

Piergiorgio Donatelli
piergiorgio.donatelli@uniroma1.it

Forms of Life, Forms of Reality

Abstract

The article explores aspects of the notion of forms of life in the Wittgensteinian tradition especially following Iris Murdoch's lead. On the one hand, the notion signals the hardness and inexhaustible character of reality, as the background needed in order to make sense of our lives in various ways. On the other, the hardness of reality is the object of a moral work of apprehension and deepening to the point at which its distinctive character dissolves into the family of connections we have gained for ourselves. The two movements of thought are connected and necessary.

1. Approaches to forms of life

In this paper I will explore aspects of the notion of forms of life in the Wittgensteinian tradition especially following Iris Murdoch's lead. I will start though with a brief remark about Amartya Sen. Sen distinguishes between approaches based on what he calls "transcendental institutionalism" and those based on "realization-focused comparison" (2009: 7). He argues that transcendental institutionalism "concentrates its attention on what it identifies as perfect justice". "It tries only to identify social characteristics that cannot be transcended in terms of justice, and its focus is thus not on comparing feasible societies, all of which may fall short of the

ideals of perfection”. “Second, in searching for perfection, transcendental institutionalism concentrates primarily on getting the institutions right, and it is not directly focused on the actual societies that would ultimately emerge” (2009: 5-6). Following and reformulating Sen’s distinction we can speak about approaches which require that we know in advance the ideals of perfection as these relate to conduct and to value and which are not interested in the “actual behaviours of people and their social interactions” (2009: 6). The notion of forms of life can be used within this kind of approach. In this case it works in order to advance such a perfect theory of justice, or virtue, or the good life.¹

Conversely, there are approaches which do not hold that one begins one’s moral reflection from a perfect theory (Sen himself argues that this is neither necessary nor sufficient in order to engage in moral and political thought), and which arrive at judgments from assessments that require a detailed knowledge of the situations under consideration. In these judgments the *description* of the situation is of particular relevance. To take an example given by Sen, if we wish to argue, say, for the superiority of a painting by Van Gogh over one by Picasso “we do not need to get steamed up about identifying the most perfect picture in the world, which would beat the Van Goghs and the Picassos and all other paintings in the world” (2009: 101). What is relevant on the other hand is description and comparison, and these are clearly steeped in culture and judgment.

We can employ the notion of forms of life within the latter kind of approach, and in this case it will be of no help to us to determine those criteria which will allow us to apply a general theory to particular situations, instead what will help us is to seek a direct encounter with those concrete situations. More generally we can say, with Wittgenstein, that our thought (not just moral thought) has to do with movements that are internal to forms of life – as he writes: “to imagine a language means to imagine a form

¹ Moments in Martha Nussbaum’s elaboration of the capability approach seem to fit into this perspective. Metaphysical Aristotelianism is also an example (though this latter is hard to identify; we may perhaps take as examples those of Philippa Foot and Michael Thompson).

of life” (2009: §19) –, movements that Stanley Cavell has taught us to visualize both in their vertical dimension, in connection with what is most “natural” in human forms of life, and in their horizontal dimension, linked to what is most “social” (Cavell 1989). These are movements through which we explore and reflect on the forms of life that are the context of our activities and relationships, and on the other hand they are movements through which we transform, through reflection and conduct, the forms of life themselves. I have given here just a few indications of a general approach by using the distinction put forward by Sen. I wish to discuss now a specific approach, one which has its roots in Wittgenstein’s philosophy and which has been further developed by authors influenced by him and who have themselves become classics, such as Cavell, Iris Murdoch and Cora Diamond.

2. Iris Murdoch

I will begin with some observations on the notion of forms of life in this approach – starting from a development present in the thought of Iris Murdoch – in which the central notions are those of *background* or *framework*, or that of the *larger structure of reality* in which our words, thoughts, choices, and our lives themselves have a place. As I will try to show these are concepts that are also congenial to a wider reflection on forms of life.

Following the thread of Murdoch’s argument this paper will be dedicated to throwing light on a particular problem. Murdoch helps us to understand that a background is the terrain of our thoughts and behaviors *against which* they unfold, yet at the same time it constitutes the active space of our lives, where such thoughts and behaviors have their being, and as such *it dissolves as mere background* that sets up a contrast between it and us, and appears to us instead rather as the articulation of who we are and what we do.

3. Background as contrast

Let us begin to consider the first aspect of the notion of background, which is linked to a particular type of realism for which the world – considered as the object and the source of our

attention, our sensibility and our moral conduct – is outside of ourselves and resists us. Above all, it is not the fruit of our desires and fantasies. As Iris Murdoch writes:

One might start from the assertion that morality, goodness, is a form of realism. The idea of a really good man living in a private dream world seems unacceptable. Of course a good man may be infinitely eccentric, but he must know certain things about his surroundings, most obviously the existence of other people and their claims. The chief enemy of excellence in morality (and also in art) is personal fantasy: the tissue of self-aggrandising and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one. (1998c: 347-48)

This idea of the hardness of the object of morality, of the experience of others, of the reality of the external world, lies at the root of the important notion of the independence of others, of the world and of things, and hence the conception that moral reflection is exercised on something that resists it, something marked by its profundity, something that leads this moral work along a potentially indefinite path. This is because the reality of the world and of others is not simply outside of us, on the surface, it is not a reality that we can grasp without entering, with difficulty, into that world that is not immediately our own world.

In discussing the philosophy of G.E. Moore in *Principia Ethica*, Murdoch writes:

Good is indefinable not for the reasons offered by Moore's successors, but because of the infinite difficulty of the task of apprehending a magnetic but inexhaustible reality. [...] If apprehension of good is apprehension of the individual and the real, the good partakes of the infinite elusive character of reality. (1998b: 333-34)

Here Murdoch defends an image of moral thought as a form of knowledge and of sensibility that has an object and is independent of us, with regard to which we must try to overcome a natural inclination to act upon it according to our own interests and projections. In view of this she cites Freud because, as she says,

Freud takes a thoroughly pessimistic view of human nature. He sees the psyche as an egocentric system of quasi-mechanical energy, whose

natural attachments are sexual, ambiguous, and hard for the subject to understand or control. [...] Objectivity and unselfishness are not natural to human beings (1998c: 341).

Murdoch indicates here that there are contexts in which it is precisely the otherness of others, their diversity and separateness, that is at the origin of the type of moral density and thickness which we inhabit when we reflect on other human beings, on animals and on nature. They are for us the sources of requests, duties or scruples, but also, and importantly, of a sense of value that takes the form of the mere contemplation of something profound and full of meaning. As she writes: “The more the separateness and differentness of other people is realised, and the fact seen that another man has needs and wishes as demanding as one’s own, the harder it becomes to treat a person as a thing” (1998c: 353-54). But this is true for the rest of the world also, not just for other human beings. Murdoch is critical of the romantic pleasure in nature which takes possession of it for our own purposes. For her what is crucial is instead that “we take a self-forgetful pleasure in the sheer alien pointless independent existence of animals, birds, stones and trees” (1998d: 369-70). This type of pleasure is able to free us from a centripetal concentration on our own ego, allowing us to appreciate external reality in its independence from our desires and our need for consolation and reassurance, in its subjection to necessity and to chance. For Murdoch: “We are what we seem to be, transient mortal creatures subject to necessity and chance. That is to say that there is, in my view, no God in the traditional sense of that term; and the traditional sense is perhaps the only sense” (1998d: 365). She also writes:

The Good has nothing to do with purpose, indeed it excludes the idea of purpose. “All is vanity” is the beginning and the end of ethics. The only genuine way to be good is to be good “for nothing” in the midst of a scene where every “natural” thing, including one’s own mind, is subject to chance, that is, to necessity (1998c: 358).

Here chance and necessity denote the harshness of a world from which we can draw no consolation. Nonetheless, this harshness is evoked here to remind us of a reality that is infinitely difficult to

reach, and yet at the same time is internal to our capacity for transformation and improvement. In this perspective, Murdoch's reflection (in its own way) belongs to the philosophical genre that Cavell calls moral perfectionism and more largely to the philosophical genre of the art of living. But I would like to note here that Murdoch's rejection of a conception of nature as a source of consolation and tranquillity, in all its countless and disorderly manifestations, distances her from the classical uses of nature in spiritual exercises, either Stoic or Epicurean (say, Seneca and Lucretius).

Murdoch's polemical target, however, is closer to us. She does not want such a contrast between the world and our moral work to be represented in Kantian or Romantic terms. She reads these latter perspectives as a form of self-indulgence, not as self-discipline, that is as a narcissistic exaltation in which otherness is functional to reassurance (this is her understanding of Kant's sublime). The moral attitudes she wishes to endorse are those "which emphasize the inexhaustible detail of the world, the endlessness of the task of understanding, the importance of not assuming that one has got individuals and situations 'taped' [...]" (1998a: 87). "The difficulty is to keep the attention fixed upon the real situation and to prevent it from returning surreptitiously to the self with consolations of self-pity, resentment, fantasy and despair. [...] It is a *task* to come to see the world as it is" (1998d: 375).

The work of moral reflection is thus centered on the understanding of the world, a world which is not constituted by humanly and morally neutral facts in respect of which morality can be represented as a ring that encloses a certain area of independent facts within a given perimeter, attributing to them a special moral property. As Murdoch writes: "a moral concept seems less like a movable and extensible ring laid down to cover a certain area of fact, and more like a total difference of *Gestalt*. We differ not only because we select different objects out of the same world but because we see different worlds" (1998a: 82). Here, many different questions are brought together, but I wish to draw particular attention to the characterization of moral work that emerges, as work of deepening and conceptual reorganization focusing on the

understanding of the world, that is to say, of the worlds. It is a struggle against the obstacles of fantasy, of the need for consolation and of the centripetal forces of egotism, a struggle aided by certain *techniques* (another signal of the correspondence of her thought with the philosophical genre of the art of living and of moral perfectionism), among which she mentions prayer and the experience of beauty.

4. Human life

I would now like to begin to show how this contrast between the ego and the outside world, characterized as “permanent background” (Murdoch, 1998c: 343), is able to explain important areas of moral thought, and two significant types of moral consideration in particular. The first is linked to a sense of human commonality, the second to a kind of respect driven by a sense of animal and human life as estranged and foreign.

Let us start with the first type of consideration. We can be struck by the independence and autonomy of life, that sets it apart from what emanates from our subjective ego, and yet it is precisely this characteristic of life that can create a human bond or solidarity. I will give two examples.

(1) I would like to start with a citation from Javier Cercas’s novel, *Soldiers of Salamis*. It is a remarkable passage in which the Republican troops are in flight from Barcelona in 1939, heading for the French borders, and a group of them decide to execute some Nationalist prisoners. One of them escapes – a leader of the fascist Falange, Sánchez Mazas – and a Republican soldier follows him, but in the end he decides to spare him. Cercas describes this Republican soldier’s encounter with Mazas, who is hiding in a ditch, staring at the soldier who has found him, waiting for the bullet that will finish him off :

The soldier is looking at him; Sánchez Mazas is looking at the soldier, but his weak eyes don’t understand what they see: beneath the sodden hair and wide forehead and eyebrows covered in raindrops the soldier’s look doesn’t express compassion or hatred, or even disdain, but a kind of secret or unfathomable joy, something verging on cruelty, something that resists reason, but nor is it instinct, something

that remains there with the same blind stubbornness with which blood persists in its course and the earth in its immovable orbit and all beings in their obstinate condition of being, something that eludes words the way water in the stream eludes stone, because words are only made for saying to each other, for saying the sayable, when the sayable is everything except what rules us or makes us live or matters or what we are or what this anonymous defeated soldier is, who now looks at this man whose body almost blends in with the earth and the brown water in the ditch, and who calls out loudly without ever taking his eyes off him:

“There’s nobody over here!”

Then he turns and walks away. (Cercas 2003: 95-96)

In Cercas’ description, everything that rules us and makes us live is in solidarity with that body merging with the muddy ditch. It is the thread of life, at its most impersonal that – responding to a fundamental necessity, above or below ordinary morality – gains the upper hand. It is a thread woven from circumstances, in which the war has united two enemies, two people who are fighting for opposing ideals, one for freedom, the other for fascism. It is not that moral principles draw a gesture of solidarity towards the fascist from the Republican combatant, nor is it a sense of humanity, it is the joyous and cruel recognition of the course of life, of how “blood persists in its course and the earth in its immovable orbit and all beings in their obstinate condition of being”. It is this independence of human life and of the entire cosmos from our interests and ideals that weaves the horizon of this choice.

(2) Another example in a similar vein – that has made an impression on more than one philosopher – is to be found in Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*. The wicked Rogue Riderhood, having rowed out on the Thames in thick fog, is hit by another boat and ends up in the river. Half drowned, his body already stiffening, he is carried to the pub and a doctor is called. Dickens writes:

No one has the least regard for the man; with them all, he has been an object of avoidance, suspicion, and aversion; but the spark of life within him is curiously separable from himself now, and they have a deep interest in it, probably because it *is* life, and they are living and must die. [...]

See! A token of life! An indubitable token of life! The spark may smoulder and go out, or it may glow and expand, but see! The four rough fellows, seeing, shed tears. Neither Riderhood in this world, nor Riderhood in the other, could draw tears from them; but a striving human soul between the two can do it easily. (Dickens 1998, Ch. 36)

Cora Diamond remarks on this passage that it shows “the sense of death as our common enemy, an enemy of a special and terrible sort” (1990: 170). In a way that recalls the passage from Cercas, here life and death appear to us as beyond our reach, but at the same time as drawing us together, as the source of the moral force that moves Dickens’ characters to struggle for the life of a man for whom they felt only contempt. Gilles Deleuze was also struck by this passage, seeing it as the supreme expression of the idea of life construed as pure immanence, a life without name or personality, but which enraptures us and draws us together: “Between his life and his death, there is a moment that is only that of *a* life playing with death” (2001: 28). In this passage, as in Diamond’s and Deleuze’s comments on it, and in the passage from Cercas, to have a life appears as that type of reality that Murdoch wishes to defend from the ego’s demands to incorporate all reality into its network of centripetal sentiments, claiming instead the distance of reality from this. Nonetheless, it is precisely this sense of reality that resists our desire for incorporation that is at the root of a commonality that touches human sympathy and morality.

5. Nature in its indifference

In these examples, the life that strikes us in its autonomy – the “blind stubbornness with which blood persists in its course and the earth in its immovable orbit and all beings in their obstinate condition of being”, as Cercas puts it – is at the root of a regained sense of bonds and of solidarity. I would now like to present some examples in which the harshness of reality produces a different type of moral response.

One example comes from Werner Herzog’s film-documentary *Grizzly Man* (2005), where the director reworks and comments on the footage of the explorer and environmentalist, Timothy Treadwell who, driven by his love of grizzly bears, spent thirteen

summers filming them in Alaska. This love led Treadwell to a tragic end, when he and his fiancée were killed and partly eaten by a bear, in front of his camera, which was still filming. Herzog thematizes the non-human ferocity of the grizzlies. As he says in the voice-over: “What haunts me is that in all the faces of all the bears that Treadwell has ever filmed I discover no kinship, no understanding, no mercy, I see only the overwhelming indifference of nature. To me there is no such thing as a secret world of the bears. [...] but for Timothy Treadwell this bear was a friend, a savior”.

At the end of the film, Herzog remarks: “While we watch the animals in their choice of being, in their grace and ferociousness, a thought becomes more and more clear, that it is not so much a look at wild nature as it is an insight into ourselves, our nature”. The concept of the distance and of the independence of external reality, of nature, and of animals, and at root also of our own nature, here takes on a different hue. What freezes the blood is the vision of an external reality that we cannot control, nor even grasp completely through the intellect or the imagination. However, this is telling us something we need to know, as inhabitants of this planet in which we live with animals like grizzly bears, and it is the fact that this world is in the end a world that is extraneous to us. The bears seem to share many things with us, like eating, playing, washing, but in the weave of these activities what emerges is their crushing disinterest in us, that renders them so utterly extraneous, animals in whose eyes we cannot find our own sentiments. And further, this glimpse into the extraneity of the grizzlies is also a glimpse into our own animal nature, that is to say, into our nature as seen from the outside, which appears to us as indifferent and alien, bone-chilling and mysterious. I could offer many examples in which our own nature strikes us as extraneous and indifferent, but I would just like to mention one type of example that has to do with illness. In illness, particularly in long-term illnesses that lead to death – those that leave us with time to think and to find ways to live with them, in effect to be changed by them – we may experience something similar to what appears in the examples given above. The illness may bring with it a striking sense of our animality, we become aware of just how much we are animals,

vulnerable, mortal, perishable, and we experience the unbridgeable distance between this and our sense of ourselves as authors of our own lives and actors in the world. I will come back to the question of vulnerability, which is a huge issue, but for now I would just like to underline that vulnerability can be portrayed as something impossible to think.

There is a long tradition of moral thought that considers human dignity and individual freedom as incompatible with the contingency of goods and of external conditions, including, primarily, that of our own bodies. What I am suggesting here is that this conception could be not only *false* but could also indicate a deep human inclination to *avoid a truth that is hard to make our own*. But it is precisely this inclination to avoidance – which characterizes our experience of mortality and of human animality – that is the ground of a new experience of ourselves, in which it is the dramatic independence of our bodies that gives meaning to our lives.

To recapitulate: that the world is at one and the same time the place we live in, our home, and a strange and frightening place; that the other animals are our companions in the adventure of life and at the same time overwhelmingly indifferent to us, sometimes interested in eating us; that our life itself can strike us as extraneous and indifferent in contrast with the comfort we draw from the personal and social sense we have of ourselves, these types of lessons about the world, animals, and life itself, are accessible to us precisely because we manage to hold on to the objectivity of reality, in all its harshness, setting aside the desire for consolation and reassurance. It is this sense of a reality external to us that drives our moral participation.

To go back to Iris Murdoch, it is important to learn “how real things can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self. This exercise of *detachment* is difficult and valuable whether the thing contemplated is a human being or the root of a tree or the vibration of a colour or a sound” (1998c: 353).

6. Dissolving permanent backgrounds

At this point we need to explore the other side of the concept of permanent background. In fact, the deepening of our sense of reality required in the moral work described by Murdoch tends to dismantle the idea of reality described here as the type of otherness that engenders the range of moral sentiments that reveal to us nature, others and ourselves as important, profound and meaningful. This is because as we deepen our knowledge of the forms of life, this otherness tends to dissolve as a permanent background and to reappear as a bundle of relations and interconnections. Other existences, the environment, our own nature, become the forms of life of which we are part in virtue of the connections that we have established.

The forms of life, the permanent backgrounds, to which we respond are constituted of conceptual organizations, of the mass of connections that link activities, individuals, attitudes, sentiments, facts and many other things. Moral work therefore also has to do with the progressive attempt to deepen our knowledge of these conceptual organizations, in accordance with their various ramifications, as they are the backgrounds (plural) that can come into contact with each other and interweave. Murdoch is of help to us (as are the other authors in this tradition) precisely because she does not separate, but rather joins together, the thesis of the independence of reality with that regarding the moral work of its apprehension. The deepening apprehension of the conceptual background, of the reality of others, of nature and of the world, is at the same time also a way in which we are transformed, together with the world in which we participate and explore. In discovering connections and making them our own we elaborate and render accessible new forms of life in which the initial reality loses its sense of distance and hardness so that we may reclaim it as a field of possibilities.

As Wittgenstein writes, it is only against the background of the “bustle” of life, of the flux of life, that we speak of actions, react, and use concepts: “The background is the bustle of life” (1980: 625). And he adds:

How could human behaviour be described? Surely only by showing the actions of a variety of humans, as they are all mixed-up together. Not what *one* man is doing *now*, but the whole hurly-burly [*Gewimmel*], is the background against which we see an action, and it determines our judgment, our concepts, and our reactions (1980: §629).

The bustle of life shows what is important for us, it is a pattern where what is significant keeps recurring with variations (Wittgenstein 1980: §672). But reflection through which we notice what is important, and the fact that it might not be so for other people, brings forth the sense of possibility. The connections we make, the spontaneous agreement and sympathy we find between things, are now gained, acknowledged, as the possibility that things agree differently, the possibility to live with different concepts (Wittgenstein 1980: §§638-40, 699). In realizing this, what was perceived as the bustle of life, *against which* actions, reactions, language and thought are determined, transforms into the space of the connections we make, into the appreciations of what is important, of what matters to us, and thus into to the space of possibility, of thought and action. The background transforms, as it were, into the foreground, of what offers itself to our *attention* (cf. Wittgenstein 1980: §725).

I will now look at a few examples to make this point clear.

7. Animals and the transformation of forms of life

I would like to return to the question of our relationship with animals. Again in this context Diamond's work will be very useful in helping us to develop this theme. In some of her essays, and in particular in "Eating Meat and Eating People" and in "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy", Diamond elaborates the point I wish to discuss here with great perspicuity. In her essay "Eating Meat and Eating People" she shows how moral thought proceeds by going more deeply into our knowledge of what it means for an animal to have a life. Doing this is possible for us because of the existence of a permanent background, in Murdoch's terms, involving the concept of animal, a concept which is constituted from a mass of responses, reactions, perceptions, activities, and relations that may be incoherent among themselves,

but this mass has enough order to allow us to think, on each occasion, of these *diverse* beings as *animals*, and, at the same time, to establish families of connections that account for the differences we determine among, for example, animals we see as companions, like dogs and cats; harmful animals, like rats and mosquitoes; wild animals like grizzly bears; and animals that we eat. These latter may be seen as animals that have been raised in a way respectful of their lives – in traditional farms, for example – or alternatively as animals treated in such a way that it is hard to speak of them as such, even for the workers who handle them, even though they are actually chickens or pigs. So this incoherent mass of activities, perceptions and attitudes constitutes nonetheless a sufficiently unitary background to allow us to find in it diverse conceptual orderings. As Wittgenstein writes: “If a concept depends on a pattern of life, then there must be some indefiniteness in it. For if a pattern deviates from the norm, what we want to say here would become quite dubious” (Wittgenstein 1980: §652). For example, we recognize immediately, in pets, beings that have a life to which we wish to attribute many of the characteristics that we generally attribute to the humans who live with them; or, watching documentaries and learning from primatology studies, we may come to feel very close to the great apes.

These possibilities of thought, which belong to the work of apprehension of the reality of certain animals, the reality of their individual existences, consist in the capacity to establish connections. We connect the concept that we have of certain behaviors that are part of their lives with aspects of our own lives. In this way, we read in them certain traits which we consider it appropriate to respond with, say, a sense of concern, or of solidarity or respect – responses that we cultivate towards other human beings. In so doing, however, we are transformed. The concept of ourselves as human beings is transformed, because it is not a case of attributing characteristics to beings as if we were situated on a separate plane from them (this is the image proposed by traditional animalist ethics, as in the well-known theories of Peter Singer and Tom Regan, and more generally by “transcendental” approaches, in Sen’s terms). As we acquire

awareness of these connections (in thought and feeling, and in some or all of the threads that woven together form the mass of responses which constitute a conceptual framework), our sense of what these lives are for us changes, and along with it our sense of what we are in our own eyes also changes. In other words, these conceptual movements modify the forms of life and therefore modify both the concept we have of animals and that of ourselves: this latter being redefined now, in part, by the relationship we have recognized with certain animals.

In her essay “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy”, Diamond discusses the difficult and risky work of Elizabeth Costello, the character in J.M. Coetzee’s book of the same name. Costello’s work consists in showing what happens to animals in our world, in the course of which she exposes herself as a wounded animal. Here I’d like to recall instead another of Coetzee’s novels, *Disgrace*, in which the elaboration of a closeness to dogs is realized through a connection with their dead bodies. The main character, David, after being driven out of his lectureship in disgrace, begins to help an acquaintance (Bev Shaw) in a veterinary clinic:

His whole being is gripped by what happens in the theatre. He is convinced the dogs know their time has come. Despite the silence and the painlessness of the procedure, despite the good thoughts that Bev Shaw thinks and that he tries to think, despite the airtight bags in which they tie the newmade corpses, the dogs in the yard smell what is going on inside (1999: 143).

But it is David’s reaction to the way the dogs’ bodies are disposed of, that I want to comment on. Coetzee writes:

Since Bev Shaw is the one who inflicts the needle, it is he who takes charge of disposing of the remains. The morning after each killing session he drives the loaded kombi to the grounds of Settlers Hospital, to the incinerator, and there consigns the bodies in their black bags to the flames.

It would be simpler to cart the bags to the incinerator immediately after the session and leave them there for the incinerator crew to dispose of. But that would mean leaving them on the dump with the rest of the weekend’s scourings: with waste from the hospital wards, carrion scooped up at the roadside, malodorous refuse from the

tannery – a mixture both casual and terrible. He is not prepared to inflict such dishonour upon them.

[...]

Why has he taken on this job? To lighten the burden on Bev Shaw? For that it would be enough to drop off the bags at the dump and drive away. For the sake of the dogs? But the dogs are dead; and what do dogs know of honour and dishonour anyway?

For himself, then. For his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing (1999: 144, 145-46).

The connection that David makes with the dead bodies of the dogs arises from the mass of responses in which he participates and which tie him to the life of the dogs as companion animals, but he goes beyond this and makes a further connection that has to do with their dead bodies, in which he reads the sense of the gravity and the solemnity of the death of human beings. In so doing, however, he does not just bring the dogs into the human world, he also transforms his human world: he awakes for himself, and for those who share his sensibility, the sense of human vulnerability and of the importance of the fact that there is someone to attend to our dead bodies, just as he attends to those of the dogs. The relationship he has made his own with the dead dogs as *bodies* whose honor must be saved transforms him, and offers a transformed sense of what it means to be human to those who share his vision.

We, as readers, may also recognize ourselves as animals for whom it is right that our remains be taken care of by others. But our recognition of this does not derive from the reassuring notion that this is somehow due to human beings (as we might think in the wake of ethical theories such as those of the Stoics or Kant or Rawls), it is rather a question of what is due to animals like dogs *and like ourselves*. We come to see ourselves through a different lens, and thus we redefine ourselves in relation to the life of animals such as dogs to the point where the sharing of bodily mortality is included. In conclusion, the way in which animals are close to us is seen to transform the sense of what it means to be human: it means being adventurous, playful, bodily vulnerable. It means that

we share the having of a body. This conception of the body is not the one hidden, as it were, when we feel ourselves to be subjects (authors, actors) who speak, act, and engage in a whole series of activities that do in fact set us apart from most other animals (as they set us apart from many other human beings), it is instead the body that experiences pleasure and suffering and death, like that of an animal, like David's dogs.

In this work of apprehension and deepening, David's dogs are not a hard and ungraspable reality, they have had a role in redefining his own life and they are now a fundamental part of the connections that have molded the new human horizon in which he lives. The vulnerability that has been won and that he has made his own is no longer something that is *impossible to think*. At the same time, however, David's dogs could have such a role because their reality was not absorbed by the centripetal forces (in Murdoch's terms) of our projections; rather, David worked on the sense of their distance and the sense of respect due to independent existences to the point of changing and reshaping his vision and his life.

8. Conclusion

As we have seen, this is not an easy task, and the difficulty, or what may be perceived as an impossibility, marks out one type of human reaction and of moral thought. In the first series of examples discussed, the sense of the importance of human life, of animals and the world, as independent entities that we may not take possession of, derives from the perception that it is impossible for us to establish connections with them. Nonetheless, if we did succeed in establishing such connections the sense of otherness would be lost, but in its place we would gain different relationships and a different range of moral sentiments.

In the example of Treadwell and the grizzlies, if we were able to fully share, with regard to many non-human animals, our sense of animality, this bond would redefine us and would cease to appear strange and alien, that is, to appear to us as a background *against which* we move as human beings belonging to an independent plane of existence. In the same way, the sense of a common identity and

the fierce determination that move the soldier in Cercas's novel and the pub-goers in Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend* are activated by an awareness of the contrast between a life stripped of its subjectivity (as Deleuze writes of Dickens) and our own subjectivity. The responses of these characters are activated by their recognition of the struggle for life of the two figures and yet they are dissipated immediately afterwards. Again as Deleuze writes of the Dickens text: "Everybody bustles about to save him, to the point where, in his deepest coma, this wicked man himself senses something soft and sweet penetrating him. But to the degree that he comes back to life, his saviors turn colder, and he becomes once again mean and crude" (2001: 28).

If, however, this momentary commonality had entered into the lives of these "saviors" to the point where the sense of their selves is modified, and the mass of their responses and their inner order reshaped, their special interest for life described by Dickens would be lost, and this loss would signify a change of their whole life: they would have become different persons.

I would like to conclude by remarking that in both cases (that of the respect of animal nature as an indifferent realm as in Herzog, or of human life in the impersonal sense in the examples of Cercas and Dickens, and the respect that redefines us in the case of the dogs in Coetzee) the moral considerations evoked are nourished by reflecting on forms of life. Reflections of a kind that a noble tradition – which I will call "rationalist" for want of a better term – is unable to pursue because it places the center of morality in a realm that is insensitive to the reality of life, to its forms and its relations.

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Biographical note

Piergiorgio Donatelli is Professor of Moral Philosophy at Sapienza University of Rome. He has worked on the theory and the history of ethics, and on (among others) Wittgenstein, Stanley Cavell, J.S. Mill, Michel Foucault. He is the author of several books and many articles and chapters in Italian, English and French. His recent publications explore the issues tied to the notion of human life: *La vita umana in*

prima persona (2012); *Manières d'être humain. Une autre philosophie morale* (2015). He has published a history of ethics: *Etica. I classici, le teorie e le linee evolutive* (2015).