will have to be precisely *my* feeling-understanding of *you*. Or better: *my openness* with *you*. Insofar as I am to be in love's openness with you, I must first of all allow myself *to be I*. *Only an I can love a you*. In other words: only insofar as I dare to be an I "can" I love you. Or rather: only insofar as I dare to be an I, *do* I love you. The other side of this openness is that it is to and with *you* that I am open. *Only a you is addressed by love.* And *insofar as* you are this you, you will be prepared to, no: "love to", *receive my openness* – and I will love to receive your openness. *Only an I receives openness*. "You" and "I" *are* only in openness. In the thesis, I did not see this, and thus misdescribed conscience as *presenting* "a" love to me. This alienation of love is internally connected to the authoritarian character of my account of ethics in the thesis; a feature it shares with collective morality in

general: "The imperative character of conscience resides solely in the recognition that the love presented in conscience is not my love." (p. 395)

7. Love and the unbearableness of evil

If we assume that love comes from somewhere else, well … then we are not dealing with love but with some curious *fantasy* about something supernatural and/or metaphysical. The purpose of this fantasy is to repress love, to repress my difficulty of being this loving I, and to project that difficulty away from me onto something or someone else.

The idea that human love is a reflection of a supernatural love – or that "meaning", "truth", "justice", etc. must have a supernatural source – is seriously confused. No matter what "supernatural power" we imagine, it cannot transform a love that is not *from the beginning* mine, into becoming mine.

There is a sense in which it makes sense to speak of love as being *free*. With this I just mean that love is not *motivated by anything*. You can comfort someone out of love but if you *attempt to display love* to someone *in order to* comfort her, then love evaporates. Speaking about freedom here indicates just that love is an aspect of my openness. You cannot *evoke* openness in someone, or *entice* her into openness, but if you close yourself, *you* are not in the openness with the other.

The idea that ethics, meaning and/or love "must" come from "somewhere else" is in some form perhaps the most prevailing idea, and confusion, within humanity. That it is still attractive is probably partly due to the fact that what is assumed to be its only alternative is so utterly inadequate, a mix of two things: (i) natural selection the way evolutionary psychology, psychology in general, and neuroscience present it, and a varying proportion of (ii) social processes. Those who are repelled by this crude account decorate it, according to their personal taste, with various amounts of the above-mentioned philosophical décor. Hence we have all the fifty shades of naturalism.

However, the deeper and more important reason for the popularity of the externalisation of love and ethics, is repression. We find it very hard to think of ourselves as the beings that "have" this love that appears to be, possibly, so wonderful. For if that wonderful love is an inherent possibility for me, *how nasty* is not my mean, deceptive and cruel small-mindedness! The thought easily becomes unbearable. Wittgenstein: "Hate between men comes from our

cutting ourselves off from each other. Because we don't want anyone else to look inside us, since it's not a pretty sight in there." (CV: 46)

My evilness becomes *morally* unbearable. The meaning of "moral" *must* then be *re*-conceived in a way where it becomes bearable. It must be changed in a way that *hides its original unbearableness*. In order for such hiding to be effective, the *hiding itself* must also be hidden. The "re-" of the "reconceiving" *must* be erased. What we *must have* is just the "conceiving", which is: a deceptive illusion of original understanding. This is our common, collective, ethics, adjusted by evil in order to render our evil bearable. It is an ethics of the *must*. Of law, necessity, duty, obligation, obedience, absoluteness and normativity. A collective pressure. A discourse of repression. It is quite bearable to have violated a law; it is unbearable to have been loveless.

8. Kant on love

Kant's ethics could be seen as the philosophical distillate of the Western form of collective ethics (though by substituting "collective, ethical life" for "moral law", Hegel made some crucial modernisations to it). One could in fact say that both Kant's ethics and collective morality in general are quasi-judicial: their "point" is to prescribe a set of norms that everyone "must" comply with and to punish, in one way or the other, persons who do not. Collective morality completely ignores the issue of moral understanding. *Blindly obeying* collective norms, in their variously puffed up disguises, is considered to be the highest moral virtue. In fact, Kant explicitly *warns* people from acting out of their own sense of goodness. However, he gives *no reason* for this warning. He just *ridicules* "beautiful things" like love and good will, and then goes on to *accuse* the kind of "fanciful pride", which according to him makes people overlook duty: "as if we were independent on the command, to want to do of our own good pleasure what we think we need no command to do". And then: "We stand under the *discipline* of reason [...]" and we "must not forget our subjection to it [reason]" (Kant 1996: 103). Kant's harshly moralising tone is quite typical of the authoritarian, collective morality. So is his *worship* of reason and duty: "*Duty*! Thou sublime and mighty name …" Submission to duty "elevates man above himself" (Kant 1996: 108). No modesty *here* …

Kant's whole discussion on love on these pages is in fact nothing but an effort to ridicule and shame anyone who dares to have the "vain, high-flying, fantastic way of thinking" where moral acting is seen as having its source in

one's own, spontaneous understanding of the other (Kant 1996: 106). Such ideas about love are judged by Kant to be instances of "moral fanaticism", "self-flattery", "vain self-love", "pathological impulses" and of taking "pride in meritorious worth", etc. (Kant 1996: 106–107). Kant obviously admits that an ethics of love is thinkable, but in his *Critique of Practical Reason* he makes *nothing* to *show* what he thinks is wrong with it. He just mocks and shames it.

In the thesis, I did not see what struck me shortly afterwards: that human being's most basic difficulty is actually to *be open*. The theme of openness is present in the thesis but in a distorted way. The moral problem is not that we do not want to accept the supernatural call to love our neighbour. The problem is that we do not want to accept that the love that makes itself felt in conscience is, precisely, *our own love*. Rejection of love is self-hatred or, better: self-disgust. "Love" is an aspect of *life*, and rejecting love is rejecting life. It is destructive of life. Evil, that is.

9. Language, conscience and the difficulty of talking

Besides the confusion concerning supernaturality and the fact that my thesis more or less lacks the concepts of repression and collectivity, it also lacks any awareness of the role a certain view of language plays both within and outside philosophy. I did not see how we have developed our everyday language partly in order to help each other not to see. The language of philosophy is a sophistication of everyday language.

When we open ourselves to each other, language is central. Language is thus dangerous and must be *restricted with an urgency that equals our difficulties with love's openness*. With motives secret to ourselves, we perform this restriction by assigning a particular, repressive, function to language.

After my thesis I begun to see how I–you understanding is not just about a moral outlook where conscience and love are central: it is also about language and how it is supposed to work. At this point I also begun to be more interested in Wittgenstein's philosophy. Earlier, I did not see what was supposed to be so radical in it, but when I thought of it from the point of view of I–you understanding, things changed.[5]

[5]I called it "I–you understanding", though I had not at that point read Martin Buber, even if Göran Torrkulla at some point said I should. My later use of the I–you perspective originates from my thesis and it was in fact Lars Hertzberg who suggested the title for my thesis.

There is no room to discuss this issue further, but it struck me that Wittgenstein everywhere uses the form: "Suppose you said to someone …", as a means of dissolving philosophical thought-cramps. In my view, this is not about language, ordinary or otherwise, but about an I talking to a you. What is said in I–you talk has meaning only to the extent that the persons dare to be I:s and you:s to each other. Wittgenstein's discussion of pain and his comments on language in this connection could be taken as an example of the way he makes use of what I take to be I–you understanding. In this discussion, he shows how the language of pain (and sensation and feeling in general) acquires its meaning from our relationship with each other (in the I–you sense), not from any kind of object. To allude to PI §304, there is no need for a "Something" here, but in terms of human suffering pain is certainly not a "Nothing" either. The language of pain is an expression of the ethical relations between "I" and "you", and if there is in some cases doubt concerning the reality of pain, this is a moral issue; not an epistemological one. I assume that this is what Wittgenstein means when he in PI §288 says that "doubt has no place in the language-game". Doubt in the epistemological sense arises when "expressions of sensations – human behaviour – are excluded". This is because in this case "a criterion of identity for the sensation" is needed "and then the possibility of error also exists". I would add that "human behaviour" is excluded in the sense of being repressed.

There would be much more to chew on here, but I hope I have managed to indicate the sense in which Wittgenstein's intention is not to show that if we keep to ordinary language we will steer clear of confusion[6], for the issue is not about language but about me understanding you. Perhaps I am allowed to quote myself here: "'This is why saying 'I understand you' means something entirely else than saying 'I understand the words you speak'" (Nykänen 2018).

Conscience is an alarm bell that makes you aware of violating meaning, of violating your "I" and of ignoring "you", or: the other's "I". In other words, conscience is the pain you feel when you repress love. And since love is – allow me to use an Old English word – the *lust* of life, violation of meaning is destructive of life.[7]

[6]There is some unclarity in Wittgenstein's thought here, but I am thinking of the passage where he says that the solipsist "does not disagree with us about any practical question of fact". Rather, the solipsist is "irresistibly tempted to use a certain form of expression, but we must yet find *why* he is" (BB: 59–60).

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