Wittgenstein and Derrida: Ethics of the Name

Matthew Furlong

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ABSTRACT

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Similar tendencies in the work of philosophers Ludwig Wittgenstein and Jacques Derrida appear in their thoughts on language and lead to similarities in their respective ethical thought. Their views are such that the way in which they conceive the operation of meaning lead to a stance that rejects the possibility of total knowledge or command of concepts, and therefore refuses the idea of a "correct" account of meaning, morality, history, knowledge, and so on.

This thesis is an attempt to identify and elaborate the overlap between Wittgenstein and Derrida's work in light of the role that proper names play in their philosophies of language and ethics. The philosophical account of proper names is important because it clarifies the view of subjectivity and also serves as a model for understanding the general operation of language. The fact that we are revealed to be inextricably dependent on the "otherness" of other people in order for each of us to be "selves" implies we are indebted to others and therefore must initiate any ethical project based on that indebtedness. Furthermore, the instability of language insures that we cannot have the "correct" interpretation of all concepts and must therefore maintain a certain charity in our dialogical engagement with others. This thesis argues in favour of the ethical stance that results from Wittgenstein and Derrida's perspectives.

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To my grandfather Thomas Furlong,

who taught me to listen to the call of language.

To my grandmother Theresa Prim,

who didn't need philosophy to think of the other.

Concordia University
School of Graduate Studies

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

By: Matthew Furlong

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and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

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Introduction

In this essay I will discuss similarities in Ludwig Wittgenstein and Jacques Derrida's philosophies of language and how those similarities are linked to relevant similarities in their ethical thought. Central to my argument is the issue of proper names, which is a useful focal point for showing the link between language and ethics. This is because the examination of proper names elucidates the generation and structure of subjectivity as well as of language in general. I will show how the model of subjectivity presented by Wittgenstein and Derrida reveals that we are implicated in a web of sociality and historical being that renders us both indebted to and responsible for others. This dual indebtedness and responsibility engenders an ethico-political stance motivated by three things: 1) affirming the instability and permeability of conceptual identity; 2) rejecting the concept of subjectivity as ontologically self-present, self-certain and isolated in favour of the view of a socio-historico-linguistically generated subject; 3) submitting to the excess of meaning instead of trying to dominate it according to some ideal of rationality.

The essay will proceed as follows: Chapters 1 and 2 will be analogously structured explications and elaborations of key issues in Wittgenstein and Derrida, respectively. Chapter 3 will be focused on more in-depth discussions about the ethical implications of their thought in relation to the matter of proper names. That chapter will also include a discussion of Derrida's thought concerning the ethical relevance of socio-historical contexts as well as the ethical tasks of bearing witness/mourning and hospitality, as they are given expression in his writing. Finally, the chapter will conclude with some brief questions about possible future research in this and related areas of

philosophical inquiry. Throughout the essay we will also touch on issues such as the way in which Wittgenstein and Derrida's thought speak to a kind of quasi-religiosity (although this term will be more closely associated with Wittgenstein) and possible reconstructive accounts of selfhood (Chapter 1 features a short discussion of Paul Ricoeur, who offers a way of rehabilitating the destabilized subject in terms of its own selfhood), and ways of dealing with the problems of cultural identity that we face in Canada in this century.

Chapter 1: Wittgenstein, proper names, and language-games

Language must speak for itself.
-Ludwig Wittgenstein

In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein meditates on the significance of proper names in our language-games. He asks, "What is the relation between the name and the thing named? —Well, what *is* it?"[1]. In grappling with his question, Wittgenstein invokes, among other things, Augustine's recollection of his initiation into language, the conception of language as the communication of determinate meanings[2], the assumption that all words are really names, the belief that names should represent simple objects (that is, individual[3] entities), the role of words like "I" and "this" in relation to proper names,

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[1] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §37.

[2] A good snapshot of this philosophical tendency is in Dallas M. High's *Language, Persons, and Belief*: "One view or theory of language that has enjoyed wide circulation—or at least it did during the first half of this century—chiefly because of its natural economy and simplicity, is what could be called the 'referential' or 'word-object theory' of meaning. The theory has been defended and supported philosophically in the twentieth century by Bertrand Russell in, for example, his *Philosophy of Logical Atomism*; Rudolf Carnap in *The Logical Syntax of Language*; and Wittgenstein himself in his earlier *Tractatus*. We need not mention the historical legacy it derives from Plato's *Cratylus* or Augustine's support in the *Confessions* or its other non-philosophical representations. Gilbert Ryle has aptly dubbed the view as 'the "Fido"- Fido theory of meaning,' since for many it has seemed transparently clear that words function like names, e.g. 'Fido'. The word 'Fido' stands for, refers to, or names the object, e.g. the dog itself, and the meaning of the word is constituted by the fact that it names the animal, the object, or the fact" [High, *Language, Persons,and Belief*, 30].

[3] Here I mean "individual" not only in an empirical way (i.e. insofar as we can individuate, identify, and count objects as per our five senses), but also in an ontological sense – the sense that each entity is only *itself*, that it is essentially self-identical, and that its complete self-identity is necessary for it to be what it is. Additionally, this ontological status must, according to the philosophical tradition with which we are taking exception, be non-discursive – in other words, an actual metastructural feature of the world (one which, in that philosophical tradition, cannot be experienced and can only be delineated by rational thought).

and the belief that language somehow has a deep metaphysical connection to the world. When talking about metaphysics, I am referring to the belief that the world has a metastructure that exists regardless of the play of concepts in language and beyond the limits of possible experience (hence the notion of "depth"). By this I mean, for instance, that we might believe causal laws to be actual nomic forces discovered through rational inquiry rather than part of a descriptive account developed in language as a way to articulate certain features of the way in which we encounter the world. Similarly, we could also construct a metaphysical theory of selfhood by positing an essential substance (such as a soul) that subtends the social self and acts as its foundation; it is this kind of metaphysical concept with which we will be primarily concerned in this chapter.

Wittgenstein's writing is extremely rich, and venturing into the *Investigations* can feel like walking into a labyrinth, so for the sake of clarity and utility I will focus in this chapter mainly on the questions he raises in sections 26-46. The important thing to keep in mind when reading Wittgenstein is that he responds to the notion of the "metaphysics of depth" by trying to show that all of our philosophical confusion can be solved by looking at the "surface"; that is, by being attentive to our actual every day human practices we can clear away our misconceptions about language. When talking about human practices, Wittgenstein uses the term *forms of life*, and it is within forms of life that what he calls language-games[4] occur. As he says, "the term language-*game* is meant

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[4] §2 of the *Investigations* depicts a language shared by two builders whose vocabulary consists of "slab", "block", "pillar", and "beam". Wittgenstein uses this example to show how even in such a primitive case, the meaning of these words is inseparable from their use: Builder A uses "slab" as an order for Builder B to do something with the slab, and Builder B understands "slab" as the cue to fulfill his purpose. Later, in §7, Wittgenstein writes, "In the practice of the use of language (2) one party calls out the words, the other acts on them. In instruction in the language the following process will occur: the learner *names* the objects; that is, he utters the word when the teacher points to the stone. —And there will be this still simpler exercise: the pupil repeats the words after the teacher—both of these being processes resembling language. We can also think of the whole process of using words in (2) as one of the games by means of which children learn

to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or a form of life"[5]. In pointing this out, he is trying to bring out the way in which language is not created separately from and then applied to our forms of life, but rather generated out of them. Therefore, for Wittgenstein, the meaning of a word, its place in a sentence, that sentence's utterance in a particular language-game, and that language-game's development out of an aspect of the way that we live—a form of life—are inextricably linked[6]. Language-games are not rational constructions that have been arbitrarily attached to human practices; on the contrary, language-games have developed as a result of them. "Commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting, are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing"[7]. The idea that language, and thus meaning, have emerged out of a more primal, non-rational source is, in a way, the lynchpin of Wittgenstein's project. As we will see, his thoughts about mind, selfhood, ethics, certainty and other things hinge on this argument[8].

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their native language. I will call these games 'language-games' and will sometimes speak of a primitive language as a language-game. And the process of naming the stones and of repeating words after someone might be called language-games. Think of much of the use of words in games like ring-a-ring-a-roses. *I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the 'language-game'"* [*Philosophical Investigations*, §7, italics mine.].

[5] *Philosophical Investigations*, §23.

[6] As an aside, I would like to note that there is no way to express this set of relations in a strictly hierarchical manner. All of Wittgenstein's conceptual devices (language-games, forms of life, family resemblances, etc.) are necessarily subject to his own kind of philosophical analysis, which Henry Staten sees as a form of deconstruction (this term, of course, is most often linked to Derrida). As he says, every concept that Wittgenstein employs is "infected by Wittgenstein's deconstruction, and ... break[s] up into a series of different—though related—uses" [*Wittgenstein and Derrida*, 82]. The consequence of this is that while we may posit language-games as being the result of forms of life, there is also the way in which forms of life are conceived within a language-game: there is no "as such" or "in itself" to any of these concepts that would allow them to escape the destabilizing effects of Wittgenstein's approach. As a result, neither "language-game", nor "form of life", nor any other of Wittgenstein's philosophical tools can be taken as "a new master concept" [*Wittgenstein and Derrida*, 83]; thus, Wittgenstein's formulations resist becoming a replacement metaphysics to supplement the one he problematizes in his work.

[7] *Philosophical Investigations*, §25.

[8] While Wittgenstein emphasizes the idea that language is part of a natural response to our being in the world, he is not saying this in order to introduce a reductive argument in which he will propose that we ought to think of ourselves as "mere" animals. On the contrary, because of the fact that meaning is not fixed and stable, the concepts that are often traditionally employed to discuss animality cannot be used to

On Wittgenstein's view, our confusion is the result of certain effects of the grammar of language. Our misconceptions are bound up in (that is, effected by as well as productive of) metaphysical/philosophical confusion; when we clear up our view of language, Wittgenstein thinks, we will remove, or at least provide some relief for the problems of philosophy as well. "What confuses us," he writes, "is the uniform appearance of words when we hear them spoken or meet them in script and print. For their *application* is not presented to us so clearly. Especially when we are doing philosophy!"[9]. In other words, we tend to become forgetful of the forms of life in which language occurs, and try to imagine it (and meaning) as existing outside of all concepts. This problem, as he says, is brought about not only by the formal characteristics of language, but also the way in which language has been traditionally theorized. Of course, this is a simplified analysis, and throughout the chapter I will try to examine some of the more subtle facets the problems that Wittgenstein deals with in his work.

In this chapter I would like to address the following issues. The first is the discussion surrounding Wittgenstein's account of how meaning is generated in language. On his view, meaning is inextricable from use and the contexts and forms of life in which use occurs. This has ontological consequences for the status of names and how they apply to the things which we name; if the meaning of a word is its use in language, then

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construct and pin down a new concept of humanity. We should always keep in mind that, even as Wittgenstein writes in an eloquent and complex way, his argument is necessarily self-reflexive; in other words, his writing is also indebted to language-games, which means that its meaning is not completely fixed. Thus, when we read him, we should always the possibility of radically questioning every term he uses, as per its various contexts of use (as well as its history, although the role of historicity in language will become more clear when we discuss Derrida in Chapter 2). This, on my reading, is part and parcel of his entire project. Wittgenstein's writing often take the form of a question, because on his analysis it is the attempt to construct stable, globalizing theories that—at least partially— is at the core of our philosophical confusions. Later, in Chapter 3, we will see the importance of the necessary possibility of putting everything into question in Wittgenstein's thoughts about ethics.

[9] *Philosophical Investigations*, §11.

the meaning of a name cannot be any different, and then we cannot posit any way in which language somehow touches things "in themselves"[10]. This will be the second issue dealt with. In the third section of the chapter, we will look at how this rethinking of language applies to proper names and personal identity. I will argue that if we take up the Wittgensteinian view of language, we will have to eschew the notion of a unified subject and rethink the category of the self as an essentially social one. Finally, in anticipation of a more detailed discussion in Chapter 3, in which we will look at Wittgenstein's thought in conjunction with that of Jacques Derrida, I will sketch out some ethical implications that Wittgenstein's thought about language, sociality, and the self carries with it. Within the larger scope of this thesis, I want to show how Wittgenstein's rejection of fixed, non-contextual meaning leads to and demands a certain ethical attitude that, on my view, is very similar to the work carried out by Derrida.

1.1: Word and meaning

In opening the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein invites us to consider St. Augustine's recollection of his initiation into language:

> When they (my elders) named some object, and accordingly moved towards something, I saw this and grasped that the thing was called by the sound they uttered when they meant to point it out. Their intention was shewn by their bodily movements, as it were the natural language of all peoples: the expression of the

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[10] This is not to imply, however, a separation or alienation between language and world, or mind and world. Rather, it calls for a radical rethinking of our way of being in the world, and how that way of being has produced language. Maintaining a dichotomy between mind and world would still operate on the assumption that language is somehow a rational concoction. According to Wittgenstein, however, language is the result of a more primitive relation to experience. Furthermore, the concepts of mind, reason, self, and so on are all indissociable from language, and therefore cannot be posited as non-contextual, self-sufficient, entities that exist in isolation from our situatedness in the world. For Wittgenstein (as well as for Derrida), the very idea of an "in itself" is drastically problematized as conceptual entities are reinterpreted as being inextricably bound up in the complex web of meaning that exists in language use.

face, the play of the eyes, the movement of other parts of the body, and the tone of voice which expresses our state of mind in seeking, having, rejecting, or avoiding something. Thus, as I heard words repeatedly used in their proper places in various sentences, I gradually learnt to understand what objects they signified; and after I had trained my mouth to form these signs, I used them to express my own desires.[11]

This passage suggests to Wittgenstein something that is both common and important to philosophical ways of thinking about language. "It is this: the individual words in language name objects—sentences are combinations of such names. —— In this picture of language we find the roots of the following idea: Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands"[12]. On this view, we get an idea of "determinate meaning" that is not dependent upon the intention of a speaker, or the context in which it is used, to mean something in particular. There are two different, yet related, ways in which meaning is believed to be determinate. First: the meaning of a word is complete, fixed, and stable. It does not require anything other than its own content and signifying power for its meaning. Second: words, as names, are denotative in their meanings. A name seems to "belong" to and correspond to the object it signifies. To put it another way, the word is taken as the fundamental semantic unit in language, and in the case of names, a word's meaning is based on the object that of which it is denotative. As Wittgenstein commentator Gerd Brand writes,

> Objects in the usual sense, the individual things we find in the world, seem to be denoted by words. These words have a meaning and indeed it seems as if the meaning of these words were nothing other than the objects which they denote or signify. If that were so, then in our investigation of the relation of word and object we could discover how the individual thing is connected with the world and with language.[13]

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[11] Augustine, *Confessions* 1. viii.

[12] *Philosophical Investigations*, §1

[13] *The Essential Wittgenstein*, 105.

The comfortable assumption of this view is that words are saturated with meaning by the objects they represent. The meaning of a word is not the description of its object; "the object is its meaning"[14], as Wittgenstein puts it in his first work, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Thus, we would imagine that the object itself would suffice to provide its name with meaning, and all names can be taken separately as pure, self-sufficient signifiers. Yet this view ignores the fact that when we actually *use* language, the name is not enough to give us a sense of its object: the name gives way to other statements about the object to which it has been applied. Wittgenstein's response here is to ask whether or not all words are really just names of objects:

> "We name things and then we can talk about them: can refer to them in talk." — As if what we did next were given with the mere act of naming. As if there were only one thing called "talking about a thing". Whereas in fact we do the most various things with our sentences. Think of exclamations alone, with their completely different functions. Water! Ow! Away! Help! Fine! No! Are you inclined still to call these words "names of objects"?[15]

Consider the one-word exclamation "water!" By uttering this exclamation, someone might be indicating dire thirst; she may be spying a shoreline after a long trudge across a landlocked region; she might (as in the film *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*[16]) be

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[14] *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 3.203.

[15] *Philosophical Investigations*, §27.

[16] Actually, this example is particularly appropriate to our current discussion. In the film, the protagonist and his companions are trying to escape from an underground mine in mine cars and the brake lever snaps off. To stop the mine car before it smashes into the wall at the end of the line, our man hangs off the outside of the mine car and presses his feet against its two front wheels so as to slow it down. Due to the speed at which they are moving, the friction almost burns through his shoes and when they finally come to a stop, smoke is coming from the soles of his feet. He jumps from the mine car and, in obvious discomfort, dances around in circles shouting 'Water! Water!' Then he looks up and sees that a huge wall of water (let loose from a reservoir during the chase) is barreling down the mine tunnel; his eyes widen in alarm, and the tone of his voice changes as he starts to run away yelling "WATER! WATER!" while pointing back to the massive wave threatening to consume everybody in sight. This is, to my mind, an excellent illustration of

warning others of an oncoming wall of water that threatens to consume her and everyone else with her. Of course, in all of these instances, the exclamation does involve the physical/chemical compound we refer to as "water", but can we reduce the word's meaning in this case to "the object for which the word stands"? Or would we rather say that there is a double meaning at work: that we are at once referring to water itself and then employing that sense of the word "water" in relation to a certain orientation we have toward it in each situation? In that case, can we say that the meaning of a word really is more complicated than just naming an object? Or can we refuse this possibility by saying that the other meanings of "water", as expressed in the exclamation "water!" are merely parasitic on the privileged content of the word; namely, the aforementioned physical/chemical, sometimes liquid, sometimes solid, sometimes vaporous, compound called "water"? What reason is there for us to think this, though? We would have to accept that the meaning of the word is constituted, as Dallas High puts it (in footnote 1, above), by the object for which it supposedly stands.

This is not satisfactory to Wittgenstein. Taking the example of the word "two", he writes:

> Perhaps you may say: two can only be ostensively defined in *this* way: "This *number* is called 'two'". For the word "number" here shews what place in language, in grammar, we assign to the word. But this means that the word "number" must be explained before the ostensive definition can be understood. — The word "number" in the definition does indeed shew the post at which we station the word. And indeed we prevent misunderstandings by saying: "This *colour* is called so-and-so", "This *length* is called so-and-so", and so on. That is to say: misunderstandings are sometimes averted in this way. But is there only *one* way of taking the word "colour" or "length"? —Well, they just need defining. —Defining, then, by means of other words! And what about the last definition in this chain? (Do not say: "There isn't a 'last' definition". That is just as if you chose to say "There isn't a last house in this road; one can always build an

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meaning-as-use. Meaning, on the Wittgensteinian view, is not just dependent on the placement of words within one sentence or another; it is also dependent on a very rich context of human actions.

additional one".) Whether the word "number" is necessary in the ostensive definition depends on whether without it the other person takes the definition otherwise than I wish. And that will depend on the circumstances under which it is given, and on the person I give it to. And how he 'takes' the definition is seen in the use that he makes of the word defined.[17]

If we go back to the "water!" example with the insight that a word's meaning is discursively generated in various contexts of use (which are related to forms of life), we can perhaps propose the following things: first, we can say that the meaning of the word "water" does not have any ideal, self-sufficient, self-identical meaning constituted by an object to which it refers, because its sense can consist only its contexts of use. Its contexts of use, of course, are by no means limited to sentences. As we can see from examples in which words (such as "ow!" or "help!") are uttered in isolation from other words, contexts encompass a much wider scope than spoken language and include all sorts of instances in which the state of affairs surrounding a one-word utterance are more than sufficient for us to get a sense of the word's meaning in that case[18]. Second, we can therefore also say that in exclaiming "water!" there is no double-meaning at work in which a privileged meaning subtends the current use of the word and makes it possible; the meaning of the word is its use in the particular situation. Finally, we can add to our previous proposal the additional assertion that the word itself is such that it can be used in many different ways in many different situations.

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[17] *Philosophical Investigations*, §29

[18] The importance of context for meaning will be central for our discussion of Jacques Derrida's view of language in Chapter 2. For Derrida, context is a critical aspect of how meaning is generated in language. On his view, it is only with a context, which never fully determines meaning, but which restricts the possibility of a speaker's full intentionality from permeating utterances (or written works, for that matter), that meaning occurs at all. This idea—sometimes taken to be an expression of a philosophical nihilism—is one that has produced much consternation among more "traditional" philosophers, for whom the total intentionality and sovereignty of the subject is of prime importance. We are therefore here anticipating the argument that will be presented in the next chapter, wherein we will see how, for Derrida, the impossibility of a person's power to fully determine the meaning of her utterances is precisely what makes any meaning possible at all.

Despite the open-endedness of use and meaning, however, Wittgenstein cautions us against saying that there is no 'last' definition[19]. The 'last' definition occurs when its meaning has been successfully employed in its use; that is, when we are satisfied that we have gotten across our meaning in using it. I suspect that Wittgenstein tries to strike a balance between acknowledging the open-endedness of use and emphasizing that there is a 'last' definition because he does not want to create the impression that there is, "metaphysically speaking," an infinite possibility of meaning "out there" waiting for us. This concern, I think, is reflected in his insight about instances in mathematics when a number series is expressed thus: "1, 2, 3, ...". We might take the ellipses to indicate that the series goes on to infinity, and Wittgenstein is afraid that this sense takes on a metaphysical depth, where on his view it should simply indicate about the way in which we work with mathematical concepts. As he says in *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, "the picture of the number line is an absolutely natural one up to a certain point; that is to say so long as it is not used for a general theory of real numbers"[20]. If we read this comment in conjunction with his admonishment in the *Investigations*, "that is just as if you chose to say; 'There isn't a last house in this road; one can always build an additional one"[21], we can get a grasp on what he is trying to say. By denying that there is a last definition, Wittgenstein fears that we will be in danger of preserving that metaphysically rich (in other words, misleading) "..." at the end of any list of definitions, thus falling once again into a conception of language that ignores the natural (which is to

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[19] *Philosophical Investigations*, §29.

[20] Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, 148e.

[21] *Philosophical Investigations*, §29.

say, to some degree, "animal"), pragmatic view that he proposes[22]. He wants us to remember that there is nothing *essential* about words that makes them this way and that they only appear to behave this way because of the ways in which we use them. More than that, he wants us to remember that there is nothing essential about meaning "as such." We can put it this way, then: if the 'last' definition occurs, it occurs in use, as everything else in language does. The 'last' definition by no means represents a metaphysical limit (in the sense that its finality is imposed as per some necessary structure that exists outside of language as it is used).

The "water!" example also illustrates that a "word must have a family of meanings"[23], which is to say that there is necessarily a backdrop of usage which produces the meanings of words. This backdrop, of course, is previous contexts of use – social life, shared practices, common ways of reacting to the world, and so on. All the various uses of words are linked conceptually, and we understand their meanings by learning language as well as being brought into a human community of shared experiences. Here we might begin to consider that language is not merely an extension of us, some kind of proxy or tool; it is as intimate to us as humans as our faces. Words and sentences cannot be separated from a whole range of gestures and concepts that are employed in relation to our way of being in the world, our forms of life. To be sure, forms of life are not limited

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[22] In Chapter 2, we will see that Derrida more radically plays with the open-endedness of meaning, and does not adopt Wittgenstein's stance of emphasizing the fact that there is a "last" meaning. For Derrida, meaning is always "to come"; its fulfillment is always anticipated and striven for. This, however, has less to do with any "property" of language "itself" than it has to do with a certain unavoidable psychology that we have: despite the fact that, on his view, the very content of experience itself is invaded—and also made possible—by what he calls *différance* (which we will deal with in that chapter), we cannot help but provisionally assign a completeness to meaning not only in each and every instance of language-use, but also to the way in which we experience existence in general. Thus, for Derrida, there is a necessary complicity with the classic language of metaphysics (what he calls the "metaphysics of presence") that we cannot avoid preserving even as we try to break free of its hold on us.

[23] *Philosophical Investigations*, §77.

to practices and activities in which intentional action is the predominant constitutive factor. Going back to the case of someone shouting "water!" as an example, the language-game in which such an utterance might make sense is dependent upon the way in which water can be a hazard to our health in certain circumstances. The way in which we talk about, think about, write about, gesture at, various aspects of the world is, in fact, dependent upon our more primitive relation to them. In a sense, spoken utterances, and their conceptual content, retain the characteristics of gesturing. One might argue that every utterance is, in a way, a gesture about or toward the world. Therefore, neither contexts of use nor particular aspects of language, as they have developed over time, are entirely arbitrary. As we saw above, it is not simply within sentences that words have meaning; contexts of use—that is to say situations in human lives—are the determining factor of meaning. This is why, as we saw in the example of one-word utterances, words can have meaning without relying on insertion into a propositional form. It would not be enough for us to take the two separate utterances of "water!" in the example above and try to discern their respective meanings by seeing them written side by side on a page. Each utterance would have to be accompanied by a description of the circumstances under which it occurred, which merely reinforces the necessity of use within human contexts for meaning to emerge at all. That each word should have a family of meanings means that there are what Wittgenstein calls "family resemblances" between a word's different uses.

> Why do we call something 'number'? Well, perhaps because it has a—direct—relationship with several things that have hitherto been called number; and this can be said to give it an indirect relationship to other things we call the same name. And we extend our concept of number as in spinning a thread we twist

fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres.[24]

The imagery here is quite powerful as well as instructive. A word's meaning consists in the relations made possible by all of its uses in our language. Similar uses and family resemblances, again, occur in relation to shared forms of life. As Stanley Cavell puts it, "human convention is not arbitrary but constitutive of significant speech and activity; ... mutual understanding, and hence language, depends on nothing more and nothing less than shared forms of life, call it our mutual attunement or agreement in our criteria"[25]. It is *in* our forms of life that we agree on concepts, use, and meaning. For instance, the fact that we need food to live is an agreement in forms of life that gives rise to certain language-games; due to the commonality of this necessity, we are thus similarly disposed to being able to develop shared concepts. There is no legislative discourse that fixes our human practices. Nor is there a repository of concepts that acts as an organizational structure according to which language can make sense.

Wittgenstein is urging us to think of language and meaning as a feature of our embodied existence as biological, living beings. When he says in *On Certainty* that "language did not emerge from some kind of ratiocination"[26], this is what he means. Language, as he sees it, has always been first and foremost a reaction to our situatedness in the world: "the origin and primitive form of the language game is a reaction; only from this can more complicated forms develop. Language – I want to say – is a refinement, 'in

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[24] *Philosophical Investigations*, §67
[25] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 168
[26] *On Certainty*, §475.

the beginning was the deed'"[27]. Simon Glendinning thinks that this interpretation calls

into question the traditional distinction between man, who is identified as the *zoon logon*

echon (roughly translated from Greek as "rational animal"), and other kinds of animals,

who are supposedly without language, without thought, and without self. "*If*," he writes,

"man is endowed with the *logos* (mental capacity, understanding, rationality, access to

the 'as such', etc.) which makes language possible, then we will have to *exclude* the

primitive forms of language and of communication which are *in fact* exhibited in the lives

of other animals. And where is the rigour in that exclusion?"[28]. His point is that there is

plenty of evidence that our forms of life (and thus, our language-games) are not

absolutely unique among, or opposed to, the behaviour displayed by other kinds of living

beings. Spoken language, the manipulation and circulation of concepts, is embroiled in a

much broader type of behaviour or activity that exceeds (yet also involves) the circulation

and comprehension of sentences. It is not by any means a purely "rational" activity; on

the contrary, rationality is dependent upon the development of language in relation to

forms of life. There is much more that goes into understanding language use than the

rational comprehension of statements according to their formal construction. This is what

leads Wittgenstein to say that

> Understanding a sentence is more akin to understanding a piece of music than one
> might think. Why must these bars be played just so? Why do I want to produce

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[27] Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 31e. The notion of reaction or responsiveness as a crucial aspect of language also finds expression in Derrida's work. There is no such thing, according to Derrida, as an originary utterance that finds no impetus beyond itself (as in the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word" [John 1:1]). This also plays into the way in which the self is constituted. When he problematizes the distinction made between humans and animals, which implies that the separation between "us" and "them" lies in our ability to "reason," "use language," "think," and so on, he questions the deeply ingrained idea that (as Wittgenstein denies) language emerged from some kind of ratiocination. Glendinning also reads Derrida in this way: "the general point will be that, for Derrida, our possession and use of language should not be conceived in opposition to, and so absolutely 'uncontaminated' by, our animality" [*On Being With Others*, 82]. We will deal with this at greater length in Chapter 2.

[28] *On Being With Others*, 73.

just this pattern of variation in loudness and tempo? I would like to say 'Because I know what it's all about.' But what is it all about? I should not be able to say. For explanation I can only translate the musical picture into a picture in another medium and let the one picture throw light on the other.[29]

The possibility of cognitively understanding a sentence, in other words, necessarily depends on a far richer background of physical (we might even say intuitive) engagement with others and the world. It is for this reason that we can never rely solely on sentences or logical explanation to give an account of understanding or of experience: the possibility of propositional, logical language only emerges within the originary responsive development of language as Wittgenstein sees it. The music analogy reminds us of the subtle, non-propositional nuances involved in our everyday discourse with others. It also reminds us of the limitations of language by showing that we can only "throw light" on one utterance by viewing it against others[30]. No word or utterance can present us with meaning in and of itself. I cannot point at a rock and simply say "rock" for someone who has never heard of a rock and has no concept of what a rock is; that would merely be, as in the passage from the *Confessions*, opening a doorway. To make full sense of my utterance, a person would have to be initiated into a broader human form of life in which rocks have a place; that is to say, that person would have to relate to rocks—for instance, according to the way that rocks figure into the rest of the world in general for us—in the same way that I do. We have to keep human forms of life (both in the sense that we are social and in the sense that we react to the world around us in

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[29] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Grammar*, 41.

[30] Once again we see a convergence with Derrida's thought. In addition to Wittgenstein's insight that the language of utterance cannot envelop and capture all aspects of experience because of its indebtedness to the more expansive sphere of life from which it is generated, Derrida would point out in this passage that we are reminded of the way in which concepts and meaning are not fully self-present, but in fact "contaminated" by their dependence upon other conceptual formations in order for their sense to be articulable.

certain ways) in mind and not let the importance of propositions and sentences become the only focal point of our philosophical investigations. As Norman Malcolm points out, there is something ineluctably instinctive bound up in language, and taking language to be a purely mental construction is mistaken: "the actions of comforting or trying to help that go with the words 'He's in pain', are no more a product of reasoning from analogy than is the similar behavior in deer or birds"[31]. To put it another way, we can no longer view language as an object that is outside of us; language is not a framework developed for confronting and making sense of an alien world about which we are unsure. Later, I will argue more fully how this has ethical and moral implications for the way in which we live with one another, and I think that the stance I am trying to promote can help us respond to skepticism about the knowledge we have of others, which in turn has consequences for thinking about the way in which we can understand and respond to others' needs.

We can now return to the passage from Augustine's *Confessions* and look at it in a different light. What Augustine describes is not his introduction into the world of signification and meaning by being taught words that are names of objects, but rather his initiation into language-use in a very limited way; namely, the beginning of learning how to *use* language. Even his very elementary notion of words and objects carries with it the groundwork for being able to understand more complicated linguistic functions. Implied in his understanding of the relation between word and object as it is expressed by the pointing gesture is the understanding that the gesture itself means something like "*this* is

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[31] Malcolm, *Wittgensteinian Themes*, 67.

called ..."; this in and of itself already opens the door to more complex ways of using language. Stanley Cavell here offers a wonderful insight:

> In "learning language" you learn not merely what the names of things are, but what a name is; not merely what the word for "father" is, but what a father is; not merely what the word for "love" is, but what love is. In learning language, you do not merely learn the pronunciation of sounds, and their grammatical orders, but the "forms of life" which makes the sounds the words they are, do what they do — e.g., name, call, point, express a wish or affection, indicate a choice or an aversion, etc. ... Instead, then, of saying that we *tell* beginners what words mean, or what we *teach* them what objects are, I will say: We initiate them, into the relevant forms of life held in language and gathered around the objects and persons of our world.[32]

Language is not some pure ideality, separated from and superimposed over human forms of life. The meaning of a word is not *merely* its place in a sentence: it is also its use in a language-game—and sentences can only make sense within the context of one language-game or another. Because language-games occur within forms of life, because concepts in language are preceded by a more immediate way of relating to our situatedness in the world, "one has already to know (or to be able to do) something in order to be capable of asking a thing's name"[33]. What this means is that our mode of being in the world must include, for instance, spatial and instrumental relations to objects (in the sense that they are relevant in some way to our forms of life) in order for the concept of naming objects to emerge. In *Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations*, William H. Brenner supports this view. He writes, "as we learn to participate in these activities, we learn our native language; as we learn our native language, we learn not only *forms of words* but also *forms of life*. We learn to *act* in such-and-such ways—to (for example) punish certain actions, establish a fact, give orders, render accounts, tell the time, take an interest in

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[32] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 177-8.
[33] *Philosophical Investigations* §30.

people's feelings, etc"[34]. Taken another way, what Brenner means is that there is not a rigourous division between what we might call "raw life," on the one hand, and the "intellectual" way in which we try to unravel its mysteries on the other. Life and language are inseparable, co-extensive, and mutual. Naming speaks to one feature of our way of relating to the world, and it is possible only in a much broader web of use.

So what Augustine describes in the passage cited by Wittgenstein is not wrong, which may be the impression we get from Wittgenstein at first glance, it is just very limited (not necessarily to say incomplete) and particular. Despite its limitedness, the very telling of it illustrates the broader sense of language-use that Wittgenstein is attempting to throw into relief; his purpose is to use it to show us how "the meaning of a word is its use in the language"[35], and that it is in the use of words that we are being trained when we use language. Our use of language, of course, does not boil down to simply "talking about things" or "expressing thoughts" or whatever else we might want to say. "Language games are many and various. Philosophers seeking to elucidate the logic of our language need to notice this variety and multiplicity. There are just many more language games than are dreamt of in their philosophies"[36].

To recap this section, Wittgenstein's look at the passage from Augustine's *Confessions* first complicates the common philosophical notion that words are simply names of objects by showing the forms of life in which they are couched; then, he shows by example how the meaning of a word is not its object but its use in our various language-games. He accomplishes this by showing, for example, how even one word,

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[34] Brenner, *Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations*, 15.

[35] *Philosophical Investigations*, §43.

[36] *Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations*, 16.

uttered on its own, can mean many different things depending upon the conditions of its use. Again, not all words are names of things; however, even in cases in which a word is employed as the name of an object, Wittgenstein's approach calls into question not only the relationship of the name to the object but also the notion that there is something substantial and essential about what is named, that there is an "in itself" to the object. Because the thing named is not identical or equivalent to its name, because it can only make sense in terms of further description, associated concepts, and human forms of life, the very notion of its essence is problematized.

For Wittgenstein, this requires a rethinking of our ontological suppositions about the unity of concepts: this is inextricable from our thought about the unity of objects, as well. Since what we think of as objects are only available to our thought conceptually, and since for Wittgenstein concepts are necessarily bound up in the play of discursivity, we cannot rely on the notion that something is simply "identical with itself". For example, when we try to describe something like a tree in a complex manner, we unavoidably have to draw on concepts with which the word "tree" is associated. This can bring us to, for instance, concepts employed in botany, which in turn will have to do with a vast array of other ideas that we use to cope with understanding various aspects of the world. Through all of our discussion, which will involve going through a network of interrelated concepts until we have satisfactorily described and made sense of "tree" for the person who is listening to us, will we have found a way to make him understand what a tree is that does not take recourse to that complicated web of discursive formations? In other words, is there a way to non-contextually understand what a tree is (or anything that we can imagine, for that matter)? In relation to these questions, we ought to contemplate

that the ideas deployed in and by botany (which is a human practice), for instance, are generated out of some aspects of our experience. This realization is of no small importance; it has massive implications for the way in which we conceive the ontological structure and essence of entities in that we encounter in the world. According to the Wittgensteinian view of language, the notion that there is something substantial and simple about objects is drastically compromised. As we will see, this has consequences for the status of the self. When we apply Wittgenstein's ideas about meaning to personal names and personal identity, the idea of a unified, substantial self has to be radically rethought.

1.2: Words as names

As I said in the previous section, we get the sense that a word's meaning—a name's meaning—is constituted by the object for which it stands. Our impression is therefore that there is a way in which that a name is sufficient to signify an object outside of all contexts and discursive practices. It does therefore not occur to us that it is not enough to simply have an object and a name in relation to one another; we act as though the name can stand on its own, with no relation to the whole of our language-games[37].

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[37] I would like to note that in saying "we act," I am not referring solely to those of us involved in philosophical activity. There is a certain sense in which we can at times, unphilosophically, assume that there is something nondiscursive and unified announced with the utterance or appearance of a name. Take, for example, the drive in society to "find oneself", to discover the undistorted, enduring, "true" self, which ignores the way in which even the concept of a "true self" has a history and a dependence upon contexts of use. I would like to suggest, though, that even this tendency (which can by no means applied globally to all people; Buddhists, for instance, view the notion of a "true self" as illusory and express a wish to dismantle it – of course, this view of existence carries with it a whole other set of problems to be investigated) can be seen as "unphilosophical," that it reveals a certain effect that philosophical thought has on thought in general over long periods of time. Just as philosophy is concerned with its other (that is, life as it is lived, we might say), the way in which philosophy evaluates the status of our existence can also find its way back to thought in general and influence. We need look no further than the ongoing and uncritical reification of reason and rationality, or the strong belief in the ownership one has over one's ideas and thoughts, to see

> Naming appears as a *queer* connexion of a word with an object. —And you really get such a queer connexion when the philosopher tries to bring out *the* relation between name and thing by staring at an object in front of him and repeating a name or even the word "this" innumerable times. For philosophical problems arise when language *goes on holiday*. And *here* we may indeed fancy naming to be some remarkable act of mind, as it were a baptism of an object. And we can also say the word "this" *to* the object, as it were *address* the object as "this"—a queer use of this word, which doubtless only occurs in doing philosophy.[38]

The problematic view of a name's relationship with an object is, as Wittgenstein sees it, bound up in, among other things, the sense that a) the feeling or impression that pointing at something while saying its name (or saying words such as "this" and "here" instead of the proper name while pointing) creates the impression that there is some kind of necessary connection between the name and the "thing in itself"; and b) "a name really ought to signify a simple"[39], which is to say that we feel as though names, which are singular, imply the ontological individuality of things that are named (the connection of names to words like "this" is a critical factor in the misconception). Both of these mistakes arise from misunderstanding how language operates as we are using it; they are part and parcel of what Wittgenstein calls the "tendency to sublime the logic of our language"[40] which refers to the way in which we are inclined to view the formal aspect of language as its most essential and profound trait[41]. When we are in the thrall of the way

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the way in which the history of philosophy has had an impact on the way in which we think about ourselves.

[38] *Philosophical Investigations*, §38.

[39] *Ibid.*

[40] *Ibid.*

[41] Nietzsche makes a similar criticism in *Human, All Too Human*: "*Language as an alleged science.* The importance of language for the development of culture lies in the fact that, in language, man juxtaposed to the one world another world of his own, a place which he thought so sturdy that from it he could move the rest of the world from its foundations and make himself lord over it. To the extent that he believed over long periods of time in the concepts and names of things as if they were *aeternae veritates*, man has that pride by which he has raised himself above the animals: he really did believe that in language he had knowledge of the world ... logic, too, rests on assumptions that do not correspond to anything in the real world, e.g. on the assumption of the equality of things, the identity of the same thing at different points of

that language tends toward making things seem uniform, we do not notice its complexity and its messiness, which exceed the ability of logic to contain it. Hence his remark in *Culture and Value*, "the power language has to make everything look the same, which is most glaringly evident in the *dictionary* and which makes the personification of *time* possible: something no less remarkable than would have been making divinities of the logical constants"[42]. The way in which time is "personified" arises from the fact that it operates as a noun in our language, and is thus classified in the dictionary. Without considering how the word "time" is actually used in various contexts, it can become easy for us to forget that, even though it is identified as a noun, it is not rendered equivocal to other nouns like "box", "gun", or "dish". It is in this sense that the logic of our language is raised above its multiplicitous uses, and we come to believe that it is in its logic that we find the "true" nature of language and meaning. In other words, we posit a depth to it that Wittgenstein believes to be illusory.

Wittgenstein wants us to notice what is happening on the surface of language-use. Again, if this is so we will enter into an account of a linguistic mechanics designed to help us avoid error. Henry Staten writes, "Wittgenstein rejects the idea of a system of rules underlying the diversity of uses in favor of looking carefully at those uses to see how they are in fact ordered. He is interested, not in atemporal formulas that can assimilate new cases to their pattern, but in *the patterns that actual words and actions*

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time; but this science arose from the opposite belief (that there were indeed such things in the real world). So it is with *mathematics*, which would certainly not have originated if it had been known from the beginning that there is no exactly straight line in nature, no real circle, no absolute measure" [Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, §19]. We know that Wittgenstein read Nietzsche, and I would suggest that we should read Wittgenstein with that in mind, for the similarities in their writing and thought can provide useful insights into what Wittgenstein is up to in his work.

[42] *Culture and Value*, 22e.

present to us as spatiotemporal phenomena"[43]. This further emphasizes Wittgenstein's desire to avoid making another metaphysics out of his thought[44]. The problems we encounter with names and naming are bound up with being mistaken about certain aspects of language. Since I have listed two particular problems associated with names and naming, then, let us look at them in turn and see how we might deal with them, following Wittgenstein.

The first problem is the impression that there is a necessary relationship between a name and the object to which it is applied. The feeling we have when pointing at or directing our attention toward an object when we say its name is that there is a connection between our gesture and utterance on one hand and the object on another. It is as though we were performing a pure act of signification in which the object is brought out of silence by the name and the name is brought out of meaninglessness by the object. The connection, then, occurs in our mind, in the feeling we have of affinity between

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[43] Staten, *Wittgenstein and Derrida*, 80.

[44] I think that Donald Davidson also voices this concern (or one like it) in his essay "On The Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme". "Conceptual schemes, we are told, are ways of organizing experience; they are systems of categories that give form to the data of sensation; they are points of view from which individuals, cultures, or periods survey the passing scene ... [r]eality itself is relative to a scheme" ["On The Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme",183]. A conceptual scheme for the mechanics of language would be one that organizes language and shows "how it is ordered", as Staten puts it. Davidson thinks that such a scheme is impossible: there is no organizational structure, and we do not experience anything of the sort. In fact, he says, we do not organize the world or our experience of it at all. "Someone who organizes a closet arranges the things in it. If you are told not to organize the shoes and shirts, but the closet itself, you would be bewildered. How would you organize the Pacific Ocean? Straighten out its shores, perhaps, or relocate its islands, or destroy its fish" [*Ibid*. 192]. This is the contrast between trying to "organize" experience—an incoherent notion for Davidson— and trying to reckon with it. Davidson feels that in language we reckon or cope with experience [*Ibid*. 193], but we do not "organize" it. Similarly, Wittgenstein thinks that "philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot give it any foundation either. It leaves everything as it is" [*Philosophical Investigations* §122]. This is the reason for Wittgenstein's insistence that we pay attention to our actual use of language. Any attempt to provide a model of language that could safely subsume all possible configurations of sense under it would only turn out to be an approximate description of it; such a model would only be outstripped by actual language-use, and on Wittgenstein's view it would be exposed as a philosophical confusion. His emphasis on practice shows us that everything (language, concepts, meaning, etc.) really does occur in a very human way, and nothing transcends it or acts as its metaphysical ground.

name and object, a relation that seems to fall naturally into place. It is as though once this act is performed, we can be silent because no further talk about the object is necessary. In the previous section, though, we saw how attention to our language-use will show that this is not the case. If the act of naming an object would be sufficient to involve it—or to account for its involvement—in our forms of life, then all of its subsequent appearances in our language-games would be either a repetition of the name or a pointing toward it (which would simply cause us to remember its name). Such an experience would be similar to what Kant refers to in *Critique of Pure Reason* as intellectual intuition, in which we would simultaneously sense and understand an object as the thing-in-itself, nondiscursively. In the case of intellectual intuition, "the existence of its object is given"[45] and understood immediately, without the need for description or any other attempt to understand it. I take this first mistaken conception of naming to be of this order: in naming—in saying the name—the object is given us in a way that is self-sufficient and complete. The name is replete with meaning because we have attached it to an object and fused them together.

Insofar as we make this mistake, words like "this" and "here" play a special role. When we say, "*this* is called ..." or simply "*this* is ...", we might feel as though the particularity, the unity, and the essence of the object is guaranteed and held in place for the proper name. We might also say that "this" produces a certain impression of *presence*. When we can point at something (a car, for instance) and say, "Yes, *this* is it! *Here* it is." we feel a kind of immediacy in relation to the object, a sense of its uncomplicated, pure, complete *this*-ness and *here*-ness. As Wittgenstein puts it, "the

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[45] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B72.

word 'this' has been called the only *genuine* name; so that anything else we call a name was one only in an inexact, approximate sense"[46]. Presumably "that" isn't considered as "genuine" as "this" because it does not evoke the same sense of proximity as "this". We usually only say "this" when pointing directly at an object that is right in front of us; we do not usually point at an object 100 feet away from where we are standing and refer to it as "this". This brings to light the importance of spatiality and situatedness (that is to say, human existence in the world) in our language-use. When we say "this", it is only in the context of something's proximity to *us*, its location in our frame of reference—or, we might say, in our forms of life. But at what point exactly do we switch from using "this" to using "that"? If we reflect on this question we will see that we cannot demarcate a clear boundary, and therefore our use of the words must be rather more fluid than determinate as well. How can the word "this" therefore be used to metaphysically "anchor" an object for us? — this is the kind of discovery made available to us by philosophical investigation. Although we may feel as though we can "say the word 'this' *to* the object, as it were *address* the object as 'this'"[47] and feel as though "this" signifies an object in the same as its proper name, this is not the case. "Take the expressions 'I', 'here', 'now'. What is 'now'? A moment of time. But which moment of time is it? —So also: what is 'here'? Which place is it?"[48]; going further, we can say, "what is 'this'? A thing. But what thing is it?" "This" rather accomplishes the function of referring to an object either *to be* named (as in the process of initiating a child into language-use, for

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[46] *Philosophical Investigations*, §38.

[47] *Philosophical Investigations*, §38

[48] Wittgenstein, "The Language of Sense Data and Private Experience", 319.

instance), or an object with which we are familiar ("Which ladder?" "Oh, this one over here"), and so on.

Words like "this" are not names, they act as reference points within statements; they are a gesturing toward something. If they were names, the act of singling out a particular object by saying "this one" would not make sense. Yet, as Wittgenstein points out, "philosophical problems arise when language *goes on holiday*"[49]. "This" seems attractive to us as a name because of its exactitude and sense of singularity. In Staten's words, "this word has what seems to be an absolutely unique role in the language: it is spoken in the presence of, seems to be absolutely transparent to, the object. It is as though with this word, language transcends its separation from things and makes contact with them"[50]. The word "this" must always be used in the presence of the object; hence the impression we get of a connection between it and the object. "This" also stands in for the proper name of the object, which solidifies the feeling we have of that connection between the proper name and the object. In allowing this mistake to occur, we really satisfy a philosophical tendency: the temptation to say that "*a name really ought to signify a simple*"[51]. Proper names, which are rather open to vagueness because they can be used in the absence of the objects to which they refer, are considered inferior to words like "this". They do not satisfy the desire for logical precision and completeness. A proper name requires further explanation, whereas "this" merely requires the presence of the object to make sense. The problem with this view is that "this" only makes sense if we have some idea of its referential use (although we may not see it as that) by being

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[49] *Philosophical Investigations*, §38.

[50] *Wittgenstein and Derrida*, 68.

[51] *Philosophical Investigations*, §39.

initiated into language. So although we might think that "this" (or "here") might truly be able to stand in for the proper name of an object (and in fact be a "better" name than the proper name), the requirements of even being able to use it reveal that this is not the case. "The demonstrative 'this' can never be without a bearer. It might be said: 'so long as there is a *this*, the word 'this' has a meaning too, whether *this* is simple or complex.' — But that does not make the word into a name. On the contrary: for a name is not used with, but only explained by means of, the gesture of pointing"[52].

The second problem that I mentioned is summed up in saying, as Wittgenstein does, that "*a name really ought to signify a simple.*" When we examine proper names, we find that they do not. Wittgenstein uses the following example:

> The word "Excalibur", say, is a proper name in the ordinary sense. The sword Excalibur consists of parts combined in a particular way. If they are combined differently Excalibur does not exist. But it is clear that the sentence "Excalibur has a sharp blade" makes *sense* whether Excalibur is still whole or broken up. But if "Excalibur" is the name of an object, this object no longer exists when Excalibur is broken in pieces; and as no object would then correspond to the name it would have no meaning. But then the sentence "Excalibur has a sharp blade" would contain a word that had no meaning, and hence the sentence would be nonsense. But it does make sense, so there must always be something corresponding to the words of which it consists. So the word "Excalibur" must disappear when the sense is analysed and its place be taken by words which name simples. It will be reasonable to call these words the real names.[53]

Wittgenstein makes a double point in this passage. First, he illustrates that the meaning of a proper name is not a simple object or entity, as things named can be broken down into other components. The role of the proper name in language does not simply amount to corresponding to an object. The meaning of the name is not, as he puts it, the same

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[52] *Philosophical Investigations*, §45.

[53] *Philosophical Investigations*, §39.

thing as the bearer of the name[54]. Second, he articulates the philosophical tendency to react to this problem by trying to find fundamentally simple things that can be named without reservation and thus preserve the unity of objects and the connection between those objects and their names. This is not a tenable response to the problem, because the meaning of a name is not the same as the bearer of a name, and even the names given to so-called simples would be implicated in language-games in exactly the same way as the names of the objects they constitute. The fact is that no bearer of a name is a "simple". Nor can we *discover* fundamental components of reality that can be "properly" named, in order to find out what the world is *really* made of. In *The Essential Wittgenstein*, Gerd Brand supports this analysis:

> A word does not have meaning which as it were was given to it by a power independent of it, so that one could undertake a scientific investigation about what the word *really* means. Rather, *someone* gave the words their meanings. And because meanings have been given there are words with several clearly circumscribed meanings. But most words are used in a thousand different ways which little by little fuse into one another. It is therefore not possible to set up strict rules for their use or to give definitions.[55]

Names are used to talk about our experience of the world. To identify "simples" would be to enter into a new practice of talking about that experience, to account for a different aspect of experience. In other words, it would be another language-game: no "truths" exterior to language would be revealed. Norman Malcolm nicely illustrates this point:

> Is my visual image of a tree a simple or a complex image? When put like that, one doesn't know what to say. But it might be decided that the image is to be called 'simple' if it is an image only of a tree trunk, but 'complex' if it is an image of a trunk and branches. But also the image of the trunk and branches of a tree might be called a 'simple' image, in contrast with the image of that tree together with a house and a telephone pole. Any particular thing can be regarded either as

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[54] *Philosophical Investigations*, §40.

[55] Brand, *The Essential Wittgenstein*, 130-1.

'simple' or 'complex,' depending on what contrasts are at stake. Is marriage a simple relationship, or a complex one? *Considered apart from all circumstances, the question has no meaning.* But if the characters, temperaments, interests, of the married people are taken into account, then we might wish to say that *some* marriages are simple relationships and others complex ones.[56]

This reinforces not only the problem of finding the elementary components of existence to which names can "correctly" be applied, but also the fact that we cannot talk about objects (much less give them names!) outside of our forms of life. Quite simply, a house or a telephone pole do not and cannot make sense without occurring in the context of human existence. There is no platonic ideal of "houseness" that exists in some intellectual realm; we rather have a concept of houses due to our current practices as humans and the history that backs them up.

When we use names (when we can safely say that a word is being used as a name, for that matter), we are not giving voice to objects, or simply signifying them. We are speaking about something in our shared forms of life, but this is precisely the point. We are speaking *about* (or in a sense *around*) things, in that the objects we encounter are circumscribed within our language-games. We do not penetrate through the world of appearances to their essences by invoking their names. We never make a metaphysical connection between an object and its name. This is not to say, of course, that we cannot reach out and grab something that we have named, that it is merely a fiction created by the mind (this would be absurd). What I mean is that while there is no "thing in itself" signified by my talk, I could surely go over and pick up what is called an apple in the forms of life of which I am a member. Wittgenstein's point is that, in our language-games, a name does not represent an ontologically individual object. Like any other

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[56] Malcolm, *Wittgenstein: A Religious Point of View?*, 38, emphasis added.

words, their meaning is dependent on their use in one context or another. In the next section, we will discuss how this pertains to personal proper names, identity, and notions of the soul.

1.3: Names and subjectivity

When discussing names in this context—in light of Wittgenstein's thought—personal names are of special importance. Unlike the names of objects, which merely pertain to things in the world, personal names should represent *us*. More than that, we feel that we in some sense *are* our names: "Who are you?" "I am Matthew." Our names signify us as people. They are the most intimate symbols of our participation in the human world; however, do our names signify something essential, atemporal, or unchanging? We may get the impression from the sentence "I am Matthew" that "I" is the person to which "Matthew" applies. This impression is brought about in much the same way that "this" *is* the object to which the object's name applies. To elaborate, there is a relationship here to Wittgenstein's comment about the personification of time: the structural similarity between the pronoun-noun relationship of "I" to "Matthew" and "this" to "____" can lead to the notion that there must be something substantive about "Matthew". In other words, I feel as though there is something about me that exceeds the sum of my parts and that cannot be reduced to a body: my capacity for rational thought and intentional action. Because language seems to impress itself upon us as uniform, we mistakenly posit the existence of an incorporeal, unified substance that can accompany the words according to which we are identified in the social world. Again, the problem is linked to a sense of presence, simplicity, and unity. "Matthew" gives way to many

descriptions, whereas "I" is caught up in the gesturing of self-reference or self-identification. According to Henry Staten, there is a subtlety in the relationship between bringing something to our attention and explaining or describing it that also plays into our confusion. Words like "I", "this", "here", and so on, tend to be used as a sort of linguistic gesture, a way to point at something, single it out, bring it to someone's attention; these uses are codependent on the descriptions and explanations that cash out the meaning (to us) of what is being pointed at. As Staten points out, "we hover between the explanation and the act of pointing, which seem to supplement each other's deficiencies, and so long as we do not look closely, we give ourselves the impression that we are here indicating the beyond of language—when all we are doing is *making signs*"[57].

A mistaken conception of how language works and what it signifies, however, is not the only factor playing into our problematic view of a substantial self. The history of philosophy has activated a concept of the self as an indivisible substance that exists beneath the social person—we need look no further than Descartes' *cogito, ergo sum* for this. Also, religious thought throughout history has postulated a life after death. Christian thought in particular imagines the afterlife as being a survival of the soul beyond the death of the body. The "I" of this thought (which is related insofar as the philosophical thought taken up by Descartes is informed by the history of Judaeo-Christian thought) is non-corporeal, intangible, and invisible, yet still substantive (in that we are talking about *something* that is mobilized in our language-games and which accomplishes certain statements and gestures). As Brenner says about time (this recalls the passage from

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[57] *Wittgenstein and Derrida*, 71.

Culture and Value discussed above), "bewitched by the fact that the word *time* is a substantive, we want to be able to designate a corresponding 'substance'"[58]. I think that this statement applies equally to thinking about the self, mind, "I", and our names. "Where our language suggests a body and there is none: there, we should like to say, is a *spirit*"[59]. So it is not merely the fact that we feel that all nouns and pronouns must necessarily refer to something substantial and concrete because of the apparent equivocality of language that produces error, there is also a certain demand, instituted theologically, philosophically, and psychologically[60] which corresponds to the way in which we acquire a mistaken concept of language.

We imagine that the person (or self) indicated by "I" is what persists over time and which links together the sequence of life in the memory of past events, present experience, and the anticipation of future events. Every time we speak about ourselves, we say, "I am ..." But do we use the word "I" in the same way in all of these instances? Is saying, "I am a depressed person" of the same order as saying "I am feeling depressed"? The former seems to indicate an enduring statement about the person that I am, whereas the latter indicates a current psychological or physical state—it could represent something completely incidental that I would not add to the repository of more or less permanent descriptions I have of myself. The former seems to transform me into an object that has certain more or less continuous and observable characteristics; the

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[58] *Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations*, 6.

[59] *Philosophical Investigations*, §36.

[60] Making the determination that the bases of the concept of a unified subject are theology, philosophy and psychology is, of course, provisional at best, and can in no way hope to provide or open up a complete framework within which a final explanation and resolution of the issue at hand can be articulated; however, I feel that in deploying them provisionally, we can get our bearings on the sorts of conceptual formations that have historically played into the problems with which Wittgenstein is concerned. In any event, we will eventually see in Chapter 2 that any analysis (of language, of the history of thought, of any conceptual formation) will never be final, and will always be open to reinterpretation.

latter is a way of indicating myself in a statement about something I am currently experiencing. From a Wittgensteinian perspective, we may describe the mistake being made in this way: we mistakenly take statements of the sort "I am ..." (in other words, self-descriptions) to indicate various modalities of the subject *as such*, which is to say different modes of something that persists and endures change. This might include, for example, trying to pinpoint what remains the same about a person as they age. According to the view that Wittgenstein opposes, to do so means to say that we are describing modifications of something that remains *essentially* the same – although we are not able to locate, describe, or show what that something is. The most that we can do is posit its existence and declare that it is the kernel of selfhood. We do not experience the presence of or a connection with a particular substance or object we might call "the self". We do *experience*, and we also describe things about ourselves; however, neither of these things implies—or, more importantly, reveals—the incorporeal substance that serves as the ground for experience and for personal identity. As Wittgenstein says, "'I see so-and-so' does not mean 'the person so-and-so, e.g. L.W., sees so-and-so'"[61]. What he means is that we are describing experiences in an immediate fashion. We do not observe some experience that our "person" has undergone and then report on it; we report the experience itself. Returning to the example "I am a depressed person", on the Wittgensteinian view, we could say that such a statement is a description of an enduring characteristic of one's experience; it is not a comment on a way in which our essence is constituted or affected. Similarly, when we remark that somebody is an unhappy person, this can only be in relation to the events and circumstances of that person's life, as well as

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[61] "The Language of Sense Data and Private Experience", 257.

his behaviour. Taken outside of any and all contexts, such statements are meaningless. This takes us further toward Wittgenstein's claim, "'I' is not the name of a person, nor 'here' of a place, and 'this' is not a name. But they are connected with names. Names are explained by means of them"[62]. When we use words like "I" and "this", we are doing so in the context of a form of life, and not to something that resides beyond the limits of our experience. So, when I use a sentence with the word "I" in it, to refer to myself, I am referring to my social self, to the person that appears in the world by virtue of being a part of a community of language-users. The way in which "I" functions in relation to the proper name of a person is subtle, but not impossible to figure out in order for us to rethink our relation to how we conceive ourselves as socially constituted beings.

Paul Ricoeur offers some valuable insights about the role of the word "I" in relation to proper names and the status of the self in his book *Oneself As Another*. He presents a close analysis of the way in which there is something not just passively illusory about the way in which language bewitches us in this regard (by "passive" I mean the uncritical use of language that causes us to fall into erroneous conceptions of it). On Ricoeur's view, there is something also institutional about the way in which "I" and proper names become linked. Part of the problem is that grammatically, "I" does not only function as a personal pronoun, but also as "the designation of a basic particular"[63]— in other words, a generic noun that is circulated in use as the designator of any particular social "I" that can identify itself to others. The double usage of "I" is socially intertwined with proper names, and "I" and proper names are often equivocated in, for instance, documents of public record:

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[62] *Philosophical Investigations*, §410.

[63] Ricoeur, *Oneself As Another*, 54.

> What we call a birth certificate contains a triple inscription: a proper name conforming to the rules of naming ... a date in accordance with the usage of the calendar, a birthplace conforming to the rules of localization in public space, the whole inscribed in public records. Inscribed in this way, the 'I' is, in the proper sense of the term, registered. From this registration, there results the one who states, 'I, so and so, born on ... at ...' In this way, 'I' and 'P.R.' mean the same person. It is therefore not arbitrary that the person (object of identifying reference) and the subject (author of the utterance) have the same meaning; an inscription of a special kind, performed by a special act of utterance—naming—performs this conjunction.[64]

Thus we see how it is easy for the word "I" to be taken as interchangeable with the name of a person, due to its socially initiated conjunction to the name; however, we also see the way in which "I" designates, as per its social inscription, a *social* person. Each term which plays into the elaboration upon "I" represents some aspect of our sociality: we see this, for instance when Ricoeur notes that a birthplace is conceptually delineated as per "the rules of localization in public space", which are in turn implicated in other complicated socio-historico-linguistic formations[65]. Ricoeur's observation is useful for thinking about the problem with which we are concerned, and it reveals the difficulty of trying to break out of the mistaken conception of language which has held us to the problematic metaphysics that Wittgenstein wants to dispel; however, I think that it also shows a way that we can think about proper names and pronouns like "I" in a less problematic manner. The way in which we use language—referentially or self-referentially— speaks about some aspect of experience, and does not point to some

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[64] *Ibid.*

[65] When we take up the discussion of Derrida, we will see how the notion of inscription in Ricoeur can also be relevant to Derrida's thought. The sense in which socio-historical practices, such as that of the example of birth registration, mentioned by Ricoeur, create and sustain certain structures of language and thought, is dealt with by Derrida (as well as other thinkers like Michel Foucault, not to mention Nietzsche) in great detail, and in doing so he ties to show how we remain indebted to sociality and history, even as we try to critically relate to the tendencies of thought thus produced.

substratum outside it[66]. For Ricoeur, we can cautiously say that, yes, "I" does indicate a person: a person that is and can only be constituted socially[67].

If "I" is a demonstrative pronoun like "this" or "here" then we can neither rely on an essential substance for personhood nor claim a metaphysical connection between our names and ourselves. What are we then left to say? That the self is nothing but words that paper over nothingness? No. Following Heidegger, we can say that "the person is not a Thing, not a substance, not an object" but "a performer of intentional acts"[68]; moreover, we must remember that our language-use is inextricably bound to our embodied human practices. When we talk about ourselves, we are talking about our practices within human ways of being. We are therefore not speaking of something incorporeal or unavailable to experience when talking about ourselves. We just cannot postulate an unchanging "I" that is at the core of our being. The sense we get of ourselves occurs in a) what we do in our lives and b) the interplay between various socially generated concepts that are inextricable from our practices. The meaning of the

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[66] We can, of course, talk about God, the afterlife, laws of causality, and so on, but we should keep in mind that on Wittgenstein's view, in doing so we are not penetrating through the "'veil of appearances", as Hegel puts it in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, but rather trying to articulate certain ways we have of relating to existence. We are, in other words, playing a different language game, with different means as well as ends. This will be important in Chapter 3 for our discussion of Wittgenstein's relation to ethical thought. We will see that, for Wittgenstein, ethics cannot be perfected as a science or rationalized system, and that we must come to treat ethical thought as a much different way of using language and relating to one another.

[67] Although I cannot fully address Ricoeur's work at this juncture, it should be mentioned that while he does consider the way in which selfhood is indebted to its inscription in social discourses, he also tries to negotiate the phenomenological aspects of life, such as the way in which we are embodied, situated beings. In this regard, Ricoeur is obviously indebted to Heidegger's notion of *Dasein* or being-there. Although Wittgenstein does not have such a strongly phenomenological bent in his writing, I feel that what Ricoeur refers calls "the irreplaceable center of perspective on the world" [*Oneself As Another*, 55] is relevant to Wittgenstein's work. I would suggest, furthermore, that when Wittgenstein writes, "you must bear in mind that the language-game is so to say something unpredictable ... it is *there*—like our life" [*On Certainty*, §559, emphasis], he is speaking to the same irreplaceable, unavoidable, indubitable givenness of our perspective on the world. While I will not take on all of Ricoeur's terminology and ideas in this essay, I think that what we have seen so far can be read in sympathy with Wittgenstein's quasi-religious acceptance of our given situatedness in the world, which I will be discussing in Chapter 3.

[68] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, H48.

word "Matthew" for me is brought out in the myriad ways in which I can be described by others and by myself. Because we humans are social, the descriptions given to me by others (the way that "Matthew" is used by them in my case) are important to who I am and what my name therefore means. Everything about who I am occurs in some way or other due to our shared forms of life, our ways of living together (and of course what we each take away from those as individual people). As Wittgenstein says, "the human body is the best picture of the human soul"[69]. What we might call the self is not to be found in some non-corporeal, ideal entity. It occurs in what we *do*—and this cannot be extracted or separated from the collective praxis and contexts of other language-users with whom we share our lives. Of course, we do not simply make a gesture once, or say "I am ..." once: we repeatedly live these things, over and over again. We can also speak about ourselves in ways that link all the descriptions about each of us together in a way that forms something of a personal history and a sense of self. It is here that our names have meaning, and that we exist as people. We might echo Heidegger by saying that we *are* in the *doing*; however, it should be remembered that anything that we, as the authors of intentional acts, are bound up in the social world and the web of meaning generated thereby.

In order to keep the theme of this thesis in view, I would here like to briefly discuss what sort of ethical implications the issues discussed above might have. I would like to ask what sort of questions we may be compelled to pose in light of re-thinking names and the self, following Wittgenstein. It seems first and foremost important to ask the questions "What obligations must we now take up?" as well as "What obligations *can*

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[69] *Philosophical Investigations*, 178.

we now take up?" in relation to this way of conceiving the self. For not only are we bound to reassess our relationships to ourselves, we should also pay attention to our relationships to others and consider how distinct and solitary we really are as human beings. Certainly, on Wittgenstein's view, the individual is not a monadic entity that springs into being independently of others, ego fully formed. Therefore, I would suggest that if we accept Wittgenstein's argument, we ought to start thinking of the self as socially generated; however, I think that even in positing the self as social, we ought to say more about it. Turning once again to Ricoeur's *Oneself As Another*, we see that Ricoeur describes the way in which we can think of the self in terms of a certain kind of *narrativity*. There is a way in which we relate to ourselves, and see ourselves as more or less continuous, with recurring (or continuing) inclinations, beliefs, hopes, and so on, can be gathered together in a sort of narrative account that helps us make sense of our lives in a unified way, and, I would like to suggest, enables us to become well-developed social and ethical people. Of course, I am not simply saying that this is what ought to be done; I would suggest that this is, to some degree how we always already do relate to ourselves. Wittgenstein does not offer any kind of positive account[70] in which he discusses how we

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[70] Hans Sluga makes this observation in the essay entitled "'Whose house is that?' Wittgenstein on the self" (in *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein)*, and mentions the absence of a supplementary account of self-understanding. As he says, they "are not Wittgenstein's issues. He stays, on the whole, with the negative conclusions that the word 'I' either refers to a body or does not refer at all. The moral conclusions he reaches are those that follow from the negative discovery that the self is not an object. Hence he never gets to the positive ideal of an "esthetics of existence" that Foucault envisaged. Wittgenstein's moral attitudes, as he expressed them in his own life and in his remarks to friends, tend rather toward a life of ascetic denial" ["Wittgenstein on the self", 349]. While I do not fully share Sluga's belief that Wittgenstein's moral attitudes mostly take that direction, and do feel that there is ample evidence of Wittgenstein's belief in kindness, generosity, charity, and so on (I will discuss this at greater length in Chapter 3), Sluga is quite right to identify the way in which Wittgenstein refrains from developing a positive account of how one ought to relate to oneself. That, I would suggest, merely speaks to the fact that "these are not Wittgenstein's issues." His reference to the work of Michel Foucault is also appropriate, in that Foucault's view of the self as an aesthetic project can also be read as sympathetic to Ricoeur's argument for a narrative view of the self. I feel that, where Wittgenstein's work ends, there is ample space

should conceive the self after his destabilizing analysis, and I feel that Ricoeur's suggestions can be read in alignment with Wittgenstein's thought. For Ricoeur, the narrative form can unify, "in an unstable mixture of fabulation and actual experience"[71], a conception of the self that helps organize past experiences, current situations, and future hopes. It can also, in that context, help us thematically treat the various concerns of social life in a way that allows us to evaluate and deal with ourselves as ethical, moral actors. Certainly, if the self is constituted discursively, it can be understood in the same way, in each case. I would argue, as an additional note, that if Wittgenstein does not try to develop a positive account of how to carry out self-understanding, his silence on the matter is tied to the fact that the self occurs, as per its relation to its form of life (and all the particular, contingencies that surround it) *in each case*. To tell other people how to understand themselves in each case seems counter to Wittgenstein's moral attitude; I think that his work implies, following in spirit not only Kant's call *"Sapere Aude!"* but also Nietzsche's argument for self-creation, that each person must figure out his own issues for himself. Of course, we should also remember the importance of the language-game, and shared forms of life when thinking about the constitutive conditions of the self: Wittgenstein at no point postulates the possibility of absolute self-determination. Thus, I would argue that for Wittgenstein, self-understanding occurs in a negotiation between one's individual inclinations, convictions, and so on, and the unavoidable determining factors that go along with partaking in a shared form of life.

Another issue that must be given attention is the status of other names that we use to describe ourselves. Here I am thinking of names like "Christian," "Republican,"

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for the anticipation of ways to address the various issues bound up in how we understand ourselves and our relationships with others.

[71] *Oneself As Another*, 162.

"Canadian," "Communist," "Heterosexual," and so on. Wittgenstein's thought should give us pause to reconsider what these words *can* mean, given their various contexts of use. The "true" definition of what it means to be a "good Christian,"—not to mention the very idea that there is such a thing—for instance, is the cause of endless (and sometimes violent) conflict. Were we to pay attention to the uses of the word "Christian" in all of its rich, varied human contexts, we would perhaps become aware that the strictly "true" definition of a word cannot exist, much less be subject to the ownership of one group or another. There is an interesting relationship between these kinds of words, which can be used to designate aspects of personhood as well as broad conceptual fields of living practice, and our proper personal names (the signifiers considered most proper to us, the discursive nexus at which all other names and self-descriptions meet and play off one another). I would like to suggest, as one of the main points of this thesis, that the relationship between the extent to which we can employ these words in our self-descriptions and regard them as indicative of true facts about ourselves, and the extent to which we have to accept that their meaning is dependent upon their uses in language (and therefore *not* subject to ownership by any one person or group of people, therefore *not* conclusively determinable according to any one definition), requires committed, thoughtful, and careful negotiation. The ethical implications of coming to see how the terms with which we describe ourselves are only meaningful within language-games are such that we cannot claim complete mastery of them, or the content articulated in their use. Next, in Chapter 2, I will examine the thought of Jacques Derrida in a similar regard; I feel that his writing lends itself to a thorough evaluation of the sorts of issues I have so far discussed and will continue to discuss in this thesis. In Chapter 3 I will read

Wittgenstein and Derrida in collaboration with one another. Wittgenstein's thought, I think, entails a certain humbleness (which is linked to a sort of "religious" or quasi-religious attitude, for Wittgenstein); despite the differences between his and Derrida's thought, I think that the humble attitude sketched out in Wittgenstein's writing resonates with the way that Derrida affirms the necessity of feeling indebted to, and acting ethically out of gratitude toward, others.

Chapter 2: Derrida on meaning, names, and responsibility

To have a system, this is what is fatal for the mind; not to have one, this too is fatal. Whence the necessity to observe, while abandoning, the two requirements at once.

-Friedrich Schlegel

This absence of univocal definitions is not 'obscurantist,' it respectfully pays homage to a new, a very new Aufklärung. This, in my eyes, is a very good sign.

-Jacques Derrida

In the previous chapter, we saw how Wittgenstein conceives meaning as generated by and inseparable from our collective practices as social, communicating, signifying – human – beings. For Wittgenstein, a word means whatever it means when it is used in an utterance that goes along with our shared forms of life. Language and the concepts mobilized in it are the result of what he calls "agreement" in forms of life. As we saw, this agreement appears not as some sort of articulated and legislated covenant, but rather as a more implicit commonality of experience as such. For instance, the possibility of producing any meaning for the word "tree" (not to mention its appearance as a vocally produced sound that is distinct and recognizable) depends not only on its use

in a sentence but also upon the development, over time, of human communities that employ concepts involving the word "tree" (and a usual array of associated words).

In this chapter, I will move to the work of Jacques Derrida. While Wittgenstein is mainly concerned with helping us see the pitfalls of language use with clarity, in the hopes that we may find our way out of the fly-bottle, Derrida is more inclined to engage the very aspects of language that trouble us. This is not, as some detractors would like to argue, due to some kind of humbug or charlatanry on Derrida's part. Derrida identifies a necessary complicity with the problematic characteristics (that is to say, the tendency to suggest metaphysical "weight") of language. Because of the philosophical, social, and linguistic history we have inherited, we cannot fully escape from the problems typified in Derrida's thoughts about language and are thus destined to confront them interminably. Stanley Cavell sums up Derrida's approach to dealing with the impression of metaphysical depth or weight by saying that "for Derrida, there is no alternative. What you have to do is, to use an image, as I recall, from Heidegger, to twist free within it, from it"[72]. This highlights Derrida's philosophical strategy and contrasts his approach with Wittgenstein's, which holds greater contempt for, to use this metaphor again, remaining within the fly-bottle. The contrast, as I see it, is threefold – although this is by no means to deny that there are myriad other possible ways of reading Derrida and Wittgenstein. Here, briefly, are the contrasts that I see in their respective thought:

- Derrida radicalizes the idea of open-endedness in meaning to the point that he thinks we must always adopt an anticipatory stance toward it, whereas Wittgenstein, as we saw in the last chapter, stresses that there is always a "last" definition and that the last definition occurs in use. Thus, Derrida preserves openness in meaning that Wittgenstein does not.

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[72] Cavell, *Philosophical Passages: Wittgenstein, Emerson, Austin, Derrida*, 77.

- Derrida does not take our tendency to assign fixed, complete meaning as solely problematic. In fact, he argues, there is a sense in which any meaning at all is possible only through the tension between its radical open-endedness and our desire for a certain "plenitude" of meaning. Wittgenstein does not take this view, and is rather more suspicious about our tendency to forget the contingency of meaning; I would suggest that he thinks it is an accidental development. He sees the possibility (although he is not very hopeful about its fulfillment) of using philosophical investigation to achieve a better relationship between language-use and our view of it.

- Because of his rejection of radical open-endedness in meaning, and because of his suspicion about our desire for plenitude of meaning, Wittgenstein's thought leads to a certain kind of silence: he feels that, in certain contexts, there is nothing more to say. This attitude is present in the *Tractatus* and never disappears, although it does become more complicated throughout the development of his work. It is for this reason that Wittgenstein does not develop an account of ethics, morality, politics, and so on. He believes that, since we are often misled by the grammar of language, we can wrongly tend to believe in the possibility of *usefully* discussing concepts such as the good, the just, evil, or the afterlife. On his reading, this is mistaken. Wittgenstein is very pessimistic about the possibility of providing an account of ethics in the hope of showing us all a way in which we might think about living with one another. Derrida, on the other hand, argues that we should think concepts such as goodness and justice on the very basis of the impossibility of giving them an unchanging definition. Coupled with his idea that there is an unavoidable and necessary tension between the open-endedness of meaning and our desire to close meaning off and finalize it, he suggests that we can think about ethical, moral, and political concepts in terms of being receptive to their instantiation in particular contexts, while always preserving hope for the possibility of finally realizing them.

In Chapter 3, I will present a more elaborate examination of the ways in which Wittgenstein and Derrida's thought differ as well as the ways in which they are, on my reading, similar to one another; moreover, I will anticipate the confrontation between them in this chapter by occasionally noting important aspects of Derrida's thought that are relevant to Wittgenstein's.

This chapter will be structurally analogous to the previous one: first, I will perform exegetical readings of language, meaning, and proper names in Derrida, and I

will conclude the chapter by briefly discussing the ethical repercussions of his work. Thus, the chapter will proceed in this way: section 2.1 will be a discussion about *différance* and its concomitant devices in Derrida's work (such as play, context, iterability, and his pronouncement "il n'y a hors de texte"[73]); following that, I will deal more specifically in section 2.2 with the role of proper names and their relation to thinking about the self; finally, in section 2.3, I will discuss not only what consequences *différance* has for ethics, but also the possibilities it provides. By contrasting *consequences* with *possibilities*, I want to show how there is necessarily a price to pay for being able to discuss ethics at all; namely, the impossibility of constructing a deterministic framework that can provide answers to all ethical problems according to a finite, fixed set of imperatives or regulations. As we shall see, the relationship between the possibility of any meaning at all and the impossibility of complete meaning is a critical part of Derrida's thought. In Derrida, more than in Wittgenstein, we seem to have an opening for addressing the impetus to think and act ethically. This is a difference between the two thinkers that I will examine in detail in Chapter 3; for now, I will simply point to this aspect of Derrida's writing.

2.1: *Différance*

Différance is a term of Derrida's contrivance that is employed to direct our attention to the structural characteristics of language that generate meaning. He takes a cue from Ferdinand de Saussure, who argued in the *Course In General Linguistics* that any and all linguistic values (be they phonetic, syntactic, or semantic) are secured

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[73] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 158.

through differentiation; they have no positive value to begin with, but are only determined by their differing from all other units in the system to which they belong[74]. The letter "a", for example, only is what it is because of its difference from every other letter in the alphabet. The same goes for each of those other letters, as well. In Saussure, there is a contrast between *langue*, which designates the finite collection of linguistic entities available to speaking subjects, and *parole*, which is the employment of the linguistic set in discourse. As Saussure writes, *langue* "is a system of signs in which the only essential thing is the union of meanings and sound-images"[75], whereas *parole* is the use of *langue*; it is "many-sided and heterogeneous"[76], and "we cannot put it into any category of human facts, for we cannot discover its unity"[77]. The structural differentiation of *langue* is characteristic of *langue* as a closed (although vast) set. The heterogeneity of *parole* is something far more confused and messy, because it consists of all contexts and instances in which we use language. The impossibility of supplying a definite analysis of it lies in the fact that all of its differences are *utterly* different; that is to say, because each utterance is singular (which is to say that even similar contexts and uses have to be different from one another by virtue of the fact that they cannot be identical) and future utterances are unpredictable.

Derrida radicalizes Saussurean difference by showing that Saussure's distinction creates a circular argument. There can be no sharp distinction between *langue* and *parole*, pointing out that they each depend on one another to the point that they are mutually *contaminated*. In *Positions* he says "if one rigorously distinguishes language

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[74] De Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 114f., 117f., 120.

[75] *Course in General Linguistics*, 15.

[76] *Course in General Linguistics*, 9.

[77] *Ibid.*

and speech, code and message, schema and usage, etc., and if one wishes to do justice to the two postulates thus enunciated, one does not know where to begin, nor how something can begin in general, be it language or speech"[78]. Derrida's question is: how can we identify an inaugural point of *langue* without finding *parole* there as well? Is not the concept of *langue* itself a product of *parole*; conversely, how can we construct, in *parole*, the concept of *langue*, or any concept whatsoever, without a more or less coherent system of linguistic patterns that make significant speech possible? The conclusion he draws from considering the problematic distinction is that the self-present unity of both *langue* and *parole* are disrupted by the presence of the supposed other in each. No speech without language, no language without speech. It is in sight of this kind of necessary mutual contamination that Derrida appropriates the notion of necessary difference and introduces *différance*. In the case of linguistic analysis, *différance* indicates the necessary difference between all units in a phonetic/syntactic/semantic set (and, to be sure, *langue* as such cannot "get going" without the differences between semantics and syntax, syntax and phonetics, etc.), but also indicates that this difference is not absolute, for if (for example) each letter of the alphabet is unavoidably indebted to all the others for its positive significance, then we can say that *what it is not* is just as an important component of it as what it supposedly is. In this way, the conceptual determination of an entity existing in and of itself is profoundly called into question: how can its complete interiority be assured when it is, from its outset (which can by no means be exactly identified), infected by what is supposedly exterior or other to it? On the other hand, how can any self-sufficiency or interiority *at all* be assured without the involvement of exteriority, otherness, and difference? The same question applies to the

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[78] Derrida, *Positions*, 28.

relationship between *langue* and *parole*: Derrida holds that neither is self-sufficient and separate from its supposed opposite, but instead necessarily carries the other's *trace* within it. The *a* which modifies the French word *différence* to *différance* represents the way in which *langue* and *parole* are indissociable from one another, for without the ability to write the word down, we would not be able to significantly talk about its sense.

For Derrida, the necessary intrusion of writing into speech has important consequences for what he calls "the metaphysics of presence": the uncomplicated self-presence and unity of a conceptual entity. His analysis of Saussurean difference is quite pertinent here, since in *Of Grammatology* he discusses the way in which, throughout the history of philosophy, a certain priority has for various reasons been given to speech and the voice. In Aristotle, for example, we see that "spoken sounds are symbols of affectations in the soul, and written marks symbols of spoken sounds"[79]. Bound up in the Aristotelian conception is the sense in which speech is somehow intimate, proximal, or "proper" to the soul or Being. This has to do, of course, with the metaphysics of presence. There is an impression that writing, the structured version of language, or *langue* (for how could we analyze *langue* were it not available to us in some stable form? If it were as ephemeral as speech, any analytic would be out of the question) is somehow secondary to *parole*, which supposedly consists in immediately expressing the content of the mind. A word like *différance* presents a major difficulty with Aristotle's view, for its sense is necessarily dependent upon how it is written. Therefore, we have to call into question the belief that the "language of the mind", so to speak, is not dependent upon language as it is structured in writing. This in and of itself will call into question the

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[79] Aristotle, *De Interpretatione* 1, 16a.

whole notion of mind, or soul, for if the soul (in the case of *différance*, for instance) requires some features of written language to structure and articulate its thoughts, then the supposed hierarchical binary between speech and writing has become irretrievably compromised. Of course, because it has become compromised, we should not assume that it has been simply inverted. To assert that linguistic structures somehow always precede the possibility of thought or speech in any uncomplicated, sequential, causal way ignores the fact that without the need to articulate things, or talk about things, the development of recognizable, systematic linguistic patterns would be a non-starter.

It is because the problematization of binaries such as *langue/parole* does not produce any simple answer, any final clarification as to their relationship, that *différance* also draws some of its sense from *deferral*. Our judgment of the meaning, for example, of *langue*, its simple, self-present, unified conceptual content, has to be put off or postponed when we see how *parole* is always already at work in it, from an originary point that cannot be determined or retrieved. Because we cannot postulate a moment at which the unity of meaning of a concept is assured, and because we cannot retrieve the moment at which the differentiation (which inaugurates and sustains meaning) begins, our final word on both matters is necessarily deferred. Thus for Derrida, when we talk about the meaning of a word, or the sense of a concept, we are doing so in the anticipation of or in hope for its completed, unified, full meaning: this is what he refers to as the desire for plenitude. In addition to the necessary differentiation between and mutual contamination by phonetic/syntactic/semantic entities, *Différance* also indicates "the detour and postponement by means of which intuition, perception, *consummation*—in a word, the

reference to a present reality, to a *being*—are also *deferred*"[80]. It calls attention to the fact that language and meaning are temporal, and necessarily so, because their use has to occur in time (that is, sequentially: a word in a sentence is preceded by or follows another[81]) as well as in history, because language is dynamic and develops in use over long periods of time. Final or "complete" unified meaning is impossible and is always deferred or "to come". In other words, it is of the future, but that future does not appear on any horizon. Yet it is in and through this endless deferral, which is accompanied by a sense of anticipation for that impossible conclusion, that any meaning at all is possible (this embodies the relationship between deferral and anticipation). As Derrida points out, were it not for the way in which *langue* and *parole* compromise their respective conceptual identities by always already presupposing one another, neither would be possible. As he says, "the play of differences supposes, in effect, syntheses and referrals which forbid at any moment, or in any sense, that a simple element be *present* in and of itself, referring to itself. Whether in the order of spoken or written discourse, no element can function without referring to another element which itself is not simply present"[82]. This is not to say, of course, that we cannot mean something more or less definite in written or spoken discourse; quite the contrary. The possibility of meaning something in particular at any given juncture, however, is, according to Derrida, accompanied by the desire for plenitude of meaning. In the "Afterword" to *Limited Inc*, he refers to it as the "*telos* of fulfillment," saying that it is "constitutive of intentionality; it is part of its

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[80] *Positions*, 29.

[81] Moreover, utterances in conversation must follow some sort of sequence, and the accomplishment of an utterance requires that it be carried out in a span of time, even if that span of time is only a second or two.

[82] *Positions*, 26.

concept. Intentional movement tends toward fulfillment"[83]. How should we think about this? I would say, first of all, that because we cannot think or speak *différance* "in itself" ("*différance* is not a word or a concept"[84]; it has no content to speak of), we must enact particular determinations of words and concepts in discourse, provided to us by previous uses in previous contexts and do so with finality as per the demands of the situation; however, in doing so, we simultaneously pay tribute to and participate in the ineluctable differentiation and deferral that has always already made meaning possible and that makes possible its meaning in the future. Thus, intentionality, too, is indebted to *différance*, and continuously acts in payment of the debt by sustaining *différance* in and through each determinate use of language.

Derrida's use of *différance* to point out the way in which meaning functions in language leads us to another motif employed in his thought, namely that of deconstruction or the deconstructive reading. Although there is no way to fully capture the meaning or implications of deconstruction (which is not a bad thing, since Derrida's intent is not to provide an all-encompassing conceptual anchor for his work), we can provisionally say that in deconstruction (which consists neither purely of an active practice nor a passive revelation) we "avoid both simply *neutralizing* the binary oppositions and simply *residing* within the closed field of these oppositions, thereby confirming it"[85]. In other words, Derrida's work represents an attempt to show how concepts play into each other (make each other possible as well as depend on each other) without completely collapsing the relationships into utter incoherence or nothingness. As

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[83] Derrida, *Limited Inc*, 121.

[84] Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 7

[85]*Positions*, 41

in the case of *langue* and *parole*, Derrida tries to show how their mutual contamination complicates their respective self-identity, and tries to do so without implying that this should lead us to conclude that neither term means anything whatsoever. He argues, on the contrary, that any meaning whatsoever of a term is only possible under the auspices of that which it is not, namely, its supposed opposite. There is a tension here that cannot be undone or simplified. The motif of unavoidable, irresolvable, necessary tension is thematic of all of Derrida's work, and it is for this reason that we cannot avoid mentioning the importance of deconstructive thought; it is, to repeat Stanley Cavell, the way in which we twist free within and from the metaphysics of presence, all the while without being able to completely reject it. There can be no simple and complete rejection, but only a never-ending reinterpretation and rethinking of it. For instance, in the case of meaning in language, we can recognize the indispensable role of context and use (we will discuss this next) but also cannot escape the desire to enact our (absolute) sovereign intentionality in each case, in each use.

For Derrida, as for Wittgenstein, the context surrounding a word's use produces its meaning; however, for Derrida, this in itself merits further scrutiny. Just as every use of a word is singular and different from every other use, every context of use is also different from every other context. Every speaker is different from every other speaker. What makes meaning work is that these seemingly endless differences are complemented by similarities that make contexts and uses recognizable to us. We recognize, take up, and continue the uses of words, thus keeping them in circulation as the things that mean what they do. Thus, we might say that *différance* is always already at work in every instance of language-use, and indeed it is, because it is differentiation and deferral that

act as the condition of possibility of meaning. We should remember, however, that particular contexts of use do not give final determinations of meaning and that words are torn out of them to be inserted into other contexts: here, too, *différance* reveals its work[86]. This has several consequences for the proper name, the self, and ethical thought, which I will discuss later in the chapter. Right now, I would like to focus on the structural aspects of language created by *différance*, and its implications for thinking about the rigour of concepts and meaning, the desire/promise of philosophy, and Derrida's confrontation with that desire and that promise.

As Derrida points out, the primary philosophical impulse and prejudice is toward completion, exactitude, and finality. More than that, there is also the drive to believe that the primary function of language is to express the own-most thoughts and feelings of individual speakers. This belief presupposes the (total) sovereignty of the subject and his intentional attitudes toward the world, and implies a certain kind of mastery of meaning that occurs independently of any collective linguistic or conceptual backdrop in and amongst other subjects. This is our inheritance from the thought of Aristotle, Descartes, even Russell and Carnap. According to Derrida (and Wittgenstein), this produces a promise that cannot be fulfilled. This passage from *Margins of Philosophy* sums up the kind of philosophical tendency with which he takes issue:

> A noun is proper when it has but a single sense. Better, it is only in this case that it is properly a noun. Univocity is the essence, better, the *telos* of language. No philosophy, as such, has ever renounced this Aristotelian ideal. This ideal is philosophy. Aristotle recognizes that a word may have several meanings. This is

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[86] Its work (or effect) is revealed, but *différance* 'itself' is not. It cannot it be thought on the basis of presence. "Now if *différance* i̶s̶ (and I also cross out the 'i̶s̶') what makes possible the presentation of the being-present, it is never presented as such. It is never offered to the present. Or to anyone" [*Margins of Philosophy*, 6]. *Différance* cannot claim for itself the status of object or concept; it is what makes conceptuality possible at all. We feel *différance's* force, but cannot possibly grasp it in itself, because there is no "in itself".

a fact. But this fact has right of entry into language only in the extent to which *the polysemia is finite*, the different significations are limited in number, and above all sufficiently *distinct*, each remaining one and identifiable.[87]

This is the promise that fails and the hope that is dashed. The failure, of course, turns out to be the very possibility of the promise itself. In fact, Derrida holds that the desire itself is not to be condemned. In *Positions*, Derrida likens the desire and tendency for intentional plenitude to what Kant called "transcendental illusion", which is to say, "not an accidental prejudice, but, rather a structural lure"[88]. It is how language, concepts, and so on, work. As Simon Glendinning puts it, "Derrida stresses that this 'longing' for a language which can secure the rigorous purity and unity of a word's meaning cannot just like that be removed. On the contrary, the promise of a unity of meaning appears to be absolutely necessary for the possibility of thinking or communicating anything at all and as such"[89]. Here we should note a fundamental contrast between Derrida and Wittgenstein. I think that when Wittgenstein describes the way in which our intelligence is bewitched by language[90], he is referring to the structural lure described by Derrida; however, I believe that his attitude toward it is different in a crucial way. For Wittgenstein (and this has to do with what I will call his quasi-religious attitude in Chapter 3), the desire for plenitude of meaning is in some sense an imperfection on our part, a *disease*, insofar as we desire it even though it cannot be achieved. He feels that our task in philosophy is to fight against this deficiency and to stop positing or hoping for a final explanation, or meaning that is not implicated in a language-game. Thus

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[87] *Margins of Philosophy*, 247-8

[88] *Positions*, 33.

[89] Glendinning, *On Being With Others: Heidegger, Derrida, Wittgenstein*, 81.

[90] *Philosophical Investigations*, §109.

proposition 7 in the *Tractatus*: "what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence"[91]. For Derrida, however, the desire for plenitude is not a deficient aspect of our thought, but rather a necessary condition of its possibility. If we did not speak, or need to speak, with a determinate meaning in mind, then there would be no multiplicity of meanings realized in contexts; however, as we have said, the fact that meaning is contextual and multiple disappoints our desire for plenitude. There can be no univocal meaning, and this is the reason that there can be any meaning whatsoever. Here we might remember the image Wittgenstein employs of multiple threads being woven into a rope that has no central strand. The strength of the rope is dependent upon the mutual support of all threads, none of which can be reduced to the others. For Derrida, meaning is generated in the same way, through the tension between and mutual support/contamination of many meanings. Without this tension, meaning would not function at all. To put it another way, let us return to Derrida's treatment of Saussurean linguistics: *langue*, which is taken by Saussure to be the systematic structure of language, is infected by the infinite heterogeneity of *parole*. Thus, the notion of *langue* as a finite, closed set is shown to be untenable. Conversely, *parole* cannot really be radically, absolutely heterogeneous, because without the repetition of relevant similarities among the differences, there could be no sense or meaning at all. In other words, where *différance* is not at work, there can be neither significant, systematic discourse nor the milieu of open-ended contextual use out of which language emerges.

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[91] Of course, as Wittgenstein is well aware, we do not, for the most part, remain silent. In his later work, he rearticulates this demand by asking that we recognize the language-game we are playing when using words that we would normally take to apply to or refer to metaconcepts, such as goodness, truth or knowledge *as such* (see, for example, PI §77).

To arrive at the point of "final" meaning is to be dead, so to speak. The same goes for the complete absence of meaning. We inhabit a median space in which meaning is at once secured and abandoned as we move toward its realization and arrest that realization by tearing words out of contexts and grafting them onto new ones. Meaning not only comes to us out of the past, because of the contexts in which words were previously used, but also looms ahead of us in the future, in which its fulfillment is anticipated. Meaning is never purely "now", or present; this confounds the hope for conceptual exactitude. By this I mean that in each use of a word, its history of insertion into many different contexts is, in effect, brought with it. Furthermore, although we are informed by this history of use, we cannot find an originary point, so we cannot pick out the "primary" use or meaning of a word: we are not in control of the past contexts that have bequeathed the possibility of use to us. The hope for a horizonal future in which its meaning is conclusively determined also appears in front of us, and it confronts a broad field of possibilities. We move toward that final determination but are impeded by the open-endedness of context and use. Derrida writes:

> Each element appearing on the scene of presence ... is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element, and already letting itself be vitiated by the mark of its relation to the future element, this trace being related no less to what is called the future than what is called the past, and constituting what is called the present by means of this very relation to what it is not: what it is absolutely not, not even a past or a future as a modified present. An interval must separate the present from what it is not in order for the present to be itself, but this interval that constitutes it as present, must, by the same token, divide the present in and of itself, thereby also dividing, along with the present, everything that is thought on the basis of the present, that is, in our metaphysical language, every being, and singularly substance or the subject.[92]

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[92] *Margins of Philosophy*, 13.

We hope for the appearance of final meaning on the horizon of a foreseeable future; however, according to Derrida, the open-endedness of meaning is so radically given to differentiation and deferral that its future advent is *non*-horizonal. It can only be anticipated in terms of a hope or a promise, not in terms of a calculable terminal point. Deferral is endless and inescapable. This is because contexts of use cannot be predicted; the future arrival of meaning is radically heterogeneous from any linear succession of events. In this way, as well, the desire for plenitude is frustrated and denied. The absolute otherness of *différance* is the trace that extends even to the temporal aspect of language, at once interrupting meaning and spurring it on. Polysemia, the multiplicity of distinct and clear meanings, is not a tenable concept. Derrida instead offers dissemination, "the concept through which [the] dispersal of the 'seme' (unit of meaning) is affirmed"[93].

All of this is Derrida's response to the philosophical belief (also attacked by Wittgenstein, as I showed in Chapter 1) that a word's meaning is the object for which it stands, that concepts are precise, and so on. On his reading, all conceptual content must be open to the play made possible by *différance* in order for it to function at all. We can see further by remembering that, as in Wittgenstein, all objects, which are signified in language, must be explained by means of a multiplicity of signifiers, because the name is not sufficient to do so. Derrida writes, "the signified concept is never present in and of itself, in a sufficient presence that would refer only to itself. Essentially and lawfully, every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of a systematic play of differences"[94]. We can go so far as to insist that even the spaces between letters in a word, or the draw of breath between words

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[93] *On Being With Others*, 81.
[94] *Margins of Philosophy*, 11.

of a sentence, proclaim the intrusion of play; spacing shows us that meaning must be assembled even as it is available to being pulled apart. Spacing complicates the notion of unified meaning, because it shows us that meaning cannot happen all at once, and is not the calm repose of absolutely present signification. "We shall go so far as to say," in Geoffrey Bennington's words, "that the signified is just a signifier put in a certain position by other signifiers, and that the difference between signifier and signified is *nothing*"[95]. The sign's ruination at the moment of its total necessity comes in the recognition that a sign leads only to other signs, and that the signifier-signified relationship does not exist as the direct relationship between word and object. Instead, there is the play of differences, between different uses of similar signifiers, and through this play, meaning is generated over time.

Thus, at any given time, we cannot find a conceptual entity that does not draw its sense from something other than its current instantiation. "Play," Derrida writes, "is the disruption of presence. The presence of an element is always a signifying and *substitutive* reference inscribed in a system of differences and the movement of a chain"[96]. Of course, the 'system' is not to be wrongly identified as an absolutely determined mechanism: *différance* always already touches it with disarray even as it secures the prospect of order. By way of illustration, let us look at an apt example, written by Michel Foucault, which shows how even Aristotle's law of identity (surely the classic embodiment of the notion of conceptual exactitude), formulated as "A = A" cannot be realized without the play of *différance* that Derrida describes. He writes, "the equation A = A is animated by an internal, unending movement which separates each of

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[95] Bennington, "Derridabase", 31.
[96] Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 292.

the two terms from its own identity and refers the one to the other by the game (the force and the treachery) of this very separation"[97]. While A = A is meant to indicate a certain stillness or lack of motion, it in fact functions only because of motion; we must work through it in order to understand it, and we come to see that what first appears as tranquility really amounts to a dialectical movement. 'A' constantly departs from and returns to 'A' through the third term, which is the concept of equivalence. The total presence of meaning is broken up at the threshold of its arrival by its dependence on what is other to it.

Because of the necessary involvement of absence, of gaps, of delay and deferral in the generation of meaning, Derrida inscribes language use in general within a structure that is more akin to writing than speech. Written works can be copied, distributed, quoted, altered, addressed to nobody in particular, or read without knowledge of the author. According to Derrida, this structural character marks speech as well; rather than being the direct expression of a totally sovereign subject, spoken language is always already dependent upon a certain distribution and circulation of its syntagmatic components in order to function properly. Furthermore, we cannot think of the circulation of meaning as in any way direct, or a simply transmission from subject to subject. For Derrida, there is a much more general, broad kind of distribution of language, a dissemination (we should remember that this term signifies for Derrida not only the exchange and proliferation of particular texts or utterances, but also the more radical dissemination that implies the instability of meaning due to the open-endedness of use in context), in which language works in the possible absence of "every empirically

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[97] Foucault, *Religion and culture*, 77

determined subject"[98]. In other words, language does not operate in terms of the intent of any authorial subject in particular *or* any particular recipient to whom a written text or spoken utterance has been intended. When we speak, are we not using words and phrases that have been used before? Have not all of those contexts of use been different from, even if similar to, the one in which we speak? There is, according to Derrida, a necessary otherness at work that makes our intentional communication possible while also making sure that our intent is a rather minimal component of the words we write or speak. This speaks to his suggestion that we are partaking in the circulation of marks that cross over our language use without belonging to any one of us in particular. "My communication must be repeatable—iterable—in the absolute absence of the receiver or of any empirically determinable collectivity of receivers"[99]; however, we should keep in mind the way in which (because we in each case are not the originary sources of meaningful language, and because we instead participate in and continue the circulation of it) we are ourselves receivers, even when it is we who are speaking or writing.

Thus, for Derrida, there is always already a component of relay, a differential moment, a necessary divisiveness, in any instance of language use. Yet *différance* is not only at work in spoken or written language. There is, as well, a differential relationship between language and what is supposedly other than it; namely, mute, animal experience. This calls to mind the way in which Wittgenstein argues that language is not the product of a rational construction but of a more primal reaction to the world. "In a word," Derrida writes, "as soon as there is, there is *différance* (and this does not await language, and the language of Being, only the mark and the divisible trait), and there is postal

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[98] Derrida, "Signature Event Context", 8.
[99]"Signature Event Context", 7.

maneuvering, relays, delay, anticipation, destination, telecommunicating network, the possibility, and therefore the fatal necessity of going astray, etc"[100]. In other words, while language operates (internally, we might say) because of *différance*, we cannot simply conclude that language "itself" is a closed system (this would simply return us to a problematic, Saussurean kind of distinction) and the only site at which *différance* works. Without an engagement with experience, language would not be possible. Just as Wittgenstein says, the way in which the intricate and multifarious conceptual formations of our language emerged out of the way in which we are situated in and respond to life, Derrida sees an originary opening from which all the differential/deferential oscillations spring. Thought "itself" is indebted to what we might call non-thought, or "pure" experience – although, as with any concept in Derrida, "purity" is always already compromised. We will see in a moment that conceptual impurity has everything to do with his pronouncement that "there is nothing outside of the text".

Thought, as engagement with the world, occurs by means of play. This holds serious consequences for the possibility of thinking of experience as simply given and as the backdrop against which signification takes place. Semiotics does not appear over and against a purely raw and undifferentiated background of "sense data", tangible, sensible objects, and so on. For Derrida, there is no rigorous distinction to be made between what philosophy thinks of as "given"[101] (that is, the world "itself", "as such") and our modes of

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[100]Derrida, *The Post Card*, 66.

[101] John McDowell's *Mind and World* contains a sustained examination of the philosophical conviction that experience is simply "given", outside of the play of concepts. He argues that the content of experience can neither be simply "empirical" nor simply "conceptual", and that the two are interwoven with one another. "We should understand," as he says, "what Kant calls 'intuition'—experiential intake—not as a bare getting of an extra-conceptual Given, but as a kind of occurrence or state that already has conceptual

confronting it. The extent of *différance's* bearing on experience cannot be underestimated: "it is therefore *the game of the world* that must first be thought; before attempting to understand all the forms of play in the world"[102]. We cannot here simply posit "the world" as the environment that we confront: "the world" has to be thought as something made possible by conceptuality, even though that does not separate it from more primitive forms of responding to existence. This is what leads us to Derrida's claim that "il n'y a hors de texte". In proposing this notion, he means that because *différance* is at work in all aspects of experience, our engagement with the world is necessarily like our engagement with a written text. This is not to say that he is presenting some sort of argument that separates us from "the world itself" and leaves us afloat in the chaos of language; in fact, he is suggesting that confusion, uncertainty, open-endedness, and the necessity of "re-reading" the world over and over again are not reflective of some deficiency in the relationship between the subject and the world. These things are, for Derrida, indispensable possibilities in the proper working of experience. Glendinning concurs with this reading of Derrida's thought:

> In Derrida's view, 'play' is a universal feature of all 'experience' in so far as it is inseparable from the field of signs. Put another way, any perception which has the structure of 'something *as* something' — i.e. what Heidegger calls our everyday openness — necessarily exhibits the same structural ambiguity which belongs to the conceptuality that informs it.[103]

Far from trying to eradicate or even minimize ambiguity, Derrida's strategy is to recognize its critical part in human experience. As with Wittgenstein, the ambiguity and

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content. In experience one takes in, for instance sees, *that things are thus and so*" [McDowell, *Mind and World*, 9]. I would suggest that this can be thought in relation to Derrida's account of the originary play of the world, in which none of the content of experience is radically outside of conceptual formations, and yet, in which no conceptual formation is radically other to experience "as such".

[102] *Of Grammatology*, 50.

[103] *On Being With Others*, 81.

multiplicity of meaning (which informs experience) is not a deeply hidden secret —
although it has been obscured because of complicated interactions between the tendency
of language to imply fixed meaning and the history of philosophical thought — and
Derrida wants to help us notice it.

Derrida's thought radicalizes the disseminating play of experience beyond simply
recognizing its inescapability. While we consider the analogy between text and world,
and the inevitability of having to perpetually "read" the world, we should remember that
for Derrida, 'reading' is also to some degree inseparable from 'writing'. He has shown
the importance of 'writing' in his work by saying that even as we perceive the world, we
are constantly doing so in terms of our conceptual backdrop. As a result, "the world" is
made indissociable from the way in which we conceive it; however, the way in which we
employ and enact its character has been provided to us by the conceptual play into which
we are inextricably drawn by virtue of our being the beings that we are. The importance
of context again emerges here. "The context," Derrida says, "is always and has always
been, at work *within* the place and not only *around it*"[104]. In other words, contexts do not
just happen within the world, the world can only occur in context: the fact that we see
that "things are thus and so" (to use John McDowell's words) means that there is always
already a context within which we understand existence and our relation to it. As Simon
Glendinning says, "the idea of achieving complete clarity about the world 'as such', the
idea of containing or limiting 'the world' within a horizon of intelligibility or significance
which escapes 'looseness' cannot be achieved"[105]. The contextual nature of experience
and understanding does cause disagreement and error, but it also characterizes the

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[104] *Limited Inc*, 198.

[105] *On Being With Others*, 92

movement in which it occurs in the first place. We need to see the differences in situations to recognize their similarities, and when we encounter new aspects of the world, we combine them with what we have already encountered, thus tying the two together in a complex affiliation.

The pure signification (or pure givenness) of objects in the world is impossible, and this is what makes any signification possible: here, too, we feel the force of *différance*. Objects only have meaning in relation to our experience of them, and their meaning must be cashed out, proposed, pondered or agreed upon in terms of their implication in our discursive practices. We do not, ever, at any point, experience "things in themselves"; there is no "thing in itself" that could be described without engaging in the play of concepts. The play of concepts, of course, disrupts the possibility of conceptual exactitude or self-sameness, and as a result, experience is not and cannot be reduced to a stable, "given", structure. As Derrida says, "from the moment that there is meaning there are nothing but signs. *We think only in signs*"[106]. Because signification always already involves the interruption and arrest of absolute presence, experience lies in the continual difference and deferral we have been considering in this chapter. It is not that we cannot "escape", as though there were an "outside" to which escape would be possible. Experience is constituted according to the force of *différance* and requires structural vagueness to function. In the following section, I will discuss the role of *différance* and play in the constitution of the self. I will argue, following Derrida, that the self is generated in the form of a responsiveness to and ongoing dialogue with others, that we cannot function as selves without the intervention of otherness, and that the self is

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[106] *Of Grammatology*, 50.

given to conceptual play just as much as any other aspect of experience. The proper name will play a crucial role here, because it marks a certain position the world, and a certain opening of the space in which the status of "person" (and all the various, changing attributes that accompany it) is continually claimed and continually answered.

2.2: Proper names and selves

In this section, we will investigate the relationship between language and the self. It involves not simply the expression of a person by means of the concepts generated in language, but also the structure born of *différance*, which requires and involves endless differentiation and delay if experience, language, thought, and subjectivity are to function. We find an oscillatory motion in which: a) contrary to the synthetic accumulation presented by simple dialectic, what we desire to regard as unified appears as a sort of fallout rather than a natural teleological endpoint; and b) there is a necessary slippage, brought about in a simultaneous acceptance and refusal, between our names and ourselves. Again, this extends into the social world, which produces a call-and-answer relationship with the other, in which we allow a certain degree of intervention from the "outside", which must also be refused in order to prevent complete and utter dissemination. Later we will discuss the consequences and possibilities that this implies; I believe that the role of *différance* in the self's constitution will ultimately lead to a greater openness about who we feel that we must be and what we feel we can be. I also believe that we will discover an impetus to pay greater attention to others because of the critical position that otherness occupies in the constitution of the self. Doing so is inherently an ethical venture, granting us a space for moral thought that cannot be initiated by some

unconditional, so-called objective set of imperatives. This space will be the one in which encountering and responding to the other causes us to think of the other's needs and interests more carefully. In the next section, I will briefly discuss how this brings about a necessary indebtedness to the other, which will be the impetus for behaving toward others with care, gratitude, and attention. The motive for caring about others that I wish to identify will be the starting point for a more in-depth treatment of ethics that will take place in Chapter 3.

Descartes posited a self-certain, unified, continuous subject. His thought, of course, followed the Christian concept of the soul, which exists beyond the social world and persists as pure spiritual substance after death. For Derrida, on the other hand, the self must inevitably come about in the shadow of *différance* and play. As social beings, we depend upon our insertion into social contexts for the characteristics that constitute us. As selves, we are deployed socially, through concepts and language, and we receive a response to our self-deployment in the form of either an affirmation or disaffirmation of how we conceive ourselves. Perhaps the primary way in which we signify ourselves to others and ourselves is through our proper names. Following traditional philosophy, all proper names are univocal and constitute the object for which they stand; this conception can lend itself to the notion of a unified and continuously self-present kind of subjectivity. Yet the simplest reflection on the lives we have led so far exposes the endless change and development that we have undergone and are undergoing. Furthermore, we posit, expect, and hope for ways in which we will change ourselves in the future. Following Derrida, I will suggest that conceiving the self is only possible through our entanglement in the play of meaning, which reveals how we are necessarily

dependent upon others. Only because of the way in which the terms according to which we thematize ourselves as individuals are put in circulation by use in social contexts can we think ourselves and articulate the view that we have of ourselves to others. The focal point of this section is therefore the issue of proper names and other self-descriptive/self-referential terms.

Thinking about names and selfhood involves not only our proper or "primary" names, but also the other "secondary" terms that we associate with ourselves adjectivally, such as those which describe our moral inclinations, political affiliations, and general character types. For instance, we might refer to ourselves as "liberal" or "conservative", as "outgoing" or "shy", or as "Canadian" or "American". If we take Derrida's theory of meaning seriously, we are going to recognize that these words have no stable, unchanging meaning, but rather get meaning according to their use in contexts. Here I wish to note that we will find a complication of what counts as a 'primary' signifier (i.e. the proper name) and all of the 'secondary' signifiers that we use to arrange ourselves. The space that is opened by the proper name can only give way to further descriptions carried out by other terms. It is therefore dependent upon and tied up in the interplay of a manifold of conceptual entities, all of which are in turn dependent on other semantic and conceptual interweavings. My first name is only the focal point, so to speak, for much richer and involved ways of articulating myself to the world, such as my familial history, my political beliefs, my musical tastes, and so on. Without these things, my name has no meaning.

The impression of a unified self is a product of the mistake, identified by Wittgenstein, discussed in Chapter 1: that we are misled by the seemingly unified and

immediate sense conveyed by words as they appear to us in writing and speech. We are forgetful of their historicity, social production, and open-endedness. We overlook the fact that we are not the same things as the names that announce our involvement with the world, and assume that they are sufficient to make us fully present. It should be remembered that the proper name is never really proper; it is subject to the differential play of language, and must be able to be used in other capacities, all of which are different from the way in which it is used in our own case. We cannot claim for ourselves the status of our name's meaning. My first name, for instance, was meant by my mother to carry out an act of remembrance for her deceased father. It also means, as per its Hebraic lineage, "Gift of God". Already, the name I bear is twice prevented from being wholly my own. It is my name to the extent that it was given to me and I cannot renounce my consent to it; my name is always retreating from me, back to the status of common noun. In fact, because my name is caught up in and made possible (as any sort of word) in dissemination and play, it is structurally necessary that my name can be used in my absence. Even after I have died, my name can retain its sense and be used in other contexts. If it had not been in play before it was given to me, it could not have been given to me at all. As Geoffrey Bennington writes, "there is no proper name. What is called by the generic common noun 'proper name' must function, it too, in a system of differences: this or that proper name rather than another designates this or that individual rather than another and thus is marked by the trace of these others, in a classification, if only a two-term classification"[107]. The "the proper name bears the death of its bearer in

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[107] "Derridabase", 105.

securing his life and insuring his life"[108] in two senses: a) by virtue of its structural

character, the possibility of its bearer's complete absence does not endanger it, and b) the

necessary involvement of otherness prevents the complete self-presence of the individual

being carried in his name. The sense of the word "death" in Derrida's work does not, it

should be mentioned, merely refer to "kicking the bucket", as he puts it in *Aporias*[109], but

more importantly, as Henry Staten describes it, to "the absence of the fullness of

intentional consciousness. It is called death to mark absence as something other than an

attenuation of presence—as something like an *absolute* absence"[110]. With this more

generalized idea of death in mind, it should be easier to see how Derrida conceives the

constitutive relationship of the self to the other as an intrusion of death that disrupts the

static continuity of a seemingly self-present ego.

As with Wittgenstein, Derrida argues that names are caught up in the play of

language, and can only lead to other terms and concepts. Despite this we are often

drawn, by the aforementioned desire for plenitude, into thinking that the proper name

directly refers to or makes present the being to which it refers. Bennington specifies the

implications of this desire for proper names:

> The proper name ought to insure a certain passage between language and world,
> in that it ought to indicate a concrete individual, without ambiguity, without
> having to pass through the circuits of meaning. Even if we accept that the system
> of *langue* is constituted by differences and therefore of traces, it would appear that
> the proper name, which is part of language, points directly toward the individual it
> names. This possibility of proper nomination ought to be the very prototype of
> language, and as such it can prescribe language its *telos*: however complicated our
> linguistic needs have become, the regulating ideal can and must remain that of a
> proper nomination, possibly of truth itself.[111]

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[108] "Derridabase", 107.

[109] Derrida, *Aporias*, 31.

[110] Staten, *Wittgenstein and Derrida*, 120-1.

[111] "Derridabase", 104.

This hearkens back to the Augustinian picture that Wittgenstein uses in the *Investigations* (or more specifically, the way in which it helps us reflect on some of the mistaken assumptions of philosophy). We act as though the nomination of something signifies *it*, "itself". We tend to neglect the way in which the object can only be conceived in terms of its role in contexts that are relevant to us. That is, we feel as though the name signifies or *points to* something that exists outside of contexts and, in fact, outside of language or conceptual thought. In Chapter 1, we saw how Henry Staten treats the subtle relationship between speech and gestures in saying that the way in which they supplement and support one another leads us to believe that we are doing more than just making signs. The gesture that we view as simplifying and concretizing is actually another production of *différance* and play. Far from being adequately insured by the ability to accompany a name's utterance with a gesturing toward its intended object (such as jerking a thumb at my chest and saying "Matthew!"), we see that pointing-at continues play and draws the name into a particular situation at a particular time, in a particular context. What the proper name does in this instance is situate it in relation to a certain expectation we have of having our self-identification corroborated and thus carried forward. Derrida draws an analogy here to the signature (this brings us again to his argument that even spoken language cannot, in general, escape the structures of writing). The signature is meant to act in place of, and to signify the agency of, the one who signs. The signature is only ever deployed to the other; indeed, without the necessary relation to the other, the signature would be useless and would never be put into play at all. Consider the signing of a contract or a cheque: this declares that an act is to be carried out. When it is

countersigned or accepted we have a confirmation that the promise is valid and that the act will go through. As Derrida responds to Christie V. MacDonald in *The Ear Of The Other*, "it is the ear of the other that signs. The ear of the other says me to me and constitutes the *autos* of my autobiography"[112]. The self is therefore not constituted as a unified object and signified by the name; structurally, the way in which we announce ourselves by our names must be circulated and confirmed by others. Put another way, we cannot become selves without others, and without the relay and disruption of *différance*.

We can (and perhaps must) go further here, going so far as to say that in a certain sense we always already take on ourselves as a form of response or acceptance. Already our name is prepared for us before we fully take it on, and in a movement yet to be determined, we answer the call and send the call out, looking to others who will be complicit in affirming the mantle we have assumed. We see the opening of this movement in Althusser, when he points out that "before its birth, the child is always-already a subject, appointed as a subject in and by the specific familial ideological configuration in which it is 'expected' once it has been conceived"[113]. I do not wish to adopt Althusser's Marxist vocabulary, which implies a degree of trickery perpetrated on the masses by the conduits of social control, but his formulation is illustrative of the way in which we have always in a sense preceded ourselves and have had to take up the task of accepting the position waiting for us upon our arrival in the world, even though we are never completely ready for it. Birth is always surprise, and the way in which we are given to it (or abandoned to it) is always beyond our ability to master it. There is no

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[112] Derrida, *The Ear of the Other*, 51.

[113] Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", 246.

simple origin, even at the beginning point: my genesis as a self is always split apart by the fact that it always carries with it the necessity of my response. This, I believe, leads to the Derrida's lament in *The Post Card*, "in the beginning, in principle, was the post, and I will never get over it"[114]. In writing this, he plays on the sense of the word "post", as it functions both as a noun, referring to postal communication, and a prefix that indicates subsequence. The postal metaphor is central to *The Post Card*; Derrida uses it to emphasize the necessity of delay, deferral, distance and space in the circulation of meaning, as opposed to the Aristotelian view. "In the beginning ... was the post": Derrida means that a) at its inception, the self relies on the general circulation of meaning in language, and is therefore not truly a unified starting point; and b) because of its dependence upon prior structures, the beginning is always already a response, which means that it is not purely originary, but also subsequent to that which makes it possible. Consequently, the "post" is at work "in the beginning" (that is to say *at* the beginning as well as *within* the beginning) in the two senses of the word that we are here using. What this means is that *différance* is always already involved even in the originary responsiveness that situates us in the world and helps us develop into distinct individuals. It is not simply the case of a unified, self-present self participating in social practices and signifying itself to others; more accurately, responsiveness is what makes selfhood possible in the first place. This, of course, prevents us from ever being unchanging, unified subjects, complete unto ourselves, but, as is the case with everything generated by the play of *différance*, that is the price to pay for the possibility of any selfhood at all.

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[114] Derrida, *The Post Card*, 29.

The response we require of the other is the continuation of our own ceaseless responding (also, a responding or responsiveness which has no determinate originary point, either), and that the relationship between the two is neither easily analyzed nor fully determinable. It is the result of radical difference, *différance*, and is indebted as much to chains of conceptual signification as it is to the simple act of a parent deciding upon what we are to be called. The appeal to the other is not simply an appeal to other people, which is to say other concrete selves of whom we have a certain experience; rather, it is a movement toward the more radical otherness of the world in general, of which we have no real certainty and into which we throw our call with no certain place at which to arrive. The postal metaphor in *The Post Card* speaks to this when Derrida writes of *envoi* (sending), of *"envoi* without destination"[115]. Thus, when we participate in the social world, when we extend our call (which is already a response) and are responded to by others, it is not in the form of a self-certain subject encountering particular others, it is the way in which we ourselves are situated as subjects. Without partaking in the constant responding of general social discourse, we do not have the resources available to become distinct persons. As Glendinning writes, "this leap, the returned signature, does not *constitute* the other as other. Rather, it is what *assigns* to a living thing the *position* of a subject, it is what 'opens up the position' of the 'I' as subject. This is why the individuation of a subject of experience, the 'who', 'stands in need' of a reading response"[116]. The distinction he makes between "a living thing" and "a subject" indicates the social constitution of the self; only by taking a detour through language can the self

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[115] *The Post Card*, 66.

[116] *On Being With Others*, 146.

come back to itself, constituted in the eyes of others, according to words and concepts that it cannot solely possess.

The self is not an object or substance. It is something constituted relationally, because of the interruption of its absolute presence. Moving back and forth from the prospect of absolute fulfillment to that of absolute indeterminacy, it marks out a middle territory that is neither completely stable nor completely erratic. To use Michel Serres' words, "what takes place in the center trembles and vibrates in time"[117]; this brings to mind the necessity of spacing in Derrida's generalized model of writing, as well as the sense in which we are not static and are given to fluctuations of self-understanding due to the social, temporal nature of our subjectivity. This follows the rhythms of *différance*: continuity rent apart but at the same time restored to order by the intrusion of what forbids it. At each moment, the unity of the self has always already been interrupted and opened up by the gap that occurs in the offering of the signature and the wait for the countersignature; however, this gap, which is the entry point of otherness (but not, to be certain, the point of its absolute entry or presence, for this would bring about the self's eradication) establishes, preserves, and continues the self. The self is therefore always in some way anticipatory, or to come. Its fulfillment can never be accepted, and the anticipation is always pushed away or refused (delayed or deferred), holding in abeyance the double enactment in which our fullness is finally confirmed and taken out of our hands. In other words, to finally be everything promised by our names, we must disappear completely behind them and let them escape us. Hence Derrida's declaration in *The Post Card*, "The name is made to do without the life of the bearer, and is therefore

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[117] Serres, *The Troubadour of Knowledge*, 23.

always somewhat the name of someone dead. One could not live, be there, except by protesting against one's name, by protesting one's non-identity with one's proper name"[118]. We cannot say that we are identical to our names, for our names are devices in language that are not dependent upon our continued existence for the possibility of meaning anything. Wittgenstein says as much in the *Investigations*: "when Mr. N.N. dies one says that the bearer of the name dies, not that the meaning dies. And it would be nonsensical to say that, for if the name ceased to have meaning it would make no sense to say that 'Mr. N.N. is dead'"[119]. Therefore, in conceiving ourselves, we have to look at our names as the way in which we, dynamic, changing beings, announce ourselves to the world and indicate our involvement in various socio-historical contexts. The ability to view ourselves as contingent and changing, however, still has to be held in tension with the structural lure of plenitude. In each case, when we describe ourselves, we do so in specific and more or less determinate ways. We do not *think* the constant changes that we are undergoing and conceive ourselves within a horizon of determination. I am inclined to characterize the way in which we understand ourselves not only futurally, according to Derrida's suggestion that all meaning is *to come*, but also narratively, as in Paul Ricoeur's thought. There is a certain kind of thematic unity that we assign to ourselves when we imagine ourselves as *this* or *that* kind of person. As I said in Chapter 1, however, the thematic unity of selfhood does not lead us to an unchanging, substantial self that is not dependent upon others, upon language, upon *différance*. Even as we account for ourselves along some teleological arc that we feel delimits our character, we

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[118] *The Post Card, 39.*

[119] *Philosophical Investigations*, §40.

are always indebted to the disruptive trace of alterity, the death that constitutes us as individual people.

This is a difficult thought, to be sure, in which we must gesture at the possibility of addressing death, that possibility which appears in the other as the disruption of our totality. Death, in the thought that Derrida gives us, is not only in the form of our eventual annihilation, but also in the constant partial annihilation that violates and makes possible what we think of as interiority, the inner self. Also, we do not, and cannot, completely accept the response to our call. "Understand me, when I write, right here, on these innumerable post cards, I annihilate not only what I am saying, but the unique addressee that I constitute, and therefore every possible addressee, and every destination"[120]. Derrida's use of the post card to get his point across reminds us, also, that our plea is itself not continuous, but also given to the disruption of *différance*. To go along with Derrida's imagery, we are constantly sending out missives, prayers, messages, testaments, and declarations. They are written (not always in pen and ink, but certainly structurally, as per Derrida's model) to everybody and nobody in particular, expecting an answer that is always to be partially refused because of the obliterative cessation involved in a final, determinative, reading; furthermore, they are done with devices that can and must work without us. Here Bennington writes,

> Let us say immediately that any signature is no more than a promise of a countersignature, but that every countersignature remains subject to the same structure of principle. Whence the relationship with death, which we shall here describe as the interruption of an ability to sign, which confers on the last signature a capital importance. As the possibility of the interruption of an ability to sign forms part of what we call a signature, we see that the signature, which, as

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[120] *The Post Card*, 33.

we said, attempts to deal with the power of death at work in the proper name, only moves this power to a different level.[121]

If we were able to finally affirm the countersignature of the other and suppose the end of differentiation/deferral at work behind our names, our absolute absence would be confirmed. In the endless call-and-response between others and ourselves, the final countersignature is always deferred, and the way in which we are situated by others is never a final substantiation of our self-identity, but rather an assurance that we are still in circulation, so to speak. The way in which we have to anticipate the plenitude of our selfhood amounts to a radical postponement. The picture we have of ourselves in a narrative unification is different from the non-horizonal future that makes that picture possible. As Derrida says, "the structure of delay in effect forbids that one make of temporalization (temporization) a simple dialectical complication of the living present as an originary and unceasing synthesis"[122]. So, even at the point where we conceive the future as belonging to some foreseeable arc in which our unity is assured in the "big picture" or the "long run", Derrida argues that doing so is impossible. The impossibility of reconciling a foreseeable future with a radically non-horizonal one that subtends the possibility of a temporally arranged thematization or determination is the same effect of *différance* that we see at work in linguistic meaning, which prevents the final determination of a word's meaning. In the wake of this radical interruption (the violation of interiority by exteriority), we are presented with a structure that is always taken apart and recovered, and a fullness that is always expected yet always necessarily overdue.

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[121] "Derridabase", 157.

[122] *Margins of Philosophy*, 21.

To sum up this section, we have seen how the constitution of the self is indebted to the involvement of others, which upsets the order of immediate self-presence. Without the originary intervention of *différance*, which is manifested in the dissemination of linguistic meaning in the social world, the possibility of becoming distinctive individuals would not be available to us. When we think about our proper names, and the other self-descriptive terms that we employ in relation to our proper names, we should, on Derrida's reading, be met with the realization that we are not isolated selves who stand in opposition to others. The content articulated in the various self-descriptive terms distributed for use in the play of language is generated by contextual use, and when we use them for our own purposes, we remain indebted to the people who have passed them on to us. Furthermore, because of the signature/countersignature model of ego-constitution that Derrida specifies, we ought to realize that we are only possible *as such* because of the intrusion of the other. Therefore, we ought to feel a certain kind of gratitude to others. In the next section, I will briefly discuss our indebtedness to the other, and anticipate the more detailed discussion in Chapter 3, in which we will see how we are not only subject to the originary responsiveness generated by *différance*, but also to a certain responsibility to the other, which has to do with history and the violence brought about by the necessary exclusion of otherness therein.

2.3: Otherness and ethics

In this chapter, we have seen how we are ineluctably drawn into, and also set forth by, a relation with the other and otherness. Without the prior community of language-use, which mobilizes and sustains thought, we would have no possibility of

developing as individual subjects in the world. It is the activity of speaking, signifying, writing, and conceiving that provides the backdrop against which experience emerges. So there is a sense in which we are obliged to feel gratitude to the other for making possible that space in which we are situated as subjects. Moreover, the other is always already retreating from us, even as it intervenes and touches us in a crucially important way. That is to say that while otherness is inescapably and intimately part of us, as we have seen throughout this chapter, that does not make the other "proper" to us. The concerns of other people, their problems and needs, are not transparent to us and exceed any simple negotiation. What I mean by this is that it is not sufficient (or possible), for instance, to reduce the other's problems to the order of our own way of dealing with things and evaluate them along those lines. This seems to be a bit of common wisdom, but I would argue that it is structurally inherent that we often generalize to the point that the other seemingly becomes absorbed by the order of the same, and that this constitutes an injustice or violence.

The kind of violence I wish to talk about here may extend only as far as our relationships with individuals in our family or circle of friends (by not listening to their concerns in certain situations); however, it can take more general forms, such as only reading the situation of various collectives in society, who have been dominated or excluded, according to the way in which they have been appropriated by larger narratives. For example, we may be inclined to downplay the historical violence carried out against First Nations peoples if we only read certain accounts of the history of Canada, written in order to bring us up to speed with where Canada's sense of self currently stands. Or, for instance, we may only understand the problem of widespread

poverty according to the belief, identified by Iris Marion Young in her essay "Activist Challenges to Democracy", that "poverty should be conceptualized as a function of the failure of individuals to develop various skills and capacities necessary for inclusion in modern labor markets"[123], without considering that such a stance might have political motivations or that it certainly is not ahistorical. The concept of poverty specified by Young is, as we know, a popular one in today's society; yet, as we should be able to anticipate, it could not have been generated outside the force of *différance*. The implications of this are such that the position itself would not be possible without alternatives to exclude or suppress. Furthermore, it is not just the opposite idea (or other ideas) that becomes muted within the hegemonic conclusiveness of the conceptual determination about poverty, it is poor people themselves who are then classified with a broad stroke of the brush and all generalized into silence by a discourse that refuses to hear their stories. Again, this is a structurally necessary possibility of any discourse produced according to the logic of *différance*, and it should not simply be reduced to any intentional abusiveness on the part of one social segment.

I would like to suggest, as I will argue in more detail in Chapter 3, that at the intersection between our originary responsiveness to the other, our inability to fully appropriate the other to us, and the necessary fallout of the way in which *différance* mobilizes and sustains socio-historical discourses, lies the opening of a certain responsibility that, for Derrida, is the impetus for ethical thought. All of the synthesized conceptual formations that inform our consciousness, from national/regional, to religious, to political identities (these by no means form a complete list) are produced through

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[123] Young, "Activist Challenges to Democracy", 686.

différance, and fissures and ruptures that prevent their uncomplicated unity run through the edifices with which we are familiar. As I suggested above, the excluded or muted facets that necessarily suffer a palpable, more or less unified view always already trouble the comfortable sense of Canadian identity; what we feel we can affirm and be proud of is unavoidably beholden to that which it supposedly is not. The most important part of this indebtedness is that it is not merely an obligatory footnote that has to be included if we wish to argue that any identity is produced and marked by *différance*: the exclusions that inevitably occur in the formation of any conceptual entity (or concept of identity) happen to real people, and they have real effects not only on individuals but also on whole segments of populations. In this way, we owe our sense of self to the violence suffered by those people. Thus, when we consider the names—primary as well as secondary, as I pointed out earlier—we use to describe ourselves, we ought to realize the complications we take on when we affirm our sense of self.

Derrida shows how we are responsible to the other; moreover, he argues that we are *infinitely* responsible. Why is this? Keeping in mind the unavoidable violence of *différance*, we have to remember that trying to right the wrongs of history will, without a doubt, engender new exclusions and create further violence. Accordingly, attempting to provide a blanket solution, according to some fixed model of "democracy" or "justice" will not satisfy our responsibility: concepts like these have no central meaning and we therefore cannot transcend their history of uses in contexts to find their "true" content. Simply coming to rest at a particular concept of justice and treating it as a universal, for instance, would enact the necessary injustice of absorbing the other into the order of the same, and/or excluding the other altogether. This is precisely the troublesome attitude and

conviction that Derrida pinpoints in *Specters of Marx*, when he criticizes, among other thinkers, Allan Bloom:

> What is one today to think of the imperturbable thoughtlessness that consists in singing the triumph of capitalism or of economic and political liberalism, the 'universalization of Western liberal democracy as the endpoint of human government,' the 'end of the problem of social classes'? What cynicism of good conscience, what manic disavowal could cause someone to write, if not believe, that 'everything that stood in the way of the reciprocal recognition of human dignity, always and everywhere, has been refuted and buried by history'?[124]

Clearly, on Derrida's reading, this kind of stance is untenable. For how can anyone propose or affirm the picture he refers to without also necessarily affirming some exclusion? It is impossible to affirm everything at once; moreover, the "reciprocal recognition of human dignity" cannot be fully realized when, according to one political model or other, we are structurally required to already oppose those who do not conform to it. Finally, we need only to look at recent history to see the way in which Western liberal democracy is sustained by international relations that many vociferously denounce as imperialist. How do we respond to those grievances without simply reducing them to an aberration from the "correct" order of things? Surely we cannot argue that we have the only answer; surely we cannot argue that there can be a monolithic discourse that avoids hegemony. Consequently, we are always in a position to answer for (to be responsible for) what we affirm, to consider it and reconsider it; furthermore, we are always already in a position to answer for what effects the development of more or less unified socio-political formations have on the lives of those who are necessarily excluded.

The infinite responsibility to which we are heirs cannot be fulfilled; this is assured by the necessary violence of *différance*. So how are we to respond? How can we try to

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[124] *Specters of Marx*, 78.

act ethically toward others without falling into the trap of committing further injustice? I want to suggest that we can think about this in three ways. First, we should always keep in mind that even though Derrida rejects the notion of univocal meaning, he does not conclude that meaning in language is somehow completely sealed off from the world. He situates language within an originary play of the world, as a response to existence (this is similar to Wittgenstein's argument that language originated in a primitive reaction to the world), and therefore sees it as something arising from the way in which we are in the world, not something arbitrary and cut off from or even hostile reality. Secondly, we ought to therefore be able to negotiate the various contexts and histories of concepts and try to understand them not only on our terms, but also on the other's terms: in fact, we should approach all discourses according to the thought of deconstruction to offer new readings on behalf of the other. Third, and finally, we ought to always welcome the other *as* other, to try to understand each singular voice on its own terms, as much as is possible. This is what Derrida might refer to as an act of absolute hospitality, which moves toward the complete violation of our own status as those who benefit from hegemonic identity formations: "absolute hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner (provided with a family name, with the social status of being a foreigner, etc.), but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I *give place* to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names"[125]. The kind of act that Derrida describes in *Of Hospitality* is bound up with a hyperbolic movement in which we try to radicalize the necessary trace of the other in us to the point that we are

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[125] Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 25.

effaced by the other in the name of justice. In Chapter 3, I will argue that Wittgenstein's demand for humility is comparable to Derrida's notion of responsibility; the emphasis that Wittgenstein puts on knowing when to remain silent is, I think, appropriate to the kind of silence required in welcoming the other as other. Obviously, we cannot allow our total effacement to take place, but Derrida stresses that infinite responsibility demands that it *must* be done. Thus, for Derrida, the question of ethics takes on an aporetic character that presents what must be done, yet what cannot be done. This is why, in the next chapter, we will discuss the way in which the fulfillment of the promises of justice and democracy, on his view, must always be anticipated in the same way that we anticipate the plenitude of meaning. For Derrida, every ethical act must be singular, yet with the anticipation of finally achieving justice in mind. We must act for the other, who always must remain other, and who cannot be reduced to any given notion that we have in mind. Of course, the consequence of taking the view of ethics suggested by Derrida is that we cannot ever fully make things right, and we are just as, if not even more, vulnerable to error as if we were to maintain the kind of ethical view of things that he wants to problematize. In the hopes of a new way of thinking about ethics, politics, and living with others, he writes, "it is indeed on the side of chance, that is, the side of the incalculable *perhaps*, and toward the incalculability of another thought of life, of what is living in life, that I would like to venture here under the old and yet still completely new and perhaps unthought name *democracy*"[126]

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[126] Derrida, *Rogues*, 5.

Chapter 3: Ethics in Wittgenstein and Derrida

May all of us who, as I allow, perceive and affirm that these texts contain various truths, show love to one another ... if truth is what we are after and not vanity.
-St. Augustine.

Man acts as though he were the shaper and master of language, while in fact language remains the master of man. When this relation of dominance gets inverted, man hits upon strange maneuvers.
-Martin Heidegger

In Chapters 1 and 2, we discussed meaning, proper names, selfhood and the possibility of ethics in Wittgenstein and Derrida. At the end of each chapter, we alluded to a more in-depth account of the ethical implications opened up by each thinker. In this chapter I would like to make more explicit the connection between proper names and the

possibility of ethics. The connection, made most explicit by Derrida, lies in the way that we can only emerge as unique selves, announced by our proper names, within a system of differences (the language-game for Wittgenstein) that disrupts the possibility of a unified self. For Derrida, the violence that has always already occurred in any moment of individuation is the necessary condition of possibility, as well as of impossibility, for identity and selfhood; to wit, he poses the idea that the other is always already at work within us, and it is the very impossibility of any true "being proper" that makes a self, capable of ethical thought, possible. The expository work in Chapters 1 and 2 showed us the philosophies of Wittgenstein and Derrida. 3.1 is dedicated to a recapitulation of their respective thought in light of one another, as well as a brief discussion of the affinities between them. Specifically, there are three lines of thought in which I have identified similarities between Wittgenstein and Derrida. These are: 1) the non-univocity of meaning; 2) the issue of proper names and its implications for conceiving subjectivity; 3) a sense of submission to the ineradicable instability of language. Each of these points is, of course, linked to the other two; we will elaborate this relation throughout the chapter. Through all of this there runs the thought of otherness, which is a critical component of the generation of meaning, the self, and ultimately ethics for both Wittgenstein and Derrida. The thought of alterity is especially important in the way that they conceive the operation of selfhood: in Chapters 1 and 2 we saw how the proper name must actually be *improper* in order for it to function as a name at all. As I explained, for both thinkers, proper names do not just directly represent the person named, and instead operate according to their implication in the network of language use. Similarly, alterity is at work in meaning in general: any conceptual entity is structurally dependent upon its place

in the network of language. There is no core or kernel of meaning that renders any conceptual formation self-present and self-sufficient.

With this theme in mind, I would like to structure the chapter thusly: first, I will briefly summarize the pertinent similarities I wish to highlight between Wittgenstein and Derrida. Then I will proceed with the in-depth discussion concerning proper names, language, and ethics. Finally, I will conclude the chapter by noting some of the disparities between Wittgenstein and Derrida in order to address possible challenges to the ways in which I think their respective projects overlap.

3.1: 'Family resemblances' in Wittgenstein and Derrida

Wittgenstein's and Derrida's formulations about language require radical amendments to the way that we think about ethics; I will argue for this point of view in 3.2. In that section, the use of proper names as the bridge between language and ethics will come to the fore for at least three reasons. First, the relation of the proper name to the person exemplifies the view that both thinkers take of conceptual identity and meaning as unstable, and so links the question of language to that of ethical subjectivity. Second, it highlights the effacement of an essentially self-present, fundamentally rational subject that can master the instability of meaning. Finally, it brings us to the recognition of our indebtedness to others in the language-game. The relationship between a subject generated by the play of language in socio-historical contexts and unmasterable meaning must, for Wittgenstein as well as for Derrida, be one of the kind of submission I alluded to above. By submission, I mean that we ought to accept that our inability to dominate the excess of meaning does not amount to a failure but is instead rooted in the conditions of

possibility for any meaning at all. To put it another way, the submission I am arguing for involves recognizing the necessary impurity of conceptual entities, despite the difficulty inherent in doing so. In Wittgenstein's work, I see a certain kind of religious or quasi-religious attitude that embodies submitting to the play of language. I would argue that this attitude is similar to the kind of affirmative stance that Derrida sees at work in deconstruction, insofar as deconstruction involves an acknowledgement of the way in which *différance* puts the fulfillment of our desire for plenitude out of reach. Accepting the dissemination of meaning is crucial for the ethical thought that I am pursuing in this essay; in 3.2, I will chart the transition from language to ethics in light of the discussion surrounding proper names. As I indicated above, the conditions of possibility for the emergence of an ethical subject and the production of meaning through the play of *différance* are closely linked. In fact, the generation of any subject at all is dependent upon the language-game or *différance*. Therefore, in delineating the arc from language to ethics in Wittgenstein and Derrida's work, the proper name is a very useful focal point of discussion.

We are concerned with similarities in Wittgenstein and Derrida's philosophies of language (which, it should be remembered, are never just about language – not for Wittgenstein, not for Derrida), which lead to analogous implications for ethical thought. Again, in both thinkers I want to identify the issue of proper names and the passage from language to ethics. As I have said, the proper name offers us an indispensable resource for contemplating the link between language and ethics. Moreover, the way that the possibility of an ethical subject figures into the investigation is crucial, because it illuminates the convergence point of two requirements that I wish to highlight. These

two requirements are, first of all, that we acknowledging the otherness at work in ourselves as well as meaning in general and, secondly, that we submit to the flux of language. These two requirements, which are not to be conceived as coercive imperatives, but which rather become unavoidable and worth affirming if we accept the view I am urging in this essay, are inextricable from one another. Acknowledging the alterity of others goes beyond simply "respecting other people", in the sense that we identify others as sovereign individuals *just like ourselves*[127]. It is realized in understanding the structural attributes of meaning identified by Wittgenstein and Derrida; more specifically, recognizing otherness is bound up in realizing what sort of subject is announced by the proper name. Realizing the socio-historical, conceptual character of subjectivity, in turn, reveals much about the operation of meaning in general; contemplating the proper name's relation to the self provides a backdrop for understanding how conceptuality pertains to our experience of the world. This is relevant, of course, to ethical thought, because ethical concepts are also generated by *différance*, and therefore must be treated accordingly: in submitting to the play of the language-game, we must suspend our desire for plenitude and thus put our moral judgments at stake, even as we affirm their relevance and value. As 3.2 progresses, and we turn our attention to the issue of history in relation to the ethico-political thought we have been developing in this essay, the discussion will focus more heavily on Derrida; unlike Wittgenstein, he has written explicitly about the importance of historical

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[127] Here I am following Emmanuel Levinas, who argues that ethics cannot be carried out on the basis of a reduction of the other to the same. In other words, if ethics is concerned with how we relate to other people, Levinas argues that it will always fail if we can only conceive of the other in terms of how we understand ourselves. His view, which is carried on by Derrida, is that we must be open to the other as radically other; that is, as an entity that we cannot comprehend according to the way in which we see ourselves, and which will always escape our attempts to capture it by a totalizing account. See, for example, *Totality and Infinity*, 38-9.

consciousness. In the following section I will further develop our investigation, focusing, as I have proposed, on the issue of proper names in relation to the link between language and ethics.

3.2: From language to ethics

In trying to show the connection between Wittgenstein and Derrida's philosophies of language and the ethical stance that I claim follows from such a perspective, the issue of proper names is critical. In Wittgenstein and Derrida, we have seen how investigating the status of proper names calls the notion of a stable, essentially rational, self-identical subject into question and reveals its indebtedness to the play of language, which in turn illuminates an indebtedness to otherness. Otherness, of course, is born of other people, as well as the way in which all conceptual formations are contaminated by their dependence on what is supposedly other to them; namely, their insertion in contexts of use, various vocabularies, and ultimately the general play of language. Thus, the proper name, which can only be elaborated upon and given sense (or which can only give sense to the person with which it is associated) by way of other terms in the system of language, and which I have shown does not simply represent the person to whom it has been given, leads us not only into a new picture of subjectivity but also into a more general view of language. Moreover, it shows us a double movement within ethical thought: first, the acknowledgement of the other in ourselves, and second, the recognition that because all concepts are always already impure, so to speak, we cannot treat them as fixed,

unchanging, and fully self-present to themselves. The two most important consequences of these two points are that 1) we are bound to thinking ethics on the basis of otherness, and 2) we must be prepared to put the concepts which form our beliefs into question in a radical manner.

The proper name is an apt focal point in our discussion because of the way in which it reveals not only the formation of ethical subjects but also Wittgenstein and Derrida's general theories of meaning (which are by no means limited to concerns about semantic value). I want to show how both thinkers lead us into an ethical stance marked by open-endedness, infinitude (which is to be thought in conjunction with our own finitude) and a certain kind of charity. The impossibility of the purely proper in ourselves (the identity that we hope is announced by our proper names), coupled with the impossibility of any rigid conceptual identity, must make us open up to the otherness which makes any conceptual or self-identity at all possible. For Wittgenstein, our implication in the ineluctable, unavoidable, unsurpassable language-game should ultimately bind us to a sort of submission to it. In both thinkers, a strong sense of indebtedness to the alterity necessarily at work behind and within what is considered self-identical pervades and informs their ethical thought. They want to treat our way of engaging the world in a manner that requires a radical rethinking of the self. The rethinking I am urging involves renouncing the belief that the subject of experience (i.e. the individual person) is in a position to master the world through understanding. Both thinkers want to retrieve a notion of experience that is much broader than a "rational" relation to life, the world, or existence in general. To that end, I believe that Wittgenstein and Derrida are motivated by the desire to defend a kind of originary openness to

experience (or rather, an openness *of* experience – perhaps an openness that *is* experience). This idea can be best captured by Wittgenstein's remark in §475 of *On Certainty* that language is the result of a primitive engagement with experience, not a primarily rationalized production, as well as by Derrida's characterization of the originary play of the world in *Of Grammatology*. Our capacity for self-reflexive thought—which often takes on the character of a single unified entity, identified by our proper names—should not be viewed as something separate from, or above and beyond our existence as embodied, organic, living creatures.

In Chapter 1, we saw how Wittgenstein rethinks subjectivity in his approach to language and meaning. By showing that words like "I", as well as proper names, and in conjunction with proper names, do not signify some intangible yet substantial essence that exists in relation to our embodied instantiation in the world, he radically displaces the locus of the self and resituates it in the social world, where it is dependent upon others for its realization. Already, this has two effects. First, it desublimates the view of subjectivity given in the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*, which fundamentally equates being with a core of rationality[128]. The desublimation occurs in terms of examining what kind of entity is made known by the proper name and finding that, in each case, we come to personhood according to concepts that have been produced socially in language. In other words, only if there are names, descriptive terms, concepts about personhood (and so on) that have been applied to other people, can we have them applied to us. Second, it shows

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[128] In *Rogues*, Derrida cautions that "Descartes never elaborated a philosophical concept of the subject and this word is not part of his vocabulary" [Derrida, *Rogues*, 43]. Of course, this is true, and the notion of a Cartesian subject owes much to Descartes' failure to fully think through the status of the thinking "I" in the *cogito*, as Heidegger pointed out in *Being and Time* [*Being and Time*, H24]. For the sake of caution, I will use the term "monadic" instead of "Cartesian" when referring to the variety of subjectivity that we are critically evaluating here.

that because we are not self-sufficient entities who are independent of others and the circulation of language in which we all participate, and also because we find the language-game given to us with no visible origin point and no explanation or justification for its existence, we have something of a mysterious relationship with existence. This enigmatic provenance is what makes us able to exist as selves, even as it cuts us off from being able to organize our understanding of conceptual sense into a permanent metastructure (here we find a link between Wittgenstein's thought and the Derridian theme of aporia). Furthermore, I would suggest that Wittgenstein's reformulation should cause us not only to recognize that our proper names and the proper pronouns used in conjunction with them do not signify some sort of spiritual essence that exists independently of the social world, but also that the terms and concepts which we employ to describe ourselves cannot be taken on as permanent, unchanging signifiers of who we are. Since the meanings of words are generated in their use, and use necessarily occurs in a dynamic social environment, we have to remain open not only to the fact that different people will use words that we use to describe ourselves in vastly different ways, but also to the fact that even within a group of people that adhere to a set of beliefs and identify their adherence by a particular label, the ideas signified by the label are subject to change, and thus the label can take on a different meaning even as we continue to use it in the sense that we always have. To clarify, in the former case, we often observe the conflict between people who claim to be Christian and disparage others who identify themselves the same way because of a difference of scriptural interpretation, for example; in the latter, we might consider how a political party like the U.S.A's Republican party has shifted in its core values and practices over the last half century, and how its name is still

taken to signify stable, enduring ideas that have not changed. Thus, we see the difficulty in claiming ownership over these types of 'secondary' names: even though we might take them on as permanent indicators of who we are as people, we are unavoidably thrown into a kind of negotiation between the sense in which we took them on (and the cultural climate at the time that we did so) and various senses they may have acquired in different contexts of use.

For Wittgenstein, proper names are never really "proper", insofar as they are contingent upon their relation to other terms in language and can only have meaning based on their use in relation to those terms within various contexts. Derrida is in agreement on this, and argues that the necessary impropriety of proper names exposes the subject's originary fracture and separation from itself. On his view, the proper name comes to the subject from elsewhere, and by individuating the subject as a unique person, draws it into the differential play of language. In *Of Grammatology*, he argues that the unified self is always already violated by its emergence out of *différance*; this was discussed in Chapter 2. Yet, the self can gather itself up into a more or less coherent, more or less continuous entity: we view ourselves as people with personal histories, personalities, plans for the future, and so on. For this to happen, we must exclude the otherness in ourselves, and in other words do violence against the originary violence that threatens to dissolve us even as it acts as the originary condition of possibility for subjectivity. In this regard, I think that we can enumerate two general and interrelated forms of necessary violence. There is, first of all, the necessary exclusion of the other in the same, which is absolutely unavoidable. This goes not only for personal identity, but conceptual identity as such. The second form of violence, which I will discuss later, is

found in the way that the development of socio-political identities, for instance, must present a more or less unified façade at the expense of what we might call the "tributaries" of the dominant identity formation. In other words, the notion of a national identity only develops by diminishing the multifarious social discourses that help create it in favour of one discourse that appears as *the* identity of that nation. In this sense, there is a certain violence in socio-political identities that is unavoidable; however, I do not wish to argue that *différance* is the cause of social violence. On the contrary, it is the contemplation of *différance* that should show us how we cannot simply assume the impermeability of socio-political identities and must therefore put them into question again and again.

The first form of violence that I mentioned above is exemplary of what Derrida calls, in *Of Grammatology*, a "reparatory" violence[129]. It reacts against the originary violence that is precisely the intrusion of the other into the same, an intrusion which has always already occurred and which makes identity possible in the first place. This reparatory violence attempts to preserve the "proper" (such as the proper name and the entity announced by it) that was, on Derrida's reading, never "proper" to begin with[130]. In terms of proper names, the double movement of violence occurs in the interplay between the originary violation of the proper that is, in fact, unavoidably bound up in the proper name, and the gathering back up of the fissured subject into a unified self. In "The Battle of Proper Names", Derrida's analysis of Claude Lévi-Strauss' encounter with the Nambikwara tribe, who, because they do not have a system of writing, are deemed by

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[129] *Of Grammatology*, 112.
[130] *Of Grammatology*, 112.

Lévi-Strauss to be nonviolent[131], we see how the appearance of proper names does in fact imply an ineradicable violence. Contrary to Lévi-Strauss, Derrida argues that writing (in the general sense that he conceives it[132]) is present in the Nambikwara insofar as proper names are an issue for them. He notes Lévi-Strauss' discovery that each member of the tribe had a proper name that was required to be kept secret, and shows how this keeping-to-oneself of the proper name implies the necessary *originary* violence of language and the reparatory, empirical, violence which reacts to it. "It reveals, " he writes, "that the first nomination was already an expropriation, but it denudes also that which since then functioned as the proper, the so-called proper, substitute of the deferred proper, *perceived* by the *social* and *moral consciousness* as the proper, the reassuring seal of self-identity, the secret"[133]. The fact that the Nambikwara have a prohibition upon the disclosure of proper names indicates, for Derrida, that they have not, in fact, escaped from the violence of writing, which splits the proper off from its own fulfillment. The proper name, which individuates each person, does so at the cost of always being just out of reach of that person's sole possession. In Chapter 2, we saw that the proper name must already be accessible within the system of language as a name (which is to say that other people must have already identified it as and used it as a name) in order for it to be given to any particular person as his or her name. Others must have used the proper name, *my name*, for it to come to have been mine; thus, its properness is always already disrupted. But by treating it as proper to me, I attempt to stall and stave off that violence. So even at the

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[131] Derrida correlates Lévi-Strauss' view about the violence of writing with that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who posited the violence of writing as a form of degradation from the simple unity found in speech. This kind of view was discussed in Chapter 2, and finds its perhaps most visible origin in the thought of Aristotle.

[132] See p. 58 above for Derrida's notion of "general" writing.

[133] *Of Grammatology*, 112.

level of the individual (insofar as it is individuated within a system of differences), there is a double violence at work, initiated by the originary violence produced by *différance* and reacted against by the reparatory violence that attempts to protect the so-called proper.

Having chosen the matter of proper names as the entry point into our discussion about language and ethics, we have seen that the Wittgensteinian/Derridian view has consequences for how we conceive the self as well as how we conceive meaning. The meditation on proper names shows us a socially generated self that is dependent upon its shared existence with other language users. It also leads us to the view of meaning as produced through use in context. The transition from this view of subjectivity to a more general account of language occurs in seeing that proper names must give way to other terms and that furthermore, those other terms must themselves be involved in contexts of use to be meaningful. But how does this relate to ethics? Earlier, I mentioned two consequences that follow from the investigation of proper names and language; that is, the sense of indebtedness to others, and the call for submission to the play of language. Just as the investigation of proper names can help us understand the perspectives developed by Wittgenstein and Derrida, it can also help us see the ethical stances that they advocate. The same logic informs their views on language and ethics; indeed, the two concerns are inextricable from each other. Moreover, their views of subjectivity, as explicated by the investigation of proper names, are a necessary facet of the kind of ethical thought to which their work on language leads us.

On Wittgenstein's view, language developed out of a prior form of experience, and that fact is to be respected when we are in danger of succumbing to the lure of

deeming meaning univocal. When we reach the so-called "limits of human understanding" (however such a notion is phrased), we ought not presume that our ability to produce and manipulate concepts can somehow burst through them and transcend our animal, or natural, existence. Because the univocity of meaning is so easily assumed, the illusion that we can master it is also easily taken on and sustained; it is because we believe there *is* something that can be totally mastered in meaning that we believe we are capable of doing so. The view of language held by Wittgenstein and Derrida, however, reveals the faultiness of this position. Derrida's thought also tends toward this belief; however, it is clear that each thinker takes it to a different conclusion (the differences will be discussed more thoroughly in 3.3). With Wittgenstein, we find an emphasis on refraining from constructing regimes of thought that are intended to serve as regulatory or legislative systems. He treats this resistance with a respect and gravity that takes on an almost religious tone. The sense in which a certain religiosity appears in Wittgenstein's work is something that I would like to associate with Derrida's affirmation of deconstruction; in particular, I feel that the way in which Wittgenstein's thought leads to a kind of religious attitude is quite similar to what Derrida will elaborate according to his notions of *hospitality* and *mourning*. I will come back to this later in the chapter. In both thinkers, the attitude that I am proposing they share consists in submitting to the way that meaning exceeds our grasp and prevents us from dominating it. In Wittgenstein, we are given no ethical system: the refusal to go beyond what we can sensibly say *is* his ethics. Wittgenstein's silence, a silence that arises out of the lack of anything to say, is his response to what he refers to as "nonsensical" in philosophy. Nonsense, for Wittgenstein, consists in making propositions about things that cannot be sensibly articulated, such as

"the question whether the good is more or less identical than the beautiful"[134]. In other words, Wittgenstein's ethics is largely a warning against constructing a "scientific" calculus of ethics: its propositions would be nonsensical. Of course, a caveat should be stated here: in excluding nonsense from the sphere of philosophy, he is not condemning it. Rather, he is saying that cannot be scientific and does not constitute a part of that sort of knowledge. In other words, we can develop extremely complicated systems of calculus, but presenting an account of whether or not numbers are purely ideal entities does not bolster what we can know as a result of complicated systems of calculus. Arguing that the laws of nature are actually what propel the lawlike appearance of natural phenomena has the same effect (or rather, the same non-effect).

Wittgenstein's destabilization of the subject and of meaning, which both emerge in this essay from the analysis of proper names, preserve a space in which the acceptance of finitude is itself an ethical move. His approach to philosophy tries to clear the field of misguided attempts at capturing everything about the world in a systematized, intelligible account. For Wittgenstein, then, philosophy is concerned with trying to see the intricate, organic, interdependent complexity of experience and to bring us to a position where we can respect it. Central to this task is the necessity of dismantling or putting in abeyance the view of human beings as somehow in control of the world, or engaged with the world in an essentially confrontational manner. When we take on a different view of how we are implicated in the play of the world, we can, to use Derrida's vocabulary, renounce our desire for plenitude and thus take on a more appropriate view of what we can and cannot work out conceptually. This is not to say that we will overcome the illusory effects of

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[134] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 4.003.

language once and for all, or that we should anticipate such a possibility's appearance on the horizon. Wittgenstein reminds us that something about language forces itself on us and causes us to fall into the trap of assuming fixed, unified meaning; we cannot simply do away with this characteristic of language, but we can try to remind ourselves of it and thereby continuously change ourselves in relation to it. For this reason, he compares philosophy, as he conceives it, to therapy[135]. In making this comparison, he is showing that our task is unfinished and should be thought of as ongoing. Furthermore, it is not, even in its progression, linear: "problems are solved (difficulties eliminated), not a *single* problem"[136]. This has an affinity with Derrida's argument that we can never finish the critical engagement with language, although Wittgenstein does not, as Derrida does, explicitly identify the desire for plenitude as one of the necessary conditions for its operation. This particular divergence is notable; in the introduction of this chapter, I mentioned that it holds possible significance for the overall view of philosophy that we may take, depending on whether we adopt Derrida's position or not.

The revelations afforded us by the examination of proper names are very similar in Derrida's work, as I have said. Chapter 2 focused on the way in which *différance* is at work in meaning, identity, and experience in general. Most important to our investigation was the relation between the proper name and subjectivity, which becomes radically complicated in Derrida's, as well as in Wittgenstein's, work. As we said, the monadic subject, the isolated *cogito ergo sum* discussed by Descartes is not tenable, because it posits the self as an entity that exists outside of language, concepts, and sociality. On the Derridian view, the self is always already contaminated by what it is

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[135] *Philosophical Investigations*, §133.
[136] *Ibid.*

not; namely, otherness. Furthermore, the self's identity is always put off or deferred because it is never a simple, unified substance; it is instead a relation of itself to itself, in which its history, current mode of being in the world, and anticipated future are all at play with one another. The self is social, and relies on relating to others within socio-historical contexts for its characteristics. The very real way in which we are indebted not only to the structural or procedural favour done for us by the originary responsiveness of relating to others, but also to their lives and experiences, is of crucial importance to discussing ethics. The latter form of indebtedness will link our self-consciousness not only to what appears more immediately—i.e. the ostensible cultural milieu into which we are thrown at birth—but also to the necessarily suppressed and excluded voices which have contributed to more readily visible historical and cultural identities. Therefore, sensitivity to history is indispensable. Second, we will see that ethics and politics are not strictly or readily dissociable, because there is a necessary relation between our engagement with particular others and the broader socio-historical milieu of human life. While the originary responsiveness that produces selfhood may not be sufficient to lead us to a feeling of responsibility, we can look to the historical awareness of violence and exclusion and how they play into the very formation of the concepts according to which we identify ourselves. This, in turn, can lead us back to particular others with whom we relate because it is upon bodies, groups, and indeed entire populaces that violence is inscribed: here we see the urgency of considering the other in his or her own right, without demanding that they conform to our understanding of them. This is where we should think about hospitality as Derrida discusses it in *Of Hospitality*. Finally, I will argue that ethics and politics after Derrida necessarily require radical open-endedness and

careful considerations of *democracy* and *justice*, as Derrida treats the concepts; we will see, furthermore, that the treatment of meaning, concepts, and identity discussed in Chapter 2 will be critical to understanding this kind of open-endedness. The originary violence of *différance* is not ethical; however, because it is violent and creates exclusions, it creates both the necessity and possibility of ethics and politics. For how could ethical concerns emerge, were there not selves capable of taking on ethical demands in the first place? The fact that *différance* (that which generates meaning even as it renders the plenitude of meaning impossible) is constitutive of the possibility of ethical thought even at the same moment that it institutes the possibility of disequilibrium and determinate acts of social or physical violence shows that our responsibility is indeed infinite, insofar as it becomes clear that there is always *more* to be done. There is no assuming, on this view, that we can escape it and achieve a state of affairs that truly gathers all social concerns under one universal response to injustice and suffering. I think that Derrida's stance can be put into play with Wittgenstein's picture of a humble approach to living in recognition of both the radical contingency of selfhood and the impossibility of finding absolute truth.

By calling attention to the consequences that a Wittgensteinian/Derridian account of language has for selfhood, we are invited to initiate a phenomenological approach to understanding what it means to be a self in the community of language users – which is to say in the language game. By coming to a new way of looking at how the human subject is constituted, we can also look at how selfhood functions differently. If we look at ourselves as emerging in contexts and practices rather than from a metaphysical starting point that also serves as the goal of its own telos (the monadic subject), we are

bound to pay attention to how we function and develop as people. From this it follows that we can establish a different kind of relation to how we conceive ourselves according to the various kinds of names that we are given as well as those that we find at our disposal in the play of language. The different kind of relation that I am imagining involves recognizing the necessity of alterity in language insofar as the meaning we assign to a term is structurally dependent upon all of the other ways in which that term is used. By seeing language in this way, we can understand that we can neither claim ownership of a concept nor be bound to an inflexible and unchanging concept of personal identity. After this turn, we should start to see more clearly how relating to ourselves and to others becomes a strongly phenomenological project[137]. This kind of a phenomenology would involve trying to carefully observe not only our utterances, but also the gestures and social practices—the forms of life—within which they are relevant. Dismantling the monadic view of ourselves contests the idea that we need to find rational structures in experience. What kind of ethical consequences does this turn have? Well, we might dispense with trying to perfect any ethical scheme and pay more attention to the way that we experience life with others. In other words, the experience of being with other people is, on the view I am recommending, a better source for revealing motivations for acting ethically than an attempt to theorize moral principles. By making

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[137] The term "phenomenology" should be used with caution here. In *Margins of Philosophy*, Derrida criticizes Husserlian phenomenology for its focus on form and the object "itself". "As soon as we utilize the concept of form—even if to criticize *an other* concept for form—we inevitably have recourse to another kernel of meaning. And the medium of this self-evidence can be nothing other than the language of metaphysics" [*Margins of Philosophy*, 157]. Certainly Wittgenstein does not engage in or endorse any such enterprise. That said, I think that Wittgenstein's work can be called phenomenological insofar as he wants us to pay attention to and think about, as best we can, what is happening in our practices and forms of life, even as we recognize that we are not escaping the language-game in doing so. Such a phenomenological approach would therefore not take on the famous "bracketing out" of conceptual-ladenness that is found in Husserl's work. If we take Wittgenstein seriously, we have to accept that value-ladenness and incompleteness are unavoidable.

this contrast I am trying to show how we can find still act ethically despite the groundlessness of our believing. A lack of grounds does not imply a lack of meaningful impetus: we can look to our mode of being-in-the-world phenomenologically, and not be so troubled by the more animal aspects of ourselves. Our reaction to pain on a human face, for instance, should not be dismissed as an unreliable indication of how to understand a person's needs simply because our reaction is not purely born of some rational precept. Our tendency to look at the human face when relating to another human is something we cannot really get away from, and also something for which we cannot provide an ultimate justification. It is just there, to repeat Wittgenstein, like our life. On Wittgenstein's view, we should rejoice in the suddenness and the givenness of the possibility of being able to relate to other living beings in such a way. The relevance of this possibility should, I think, be included when we are discussing things like morality and ethics. The assertion that all moral values are strictly productions or convenient illusions can be countered with the observation that we all look to a person's face for signs of pain; to discount this aspect of our moral upbringing is to reaffirm the idea that we are transcendent over animality and that possible solutions to our problems are not to be found in earthly phenomena.

It is with the thought of humility in mind that I would now like to briefly turn to Wittgenstein's "religious" thought. I claim that it is a necessary component of understanding how his philosophy leads us into a strongly ethical attitude. Considering that a Wittgensteinian view of language implies that we are *not* hermetically sealed subjects emerging independently against the backdrop of a world with which we are in a confrontational relationship, we are forced to give up the belief that who we are as people

is completely a matter of our own power, our own mastery of meaning, and our insertion into the world, alone and utterly autonomous. To what view, then, do we move? It is precisely our implication in the language-game. We are dependent upon it for our development into people with more or less distinctive characteristics who can act intentionally in relation to others. Hence, we have to give up the monadic view of ourselves, which, on Wittgenstein's view, leads us into the prideful and troublesome stance that he is trying to undo. In *Culture and Value* he writes, "the *edifice of your pride* has to be dismantled. And that is terribly hard work"[138]. Here I would like to read Wittgenstein's remark as not only voicing the demand to give up the kind of arrogance that Wittgenstein fears is at work in the monadic subject, but also giving us the reminder that the dismantling never fully happens; it is always *to be* done. The endlessness of the task originates in the impossibility of getting outside of the language-game; moreover, we cannot do away with our tendency to view meaning as uniform and unchanging. The work is not only hard, but also ongoing and its completion is forever anticipated. Of course when making this assertion we should bear in mind the relevant difference between Derrida and Wittgenstein; for Derrida, completing the task of philosophy is impossible specifically because that impossibility is structurally necessary, while for Wittgenstein, it arises from a mistaken conception – reinforced by the history of philosophy – of the operation and essence of meaning.

The realization that we cannot conclude the sort of philosophical critique currently under discussion necessarily leads us beyond how we view subjectivity into the realm of social and ethical considerations. If we have already accepted, due to an

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[138] *Culture and Value*, 26e.

analysis of proper names, that the structure of the self is indissociable from language-games (and if, conversely, our investigation of proper names has shown us how meaning and conceptual identity function in general), we also have to rethink–as I have said–the terms we use to describe ourselves, and the concepts with which we associate our moral and political stances. How would this lead to a new kind of ethical stance? What sort of character would such an ethics take on? William Brenner looks at it this way: "I suggest that it would entail relativizing *all* one's problems and solutions — even those sanctioned by the ethico-religious system to which one may be committed"[139]. I think that this is correct: due to the nature of the language-game, we cannot avoid putting into question the conceptual formations that inform our ethical, moral, and political stances. Furthermore, I think that the call for this kind of relativism (which perhaps means a *hyperbolic* kind of relativism, and which I would not call a *complete* relativism, for a reason that I will give shortly) is a response to the argument that Wittgenstein's, as well as Derrida's, thought leads to a kind of collapse of meaning into a relativism that decrees all values and judgments to be as good as one another. To adopt such a stance would essentially be to erect a new metaphysical account of existence, in which it is *positively affirmed* that meaning is relative and cannot be criticized. If we relativize all of our problems and solutions, as Brenner suggests, then we should be suspicious of believing that all of our problems and solutions can be written off as equally meaningful and valuable. Rather than charging ahead with the declaration that all meaning is relative, the act of relativizing, of putting into question, of suspending final judgment, is, in fact, a step back from the precipice of another totalizing system. To do otherwise and to posit the

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[139] *Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations*, 156.

complete equality of all value (which is more or less to judge it all meaningless), is finally to identify a point at which meaning becomes fixed: the judgment itself is absolute. Furthermore, it implies the possibility of a subject that can master the world through understanding, which is in itself problematic insofar as it directly undercuts the notion of an absolute relativity of meaning by recouping something that is not relative: the rational subject, whose rationality and ability to understand the world (which would presumably lead it to conclude that concepts like "rationality" are meaningless) are also not relative. The judgment of absolute relativism (in contrast with what we find in Wittgenstein, which is what I would call rather a radical kind of relativism, if the term "relativism" ought to be kept on board at all) leads us into a nihilist's stance at best, and a completely incoherent one at worst. As we have seen in Chapter 1 as well as in Chapter 2, however, the concepts employed in judging any value to be as meaningful or meaningless as every other value are themselves dependent upon and given to us by the play of meaning in language, and cannot help but reveal their emergence out of that play. For Wittgenstein, we cannot seriously proclaim such a judgment to be true outside of all contexts; like any other concept, including the concept of selfhood that melts apart upon close examination of proper names and other self-descriptive terms, the concept of relativism itself cannot help but constantly and continuously be at risk. This is the moment in which ethical thought is saved, even as it is put into question. Similarly, in the "Afterword" to *Limited Inc*, Derrida postulates a give-and-take relationship between employing concepts in a determinate, precise manner and reading them deconstructively in order to tease out their conditions of possibility[140]. In moving to this radically

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[140] *Limited Inc*, 116-7.

relativist stance, Wittgenstein (accompanied, I believe, by Derrida) shows how we can put our ethical concepts into question by viewing them in a different context (namely, a meta-philosophical or meta-ethical one) than the one in which they are employed more or less uncritically.

The sociality of the self and of language are clearly critical and intertwined themes in our attempt to discuss the sort of ethical thought that emerges out of Wittgenstein and Derrida's work. In Derrida's work, however, we see a greater emphasis on the role of history in the way we think about ethics. I would suggest that despite Wittgenstein's silence on the subject, his view of language entails a historical sensitivity; certainly, he does not take a merely synchronic view of language. In fact, he observes in the *Investigations* "what we are supplying are really remarks on the natural history of human beings"[141]. To my mind, this shows that Wittgenstein's thought necessarily entails a consideration of the history that informs our consciousness: not just the history of philosophy, but the general historicity that goes into being human[142]. Nonetheless, Derrida's attention to the importance of history is much stronger than Wittgenstein's; indeed, if Wittgenstein's thought leads to a very personal transformation, Derrida's thought can be more easily lent to broader socio-historical and socio-political contexts because of his greater emphasis on our indebtedness to others and on the gratitude he feels must necessarily come from that indebtedness. For him, the tension between the

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[141] *Philosophical Investigations*, §415.

[142] McDowell points out that "the feature of language that really matters is ... that a natural language, the sort of language into which human beings are first initiated, serves as a repository of tradition, a store of historically accumulated wisdom about what is a reason for what. The tradition is subject to reflective modification by each generation that inherits it. Indeed, a standing obligation to engage in critical reflection is itself part of the inheritance" [*Mind and World*, 126]. This is a point that I think is agreeable with the sense in which Wittgenstein's thought can be most easily viewed as historicist; even if Wittgenstein does not take historical sensitivity to the same degree and in the same direction as Derrida, I think that this "minimal" historicity can be read into his work and can be used as a link with the appreciation of and concern for more determinate historical forms that Derrida displays.

originary violence that disrupts the unity of the self and the exclusion of alterity in order to preserve its marginal self-identity does not produce an ethical attitude that is limited to considerations of those with whom we have immediate contact. In fact, I would argue – and did argue in Chapter 2 – that the mere structural indebtedness that we have to others is not sufficient to link originary responsiveness to a full-blown sense of responsibility to the other. To think about this problem, we should return to the issue of proper names. Specifically, I would suggest that the connection between proper names and its dependence upon the other conceptual entities that cash it out leads the way to the connection between the self and historical awareness, between responsiveness and responsibility. There is a strong structural link between the particular exclusion of otherness that allows for the emergence of a unique bearer of a proper name, who is originarily inscribed in a system of differences, and the more general exclusion that must occur in the course of the development of hegemonic formations (geo-political entities, for instance, and the conceptual formations that accompany them).

The link, as I see it, is this: that the more general concepts according to which we identify ourselves, and according to which we explicate the sense of our proper names (which is to say that we give an account of who we are as people), are themselves produced because of violent exclusions. This kind of violence, just like the violence that attempts to recoup and preserve the unity of the self, is reparatory. In other words, when we move from the mere enunciation of our names to a fleshed out story about ourselves, we employ concepts such as our ethnicity, our nationality, our political leanings, and so on: these concepts are born of exclusionary, reparatory violence. In the case of concepts such as that of nationality, for instance, we are only able to proclaim and take ownership

of them at the expense of the subjugated discourses that have gone into their development. The idea of a national identity, as I will elaborate upon shortly, is not uncomplicated, univocal, and fully present to itself. It is instead always already fissured from within by the many differences that necessarily subtend its meaning as we see it; structurally speaking, it is no different than personal identity in the way that it is generated. These differences are not merely structural, however. They are, in fact, representative of the different ways of life that must disappear under the aegis of a hegemonic conceptual formation: a unified geo-political identity. While these differences do, in keeping with the logic of *différance*, threaten to evaporate the notion of the uncomplicated and unified concept of nationality in any given society, they are nonetheless silenced by the reparatory violence that protects the larger conceptual formation that they render possible. The fact that the reparatory violence which attempts to recover the "proper" or the "univocal" necessarily entails the suppression and domination of numerous social discourses and ways of life means that we are, in a very real way, indebted to them. Also, with the awareness that the others who suffer the violence of history are always other people who could have been those around us, we have further impetus for thinking about the people who *are* around us and make us possible.

Here we have the link between originary responsiveness, which is produced by our implication in the differential, social play of language, and a sense of responsibility to others. The demand for responsibility comes to us not only out of a history which is always already a violation of many histories, not only out of a present marked and disturbed by the unsettled aftermath of that originary violence (let us not forget that

history is still being *made*, produced and perpetuated), but also out of a future that cannot be foreseen or safely anticipated. Since the ethical demand of welcoming or resuscitating otherness appears in a way that is not immediately present—since it is a disturbance, an echo, or what Derrida identifies as a *spectral* presence in *Specters of Marx*—we cannot confront it in the hopes of answering it. The idea of spectrality is, I think, quite relevant here: like all of Derrida's metaphors and devices, it speaks to the aporetic character of meaning, thought, and so on. Spectrality conveys the sense of a simultaneous presence and absence, such as that of the person announced by the proper name, or the meaning of a word, or the validity of an ethical judgment. In each of these cases, we find not an uncomplicated unity, but rather a marginal unity that is contaminated as well as made possible by its own negation (we have already gone over this theme in Chapter 2 and it needs no greater elaboration at this point). Not only is each conceptual entity divided and violated as per the logic of its dependence upon its situation in the differential system of language, it is also further split up and complicated by each of its uses in context. This guarantees that we cannot achieve plenitude even by trying to imagine the system of language as a whole, and conceive each term therein as per all of its possible uses and relations with other terms. There is a temporal effect at work in the play of *différance* that ensures our inability to avoid the unexpected and circumvent the possibility of being surprised by the new paths of language and meaning. This is why, as we said in Chapter 2, the futural character of meaning is at once horizonal *and* non-horizonal; we might also come to think of it as *spectral*, even though this should not be taken to imply that it is hiding in some supra-sensible realm. We cannot own or master the conceptual content of language; it exceeds us temporally because it is always already ahead of us in

unpredictable ways, even as we constantly chase it and try to wrest it from the unpredictable. The demand of ethics is, in Derrida's words, an *excessive* or infinite demand, as is our responsibility to it[143]. We must consider the importance of history as well as of the non-horizonal future when we consider personal identity, the meaning of a text, or ethical ideas, for it is only within the scope of socio-historical contexts that their sense materializes. This means that I cannot perpetuate, bear, and present myself as the person I am solely on the strength of the relationship of originary responsiveness described in Chapter 2. Without the content of history, which is to say the content of many lives carried out together, my interlocutors and I have no backdrop against which to emerge as individuals with significant combinations of rather more general characteristics.

The introduction of a strong attentiveness to the importance of history further complicates the way in, and degree to, which we can deal with the effects of conceptual dissemination. Already we must, due to the very nature of the language-game, be ready to call into question the concepts that we employ in ethical thought (such as goodness, justice, charity, and so on), even as we recognize that there is something unavoidable about their role in language. Now, with Derrida's attention to the violence of history spawned from the originary violence of *différance*, we are not only confronted by meaning that exceeds us due to the way in which concepts are always already unstable and contaminated by alterity, we are also forced to face a radically temporal and historical facet of its generation. Thus, to think ethically we must engage in a negotiation marked by uncertainty: we cannot "capture" or "organize" ethics in any permanent way.

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[143] Again, this thought is indebted to Levinas, for whom the encounter with the other is the primary opening to experience, and the relation which determines all other possible thought.

Wittgenstein himself says "ethics, so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense"[144]. Of course, Wittgenstein's view of language necessarily entails that this is so, for we are always caught up in the use of concepts that melt into each other and escape our grasp. It is logically impossible (according to Wittgenstein's logic, and it should not be doubted that his work displays one) to assemble a collection of statutes that would provide an immovable, permanent, lasting conceptual framework according to which all human interaction could be dependably regulated. First of all, we have to radically put into question the sense we might have of ourselves as unified, essentially rational subjects that exist with or without sociality, even as we can and do experience ourselves more or less thematically, in a more or less unified way. In other words, we ought to keep our indebtedness to those with whom we participate in the language-game (as well as those with whom we do not participate, but whom are implicated in the historical exclusions mentioned above) in mind as much as possible. We also have to try to let go of the lingering impression that meaning can be subdued and cowed into doing what we want it to do in all instances. We have to move to a position wherein we recognize our reliance on the language-game, which entails our indebtedness to the forms of life in which we are situated; moreover, we have to accept that "to be sure there is justification; but justification comes to an end"[145]. Recognizing the end of justification is to accept the slippage between and exhaustion of the concepts that we employ to talk about others, the

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[144] Wittgenstein, "A Lecture on Ethics", 44.

[145] *On Certainty*, §192

world, and ourselves. This includes, of course, scientific propositions and, more importantly to our discussion here, ethical and moral claims.

The meditation on proper names is exemplary here: when we realize that even we, as individuals, occur only within the social context of the language-game, we can no longer posit the notion of a subjectivity that serves as the fixed site at which the world is confronted and comprehended. Nor can we look to a stable space of meaning in which to grasp the nature of existence. As Wittgenstein says, "It is so difficult to find the *beginning*. Or better: it is difficult to begin at the beginning. And not try to go further back"[146]. In the search for foundations, for first principles, for a starting point, we always come up short. After the thought of Wittgenstein and Derrida, to what should we look for the opening of our engagement with existence? I would suggest that the disseminating play of language, which is mobilized within the originary play of the world (discussed in Chapter 2), should be our departure point – despite the fact that it is no clear starting point at all. "What has to be accepted, the given, is—so one could say—*forms of life*"[147]; indeed, and we cannot help but accept it, warts and all. In other words, there can be no "first principle" that is non-contextual, so we must think in terms of contextuality, the language-game, or the play of *différance*. If we accept the idea that the language-game or that *différance* is the beginning (a beginning without a beginning, yet nonetheless the starting point for our understanding of meaning), we have to take on a radically different view of the world and knowledge of our existence within it. On the view I am urging, the view that embraces Wittgenstein's notion that language is indebted to a primal reaction to the world, a view that is shared by Derrida, understanding

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[146] *On Certainty*, §471

[147] *Philosophical Investigations*, 226e.

existence no longer amounts to a rational comprehension, but a rather more primal and intuitive encounter[148]. To put it another way, we might start to conceive rational thought as something made possible by an originary, reactive openness to existence, not as a primary structure that precedes it. If we take knowledge to indicate, first and foremost, a *familiarity-with*[149], then certainly, our openness to the world is an originary knowledge, that is "crossed like a threshold"[150] as we move about in life, making judgments, observations, and other forms of expression intended to cope with our mode of being. Wittgenstein's very strong quasi-religious stance is embodied in affirming the acceptance of this ineluctable givenness. "You must bear in mind," he writes, "that the language game is so to say something unpredictable. I mean: it is not something based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable). It is there—like our life"[151]. Thus, we have no recourse to a conceptual superstructure that can explain life and all of its variables. According to Wittgenstein, however, we should not view the abandonment to indeterminacy as a source of grief. "A man who lives rightly won't experience the

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[148] Here it would be worth considering the possible connections between this argument and the account of consciousness in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Hegel argues that differential relations make the supposed "pure being" of consciousness possible, saying that it "is not an immediacy, but something to which negation and mediation are essential"[Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §99]. This seems to resonate with Derrida's contention that *différance* is the condition of possibility (as well as of impossibility) for experience, thought, and meaning. The fact that the thinking subject, for Hegel, is made aware of itself in terms of its relation to something outside of it, which is to say its negation (insofar as the object of its attention is *not* it) speaks to Wittgenstein and Derrida's view that language is the result of a primal encounter with existence. Interestingly, in *Mind and World*, McDowell, whose philosophical disposition is influenced by Hegel's, suggests that conceptuality is an outgrowth of our more primitive animal qualities, and refers to it as "second nature": "our nature is largely second nature, and our second nature is the way it is not just because of the potentialities we were born with, but also because of our upbringing, our *Bildung*" [*Mind and World*, 87]. Because he offers an elaborate account of *how* the possibility of thought emerges from animality (which, at the very least, consists of a reactive encounter with existence), I would suggest that an interesting and fruitful project exploring the collaborative possibilities between a McDowellian account of second nature/ conceptuality and the Wittgensteinian/Derridian thought being discussed in this essay could be undertaken in a separate project.

[149] *On Certainty*, §582

[150] This phrase is taken from Georges Bataille's essay "The Labyrinth" (in *Visions of Excess*, 171-177).

[151] *On Certainty*, §559

problem as *sorrow*, so for him it will not be a problem, but a joy rather; in other words

for him it will be a bright halo around his life, not a dubious background"[152]. The "bright

halo" is at once the enigmatic opening up of experience and meaning as well as the point

at which meaning is disappointed. But if we live in the radically different way

considered by Wittgenstein, in which we try to embrace the way that meaning slips away

from us, we should see it not as disappointment, but as a sort of *freedom*. Were it not for

the mysterious way in which we find ourselves in the world, if we did not constantly and

continually find ourselves open to the flux and unfolding of experience, then the space of

meaning would not be available to us. Here we might think of Derrida, for whom the

fluctuation of *différance* is a necessary condition for experience and meaning to be

possible. Thus, we can see how we ought not, on Wittgenstein's view, treat our mode of

existence as troublesome or deficient, but rather worth affirming as the possibility of

being able to think, speak, and live with others as we do, relating to one another

conceptually.

Two themes have been emerging that speak to Wittgenstein's "religious" or

quasi-religious thought. First, we see an emphasis on rejecting the sovereignty of a

fundamentally rational, ontologically individual self, and accepting our dependence upon

the forms of life (and, of course, the people we live with) that make us possible. Second,

we have a move to accepting that some things are simply *given*, and must be *taken*, even

if within the context of those things (or perhaps, *the* thing: our openness to existence) we

can work out many problems. By saying this I am not proposing that Wittgenstein's

stance is foundationalist; what is given, what cannot be circumvented, contained, or

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[152] *Culture and Value*, 27e.

dominated by any philosophy is the inescapable slippage of meaning found in language. As he says, "nothing we do can be defended absolutely and finally. But only by reference to something else that is not questioned. I.e. no reason can be given why you should act (or should have acted *like this*), except that by doing so you bring about such and such a situation, which has to be an aim you accept"[153]. This leads us to what we might call a "deeper" sense of Wittgenstein's quasi-religiosity. There comes a certain point at which we can no longer offer justification; "the difficulty", according to Wittgenstein, "is realizing the groundlessness of our believing"[154]. Here the balance between his philosophy and his affirmation of a certain religious, or quasi-religious, attitude comes to the fore. For Wittgenstein, philosophy ought to lead us to give up trying to capture the whole of existence on the power of our rational capabilities; if we can do so, then our whole way of living can drastically change. The move we have to make not only involves understanding what we can and cannot sensibly say about existence, but also learning to stop seeing those things that elude us as inherently problematic (because of our inability to capture them). Yet, trying to find "first principles" or "fundamental grounds" seems to have an irresistible allure, and the identification of a monadic, extra-social self is critical to this desire. When we feel certain that we ourselves are fixed, unchanging, and utterly self-identical, it is easy to view the world around us as having the same character; however, the Wittgensteinian perspective shows us that there can be no fundamental grounds, because whatever we might identify as such can only give way to other terms which make it possible. In *On Certainty*, he wrestles with the problems of knowledge and skepticism, trying to discuss

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[153] *Culture and Value*, 16e.
[154] *On Certainty*, §166.

the point at which we simply have to affirm that things are how they are. This

affirmation, which can also be read as a kind of submission or a letting-be, is at the core

of Wittgenstein's religious attitude; moreover, this affirmation is present in Derrida's

thought. Deconstruction, which has often to been misunderstood as a nihilistic practice

by many critics[155], is an expression of joyousness for Derrida. He affirms the priority of

language over our ability to interrogate it and the world, and argues that we cannot help

but be given over to the way in which it exceeds us:

> Language is *already* there, in advance at the moment at which any question can
> arise about it. In this it exceeds the question. This advance is, before any contract,
> a sort of promise of originary alliance to which we must have in some sense
> already acquiesced, already said *yes*, given a pledge, whatever may be the
> negativity or problematicity of the discourse which may follow.[156]

Derrida here reveals how the destabilizing force of deconstruction, whether carried out by

textual readings or forced upon us by the unavoidable dissemination of meaning

produced by *différance*, cannot help but lead us back to what I would call an originary

affirmation. This is obviously sympathetic to Wittgenstein's assertion in *Culture and*

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[155] See, for example, Thomas McCarthy's "The Politics of the Ineffable: Derrida's Deconstructionism", in his book *Ideals and Illusions: On Reconstruction and Deconstruction in Contemporary Critical Theory*. In that essay, McCarthy unfortunately discerns an "apocalyptic" tone in Derrida's work, and does not fully grasp its essentially affirmative outlook. I would suggest that part of his misreading arises from the fact that he believes Derrida to be positing a self-certain subject confronted with a chaotic field of purely contingent meaning [p. 104]; he misses out on the fact that Derrida destabilizes even the self-certainty of the subject, which prevents us from falling into the sort of destructive relativism that I argued against, due to its logical inconsistency as well as its undesirability, on pp. 104-5 above. McCarthy's misreading of Derrida is disappointing: later, he discusses the possible similarity between Derrida's notion of the *telos* of fulfillment (his reading of this also seems to be tainted by his diagnosis of a Derridian pessimism) and Jürgen Habermas' claim that conceptual idealizations are "pragmatic presuppositions of communicative interaction" [McCarthy, *Ideals and Illusions*, 231n27] and raises the question of carrying out a Derrida-Habermas dialogue along those lines. Because of McCarthy's reading of Derrida is weakened by his misunderstanding, he misses an opportunity to open the question of a more general and in-depth discussion of possible lines of allegiance between Derrida's thought and his (and Habermas') brand of democratic/critical theory. Were he to have perceived Derrida's generally affirmative stance, perhaps McCarthy would have had the impetus to discuss the possibility of a positive dialogue between deconstruction and the elaborate democratic thought that runs so strongly through his own work. To be fair, the essay in question was originally published in 1989, when the general reception to Derrida's work was still not as open as it is now; however, I feel that it is representative of a predisposition toward Derrida that has not yet completely faded.

[156] Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, 129n5.

Value that the ambiguity of our existence in the world should be a source of joy rather than despair, and here we have the link between deconstruction and what I have been calling Wittgenstein's quasi-religiosity. For both of them, we must appreciate that all meaning has emerged from a source that cannot be made known in a totalizing philosophical system and must give ourselves over or submit to the way in which it exceeds us; in fact, Derrida's language is much stronger here, as he says that we have always already submitted to it and said "yes" to it.

What I want to propose here is that the exhaustion of our power to rationally comprehend the nature of existence is at once the shipwreck of thought (the dead end of philosophizing) as well as the hint as to its condition of possibility. Wittgenstein recognizes not only a mistaken conception of our position in the language-game that he feels must be rejected, a mistake that engenders arrogance[157], but also that his thought in this regard leads us to the recognition that tyranny and violence can arise when the arrogance I am describing is not kept in check. We should not forget that Wittgenstein was a person quite troubled by, even obsessed with, ethical considerations. Biographical accounts given by his colleagues and acquaintances speak quite strongly of this, and in his correspondence with others we can discern an extremely concerned person trying to

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[157] I feel that the kind of arrogance we are dealing with is captured nicely by Nietzsche in *The Gay Science*: "The whole pose of 'man *against* the world,' of man as a world-negating principle, of man as the measure of the value of things, as judge of the world who in the end places existence itself upon his scales and finds it wanting – the monstrous insipidity of this pose has finally come home to us and we are sick of it. We laugh as soon as we encounter the juxtaposition of 'man *and* world,' separated by the sublime presumption of the little word 'and' [Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §346]. This aphorism touches on several problems that are germane to our current discussion: 1) the problem of Cartesian subjectivity, that posits humans as being in conflict with the world rather than somehow belonging to it and produced by it; 2) the notion that we are somehow different in kind from everything else in the world and transcend its apparent chaos by means of our special status as 'rational' creatures; 3) the aforementioned arrogance that is part and parcel of this view of existence; 4) finally, the suffering to which we are subject because of our refusal to give up this stance and cease aiming for an all-powerful, *essentially rational* determination of the world's meaning.

battle his imperfections in order to live well with others[158]. For him, a sense of wonder and humility in reaction to existence, which has been *given* to us (and which is always being given), is necessary if we are to avoid becoming not only overwhelmed by philosophical problems as well as given to overly presumptuous judgments as to the truths of life. We must experience a radical change in how we view the problems tackled by philosophy: not only should we approach them differently, we should also see the mysteries left behind as unproblematic, even as a source of joy and wonder, as I have said. A similar relationship to language appears in Derrida's thought; however, for Derrida it leads to a more productive way of talking about ethics in which the kind of restraint found in Wittgenstein is coupled with and augmented by a stronger belief in the possibility of a philosophically driven ethical project. Derrida does not, of course, propose a normative ethics, but instead investigates the conditions of possibility for ethics in general. For his part, Wittgenstein does not discount the possibility of ethical statements; however, he is largely suspicious of the potential for developing a philosophical project out of that possibility. I would suggest, however, that one point upon which they are both in agreement is that the misunderstandings of the self and of meaning in general are productive of unnecessary violence and tyranny.

In Chapter 2, I discussed Derrida's notion of infinite responsibility, and argued that it should be thought not only in terms of an indebtedness to the other for the

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[158] Take, for example, the recollection given by M. O'C. Drury in K.T. Fann's anthology *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Man and His Philosophy*, in which he writes, "Wittgenstein had a difficult temperament to contend with. No one knew this better than he himself. Nothing that has been said about him has been half so scathing as his own self-criticism. Once when I was discussing a personal problem with him, he said to me: 'One keeps stumbling and falling, stumbling and falling, and the only thing to do is pick oneself up and try and go on again. At least that is what I have had to do all my life'" [*Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Man and His Philosophy*, 68]. For other good sketches of Wittgenstein's character, see further contributions from Eric Heller, Norman Malcolm, and Rush Rhees in the same anthology, as well as Peter Winch's response to Malcolm in *Wittgenstein: A Religious Point Of View?*

originary responsiveness that makes selfhood possible for us, but also in terms of how *différance* necessarily causes any identity formation to be possible only at the cost of exclusions. As we saw, the exclusions of this sort are more determinate acts of violence carried out along socio-historical lines. Because Derrida locates the generation of all conceptual and socio-historical formations within the logic of *différance*, he argues that we cannot ever arrive at a final reading of them. This radical open-endedness carries an ethical force, because it means that we can never have the final word on the truth of socio-historical events and the effects that they produce. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida diagnoses a certain kind of unrest that arises from trying to prevent *différance* from continuing to work. He describes how the excluded voices of history do not stay silent, haunting us as *revenants*, or those who come back. These *revenants* trouble our uncomplicated, linear views of history and strike us with the grief of those who have been affected by the violence of history. They appear spectrally; they do not completely uproot history and send everything into ruin, but it is in light of their refusal to appear or disappear completely that "the world is going badly"[159]. On Derrida's reading, this disruptive upwelling of grief is symptomatic of otherness asserting itself. He argues that because of our responsibility to these phantasmal voices, we should welcome them *as* other, in the Levinasian sense: at once near to us, yet separated by a distance that we cannot possibly traverse in order to achieve a comfortable familiarity[160]. In other words,

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[159] *Specters of Marx*, 77.

[160] In Levinas' thought, the other appears to us as an overwhelming encounter; it is not experienced in the sense that "experience" provides us with a penetrating understanding of something, or a greater ease in dealing with it. In *Totality and Infinity* he proclaims that "the absolutely other is the Other" [*Totality and Infinity*, 39], meaning that there is an alterity in the other person that prevents us from reducing her to the order of our self-understanding. Derrida adopts the figure of the other from Levinas; however, he does not treat the relation as a stable encounter of one and the other that escapes it. Instead, he views the other as drastically other, even to itself, as it is caught in the play of *différance*. For this reason, the infinitude of responsibility, and the open-endedness of responding, is deepened in Derrida's work.

we cannot conceive the other as another version of the self, and must instead receive the other as radically, absolutely other, to the point that it cannot be assigned a stable identity. We should welcome each voice, each case, each singular story to come, even at the cost of effacing our own comfortable situatedness in the forefront of historical narratives. In *Of Hospitality*, he calls welcoming the other an act of hospitality, and argues that ethically, hospitality must be absolute (which is impossible, yet which must be striven for in any event)[161]. In *Specters of Marx*, he discusses mourning, which, on his view, is the work of remembering and letting these voices speak. Of course, I would suggest that both absolute hospitality and the work of mourning should be thought of in conjunction with one another. Being ethical, for Derrida, is constantly welcoming the other—whom he describes in *Aporias* as an *arrivant*[162]—without imposing our expectations. Ethics can only be carried out in singular instances, even if we have a *telos* of fulfillment in mind. Thus, for Derrida, ethics always has an aporetic quality: it must be fulfilled, but it cannot be fulfilled. The logic of *différance* is at work here, and once again we see how it acts as the condition of possibility as well as impossibility for conceptual formations. Derrida therefore speaks of democracy or justice *to come*, in the sense that we desire their fulfillment despite the necessary rupture that foils it. Because meaning must be open-ended, according to *différance*, these concepts must also be open-ended and always only anticipated in their plenitude. The link with Wittgenstein is clear here, because he also posits the impossibility of a totalizing ethical system. As he declares in "A Lecture on Ethics", "I can only describe my feeling by the metaphor that, if a man could write a book on Ethics, this book would, with an explosion, destroy all the

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[161] I will elaborate on this point below.
[162] *Aporias*, 34.

other books in the world"[163]. I would like to suggest that that both Wittgenstein and Derrida are writing in defense of what we might call a certain liberatory drive, or resistance to determinacy, that is characterized in their work. Just as meaning is made possible by the very thing that prevents it from being fixed and complete (*différance* in Derrida's case, the instability of language-games in Wittgenstein's), ethics is likewise dependent upon the very impossibility of its fulfillment.

Knowing at which point what we say becomes nonsense is not merely a matter of good philosophy, it carries an ethical force, in several ways. First, it means that we have to refrain from passing moral judgments based on a belief that we are in possession of "the" truth (what one might like to call "capital-t Truth"); thus, we are unable to see ourselves as being superior to others in our relation to it. This requirement, to my mind, is summed up in the final proposition in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence"[164]. It should, however, be accompanied by Wittgenstein's dictum in *Culture and Value*, "Don't *for heaven's sake*, be afraid of talking nonsense! But you must pay attention to your nonsense!"[165]. The tension between these two statements embodies the stance I have been supporting throughout this essay; namely, that we are not restricted from employing concepts in determinate ways, but that we are also bound to recognize their contingency and contextuality. Taken together, Wittgenstein's two declarations lead us back to the conclusion in the "Lecture on Ethics" that while thinking ethically cannot be a science, it is also a worthwhile aspect of human experience. This is why Wittgenstein links ethics to the aesthetic: we can develop very

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[163] "A Lecture on Ethics", 40.

[164] *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 7.

[165] *Culture and Value*, 56e.

refined ethical ideas, but they can never be calculable or available to rigourous delimitation. Another aspect of the ethical force I am talking about is more personal. It brings about the relief, as Wittgenstein hoped, of suffering from the conflict between our finitude and our desire for plenitude. By accepting the radically contingent emergence of our way of being-in-the-world, and seeing it as a thing of wonder rather than a source of frustration, we might perhaps not be so bothered by the problems that we cannot solve, and learn how to solve what we can in light of the mysterious character of our existence. The examination of proper names leads us to a view of selfhood beholden to sociality, and hence to others. In turn, we are in each case implicated in a network that frustrates the notion of conceptual rigidity and that, at its limits, shows us how the lack of rigidity reveals our constant reliance upon what cannot be comprehended, namely, the language-game or *différance*. That is, neither subject nor object can be taken non-contextually, and it is precisely contextuality that we cannot bring under our control. This is the givenness of existence for us: our indebtedness comes in the form of our reliance upon others who, in these contexts, participate in the language-game. Thus, from the people announced by our proper names in each case, we move outward and through a complex and ultimately *given* play of language that is at once unjustifiable and unavoidable. It is only within this enigmatic and incomprehensible field that we can emerge as subjects who can make any kind of judgments; conversely, of course, it is the source of our being that also disappoints us in our desire for the plenitude of meaning. We are therefore caught up in the give and take of possible understanding, which has unclear limits, and the unfathomable givenness of existence, language, and conceptuality that makes things such as selfhood, understanding, and judgment possible.

Here I would like to revisit and expand upon our attention to the awareness of history present in Derrida's work and make more explicit the link between the formation of the self and the historical contexts that make it possible. We have seen that the self is formed temporally (or, as Heidegger would say, the self *is* temporal), but we have not fully considered how history plays into that formation. The available content of selfhood is disseminated through the circulation of meaning in language. The complexity that this entails should not be neglected or underestimated; nor, on the other hand, can it fully be apprehended. It means that although we are indebted to the availability of others with whom we live, we are also equally indebted to those who came before us, before the living others who surround us, and even before those of whom we have knowledge through anecdotal evidence. On every level and to every degree, we are all implicated in inheriting a history that provides the tableau for our sense of self. Derrida writes:

> That we *are* heirs does not mean that we *have* or that we *receive* this or that, some inheritance that enriches us one day with this or that, but that the *being* of what we are *is* first of all inheritance, whether we *like it or know it or not.* And that, as Hölderlin said so well, we can only *bear witness* to it. To bear witness would be to bear witness to what we *are* insofar as we *inherit*, and that—here is the circle, here is the chance, or the finitude—we inherit the very thing that allows us to bear witness to it.[166]

Herein lies the entire problem as well as the opening of how we might deal with it. We *are* heirs: inheritance is always already part of how we are constituted. Our inheritance, however, is not something that we receive or obtain: we are not given ownership of it. The inheritance, I think, operates in the way that Heidegger describes in *Being and Time* when he discusses the constitutive role of history in the Being of Dasein.

> Whatever the way of being it may have at the time, and thus with whatever understanding of Being it may possess, Dasein has grown up both into and in a

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[166] *Specters of Marx*, 54, emphasis added.

> traditional way of interpreting itself: in terms of this it understands itself proximally, and within a certain range, constantly. By this understanding, the possibilities of its Being are disclosed and regulated. Its own past—and this always means the past of its 'generation'—is not something which *follows along after* Dasein, but something which already goes ahead of it.[167]

This would, *prima facie*, seem to be relatively unproblematic. For instance, the history of Canada, officially inaugurated in 1867, is received as the setting for the development of "Canadian" identity. Yet that history, as are all histories, is marked by conflict. This is readily apparent in the quarrel between Canada and Québec. On the one hand, we have the affirmation of a more or less unified national identity, and on the other hand, we have a tale of injustice toward and suppression of Franco-Canadian culture by Anglo-Canadian culture. It is not enough to say that English and Quebecois cultures both contribute equally to the common notion of being Canadian; we also have to acknowledge that the violence involved in one cultural group dominating another cultural group is indebted to the play of *différance*, and it is *différance* that has produced the sense of Canadian identity as we now know it. Conversely, the Quebecois identity also necessarily depends upon the historical events and trends of Anglophone-Francophone relations in Canada during the latter half of the last millennium. Neither identity is rigidly isolated or self-sufficient; each depends upon its other for self-determination. In the case of Canada in general, the sense of being Canadian depends on a multiplicity of other cultural patterns for the conceptual edifice to work at all[168]. At the same time, the proliferation of

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[167] *Being and Time*, H20.

[168] This brings to mind a Canada Day 2005 call-in show on CBC Radio One during which callers were asked to discuss what they feel defines being Canadian. One caller in particular made it his task to complain about the affirmation of regional identities, saying that "We are Canadians first", which presumably means that we are Albertans, or Quebecois, or Newfoundlanders only in light of that. This, of course, implies that being a Canadian is somehow not supervenient upon regional identities and therefore transcends them in a moment of Canadian "universality". The caller felt that affirming the sense of self

multiplicity and difference must be muted for the sake of unity. In other words, somebody must always be crossed out, shoved aside, censured, or erased. A hegemonic macro-structure must emerge, thus silencing innumerable other possible paths that could have been taken. Nonetheless, on Derrida's view, the macro-structure is infested with and haunted by what is has excluded; it would like to view itself as purely self-identical, but it cannot. "The living ego is auto-immune, which is what they do not want to know. To protect its life, to constitute itself as unique living ego, to relate, as the same, to itself, it is necessarily led to welcome the other within"[169]. We can clearly carry the contemplation of proper names over to this area of investigation. The issue of social identity, as signified by terms that indicate nationality, for instance, is subject to the same conclusion as that of personal identity. Even when we say that we are Canadian, or American, or British, or of any other nationality, the self-identity of the concept is *a priori* torn apart and rendered improper; it already presupposes, despite any strong claims to the contrary, that the other (or a multiplicity of others) is always already at work within it. Again, we see the tension between originary violence and the secondary, reparatory violence mentioned by Derrida in *Of Grammatology*. Self-identity is contaminated and disrupted by the necessary alterity that presupposes it, and the preservation of its unity

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that arises from living with others around you in the place that you feel most at home is a) infantile; and b) incompatible with being able to affirm a greater sense of togetherness under the banner of being Canadian. The fact is that we have never been Canadians "first", in the sense that had people not been living together in each region of what is now Canada, there would have been no way to construct the socio-political entity now identified by that name. This is to my mind a perfect example of *différance* at work in social/political/historical concepts: the desire for a stable and unified identity is confounded by what simultaneously prevents that stability and makes any sense of being Canadian possible in the first place. In treating the affirmation of other identity claims besides the universal Canadian one as illegitimate, the caller perpetuated the violence inherent in demanding pure self-presence and absolute self-identity. Similarly, the Sovereigntist desire to expel all things Anglo from Quebec (or at least to suppress them within it) could be analyzed in a similar fashion: there is a refusal to acknowledge the necessary involvement of what is supposedly at odds with the uniformity of the 'true' Quebecois identity.

[169] *Specters of Marx*, 141.

relies upon a violence done against the originary violence that threatens to dissolve it, even as that violence is its very condition of possibility. We find a sense of identity that is troubled by its necessary lack of a stable center. It is not completely self-present. In still other words, it is not fully synchronous with itself, because what we would like to affirm as *the* sense of being Canadian is gained at the cost of countless other possibilities that are silenced. The problem arises because the silencing never truly happens, and what is supposedly gone, excluded otherness, comes back to haunt us in "spectral" forms, as Derrida puts it in *Specters of Marx*. How does this occur? The contrast between the marketable face of being Canadian and the situation of First Nations peoples living on reservations in places like Davis Inlet, Labrador, is a good example[170]. The current living conditions of those people, for whom drug abuse and child suicide are crippling problems, are just as bound up with the formation of being Canadian as is our healthy respect for pluralism and "not being American". Here I think that Derrida's work in *Specters* is most appropriate. The suffering of those in Davis Inlet, the extermination of millions in the Shoah, the nameless and voiceless peoples in the past who are lost in the grand narratives of our time (but who nonetheless have made it possible), and those not even yet born who will also fall victim to sudden or prolonged acts of violence: to these we are responsible, even if we are not guilty of causing the violence done to them.

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[170] For a graphic and disturbing account of the Davis Inlet story, a video chronology is available at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's online archives (http://archives.cbc.ca/IDD-1-70-1671/disasters_tragedies/davis_inlet/). The situation in Davis Inlet is germane to our discussion of the infinite responsibility engendered by the violent exclusions produced throughout history and exacerbated by its representations. In it we can see that affirming a certain sense of identity always comes at the cost of having to accept aspects of it that we might find less palatable. According to Derrida's analysis of spectrality, such circumstances are voices coming out of the past, showing us that the past really has not been settled, and that it is not really behind us. Moreover, they show us a present at odds with itself, tortured by whispers that question whether it really is as uniform and uncomplicated as it appears. We could say that sufferings endured in the present are the return of past violence.

No justice—let us not say no law, and once again we are not speaking here of laws—seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some *responsibility*, beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead, be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or other kinds of exterminations, victims of the oppressions of capitalist imperialism or any of the forms of totalitarianism. Without this *non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present*, without that which secretly unhinges it, without this responsibility and this respect for justice concerning those who *are not there*, of those who are no longer or who are not yet *present and living*, what sense would there be to ask the question "where?" "where tomorrow?" "whither?"[171]

We should carefully think through the extent to which this responsibility haunts us. Why does it haunt us? Should we say that our professed disapprobation of the atrocities committed in the Holocaust, for instance, really captures the spectrality of those lost in it? I would say, rather, that the haunting is far more penetrating than that. The way in which the liberation of Europe can cause us to affirm the notion of goodness not only amongst ourselves, who stood up (and would stand up again and again) against evils like the Third Reich, but also in the world in general – this is indebted to those silenced voices. Concepts such as goodness and justice—concepts which we often cite when we are feeling good about ourselves as people and as peoples—are not possible without a) what we usually define as their opposites, and b) instances or situations in which these concepts are relevant – these must necessarily involve some sort of transgression against a person or group of people. What I am trying to further bring out here is the necessary impossibility of conceptual purity in the formation of personal and mass social identity. Just as these concepts are generated by what we affirm, they are also at least partially generated by what we cannot affirm; namely, the excluded lives and voices that have made possible the ideas according to which we describe ourselves as people. This play

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[171] *Specters of Marx*, xix.

must occur across bodies and peoples; otherwise they would not trouble us so. In realizing our indebtedness to the infinite ruin of others—this is not metaphorical, but real, experienced in and by the flesh—we have to recognize our responsibility to address suffering. "There is no inheritance without responsibility. An inheritance is always the reaffirmation of a debt, but a critical, selective, and filtering reaffirmation"[172].

This is the link between originary responsiveness and infinite responsibility. We have inherited a legacy of violence and exclusion of which we are not necessarily guilty, but for which we are nonetheless responsible if we are to show gratitude for the possibility of our mode of being-there. The distinction between guilt and responsibility is critical: we are not personally culpable, for instance, of the exclusion and suppression that is necessarily part of the possibility of our having the consciousness that we do. We are, however, responsible or answerable to it insofar as it has brought us into the position of responding at all. The fact that we *can* bear the ethical demand of facing the injustices of history that have preceded us is, in fact, dependent upon the cumulative result of that violence. There is a link here between our personal sense of self, the particular community in which we find ourselves emerging as people, and the multiple socio-historical contexts in which that particular community finds itself and within which it can be differentiated as more or less singular. What form will ethics and politics take after this realization? I would like to suggest, following Derrida, that radical openness becomes the focal point of answering our infinite responsibility. This openness should be thought in the light of a historical sensitivity to the particular acts of violence; moreover, we should not simply look at history in this way, we should also remember what

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[172] *Specters of Marx*, 91-2.

consequences it has for ourselves. Since every term with which we describe ourselves to others and ourselves inherently carries both a structural violence as well as a history of violence; for every concept that is constitutive of our sense of self, there is also the possibility of things having turned out otherwise. A strongly ethical stance, of course, should require that we constantly evaluate ourselves; without a good, critical, self-understanding, it seems unlikely that we should be able to know how to treat others. To make the point stronger, I would argue that the account of subjectivity presented by Wittgenstein and Derrida provides an unavoidable impetus for self-critique: due to the fact that we are generated as unique subjects by virtue of otherness, and because this implies an infinite responsibility to others, the kind of ethical thought that I have been urging in this essay cannot do without the activity of calling ourselves into question. I think that this is what Foucault has called the "critical ontology of ourselves"[173] in the famous essay "What is Enlightenment?" Furthermore, he offers a view of how a historical sensitivity to radical contingency can work to revive the voices that have been suppressed due to the unavoidable necessity of exclusion and violence:

> Historical sense can evade metaphysics and become a privileged instrument of genealogy if it refuses the certainty of absolutes. Given this, it corresponds to the acuity of a glance that distinguishes, separates, and disperses; that is capable of liberating divergence and marginal elements – this kind of dissociating view that is capable of decomposing itself, capable of shattering the unity of man's being through which it was thought that he could extend his sovereignty to the events of his past.[174]

This remark seems to me to carry both the sensitivity to difference found in Derrida and the refusal to assume complete mastery of meaning and knowledge in Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein's emphasis on reaching humility through recognizing our finitude speaks

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[173] Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?", 50.

[174] Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History", 87.

well to Foucault's vision for the liberatory possibilities of a genealogical analysis of history. Derrida's thought is also important because of his reminder that we cannot rest at any simple inversion, unearthing, or reversal: each one carries with it its own violence. The threat is exacerbated if we act as though we are liberating something "itself", which is to say something that is a purely self-sufficient and rigourously definable object, uncontaminated by alterity. Derrida shows us that there is no such thing, and that all concepts are inscribed within a structure determined by *différance*, which Derrida describes as a *sheaf*: "the assemblage to be proposed has the complex structure of weaving, an interlacing which permits the different threads and different lines of meaning—or of force—to go off again in different directions, just as it is always ready to tie itself up with others"[175]. Our critical attitude, which is ethico-political, must attempt to think this, and to think the violence inherent in every determination or judgment made in the name of justice. In a sense, it is another kind of violence, even though our intentions may be noble. Hence, justice for Derrida cannot be realized: it is possible/impossible, or aporetic. It means that our self-critique, and the critique of socio-historical forms must be endless, as must our task of engaging problems to be solved. As per our inheritance, which constitutes our living present, and which cannot be fully apprehended, dealt with, and put to rest, we must act in the repayment of a debt that cannot be repaid. "These accounts," writes Derrida, "cannot be tabulated. One makes oneself accountable by an engagement that selects, interprets, and orients. In a practical and performative manner, and by a decision that begins by getting caught up, like a responsibility, in the snares of an injunction that is already multiple, heterogeneous,

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[175] *Margins of Philosophy*, 3.

contradictory, divided—therefore an inheritance that will keep its secret"[176]. We are

unable to make a complete tabulation or account because there is necessarily always

something that exceeds our ability to grasp and comprehend the multiple voices of our

inheritance. Each attempt to welcome the other must occur in context, and is always

singular for that reason. Thus, when we try to interpret historical injustices, for instance,

we are always doing so in a new way; because of *différance*, we are always already

encountering something that has always already been made different.

This is where we should think in terms of both hospitality and mourning. In *Of*

Hospitality, Derrida asks:

> Does hospitality consist in interrogating the new arrival? Does it begin with the
> question addressed to the newcomer (which seems very human and sometimes
> loving, assuming that hospitality should be linked to love—an enigma that we
> will leave in reserve for the moment): what is your name? tell me your name,
> what should I call you, I who am calling on you, I who want to call you by your
> name? What am I going to call you? What am I going to call you? It is also what
> we sometimes tenderly ask children and those we love. Or does hospitality begin
> with the unquestioning welcome, in a double effacement, the effacement of the
> question *and* the name? Is it more just and more loving to question or not to
> question? to call by the name or without the name? to give or to learn a name
> already given? Does one give hospitality to a subject? to an identifiable subject?
> to a subject identifiable by name? to a legal subject? Or is hospitality *rendered*, is
> it *given* to the other before they are identified, even before they are (posited as or
> supposed to be) a subject, legal subject and subject nameable by their family
> name, etc.?[177]

By posing this question, he shows the way in which he conceives how we cannot help but

receive the other. For Derrida, of course, the other can never *be received*, because the

other is always radically singular, always radically different, and always radically new.

By welcoming the other as other, and by embracing the open-endedness of socio-

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[176] *Specters of Marx*, 93.

[177] *Of Hospitality*, 29.

historical readings, we can effectuate justice to come. We are asked, therefore, to adopt an ethics and politics that cannot accept answers without suspending acceptance and putting the answers immediately into question again; furthermore, we must accept that our questioning is vulnerable to the unexpected. Despite our attempts at determining the other in our encounter, the other can and will surprise us: thus, our hospitality is always already unconditional, because even when we accept the other under certain conditions, those conditions can always be displaced and undermined. The encounter with the other is always the encounter to come, and it confounds our expectations at every turn.

The motto here, as Nietzsche quips in *Ecce Homo*, might be "I do not refute ideals, I merely put on gloves before them"[178]; we must handle our conclusions with care, we must not let them settle in and congeal into universalities. We must treat each problem as singular and open to revision, not as tokens of uniform and stable classes; however, we must remember that according to Derrida, the complete rejection of universals is impossible. It is within the scope of this tension between radical singularity and totality that our ethical task plays out. We have to be thoroughly critical, while nonetheless being ready to curtail the extent of our critique at any given moment. Our task is infinite, but we are not. "As often happens," writes Derrida in *The Gift of Death,* "the call of or for the question, and the request that takes us through it, echoes further than the response"[179]. Thus, we must learn to move on as best we can, while allowing excluded voices to be heard, and to learn lessons from them. We must be careful and attentive. We must learn to hear the other, whether the other is dead and calling to us

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[178] Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 218.
[179] Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 115.

from the fog of history, whether the other is with us in the living present, demanding to

be heard, or even whether it is not yet born and coming to us out of the future.

> If he loves justice at least, the "scholar" of the future, the "intellectual" of
> tomorrow should learn it and from the ghost. He should learn to live by learning
> not how to make conversation with the ghost, but how to talk with him, with her,
> how to let them speak or how to give them back speech, even if it is in oneself, in
> the other, in the other in oneself: they are always *there*, specters, even if they do
> not exist, even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet.[180]

I would like to emphasize that the attitude I have been urging throughout this section,

throughout this chapter, and throughout this entire thesis, cannot be carried out with a

purely theoretical or academic interest in mind. I have been trying to stress, in a spirit I

feel is embodied by Derrida as well as by Wittgenstein, that this attitude comes about as

the result of realizing the very real connection we have to others, living and dead. We

are dealing with concepts, meaning, thought, and so on but we should not be fooled into

thinking that in doing so, we have left the realm of bodies and forces. Conceptual

formations are always already at work in and on us; the ethical task described by Derrida

is the attempt to think through and deal with how they effect us as well as how we can

work with them in order to live with one another. I have been trying to argue that we can

do this by a) accepting the radical contingency of ourselves and to learn how to

reinterpret ourselves as living human beings, b) approaching ethico-political problems

with a view to open-endedness and multiplicity, so that we will not follow the perhaps

avoidable violence of rigidly linear thought, and c) acknowledging the profound

interdependence between ourselves and others, so that we can feel the concern and not

just think it as some form of disinterested duty or requirement.

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[180] *Specters of Marx*, 176.

The consideration of justice, as Derrida treats it, is central to our project. Traditionally, justice has been conceived as the equilibrium of needs, the balancing out of a wrong with a right, fairness (as in John Rawls' formulation), and so on. The most fundamental concept that seems to keep appearing when we discuss justice is a sense of evenness or balance. For Derrida, however, every claim of equilibrium necessarily creates another disequilibrium (or perhaps, multiple disequilibria) because of the necessity of exclusion. Therefore, our treatment of justice or responsibility must become hyper-acute, hyper-responsive, and hyper-anticipatory. We must always commemorate the injustices in every act of justice, and move toward correcting it, which will in turn proliferate further injustices. Geoffrey Bennington expresses this thought quite well:

> Every law tries to ground its justice in *justesse*, transforming the violence of its performative force into a calm constatation of the state of affairs it produces ... [t]his schema only allows injustice to be thought on the model of falsity: the only chance of thinking a justice not thus modeled on constatation is to recognize the (necessary) possibility of an injustice already inscribed into the very structure of the law, not even as an anticipation of its transgression, but as its own illegality as such.[181]

We therefore have to try to strike a balance that is always already unstable, by recognizing the inherent violence of any and all judgments or decisions, any and all laws, any and all solutions, and any and all concepts according to which we organize ourselves. I would like to suggest that the same refusal of determination is necessary for our ethico-political attitude, which follows Derrida's demand that we read and re-read the "text of the world". Concepts such as justice, which can of course be read according to their history and use in the play of human lives, are useful and indeed indispensable; however, because they do have a history of use in innumerably different contexts (this is what

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[181] "Derridabase", 240-1.

produces their meaning), and because we are finite beings who cannot master meaning, we must refuse to apply a final determination that will stand for all time. We must learn to see the differences at work in all concepts, and in a remembrance of our own indebtedness to difference and otherness, we must not subjugate them, but rather learn to give them voices and let them live. This, following Derrida, is the never-ending task of hospitality and the work of mourning. At the same time, we have to remember the violence inherent in the revival of differences, and strive to prevent as much domination and exclusion as possible. Thus, our task truly is infinite. In carrying out the task of justice, or the preservation of freedom, we have to remember that it is to others that we pay our debt, not idealized concepts that loom over and above history.

To conclude this section, I have tried to show how, for both Wittgenstein and Derrida, there is a necessary correlation between language and ethics by way of the issue of proper names. As we saw, there are numerous similarities between their approaches to understanding subjectivity, meaning, and ethical thought; yet we also saw ways in which their thought diverges. The most significant difference between the two is that Derrida has elaborated the possible implications in language for ethical thought to a far greater degree than Wittgenstein has; this much has been demonstrated by the progression of this section. I would suggest that this is because of Derrida's belief that our desire for plenitude is a necessary aspect of meaning. It is on the basis of the oscillation between plenitude and absolute difference that he feels an ethical project can be initiated. The kind of ethical project he has in mind, of course, is not a fundamentally normative one: because of his emphasis on being radically open to otherness, Derrida's ethical stance involves the call to put all ethical norms into question. It has been shown that

Wittgenstein's thought leads to a radical questioning as well, but he does not frame it in the more positive terms that Derrida does. Wittgenstein's approach, on the other hand, is to offset exclusionary violence by holding back from engaging in any normative account of ethics at all. He does not take the risk of proposing a model for thinking about such problems in the way that Derrida does. In the final section of this chapter I would therefore like to discuss this point of departure between Wittgenstein and Derrida. First and foremost, I will raise the question of whether or not this difference between their projects seriously challenges the overlap I have identified in their work. Furthermore, this difference itself causes a question to be raised by each point of view that can and perhaps must be put to the other: is Derrida's notion about the ineradicability of our desire for plenitude mistaken? Or, on the other hand, does Wittgenstein's refusal to make such a move constitute a failure on his part? As I asserted at the outset of this chapter, each perspective has potentially drastic consequences for the status of philosophy.

3.3 Questioning the differences: toward future dialogue

What are the potential consequences of this apparent difference between Wittgenstein and Derrida? Primarily, I would suggest that, depending on what side we take, we will either look toward an eventual overcoming of metaphysics or, like Derrida, remain in an oscillatory movement within metaphysics. If Wittgenstein's silence is, in fact, the better stance, then we will be unable to undertake an ethics like the one envisioned by Derrida. If the desire for plenitude is not a necessary element of the way in which conceptuality operates, then it is presumably, on the Wittgensteinian view – if that is the Wittgensteinian view – an artifact of our philosophical history.

Does this provide a serious challenge to the affinity I have tried to draw between Wittgenstein and Derrida? Or, on the other hand, is the desire for plenitude actually tacitly presupposed in Wittgenstein's writing? Although this issue cannot be fully fleshed out within the scope of our current discussion, I would like to make the proposal, preliminary to future possible research in this area, that the desire for plenitude is actually implied by Wittgenstein. Repeatedly in the *Investigations* he shows that meaning-as-use is inextricable from the *satisfaction* that we have made ourselves understood to one another in discourse. He contends in §29, for instance, that the "last" definition of something is the one that fulfills the task of making somebody understand what is being talked about[182]. I would suggest that this reveals that Wittgenstein's thought does not move outside of the *telos* of fulfillment discussed by Derrida in *Limited Inc*. This is not to say that Derrida's notion of the *telos* of fulfillment/desire for plenitude – which is part of his quasi-transcendental account of how conceptuality functions – and Wittgenstein's claims about what constitutes successfully meaning this or that when talking with other people are reducible to one another. It merely opens up possible lines of inquiry as to whether or not Wittgenstein can really hope for the overcoming of metaphysics, and even whether or not he *does* hope for it. His writing is certainly not clear on the matter; however, this too may play into his suspicion of assembling positive philosophical doctrines.

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[182] In *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume One*, Jürgen Habermas discusses Wittgenstein's account of how language operates in communication, and makes more explicit what Wittgenstein does not elaborate on in great detail: the normativity of satisfactorily conveying meaning to one another in discourse. He argues that mutual understanding is a necessary precondition for the functioning of language, and in doing so strengthens what I am proposing: that the Wittgensteinian account of language use may, in fact, imply the same *telos* of fulfillment or desire for plenitude that Derrida thinks is ineradicable. See pp. 97-101 in *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume One*.

I think that there are grounds for reading Wittgenstein along lines similar to Derrida in this regard. John McDowell supports my inclination to think that Wittgenstein may not posit the eventual obsolescence of philosophy. In *Mind and World* he says

> I credit Wittgenstein with the aspiration of seeing through the apparent need for ordinary philosophy. This needs to be taken with care. I do not mean to suggest that Wittgenstein seriously contemplates a state of affairs in which ordinary philosophy no longer takes place. The intellectual roots of the anxieties that ordinary philosophy addresses are too deep for that. This point comes out dramatically in the multiplicity of voices in Wittgenstein's later writing, its dialogical character. The voices that need to be calmed down, recalled to sobriety, are not alien voices; they give expression to impulses he finds, or at least can imagine finding, in himself. When he writes, "The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to" … we should not take him to be envisaging a post-philosophical culture (an idea that is central to [Richard] Rorty's thinking). He is not even envisaging a future for himself in which he is definitively cured of the philosophical impulse. The impulse finds peace only occasionally and temporarily.[183]

This is an attractive and plausible reading of Wittgenstein, one that puts him much closer to Derrida's position; additionally, it thereby – and in a surprising way, because it is a thinker like McDowell who helps us put Wittgenstein and Derrida into closer alignment – opens up another avenue for studying the connections and possible affiliations between so-called continental and so-called analytic philosophy in order to further combat the faulty, yet persistent, notion that they are somehow radically opposed to one another (although this point is rather tangential to the central theme of this essay, I feel that it must be mentioned). Most importantly, it allows us to see a way in which Wittgenstein's thought can also be open to the kind of ethico-political stance recommended by Derrida, along with all of its possibilities. Of course, McDowell's reading of Wittgenstein in the above passage does not address the question of why the intellectual roots of our philosophical anxieties run so deeply; however, I think that it is reasonable to propose

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[183] *Mind and World*, 177.

that the Derridian notion of an ineradicable and structurally necessary desire for plenitude would not be at odds with his perspective.

Yet what of Wittgenstein's silence? Is it valuable in a way that stands out from and is irreducible to Derrida's project? If Derrida's attempt to reveal the conditions of possibility as well as of impossibility for meaning constitutes a step back from completely succumbing to the lure of our desire for plenitude, does not Wittgenstein's silence amount to another kind of step back? On my view, it names a moment in which we relinquish the desire for plenitude and acknowledge that otherness is at work in meaning. It is the *caesura*, the breaking point at which we step back from the illusory lure of language and take a breath as language – as Wittgenstein might put it – speaks for itself. In fact, I would suggest that a double movement happens in Wittgenstein's silence: it is at once a refusal as well as an affirmation. To that end, is there a place in Derrida for this sort of silence? These are open questions to which my tentative reactions in this work can by no means give a satisfactory response. I pose them to show the necessity of deepening our inquiry into the overlapping aspects of Wittgenstein and Derrida's work, as well as to indicate possible points of departure for future research.

Conclusion

I have tried in this essay to advance and defend my account of significant similarities between Wittgenstein and Derrida as per their philosophies of language and of ethics. More than that, I have tried to make a convincing and plausible argument for the ethical thought that springs from each of their work. To start with the other (and indeed, Derrida would say that everything starts with the other) is the most critical and ethical opening of explicitly ethical thought. To think of the other *first*, and to humble ourselves before the other without whom we would not be possible, is to answer the call that cannot be fulfilled yet which demands that we always go further. The way in which we are always already questioned, always already *called into* question, precedes, exceeds and makes possible any philosophy, any ethics, any politics. It is my contention that thinking of the other is the necessary precondition for any democratic thought; indeed, I would suggest that further work can and should be undertaken in terms of the relationship between the ethico-political attitude I have been promoting and more elaborate, specific political theory.

What I have wanted to convey most strongly throughout this work is my feeling that the ethical thought I am recommending is incompatible with a merely academic or theoretical interest. As Nietzsche says in *The Gay Science*, "all great problems demand great love ... [i]t makes the most telling difference whether a thinker has a personal relationship to his problems and finds in them his destiny, his distress, and his greatest happiness, or an 'impersonal' one, meaning that he can do no better than to touch them and grasp them with the antennae of cold, curious thought"[184]. This passage quite

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[184] *The Gay Science*, §345.

beautifully articulates my belief that a philosophical account of ethics cannot be carried out for the sake of purely academic discussion. My intent here is not to belittle or dismiss normative theories of ethics that do not explicitly discuss the importance of thinking of the other; however, I would suggest that acknowledging our debt of gratitude to the other (which is to say other people) is the keystone for any possible theory of ethics. Before, as well as *after*, the delimitation of any systematic ethico-political project, we have the relationship with the other. Of all the insights drawn out in this essay (and many of them have occurred to me as though I were in receipt of a gift, since they came upon me and I was not dominant over their realization), I would hope that the Wittgensteinian/Derridian perspective about our indebtedness to others stays with the reader the most. Repayment of our debt, not only in terms of everyday generosity, but also in the broader sense articulated and called for in this essay, should be the deepest ethical impulse that drives us to thought and action.

> *Circumstances of course alter cases*
> *in fact alter words' meanings*
> *and no never did struggle with yes*
> *it was no contest*
> *when I looked in your eyes*
> *there was no semantic play of word-games*
> *in this more important arena*
> *where we drown and swim to shore*
> *and have no selves and discover ourselves*
> *and melt in the silences*
> *and our opposites join*
> *and now and then we are happy*
> -Al Purdy

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