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The Philosophy of the Face and 20th Century Literature and Art

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The Philosophy of the Face and 20th Century Literature and Art

Abstract

This dissertation explores the importance of the human face in modern literature, philosophy, and art. "Meaning is a physiognomy," wrote Wittgenstein--quite literally, if somewhat cryptically--in the *Philosophical Investigations*. My project takes this remark seriously and begins, in chapters one and two, by reading Wittgenstein's discussion of aspect-seeing alongside recent work in cognitive science and the philosophy of mind in order to explain how we perceive mentality in the appearance of a human face. I then trace the surprising ways in which our ability to understand facial expressions informs not only the way we understand language, but also other minds and the concept of personhood itself. Chapters three and four extend these findings into an analysis of visual portraiture, focusing on the paintings of Francis Bacon. Regarding the sense of injury often associated with Bacon's violently distorted likenesses, I ask why such "magical" feelings arise at all with respect to images of human faces. Reading Wittgenstein along with Gombrich and Wollheim, I find that the mind naturally responds to images of faces as expressive of mentality: we not only see faces *in* images but also to an extent see the images *as* persons. My final chapter looks into the ethics of physiognomy, asking what difference it makes whether we see the mind as a private substance or, as John Ashbery has suggested, a "visible core." This chapter reads two narratives about faces that dramatize the solipsistic consequences of a Cartesian commitment to mental privacy: that of the faceless woman in Rilke's *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* and the Magistrate's dreams about the tortured woman in Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*. I next consider Levinas' ethics of the face, an ambivalent critique of Husserlian phenomenology that tries, but ultimately fails, to escape this Cartesian predicament. In the end, the convergence of ethics and physiognomy may explain the face's importance to the modern imagination: perhaps, as Wittgenstein's writings suggest, faces grip us so because they call upon the same powers of pattern recognition that enable us to grasp the reality of other minds and moral values as well.

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**THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE FACE
AND 20TH CENTURY LITERATURE AND ART**

Bernard J. Rhie

A DISSERTATION

in

English

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2005



Supervisor of Dissertation



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Bernard Jaeseong Rhie

2005

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ABSTRACT

THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE FACE AND 20TH CENTURY LITERATURE AND ART

Bernard J. Rhie

Adviser: Susan Stewart

This dissertation explores the importance of the human face in modern literature, philosophy, and art. “Meaning is a physiognomy,” wrote Wittgenstein—quite literally, if somewhat cryptically—in the *Philosophical Investigations*. My project takes this remark seriously and begins, in chapters one and two, by reading Wittgenstein’s discussion of aspect-seeing alongside recent work in cognitive science and the philosophy of mind in order to explain how we perceive mentality in the appearance of a human face. I then trace the surprising ways in which our ability to understand facial expressions informs not only the way we understand language, but also other minds and the concept of personhood itself. Chapters three and four extend these findings into an analysis of visual portraiture, focusing on the paintings of Francis Bacon. Regarding the sense of injury often associated with Bacon’s violently distorted likenesses, I ask why such “magical” feelings arise at all with respect to images of human faces. Reading Wittgenstein along with Gombrich and Wollheim, I find that the mind naturally responds to images of faces as expressive of mentality: we not only see faces *in* images but also to an extent see the images *as* persons. My final chapter looks into the ethics of physiognomy, asking what difference it makes whether we see the mind as

a private substance or, as John Ashbery has suggested, a “visible core.” This chapter reads two narratives about faces that dramatize the solipsistic consequences of a Cartesian commitment to mental privacy: that of the faceless woman in Rilke’s *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* and the Magistrate’s dreams about the tortured woman in Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*. I next consider Levinas’ ethics of the face, an ambivalent critique of Husserlian phenomenology that tries, but ultimately fails, to escape this Cartesian predicament. In the end, the convergence of ethics and physiognomy may explain the face’s importance to the modern imagination: perhaps, as Wittgenstein’s writings suggest, faces grip us so because they call upon the same powers of pattern recognition that enable us to grasp the reality of other minds and moral values as well.

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Preface

Faces play a truly special role in human cognition. To begin with, no other visual object communicates as many different types of social information. As Andrew Young and Vicki Bruce put it:

We use them not only to recognise people we know, but also to infer moods and feelings, to regulate social interaction through eye contact and facial gestures, to assist in speech comprehension (e.g., when lip reading; ... even people with normal hearing do this), to determine age and sex, and even to attribute characteristics on the basis of social stereotypes.¹

One linguistic measure of the centrality of the human face to social life is its common figurative employment as a synecdoche for the whole person. Consider such idiomatic phrases as “face-to-face,” “say it to his face,” “set one’s face against,” “to lose face,” “shut the door in his face” and “to show one’s face in public.” The referent of the word “face” in these examples quite obviously extends far beyond the front of the human head, rhetorically encompassing the whole person.

It is this everyday linguistic association between faces and persons that enables literary and artistic representations of faces to serve so naturally as indices of psychological states. Toni Morrison, for example, employs this logic in her novel, *Song of Solomon*, at a moment when the main character, named Milkman, engages in a bit of long-overdue self-scrutiny:

¹ Young, A., Bruce, V., “Perceptual Categories and the Computation of ‘Grandmother’” in Vicki Bruce, ed., *Face Recognition: a Special Issue of the European Journal of Cognitive Psychology* 3 (1), pp. 5-49, p. 7. The parenthetical remarks on lip reading refer to a study by McGurk, H., MacDonald, J. (1976). “Hearing lips and seeing voices” in *Nature* (264), pp. 746-8.

Milkman stood before his mirror and glanced, in the low light of the wall lamp, at his reflection. He was, as usual, unimpressed with what he saw. He had a fine enough face. Eyes women complimented him on, a firm jaw line, splendid teeth. Taken apart, it looked all right. Even better than all right. But it lacked coherence, a coming together of the features into a total self. It was all very tentative, the way he looked, like a man peeping around a corner of someplace he is not supposed to be, trying to make up his mind whether to go forward or to turn back.²

The apparent disjuncture of the features of Milkman's face betrays a hesitant personality that is developmentally incomplete, and thus manifestly out of joint. Here, as elsewhere in Morrison's novel, Milkman shows himself to be something of a modern Hamlet, whose literary spirit haunts Morrison's own meditation on ghosts and intergenerational inheritance. The great themes of Shakespeare's drama—the spectral presence of a dead father, the troubled affective bonds between a mother and her son, the inverse relationship between thought and action, and the psychological mood of melancholy—all figure prominently in Morrison's fable about African-American masculinity. The importance of the face to its figurative logic as well is therefore unsurprising, since the legibility of the face is naturally a question of great urgency in Shakespeare's drama of deceit and betrayal.

Morrison's faith in the meaningfulness of the face's appearance, however, inverts the profound mistrust with which faces are consistently (and understandably) regarded throughout *Hamlet*. Shakespeare's play is, if anything, a skeptical meditation on the incommensurability of surfaces and depths. In Claudius' Denmark, one would be a fool to trust appearances, especially those of a person's face: after all, "one may

² Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York: Plume, 1977), p. 69-70.

smile and smile and be a villain,” as Hamlet bitterly notes (1.5.115).³ Of course, Claudius knows this as well, as he reveals in a telling aside that more than hints at the deed that weighs heavily upon his soul: “The harlot’s cheek beautied with plast’ring art / Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it / Than is my deed to my most painted word. / O heavy burden!” (3.1.59-62). Here the king’s public face is shown to be a kind of mask, and we can see why in a world rendered so rotten by political theater, Hamlet would perversely insist that the “fruitful river in the eye” and the “dejected havior of the visage” should not be taken as reliable signs of his inner grief: “For they are actions that a man might play” – “but the trappings and the suits of woe” – whereas he has “that within which passes show” (1.2.83-88). Perhaps Shakespeare’s point is that politics is but a debased form of theater and that therefore politics and the hermeneutic faith of physiognomy are radically incompatible: after all, in another of Shakespeare’s great political dramas we hear the ill-fated Duncan, who has just bestowed the title of the Thane of Cawdor upon Macbeth, declare the ironically self-confirming sentiment that “There’s no art / To find the mind’s construction in the face” (1.4.11-12).⁴ Unfortunately for the hapless king, Macbeth will soon conceal his own treachery with “fairest show,” having learned that “False face must hide what the false heart doth know” (1.7.82-83).

Claudius’ rhetorical play on conscience and cosmetics, and Hamlet’s obsession with the difference between sincerity and theatricality, both suggest that faces can, and often do, serve as deceitful masks. But, of course, masks need not be equated with

³ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Ed. Harold Jenkins (London: Routledge, 1982).

⁴ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Eds. David Bevington *et al.* (New York: Bantam, 1980).

disguise, regarded, that is, as *merely* theatrical, in the pejorative sense that is common in the modern West. Shakespeare's notion of deceit presupposes a doubling of the face (captured nicely in the idiom "two-faced"); but what if there is no "inner" face beneath which to search for that which "passes show"? Then, the face might be called a mask, but a mask might also be understood as a kind of face: the distinction would lose its hold on us. The ancient Greeks understood this well when they used the same word, *prosopon*, to refer to both masks and faces. Eliot's Prufrock, perhaps Hamlet's canniest modern reader, understood this too in his own neurotic way: "There will be time, there will be time / To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet" (ll. 26-27).⁵ But even when the conceptual line between face and mask becomes so utterly blurred, the face nonetheless remains a privileged index of personhood, even if the person is now regarded as a *persona*.

Twentieth-century investigations into the philosophy and science of mind tell us a great deal about why the human face and personhood are so inextricably linked. Much remarkable work has been done exploring the central role that faces play in human life. Wittgenstein, especially, attributed great importance to the face in his later philosophical reflections. In fact, the ways in which the workings of the whole body make visible the life of the mind was an abiding concern of Wittgenstein's later philosophy; for as he declared in the *Philosophical Investigations*, "the human body is

⁵ T.S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" in *The Waste Land and Other Poems*, Ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Penguin, 1998), pp. 3-8.

the best picture of the human soul” (PI p. 152).⁶ But it is clear that he regarded the face, of all the parts of the body, as the most special. As we will see, Wittgenstein cared deeply about understanding the nature of facial perception; however, he was interested not only in how we see actual faces (cf., for instance, PI §§536-539), but how the way we see faces informs numerous other aspects of human life as well, including the very possibility of philosophical reflection itself. During his discussion of rule-following in the *Investigations*, for example, we find the ancient art of face-reading invoked in order to illustrate an important point about semantics: “Meaning is a physiognomy [Die Bedeutung eine Physiognomie]” he concludes while musing upon the “character” of the game of chess (PI §568). Physiognomy turns up again in the discussion of seeing aspects and aspect-blindness in Part II (sec. xi), where he goes so far as to endow words with faces: “The familiar physiognomy [Gesicht] of a word, the feeling that it has taken up its meaning into itself, that it is an actual likeness of its meaning—there could be human beings to whom all this was alien” (PI p. 186). The aspect-blind (those who could not see a word *as* its meaning) would regard words as purely arbitrary signs, the connections between their letters and their meanings entirely conventional (as in structuralist linguistics), just as those who look at faces un-physiognomically (like Hamlet) would regard the relationship between a face’s appearance and a person’s thoughts and emotions as contingent or even non-existent. For Wittgenstein, meaning is to a word as mind is to a face; but he can express his understanding of how we

⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed., Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001). References to this text will be given parenthetically with the abbreviation PI.

experience the meaning of a word by likening a word to a face (*Gesicht*) only because he already regards faces physiognomically: that is, as expressive of mind.

Just as a word, in our everyday use of language, is not taken as an arbitrary sign of a transcendent meaning, a face is likewise not an essentially “outer” sign to be interpreted or deciphered for some contingently associated “inner” mental state. As he puts it in a passage in *Zettel*:

“We see emotion.”—We do not see facial contortions and make inferences from them (like a doctor framing a diagnosis) to joy, grief, boredom. We describe a face immediately as sad, radiant, bored, even when we are unable to give any other description of the features.—Grief, one would like to say, is personified in the face. (Z 220)⁷

Of course, someone may feign (or suppress) a facial expression to deceive us, just as someone may lie with words (as with silence), yet the possibility of deceit is grounded upon the prior and more fundamental ability of the face to *express*: “We say ‘The expression in his voice was *genuine*’. If it was spurious we think as it were of another one behind it.—*This* face he shews the world, inwardly he has another one.—But this does not mean that when his expression is *genuine* he has two the same” (PI §606). Mental states, as physiognomists have long insisted, are readily recognizable in the faces of others:

Consciousness in another’s face. Look into someone else’s face, and see the consciousness in it, and a particular *shade* of consciousness. You see on it, in it, joy, indifference, interest, excitement, torpor and so on. The light in other people’s faces.

Do you look into *yourself* in order to recognize the fury in *his* face? It is there as clearly as in your own breast. (Z 220)

⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, Eds. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright., Trans. Anscombe (Berkeley: UC Press, 1970). References to this text will be given parenthetically with the abbreviation Z.

Wittgenstein's later writings, that is, somewhat surprisingly ask us to take the art of physiognomy quite seriously, certainly more seriously, I suspect, than most of us are accustomed to doing.

For if physiognomists—from Aristotle to Montaigne, and Lavater to Lombroso—have always tried to read the mind or soul of the individual exhibited outwardly by the human face, our late modernity has tended to dismiss this desire as a deluded, even pernicious, dream. Indeed, the art historian James Elkins declares the practice of physiognomy a “dead issue” for contemporary art, and he even goes so far as to characterize the twentieth-century in general as “antiphiognomic”:

As a science, physiognomy has entirely vanished: not only do current art historians and artists not believe it but also they do not care about it, and contemporary artworks that concern the face avoid implying recoverable or specific psychological meaning. The twentieth-century is immoderate and skeptical.⁸

Of course, as Hamlet's skeptical remarks about faces clearly suggest, doubts about even its basic presuppositions have long dogged the practice of physiognomy and are therefore far from being unique to the twentieth century. For instance, Hegel's critique of Lavater in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* was neither the first nor the last of its kind to argue explicitly against the physiognomic assumption that “the reality of a man is his face.”⁹ Nonetheless, our late modern disaffection with physiognomy is of an entirely different, and I would argue higher, order. Hegel at least shared with his physiognomist opponents a fundamental belief in the mental or spiritual expressiveness of the human

⁸ James Elkins, *Pictures of the Body: Pain and Metamorphosis* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1999), p. 73.

⁹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 193.

face. As he remarked in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Fine Art*, “Although the expression of spirit must be diffused over the appearance of the entire body, it is most concentrated in the face, whereas the other members can reflect the spirit only in their position.”¹⁰ But during the twentieth-century, the once widely shared physiognomic belief in the expressive meaningfulness of the face was cast into doubt. The explicit affirmation of physiognomic views and ideas, especially in art and critical theory, became questionable, even ideologically suspect. Of course, our everyday faith in physiognomy remains untouched. As ever, people continue to interpret each other’s faces on a daily basis, either tacitly or unconsciously. But a wide range of cultural forms such as portraiture and the philosophy of art; poetry and poetic theory; even the fields of semantics and ethics, all bear evidence of the problematic nature of the face in modernity.

A number of factors have surely contributed to the attenuation or rupture of the physiognomic link between the face and the meaningfulness of its expressions. Perhaps many of us simply doubt whether the varieties of emotional experience considered typical of modernity (such as *anomie*, *angst*, shock and trauma) can be expressed *at all*, let alone by the features of the face. An absolute absence of expression, according to this view, may very well characterize the modern face at its most “expressive,” calling into doubt whether expression of any kind can convey what is most meaningful (or meaningless) about our troubled modernity. Moreover, some particularly baleful

¹⁰ G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel’s Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art, Vol. 1*. Trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 727.

aspects of the twentieth-century are directly related to the ideological distortion and misuse of physiognomy itself: for example, we might recall such repellent physiognomic theories as Lombroso's "criminal anthropology," which correlated craniofacial features to propensities for criminality, and Otto Weininger's *Sex and Character* (1903), with its misogynistic and anti-Semitic theory of human morphology. As recently as the 1920's, Lombrosian measurements were admissible as prosecutorial evidence in American courtrooms, while Weininger's ideas were valued and disseminated by Nazi propagandists.¹¹ In the wake of such dark associations as these, it is no wonder that physiognomy as a whole became suspect. And further contributing to this theoretical distrust may be various forms of postmodern skepticism about personhood itself: such skepticism, after all, entails doubt about the meaningfulness of the face. In Paul de Man's deconstructive notion that literary images of "defacement" symbolize the figurative destiny of the psychological "subject" (itself regarded as nothing but a linguistic trope), it is as if the truth of physiognomy were being affirmed in an inverted and ironic manner, the fate of the face bound yet to the fate of the "inner" person.

Whatever the reasons may be, the physiognomic face, understood as expressive of a person's character, thoughts and emotions, has now receded from sight into the shadows cast by the doubts of a skeptical age. One measure of the widespread cultural suspicion regarding physiognomy and the meaningfulness of the face is the frequency with which modern artworks reduce the face to the plasticity of a mask or the

¹¹ On Weininger's use by the Nazis, cf. Ray Monk, *Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (New York: Penguin, 1990), p. 23.

contingency of a sign, aesthetic tendencies exemplified by the silkscreens of Andy Warhol and the photographs of Cindy Sherman. Early in the twentieth-century, Guillaume Apollinaire's musician from Saint-Merry "with no eyes no nose no ears" and Giorgio de Chirico's faceless mannequins prefigured but one limit of a generalized occulting or eclipse of the face.¹² And yet, despite the radical questioning of the meaningfulness of the face, or indeed perhaps because of it, the meaning of the face as such remains very much *in question*. Doubt, after all, is not the same as indifference. That is, the face, even when treated with profound skepticism by modern thinkers and artists, nonetheless remains a matter of great urgency, crucial to any understanding of what it means to be human, including what it means to be able to *mean* anything at all.

In a foreword that J.M. Coetzee wrote for Cecile Pineda's novel *Face*, a harrowing tale of a man who becomes badly disfigured (in effect, faceless) after a terrible accident, Coetzee suggestively remarks that one thing Pineda's novel shows us is that our culture has yet to give adequate thought to the meaning of the human face:

Helio Cara is a man who loses his face and learns what it is to live without a face in a society that is neither particularly cruel nor particularly kind, just has no philosophy of the face, has given no thought to the face, and therefore reacts to facelessness with bewilderment and anger.¹³

I doubt Coetzee himself believes that we have given no thought at all to the face: indeed, as I will show in chapter five, his own novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*, published four years before Pineda's, is an important contribution to what might be

¹² On Apollinaire's faceless flute-player and his influence on surrealism and other modernist movements, see Willard Bohn, *Apollinaire and the Faceless Man: The Creation and Evolution of a Modern Motif* (London: Associated Univ. Presses, 1991).

¹³ J.M. Coetzee, "Foreward" in Cecile Pineda, *Face*, Rev. ed. (San Antonio: Wings Press, 2003), p. xi.

called the moral philosophy of the face. Moreover, the rich insights about faces culled from the writings of many others and gathered together in the pages of this dissertation also belie the sweep of Coetzee's remarks. Yet I would agree with the spirit of his words. If the face has certainly been an object of reflection, nonetheless still much more remains to be discovered, synthesized, and thought through before we can answer such fundamental questions about the face as Coetzee poses here:

What is this thing, this structure of skin and bone and gristle and muscle, that we are condemned to carry around with us wherever we go? Where does it begin, where does it end? And why does everyone see it rather than seeing me? Or – turning the questions on their head: Who is this I that dares to think of itself as concealed behind its face, other than its face, so that its face is not it? (xi)

So with Coetzee's remarks in mind, and with the intention of making a modest contribution to some still incomplete philosophy of the face, this dissertation will explore the important role representations of the human face play in twentieth-century aesthetic experimentation and philosophical reflection.

My dissertation begins, in chapter one, with a survey of recent scientific studies of the connection between face and mind. From the writings of investigators such as Andrew Young and Martha Farah, I gather together research findings which show that humans are biologically predisposed to treat faces and face-like visual patterns as special perceptual objects. In addition, research on autism conducted by developmental psychologists such as Uta Frith and Simon Baron-Cohen suggests that our innate sensitivity to faces, in turn, plays an important role in the normal development of our understanding of other minds as well as the acquisition of language. I conclude chapter

one by integrating these scientific findings about human psychology with philosophical writings by Quine, Dennett and Davidson which offer a complementary, yet more theoretically comprehensive, explanation of how we understand the behaviour, linguistic utterances, and mental states of other persons.

Chapter two continues tracing the surprising ways in which our ability to understand the expressions of the human face informs not only the way we understand language, but also other minds and the very concept of personhood itself, attesting to the deep truth of ancient correlations between faces, masks and persons. This chapter supplements the findings of chapter one with a sustained reading of Wittgenstein's writings on aspect-seeing in order to more fully explain how we perceive mentality in the appearance of a human face. Mental states are neither facts of the matter in the features of the face (a face is only flesh, after all), nor subjective projections on the part of the beholder, but rather perceptual phenomena—Wittgenstein calls them “aspects”—that we naturally see by adopting a certain *attitude* towards the face's appearance: “My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul,” as the *Investigations* puts it. Wittgenstein's discussion of aspect-seeing, like Dennett's notion of the “intentional stance” and Davidson's theory of “radical interpretation,” shows that the human mind is not a private Cartesian substance but what we “see” by virtue of a complex, though utterly natural, process of intersubjective response and pattern recognition—and the human face is the paradigmatic visual pattern in which such recognition of mind occurs.

Chapters three and four extend these findings into an analysis of visual portraiture, focusing on the paintings of Francis Bacon. Beginning with Bacon's

remarks during interviews with David Sylvester about the sense of injury often associated with his physiognomic distortions, chapter three begins by asking why such “magical” feelings arise at all with respect to visual representations of human faces. Reading Wittgenstein with the work of art historians Ernst Gombrich and Richard Wollheim, I find that the human mind naturally responds to images of faces *as* expressive of mentality: we do not simply see faces *in* the images, but to an extent we see, and thus respond to, the images *as* persons. Chapter four then goes on to argue that the violent “sensations” Bacon’s paintings provoke is directly linked to this natural cognitive confusion, explaining why Bacon’s art necessarily steered clear of total abstraction: the affective force of his portraits depended upon the perceptual recognizability of his faces *as* faces. Seen this way, Bacon’s portraiture comes into focus as a sustained meditation on the nature of modern personhood in the wake of a post-Darwinian acceptance of the contingency of life. I find, however, that a profound ambivalence about personhood runs through Bacon’s portraiture: on the one hand, his art affirms that personality is wholly visible, a cloud-like emanation that floats upon the surface of a person’s face, while on the other hand, it implies that the self is a hidden substance requiring an invasive and violent disclosure in order to be captured in paint. In the end, though, this chapter argues that Bacon’s greatest obsession was with the wonder of creation itself: that chance procedures in the studio might somehow replicate and capture on canvas the total accident of personal existence.

My fifth and final chapter looks into the ethics of physiognomy, asking after the moral consequences of whether we see the mind as a private substance or, as John

Ashbery has suggested, a “visible core.” This chapter reads two narratives about faces that dramatize the solipsistic consequences of a Cartesian commitment to mental privacy: that of the faceless woman in Rilke’s *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* and the Magistrate’s dreams about the tortured woman in Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Anticipating elements of Bacon’s portraiture, Rilke’s vignette is a gory dramatization of the epistemological violence entailed by any conception of the mind as essentially private. Coetzee’s novel too cautions us against such Cartesian imaginings, suggesting that they are conceptually isomorphic with the psychological views that motivate invasive interrogation practices used in the name of state power. I next consider Levinas’ paradoxically iconoclastic phenomenology of the face, an ambivalent critique of Husserlian phenomenology that aims, but ultimately fails, to escape this Cartesian predicament. Levinas shows himself still to be in the grip of a fundamentally Cartesian picture of mind, which explains why he would feel himself able to respect the alterity of the other person’s face only by refusing to see it. Wittgenstein’s writings, on the other hand, show how the expressive meaningfulness of the face can play a positive, even essential, role in ethical life. I conclude by arguing that his theory of aspect-seeing explains not only how we can understand the expressions of a human face but also how we can perceive ethical truths, preserving the *reality* of moral claims while steering clear of both moral subjectivism and fundamentalism.

1. Face and Mind: Scientific and Philosophical Investigations



Fig. 1

Developmental psychologists have shown that we enter the world predisposed to treat faces unlike all other perceptual objects. Human neonates, for example, will track a moving face further than any other pattern of comparable complexity.¹⁴ In one study (by Goren *et al.* [1975]), forty infants with a median age of nine minutes were presented with four different visual stimuli: a regular face pattern, two scrambled faces, and a blank face. Each pattern was moved back and forth in front of the newborns through a 180-degree arc, while their head and eye movements in response to the stimulus were noted. Responsiveness to the regular face pattern was significantly greater than to any of the other stimuli. As the researchers summarize the important implications of their findings, which have since been replicated by others (Johnson *et al.* [1991]): “These results imply that organized visual perception is an unlearned capacity of the human organism. The preference for the proper face stimulus by infants

¹⁴ These results were first reported in Goren, C.C., Sarty, M., and Wu, R.W.K. (1975). “Visual following and pattern discrimination of face-like stimuli by newborn infants” in *Pediatrics* 56, pp. 544-9. Goren *et al.*'s findings were replicated and expanded upon by Johnson, M. H., Dziurawiec, S., Ellis, H., Morton, J. (1991). “Newborns’ preferential tracking of face-like stimuli and its subsequent decline” in *Cognition* 40 (no. 1-2): 1-19. Goren *et al.* (1975) cited in Andrew Young, *Face and Mind* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), pp. 71-2. Subsequent references to *Face and Mind* will be given parenthetically with the abbreviation FM. Johnson *et al.* (1991) cited in Martha Farah, *The Cognitive Neuroscience of Vision* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), pp. 116-7. Subsequent references to *The Cognitive Neuroscience of Vision* will be given parenthetically with the abbreviation CNV.

who had not seen a real face prior to testing suggests that an unlearned or 'evolved' responsiveness to faces may be present in human neonates" (Goren *et al.*, p. 544).

Moreover, in addition to showing an innate preferential attentiveness to face-like patterns, humans also seem able to perceptually discriminate between different facial expressions at a remarkably young age. One study (Field *et al.* [1982]) observed that infants with an average age of but thirty-six hours could discriminate between at least three different facial expressions (happy, sad and surprised).¹⁵ Repeated exposure to one of these facial expressions modeled by a live adult would result in a gradual diminishment of the infant's visual attentiveness, while a presentation of a new expression would result in a renewal of visual fixation, demonstrating that infant's even this young must be able to perceive differences among facial expressions. The researchers also noted that the neonate subjects tended to imitate the facial expressions with which they were presented (see fig. 1, from Field *et al.* [1982]), suggesting that "there is an innate ability to compare the sensory information of a visually perceived expression... with the proprioceptive feedback of the movements involved in matching the expression" (Field *et al.*, p. 181). These studies show that even at birth, humans possess a special sensitivity to faces and their expressions.

As we grow older, faces retain their cognitive status as special perceptual objects. Robert Yin, for example, demonstrated that our recognition of faces is uniquely sensitive to spatial orientation. As Andrew Young describes Yin's influential work:

¹⁵ Field, T.M., Woodson, R., Greenberg, R. and Cohen, D. (1982). "Discrimination and imitation of facial expressions by neonates," in *Science* 281, pp. 179-81. Cited in Young, *Face and Mind*, pp. 72-3.

Yin (1969) began by comparing face recognition with recognition of other objects normally seen in one orientation (aeroplanes, houses, stick figures). Not surprisingly faces proved easier to recognize which, Yin realized, did not tell us anything very profound. Faces may be well remembered simply because of greater task familiarity or even because the particular set of faces used may have been especially easy to remember. For this reason Yin included a second condition in which the stimuli were inverted both at study and test. This condition produced a reversal in rank order, with faces now proving hardest to recognize.¹⁶

Yin hypothesized that this startling inversion effect indicated that faces are perceived in a different manner than other classes of objects. Whereas most visual objects are perceived by means of decomposition into discrete features, faces, Yin argued, are not decomposed into parts and thus face recognition is disproportionately affected by inversion.

Martha Farah and others have since provided confirmation of the hypothesized link between the inversion effect and the special “holistic” nature of facial perception. In one study, Farah *et al.* encouraged half of a group of human subjects to learn to recognize a set of faces by familiarizing themselves with the various “parts” or individual features of the faces. The other half of the subjects were presented with faces presented in a normal format (that is, not broken up into parts). Remarkably, the subjects who learned the faces in parts showed no inversion effect, while those who learned the faces in a normal fashion did. Farah writes that “these results suggest that what is special about face recognition, by virtue of which it is so sensitive to

¹⁶ Andrew Young, *Face and Mind*, p. 76. Citing Yin, R. K. (1969) “Looking at upside-down faces” in *Journal of Experimental Psychology* (81), pp. 141-5.

orientation, is that it involves representations with relatively little or no part decomposition” (CNV 138).

Recent neuroanatomical studies in lower primates suggest that face perception is special not only because of its holistic manner of visual processing, but also because it is localized in different regions of the brain than are the systems for perceiving nonface objects. A neuroscientific technique known as single cell recording, which measures the neuronal activity of a given brain cell, has shown that there are individual cells selectively responsive to the presence of face-like visual patterns. Face cells, as they are called, “respond vigorously to faces yet show little response to nonface objects or scrambled arrays of face parts” (CNV 119). In monkeys, face cells are particularly concentrated in a single region of the brain (anterior superior temporal sulcus), where they comprise up to 20 percent of all the cells in that area. While brain cells have been found that are selectively sensitive to other types of visual objects, no other objects except faces have so many cells devoted to their perception. Consistent with the findings that facial perception is holistic in nature, “analyses of the aspects of facial appearance that drive the cells suggest that configurational relations among multiple facial features are critical” (CNV 119).¹⁷ However, it is not the case that a single cell is devoted to a single face: while different cells respond differentially to different faces, “each cell has a gradient of responsiveness to a range of faces, and any given face will evoke activity at different levels over a subset of the face cell population” (CNV 121). This suggests that face cells comprise a “system of distributed representation” in the

¹⁷ Citing Yamane, S., Kaji, S. and Kawano, K. (1988) “What facial features activate face neurons in the inferotemporal cortex of the monkey?” in *Experimental Brain Research* (73), pp. 209-214.

brain, consistent with recent connectionist and neural network theories of cognition in the philosophy of mind.

The specialness and specificity of facial perception is also indicated by the nature of prosopagnosia, which is “an inability to recognize familiar faces following cerebral injury” (FM 81) despite “intact intellectual functioning and even apparently intact visual recognition of most other stimuli” (VA 69).¹⁸ Andrew Young explains that people who suffer from this condition “are often unable to identify any familiar faces including famous faces, friends, family, and their own faces when seen in a mirror... They can distinguish faces as a category quite easily from other visual object... but have no idea to which individual a specific face belongs” (FM 81). One study examined a prosopagnosic (named W.J.) who happened to raise sheep. The researchers assembled groups of photographs of three different classes of visual objects: human faces, sheep faces of the same breed kept by W.J., and sheep faces of a different breed. They then trained W.J. along with a group of other, non-prosopagnosic, subjects to associate names with each of the faces. The normal subjects performed better with the human faces than with the sheep faces (even some who raised sheep themselves). W.J., on the other hand, performed poorly with the human faces and normally with the sheep faces. Farah notes that the “data suggest that W.J.’s recognition impairment does not affect the recognition of all groups of visually similar patterns, but is selective for human faces” (CNV 123). This, and other types of related studies of normal and prosopagnosic

¹⁸ Martha J. Farah, *Visual Agnosia: Disorders of Object Recognition and What They Tell Us about Normal Vision* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990). References to this text will be given parenthetically with the abbreviation VA.

subjects, show that “prosopagnosia represents the selective loss of visual mechanisms necessary for face recognition, and not necessary (or less necessary) for other types of object recognition.... [T]his implies that the face recognition system is separately lesionable and hence anatomically distinct from the object recognition system” (CNV 127).

Findings such as these provide strong evidence that faces are in a perceptual and cognitive category of their own. And indeed, it is not difficult to imagine evolutionary reasons that such perceptual sensitivities would be selected for. The importance to an infant’s survival of recognizing and responding to the faces of adult caretakers is obvious. But, of course, our relationship to faces is far from entirely instinctual! Surely, very few parts of the human body are as freighted with cultural associations as is the face. One need only consider the types of headshots that are so common on the covers of high-fashion magazines in order to appreciate the extent to which the appearance of the face can be encoded with social meaning. But the evident extent to which culture informs our responses to faces needs to be understood against the background of scientific findings such as the ones we have already discussed; they show clearly that the importance of the face to human forms of life has as much to do with the kind of biological *life* we are as with what cultural *forms* we might socially construct. The recent discoveries of cognitive neuroscience are important for philosophically-minded reflection on the nature of human thought not only because of what they can add to our knowledge about such issues as perception and imagination, but also, and perhaps primarily, because of the *constraints* they put on our theoretical

and philosophical speculations. If there are ways in which culture shapes our ideas about faces – and certainly there are *many* – that does not mean that the role of the face in the lives of humans is *wholly* cultural, as has been maintained by some.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, for example, argue in *A Thousand Plateaus* that the human face is ideologically determined, through and through.¹⁹ They see the face as the repressive product of something they call an “abstract machine of faciality” that, among other things, distributes to each member of a society “facial units” that are structured by a binary semiotic logic: “a man *or* a woman, a rich person or a poor one, an adult or a child, a leader or a subject, ‘an *x or a y*’” (TP 177). Sounding very much like a postmodern parody of Lavater’s eighteenth-century *Essays on Physiognomy*, they argue that the various “concrete individualized faces are produced and transformed on the basis of these units, these combinations of units—like the face of a rich child in which a military calling is already discernible, that West Point chin” (TP 177).²⁰ In other words, Deleuze and Guattari see the human face as a social *construct*—“You don’t so much have a face as slide into one” (TP 177). They therefore regard the face as a thoroughly political issue. In accord with their analysis of the ideological

¹⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1987). References to this text will be given parenthetically with the abbreviation TP.

²⁰ Johann Caspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, 3 vols. (London: J. Murray, 1789-98). For example, here is a typical analysis of Lavater’s: “A portrait by Colla, which... we may affirm to be a great likeness. Nature, precision, harmony, exactness, are discoverable in every part. The flat, somewhat sinking forehead, agreeable to the whole, denotes an unpolished person, confined within a small circle of domestic economy. The strong eyebrows do not speak mental, but bodily power. Eyebrows are only significant of the former when they are unperplexed, equal, and well disposed. Nose, chin, neck, hair, all are characteristic of rude, narrow insensibility. Rustic sincerity is evident in the mouth” (p. 177). Cited in John Graham, *Lavater’s Essays on Physiognomy: A Study in the History of Ideas* (Berne: Peter Lang, 1979), p. 46.

constitution of “facial units,” they (logically enough) call for the “dismantling” of the face (TP 188). Such a politics would amount to an overcoming of both the ideology of subjectivity and the semiotics of the signifier that motivates the social construction of human faces in the first place, for they explicitly position faces at the intersection of language and subjectivity: the “faciality machine,” as they put it, is “the condition of possibility” of both the “signifier” and the “subject” (TP 180). To dismantle one’s face would therefore amount to breaking through both language and identity as we know it – a heady possibility that Deleuze and Guattari find not only intelligible but deeply attractive as well: “If the face is a politics, dismantling the face is also a politics involving real becomings, an entire becoming-clandestine. Dismantling the face is the same as breaking through the wall of the signifier and getting out of the black hole of subjectivity” (TP 188). Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of “faciality,” however, is predicated upon a thoroughly constructivist understanding of the role the face plays in human societies, which therefore presupposes that that role might be fundamentally altered. Recent work in cognitive neuroscience, however, enables us to see that such views are entirely misguided: dreams of “dismantling” the face are but idle flights of fancy. There can be no social constructivist understanding of the face.

- Life and Logos: Faces and the Development of Mind

In fact, not only do human sensitivities to the face clearly exist at birth – *prior* to any kind of enculturation – we will see that such innate capacities actually enable and

facilitate subsequent developmental steps towards full-blown socialization. If, as Aristotle put it, humans are “rational animals” (*zoon logon echon*), our sensitivity to faces can be understood to straddle or bridge the conceptual and developmental chasm that separates the *animal* from the *rational* sides of our being. Aristotle’s apt description of human beings can, of course, also be translated as speech-possessing life: *logos* is at once reason and speech, and along with Aristotle countless philosophers have claimed that the possession of language is a necessary condition of rationality. This is Donald Davidson’s view, for example, and in an essay entitled “Rational Animals” he explains why he thinks that rationality depends on the possession of language.²¹ To begin with, he sees rationality as consisting in “having propositional attitudes such as belief, desire, intention, and shame”: “to be a rational animal is just to have propositional attitudes, no matter how confused, contradictory, absurd, unjustified, or erroneous those attitudes may be” (SIO 95). A substantial degree of actual irrationality in a given human is fully consistent with Davidson’s fundamental claim, for “the possibility of irrationality depends on a large degree of rationality. Irrationality is not mere lack of reason but a disease or perturbation of reason” (SIO 99). This is what distinguishes the rationality of a normal adult from the mere animal existence of a snail or an infant one week old:

Neither an infant 1 week old nor a snail is a rational creature. If the infant survives long enough, he or she will probably become rational, while this is not true of the snail. If we like, we may say of the infant from the start that he is a rational creature because

²¹ Donald Davidson, “Rational Animals” in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: OUP, 2001), pp. 95-105. References to *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* will be given parenthetically with the abbreviation SIO.

he will probably become rational if he survives, or because he belongs to a species with this capacity. Whichever way we talk, there remains the difference, with respect to rationality, between the infant and the snail on the one hand, and the normal adult person on the other. (SIO 95)

Davidson goes on to note that propositional attitudes only come “as a matched set”: “to have one is to have a large complement. One belief requires many beliefs, and beliefs demand other basic attitudes such as intentions, desires, and, if I am right, the gift of tongues.... [T]he intrinsically holistic character of the propositional attitudes makes the distinction between having any and having none dramatic” (SIO 96). But the key element in Davidson’s argument is that the basic propositional attitude of belief itself requires one to possess a conceptual distinction between “what is believed and what is the case.” Interestingly, this makes the ability to experience *surprise* criterial of rationality: “surprise about some things is a necessary and sufficient condition of thought in general.” Davidson’s point is that the ability to feel surprise about one’s beliefs (to find that a belief one holds is false) indicates that one possesses “the idea of an objective reality which is independent of [one’s] belief” (SIO 104). For Davidson, this does not *prove* that linguistic communication is necessary for rationality (after all, nothing could), but he also has no “idea how else one could arrive at the concept of an objective truth” (105). He therefore concludes that “rationality is a social trait. Only communicators have it” (105).

But how do we come to possess the language that enables us to have a concept of an objective truth in the first place? That is, how do we enter the space of reasons, the interdependent web of propositional attitudes that constitutes rationality?

In an essay on “The Emergence of Thought,” Davidson discusses this question, which he acknowledges is a profoundly difficult one.²² For we are asking what happens to a human infant between the time it is a non-rational animal and the time at which it possesses the full-blown rationality of an intentional agent who possesses beliefs and other related propositional attitudes. Because of the holism of the mental, as Davidson terms the interdependency of the various aspects of mentality, it is difficult to describe the intermediate steps that link the two sides of the Aristotelian phrase “rational animal”:

We have many vocabularies for describing nature when we regard it as mindless, and we have a mentalistic vocabulary for describing thought and intentional action; what we lack is a way of describing what is in between. This is particularly evident when we speak of the “intentions” and “desires” of simple animals. We have no better way to explain what they do. It is not that we have a clear idea what sort of language we could use to describe half-formed minds; there may be a very deep conceptual difficulty or impossibility involved. (SIO 128)

For Davidson, meaning, like mentality, is holistic in nature: “words, like thoughts, have a familiar meaning, a propositional content, only if they occur in a rich context, for such a context is required to give the words or thoughts a location and a meaningful function” (SIO 127). Therefore, if we happened to come upon a mouse who had the right kind of vocal cords and trained it to say the word “cheese,” that “word would not have a meaning when uttered by the mouse, nor would the mouse understand what it ‘said’” (127). The early verbal sounds emitted by an infant would be of the same nature: “Infants utter words in this way; if they did not, they would never come to have

²² Donald Davidson, “The Emergence of Thought” in SIO, pp. 123-134.

a language. But if you want to describe what is going on in the head of the child when it has a few words which it utters in appropriate situations, you will fail for lack of the right sort of words of your own" (SIO 127-8).

While he acknowledges the profound difficulties involved, Davidson nonetheless goes on to suggest one developmental step, which he calls "triangulation," that he sees as a "necessary condition for thought and language, a condition that can exist independent of thought, and can therefore precede it":

The basic situation is one that involves two or more creatures simultaneously in interaction with each other and with the world they share; it is what I call *triangulation*. It is the result of a threefold interaction, an interaction which is twofold from the point of view of each of the two agents: each is interacting simultaneously with the world and with the other agent. To put this in a slightly different way, each creature learns to correlate the reactions of other creatures with changes or objects in the world to which it also reacts.... [T]he triangle I have indicated is essential to the existence, and hence to the emergence, of thought. For without the triangle, there are two aspects of thought for which we cannot account. These two aspects are the objectivity of thought and the empirical content of thoughts about the external world. (SIO 128-9)

Triangulation is a situation of shared attention and response: two creatures attending and responding to the same objects or events in the external world while, at the same time, being aware that they are doing so. If we imagine the reactions of one of the agents as taking a linguistic form ("Here's your bottle"), then we have a picture of the very common way in which infants are taught numerous basic words, such as milk, mommy, doggie, or ouch.

Those familiar with the work of Quine will recognize the basic outlines of this scenario from the “radical translation” thought experiment in *Word and Object*, which had a profound influence on the development of Davidson’s ideas.²³ There, Quine imagines a situation in which a linguist attempts to translate a foreign language for which no translation manual exists: “*radical* translation, i.e., translation of the language of a hitherto untouched people” (WO 28). Quine notes that the kinds of sentences most likely to be translated first under such conditions would refer to “present events that are conspicuous to the linguist and his informant,” to events, that is, that can be readily triangulated in Davidson’s sense: “A rabbit scurries by, the native says ‘Gavagai’, and the linguist notes down the sentence ‘Rabbit’ (or ‘Lo, a rabbit’) as tentative translation, subject to testing in further cases” (WO 29). In order to be sure that the one-word observation sentence “Gavagai” means the same thing as the English “Rabbit,” the linguist must repeatedly test the correlation, stating “Gavagai” himself in the presence of a rabbit while checking to see if this utterance consistently prompts the native’s assent. If the correlation is confirmed frequently enough, the linguist can conclude that the meanings of the two observation sentences are the same. Unlike Davidson, who did not follow him on this score, Quine views the meaning of observation sentences as the disposition of speakers to utter certain sounds in response to certain patterns of sensory stimulation: thus Quine calls the meanings of observation sentences “stimulus meanings” (Davidson, on the other hand, came to view the distal object itself, rather than the proximal pattern of sensory stimulation, as the third point of the triangulated

²³ Willard Van Orman Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960). References to this text will be given parenthetically with the abbreviation WO.

relationship²⁴). In *Word and Object*, therefore, Quine states that the sameness of the meaning of the two sentences (“Gavagai” and “Rabbit”) is attributable to the sameness of sensory stimulation for both speakers (WO 43). One point of the thought experiment was to show that it was possible to explain linguistic meaning and translation simply by reference to the relationship between behavior and patterns of stimulation; in other words, Quine saw no need to posit the existence of non-physical (mental or intentional) objects in order to explain effective translation. As Quine later put it:

The point of my thought experiment in radical translations was philosophical: a critique of the uncritical notion of meanings and, therewith, of introspective semantics. I was concerned to expose its empirical limits. A sentence has a meaning, people thought, and another sentence is its translation if it has the same meaning. This, we see, will not do.²⁵

Quine’s point, of course, went beyond the situation of translation and was intended to account for linguistic meaning in general: “There is nothing in linguistic meaning beyond what is to be gleaned from overt behaviour in observable circumstances,” as he later put it (PoT 37-8). Quine, however, is no crude behaviorist: he does not deny the existence of mental states that are inner and not publicly observable. Rather, he merely notes that “as long as our command of our language fits all external checkpoints, where our utterance or our reaction to someone’s utterance can be appraised in the light of some shared situation, so long all is well. Our mental life between checkpoints is indifferent to our rating as a master of the language” (PoT 37-8). Because the meanings

²⁴ On the differences between Quine and Davidson on this matter, see Quine’s *The Pursuit of Truth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1990), pp. 41-2. Subsequent references to this text will be given parenthetically with the abbreviation PoT.

²⁵ Quine, W.V.O. “Indeterminacy of translation again” (1987), p. 9.

of sentences are not intentional objects, it follows that there is no fact of the matter whether a given sentence in one language correctly translates a given sentence in another. If a translation works, it works: the pragmatic fact that it works is the only “fact” that might settle the matter. It is conceivable, therefore, that two radical translators might produce perfectly adequate, but incompatible, translation manuals for a single native language. This possibility is what Quine called the thesis of the indeterminacy of radical translation.

However, the positing of an intersubjective likeness of stimulation for the two speakers in the radical translation thought-experiment posed conceptual problems that Quine eventually came to view as intractable. As he later put it:

an event of stimulation... is the activation of some subset of the subject’s sensory receptors. Since the linguist and his informant share no receptors, how can they be said to share a stimulation? We might say rather that they undergo *similar* stimulation, but that would assume still an approximate homology of nerve endings from one individual to another. Surely such anatomical minutiae ought not to matter here. (PoT 40)

In *The Pursuit of Truth*, Quine therefore decided to discard the notion of likeness of stimulus meaning first presented in *Word and Object*: “The view that I have come to, regarding intersubjective likeness of stimulation, is rather that we can simply do without it. The observation sentence ‘Rabbit’ has its stimulus meaning for the linguist and ‘Gavagai’ has its stimulus meaning for the native” (PoT 42). The linguist observes the native informant consistently assenting to “Gavagai” when he imagines that he himself, in the same position, would do so as well. The linguist’s grasping of the likeness of meaning is therefore the result of an “uncanny” kind of interpersonal imaginative

projection, which Quine terms *empathy*: “We all have an uncanny knack for empathizing another’s perceptual situation, however ignorant of the physiological or optical mechanism of his perception” (PoT 43). Our knack for empathy obviates any need to make reference to “anatomical minutiae” of any sort. Quine then goes on to offer a striking analogy in order to illustrate what he means by empathy: “The knack is comparable, almost, to our ability to recognize faces while unable to sketch or describe them” (PoT 43). It is by means of such empathy, Quine explains, that the linguist can come to feel that the two words mean the same thing. It follows that empathic response must be an essential component of *all* language acquisition:

Empathy dominates the learning of language, both by child and by field linguist. In the child’s case it is the parent’s empathy. The parent assesses the appropriateness of the child’s observation sentence by noting the child’s orientation and how the scene would look from there. In the field linguist’s case it is empathy on his own part when he makes his first conjecture about “Gavagai” on the strength of the native’s utterance and orientation, and again when he queries “Gavagai” for the native’s assent in a promising subsequent situation. (PoT 42)

It is unclear why Quine would feel compelled to specify which party (child or parent, linguist or native) would need to exercise empathy for effective language-learning to occur, for it is obvious that in each case the empathy of *both* parties is necessary. Imagine the linguist attempting to prompt the assent of the native informant to an utterance of “Gavagai” if the native happened to be indifferent to the state of the linguist’s mind. And what good would the empathy of the parent be without the simultaneous and mutual attentiveness of the child? Any parent knows how pointless it is to point to an object and name it if the child is not “tuned in” at the same moment.

And certainly young children are familiar with the frustration of questioning an adult about the name of an object when that adult's attention is directed elsewhere.

Davidson's model of triangulation, therefore, while based on Quine's discussion of radical translation, better captures the mutuality of both agents necessary for linguistic training to occur. But Quine's point about the similarities between empathy and facial perception provides a fascinating clue as to how the experience of mutuality itself might arise. As it so happens, recent findings in developmental psychology (especially concerning the condition of autism) support Quine's intuitive association between language learning, empathy and facial perception. If we consider it, the way we can empathetically grasp a person's state of mind in the appearance of his or her face is a remarkable ability. As everyday as the experience is, how is it that we so readily know when another person is attending to the same event or object that we are? Davidson's presentation of the idea of triangulation presupposes the presence of this social and cognitive capacity, and yet if we consider how remarkable that ability truly is, it is clear that it is hardly something to be taken for granted. Indeed, research by Uta Frith, Alan Leslie, Simon Baron-Cohen and their colleagues into the disorder of autism has shown that it is this very ability to experience what they call "joint attention" that is severely impaired or even absent in autistic children.²⁶

²⁶ See Uta Frith, *Autism: Explaining the Enigma*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003); Alan Leslie, "Pretense and representation: The origins of 'theory of mind'" in *Psychological Review* (94), pp. 412-26; and Simon Baron-Cohen, *Mindblindness: An Essay on Autism and Theory of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), pp. 64-96. Subsequent references to Frith's text will be given parenthetically with the abbreviation AEE; subsequent reference to Baron-Cohen's text will be given parenthetically with the abbreviation MB.

• Seeing Eye to Eye: Autism, Mindblindness and the Intentional Stance

The explanation of autism developed by Frith, Leslie and Baron-Cohen, widely acknowledged to be the best one currently available, sees it as an impairment in the normal human ability to “mind-read”: that is, to regard other humans as intentional agents interpretable according to mentalistic descriptions. Children with autism, Baron-Cohen explains, fail to develop this basic ability and therefore suffer from what he and his colleagues call “mindblindness”: that is, they do not see others, to use Dennett’s phrase, as “intentional systems.” In fact, Baron-Cohen’s explanation of autism adopts wholesale Dennett’s notion of the “intentional stance,” and the great clinical success he has had using Dennett’s theory provides some of the most compelling empirical evidence in favor of its explanatory power. Baron-Cohen glosses the intentional stance as our ability to attribute to others “the full set of intentional states (beliefs, desires, thoughts, intentions, hopes, memories, fears, promises, etc)” (MB 21). Dennett himself describes the intentional stance this way: “the tactic of interpreting an entity by adopting the presupposition that it is an approximation of the ideal of an optimally designed (i.e. rational) self-regarding agent” (CPM 238).²⁷ Dennett’s formulation may recall the sort of rational agent that is familiar from decision theory, which, as Davidson points out, is “often derided as a false description of how people actually act” (SIO 126). However, Davidson believes such criticisms miss the mark:

²⁷ Ed. Samuel Guttenplan, *A Companion to the Philosophy of Mind* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994). References to this text will be given parenthetically with the abbreviation CPM.

... the theory answers to our intuitions about how actual decisions are made; in effect it simply spells out our commonsense apparatus for explaining intentional action. For we all, whether we think about it or not, make our decisions in terms of how we weigh the values of various possible outcomes of our actions, and how likely we think one or another course of action is to attain those values. We understand why someone acts as he does only by supposing that he or she values to various degrees the possible results of action, and how probable he or she thinks a given action is to produce one or another result. So although not capable of precise predictions of actual choices, decision theory nevertheless corresponds to our intuitions about how actual decisions are made, and so is part of our commonsense apparatus for explaining intentional behavior. (SIO 126)

Consistent with Davidson's talk of a "commonsense apparatus," Dennett calls the "intentional stance" a version of "folk psychology" (a phrase that Dennett himself coined and which has become a major subject of debate in the analytic philosophy of mind).²⁸ While we may become philosophically reflective about what is entailed in taking up the intentional stance, Dennett sees such theoretical explanations as Davidson's and his own as nothing but the explicit elaboration of what all normal humans already do implicitly without thinking twice about it.

Dennett, along with Quine and Davidson, is a non-reductive physicalist (a position distinguished, on the one hand, from mind-body dualism, and on the other, from eliminative materialism, which sees "folk psychology" as illusory and dispensable,

²⁸ Barbara Von Eckardt provides the following bare-bones preliminary description of what the phrase "folk psychology" means in the current philosophy of mind literature: "Human beings are social creatures. And they are reflective creatures. As such, they continually engage in a host of cognitive practices that help them get along in their social world. In particular, they attempt to understand, explain, and predict their own and others' psychological states and overt behaviour; and they do so by making use of an array of ordinary psychological notions concerning various internal mental states, both occurrent and dispositional. Let us then consider [folk psychology] to consist, *at a minimum*, of (a) a set of attributive, explanatory, and predictive practices, and (b) a set of notions or concepts used in those practices" (CPM 300).

ultimately to be superceded by scientific explanations²⁹). While there are important differences among their individual versions of non-reductive physicalism, they are each fully committed to the idea that there is nothing in the universe but entities of the kind posited in (an ideally completed) physics, but at the same time hold that the mentalistic vocabulary we use to talk about intentional agents (i.e. persons) is indispensable and irreducible to the physical descriptions available to us from the various core natural sciences. Quine, in *Word and Object*, therefore calls the attribution of propositional attitudes to ourselves and others an “essentially dramatic idiom”: mind is something we thereby *project* into ourselves and others (WO 219). As unreal as the referents of such idiomatic usages may be, however, Quine nonetheless regards this form of theater as “humanly” and “practically” indispensable (WO 218, 221). But it is because the attribution of intentionality is a fundamentally projective act that we are, in practice, unsure where to draw the line: that is, there is no fact of the matter that would decisively settle when such projections have gone too far. As Davidson put it, “we speak of the ‘intentions’ and ‘desires’ of simple animals” because we don’t know how else to talk

²⁹ As Paul Churchland, one of the most prominent eliminative materialists, puts it: “FP [folk psychology] does indeed portray human cognition in terms of overtly sentential prototypes, viz. in terms of the many propositional attitudes. But there is no reason why it must be *correct* in so representing our cognition, nor in representing itself in particular. Perhaps the internal kinematics and dynamics of human and animal cognition is not at all like the sentential dance portrayed in FP.... Perhaps we harbour instead a kinematics of activation patterns and a dynamics of vector-to-vector transformations driven by learned configurations of synaptic connections. Evidently it is not inconceivable that FP might someday be challenged by a better account of human nature. Evidently the process is already underway” (CPM 315). Dennett and other non-reductive physicalists would not fundamentally disagree with Churchland’s account of the physical processes that must underlie human cognition (to use a term that has become common in the philosophy of mind, Dennett and Davidson agree that the mental must *supervene* on a physical base), yet they would disagree with Churchland’s notion that folk psychology could (and should) ever be superceded by a non-intentional, purely scientific, vocabulary. On supervenience, see: Jaegwon Kim, *Mind in a Physical World: An Essay on the Mind-Body Problem and Mental Causation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998).

about them: "We have no better way to explain what they do" (SIO 128). Or as Quine puts it:

Casting our real selves thus in unreal roles, we do not generally know how much reality to hold constant. Quandaries arise. But despite them we find ourselves attributing beliefs, wishes, and striving even to creatures lacking the power of speech, such is our dramatic virtuosity. We project ourselves even into what from his behavior we imagine a mouse's state of mind to have been, and dramatize it as a belief, wish, or striving, verbalized as seems relevant and natural to us in the state thus feigned. In the strictest scientific spirit we can report all the behavior, verbal and otherwise, that may underlie our imputations of propositional attitudes, and we may go on to speculate as we please upon the causes and effects of this behavior; but, so long as we do not switch muses, the essentially dramatic idiom of propositional attitudes will find no place. (WO 219)

According to Quine's view of mentality, in other words, the first objects of anthropomorphism and the pathetic fallacy must needs be ourselves.

Adapting and extending Quine's insights, Dennett argues that we may describe a living human organism (any many other things besides) from three different perspectives (or stances): the physical stance, the design stance, and the intentional stance (Dennett's version of Quine's "dramatic idiom"). The physical stance simply describes an object's material make-up, while the design stance treats a thing functionally: a physical description of a computer, for example, would account for all of the materials that constitute its physical make-up, while a design description would explain that pressing the "backspace" key will cause the cursor to move one space to the left on the screen. The higher level intentional stance, however, treats entities like humans (and sometimes even mice) as rational agents whose behavior can be

characterized and predicted by means of intentional or mentalistic interpretations. But along with Quine, Dennett does not believe there is any fact of the matter to which our intentional idioms refer. The intentional states (such as ones of belief) postulated by the intentional stance have no ontological existence: they are non-factual and only “appear” when we assume the right attitude towards another human being. Dennett explains that attributions of intentionality are

interpretations of the phenomena – a “heuristic overlay,” describing an inescapably idealized “real pattern.” Like such *abstracta* as centres of gravity and parallelograms of force, the beliefs and desires posited by the highest stance have no independent and concrete existence, and since this is the case, there would be no deeper facts that could settle the issue if – most improbably – rival intentional interpretations arose that did equally well at rationalizing the history of behavior of an entity. Quine’s thesis of the indeterminacy of radical translation carries all the way in, as the thesis of the indeterminacy of radical interpretation of mental states and processes. (CPM 239)

According to Baron-Cohen’s theory of autism, four different cognitive subsystems or “mechanisms” make up what he terms the normal “mindreading system,” which as a whole enables us to adopt the intentional stance towards others. The first is called the “intentionality detector” (ID): “ID is a perceptual device that interprets motion stimuli in terms of the primitive volitional mental states of goal and desire. I see these as primitive mental states in that they are the basic ones that are needed in order to be able to make sense of the universal movements of all animals: approach and avoidance” (MB 32-3). In support of the existence of this subsystem Baron-Cohen cites a number of studies: one (Reddy 1991) shows “that very young infants are sensitive to changes in an adult’s goal. For example, they respond to the distinction between a give

and a tease” (35).³⁰ Studies of lower primates have “identified cells in the temporal lobe of the monkey brain that respond selectively to the sight of another animal facing forward, even if seen in profile. One can think of these as part of ID, detecting the animal’s goal (to move forward). Yet other cells fire selectively to tactile stimulation by an agent other than oneself, which suggests that there may be specific neural structures sensitive to another agent having a goal of doing something to the observer” (MB 38).³¹ And in support of the subsystem’s localization and dissociability, he cites a study that has shown that “some patients with focal brain damage have been found to lose the specific ability to categorize things as animate or inanimate” (MB 38).³²

The second mechanism in the mindreading system is what Baron-Cohen calls the “eye-direction detector” (EDD). The EDD has three basic functions: “it detects the presence of eyes or eye-like stimuli, it computes whether eyes are directed toward it or toward something else, and it infers from its own case that if another organism’s eyes are directed at something then that organism sees that thing” (MB 38-9). A number of studies have shown that for the human perceptual system, eyes are the most important part of the whole face. Daphne Maurer, for example, found “that 2-month-old infants looked almost as long at the eyes as at a whole face but looked significantly less at other parts of the face” (MB 39). Six months old have also been found to look two to three

³⁰ Reddy, V., “Playing with other’s expectations: Teasing and mucking about in the first year” in *Natural Theories of Mind*, ed. A. Whiten. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

³¹ Baron-Cohen cites: Perrett, D., and Mistlin, A. “Perception of facial characteristics by monkeys” in *Comparative Perception*, vol. 2: *Complex Signals*, ed. W. Stebbins and M. Berkeley (Wiley, 1990); Hietanen, J., and Perrett, D. “A role of expectation in visual and tactile processing within temporal cortex” in *Brain Mechanisms of Perception and Memory: From Neuron to Behavior*, ed. T. Ono et al. (Oxford: OUP, 1991).

³² Warrington, E., and Shallice, T. “Category specific semantic impairments” in *Brain* 107 (1984), pp. 829-854.

times longer at a face looking at them than at a face looking away. In a study conducted by Baron-Cohen and a colleague, they found that “computation of eye direction was easily within the ability of normal 3-year-olds” (MB 40).³³ Moreover, studies have shown that we are particularly sensitive to mutual eye-contact: “there is clear evidence of physiological arousal produced by mutual eye contact. For example, galvanic skin responses increase with mutual eye contact, and brain-stem activation has been reported in response to eye stimuli in monkeys” (MB 42).³⁴ While physiological arousal can of course be felt as both negative and positive in quality, in the case of human infants the evidence suggests that the responses are usually pleasurable, “since eye contact reliably triggers smiling” (MB 42).³⁵ Indeed, it appears that the self-manipulation of arousal in response to eye-stimuli is a very important part of an infant’s life:

Stern (1985)³⁶ points out that an infant’s control over its visual system is precociously mature, enabling the infant to make or break eye contact and thus regulate the degree of eye contact and the amount of physiological arousal that the infant can cope with at a time. Too much might be uncomfortable; too little might be understimulating. Since what constitutes a comfortable level of arousal is likely to vary from one infant to another, it makes good sense that the infant should have its own regulatory mechanism to control this. There is mounting evidence that infants have a drive

³³ Baron-Cohen, S., and Cross, P., “Reading the eyes: Evidence for the role of perception in the development of a theory of mind” in *Mind and Language* 6 (1992), pp. 173-186.

³⁴ Nichols, K., and Champness, B., “Eye gaze and the GSR” in *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 7 (1971), pp. 623-626; Wada, J., “Modification of cortically induced responses in brainstem by shift of attention in monkeys” in *Science* 133 (1961), pp. 40-42.

³⁵ Wolff, P., “Observations on the early development of smiling” in *Determinants of Infant Behavior*, vol. 2, ed. B. Foss (Wiley, 1963); Stern, D., *The First Relationship: Infant and Mother* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1977); Schaffer, H., “Early interactive development” in *Studies in Mother-Infant Interaction*, ed. H. Schaffer (Academic Press, 1977).

³⁶ Stern, D., *The Interpersonal World of the Infant* (Basic Books, 1985).

to maintain an optimal level of stimulation.³⁷ Furthermore, as all parents know, infants and toddlers love to play peekaboo, which is all about occluding the eyes and then revealing them. (MB 42)

According to Baron-Cohen, the intentionality and eye-direction detectors together allow the infant to produce what he calls dyadic “representations” of various states of affairs, such as: A wants food; B wants to open drawer; C sees me; D sees the door. (Talk of “representations” is common in the cognitive scientific literature, but such terminology should not be confused with representations in the philosophical sense: there is no suggestion that these representations are in any way conscious or linguistic in nature – rather, they are explicitly sub-personal and should be understood as the “contents” of information-processing systems.) As Baron-Cohen explains, such dyadic representations are obviously important but do not yet constitute the kind of intersubjective cognitive relationships that would enable one “to be aware of a shared universe,” the concept of an “objective reality” that Davidson argued can only be produced by triangulation:

All these representations can be described as dyadic, since they only specify the intentional (i.e. mentalistic) relation between two objects (Agent and Object, or Agent and Self). Though that gets you pretty far, these mechanisms do not allow you to represent that you and someone else (whom we have been calling the Agent) are both attending to the same object or event. And yet that is exactly what one would need in order to be able to communicate about a shared reality and to feel that you and the other person are focusing on and thinking about the same thing. (MB 44)

³⁷ Maurer, D., “Neonatal synaesthesia: Implications for the processing of speech and faces” in *Developmental Neurocognition: Speech and Face Processing in the First Year of Life*, ed. B. de Boysson-Bardies et al. (Kluwer, 1993).

Joint attention, or triangulation, is the result of the third component in Baron-Cohen's theoretical model, which he calls the "shared-attention mechanism" (SAM): "SAM's key function is to build rather interesting things called *triadic representations*.... Essentially, triadic representations specify the relations among an Agent, the Self, and a (third) Object. (The Object can be another Agent, too.)" (MB 44-5). As an example of a triadic representation, Baron-Cohen offers the following: "You and I see that we are looking at the same object" (MB 45). Research findings suggest that the shared-attention mechanism depends heavily (though not exclusively) upon our perception of eye-direction and begins quite early in life: "gaze monitoring is seen in infants from around 9 months of age, and which all children, the world over, show by 14 months or so. In this phenomenon, the infant turns in the same direction that another person is looking at and then shows gaze alternation, checking back and forth a few times to make sure (as it appears) that it and the other person are both looking at the same thing, thus establishing shared visual attention on the same object" (MB 48).³⁸ Moreover, children around the same time will begin to produce a "so-called protodeclarative pointing gesture—that is, pointing with an outstretched index finger at an object and then alternating the gaze again, checking back and forth a few times to make sure (as it appears) that the other person has turned to look at the same thing the toddler is looking at. This is a simple but effective way to direct someone else's visual

³⁸ Scaife, M., and Bruner, J., "The capacity for joint visual attention in the infant" in *Nature* 253 (1975), pp. 265-266; Butterworth, G., "The ontogeny and phylogeny of joint visual attention" in *Natural Theories of Mind*, ed. A. Whiten (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

attention to a shared focal object” (48).³⁹ Such proto-declaratives constitute an early, pre-linguistic, form of ostensive communication that will flower into the wide range of indexicals that are such an important part of mature language use. What makes the joint attention that is the goal of proto-declarative behavior so important to the development of an intentional stance is that it evinces interest not merely in the object itself but in the mental attitude of another person towards that object as well. As Uta Frith puts it: “Attending to the object that another person is also attending to is a major developmental milestone, which presents the child with a multitude of learning opportunities”(AEE 101). But the first thing such joint attention behavior shows is that the infant has already grasped the existence of other minds as such: and the faces and eyes of others appears to be the most natural places for infants to look for signs of mentality.

Studies show that the eyes are particularly important. At a very young age, children regard the eyes of others as providing privileged access to their mental states. “When the goal of an action is uncertain,” experiments have demonstrated, “the first place young children (and indeed adults) look for information to disambiguate the goal is the person’s eyes” (MB 49).⁴⁰ Moreover, it has also been shown that children use eye direction as a way of detecting another agent’s goal. “When 3-4-year-olds were asked ‘Which chocolate will Charlie take?’ after being shown a display of four chocolates and

³⁹ Bates, E., Benigni, L., Bretherton, I., Camaioni, K., and Volterra, V., “Cognition and communication from 9-13 months: Correlational findings” in *The Emergence of Symbols: Cognition and Communication in Infancy*, ed. E. Bates (Academic Press, 1979).

⁴⁰ Phillips, W., Baron-Cohen, S., and Rutter, M., “The role of eye-contact in the detection of goals: Evidence from normal toddlers, and children with autism or mental handicap” in *Development and Psychopathology* 4 (1992), pp. 375-383.

Charlie's face looking at one of these, they tended to pick the one he was looking at as the goal of his next action" (MB 49). In a variation on this study, the face of Charlie was again depicted as looking at one of the four sweets and the 3 to 4 year olds were asked "Which one does Charlie want?" As Baron-Cohen reports, "children of this age had no difficulty at all in inferring Charlie's desire... from his eye direction. This was particularly striking, as in a retest of this experiment the display also included a distracter cue: a big, bold, black arrow pointing at another of the four chocolates. Normal 3-4-year-olds appeared to ignore this 'unnatural' cue, and predominantly used the 'natural' cue of eye direction" to determine Charlie's mental state (MB 49-50).

The research of Baron-Cohen and his colleagues has shown that the "intentionality detector" and the "eye-direction detector" are intact and normally functioning in children with autism. However, it has been shown that autistic children suffer a massive impairment in the functioning of the shared-attention mechanism, and therefore do not seem capable of social triangulation: "Children with autism often do not show any of the main forms of joint-attention behavior. Thus, they do not show gaze monitoring,⁴¹ nor do they show the related behaviors of attempting to direct the visual attention of others by using the pointing gesture in its 'protodeclarative' form"⁴²

⁴¹ Mundy, P., Sigman, M., Ungerer, J., and Sherman, T., "Defining the social deficits in autism: The contribution of nonverbal communication measures" in *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 27 (1986), pp. 657-669; Loveland, K., and Landry, S., "Joint attention and language in autism and developmental language delay" in *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 16 (1986), pp. 335-349.

⁴² Baron-Cohen, S., "Perceptual role-taking and protodeclarative pointing in autism" in *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* 7 (1989), pp. 113-127; Mundy et al. "Defining the social deficits in autism: The contribution of nonverbal communication measures" (1986); Curcio, F., "Sensorimotor functioning and communication in mute autistic children" in *Journal of Autism and Childhood Schizophrenia* 8 (1978), pp. 281-292.

(MB 66). Interestingly, this is not because they cannot point at all. Baron-Cohen reports that “they do use the pointing gesture for some other, non-joint attentional functions, such as to request objects that are out of reach” (66).⁴³ The crucial difference between “proto-imperative” and “proto-declarative” pointing behavior is that the former treats other agents in a purely behavioral goal-directed way (i.e. “give me that!”) while the latter is directed at affecting the mental states of other persons: “look at that!”

When these three subsystems are working properly, they lead to the development of a fourth component that finally provides a full-blown intentional stance: Baron-Cohen calls this final component the “theory-of-mind mechanism” (ToMM).⁴⁴ (The use of the word “theory” in this phrase can be misleading, for it is not meant to suggest anything consciously grasped: it is rather like Davidson’s “commonsense apparatus” or Dennett’s “folk psychology”.) The theory-of-mind mechanism is what allows us to so easily and intuitively “mind-read” other humans, regardless of the fact that “mind” itself is clearly not a fact that is visible in the way that our bodies or behavior are. Along with the “shared attention mechanism,” this cognitive subsystem is either missing or severely impaired in children who suffer from autism: thus, as it is commonly put in the scientific literature, they lack an intuitive “theory of mind,” rendering them “mind-blind.” According to Baron-Cohen, the “theory-of-mind mechanism” utilizes the output of the other three in order to enable one to grasp the full range of “*epistemic mental states* (which include pretending, thinking, knowing,

⁴³ Baron-Cohen, S., “Perceptual role-taking and protodeclarative pointing in autism” (1989).

⁴⁴ Baron-Cohen notes that he is taking the phrase “theory-of-mind” from Leslie, A., “ToMM, ToBy, and Agency: Core architecture and domain specificity” in *Mapping the Mind: Domain Specificity in Cognition and Culture*, eds. L. Hirschfeld and S. Gelman (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994).

believing, imagining, dreaming, guessing, and deceiving)” and to tie them together “into a coherent understanding of how mental states and actions are related” (MB 51). Interestingly, Leslie has argued that the earliest and most important epistemic mental state for the development of a full-blown theory of mind is *pretence*, which underlies the spontaneous pretend play that is common among very young children but which has been shown to be absent in those with autism. Leslie finds the early onset of the ability to pretend remarkable:

Pretending ought to strike the cognitive psychologist as a very odd sort of ability. After all, from an evolutionary point of view, there ought to be a high premium on the *veridicality* of cognitive processes. The perceiving, thinking organism ought, as far as possible, to get things right. Yet pretense flies in the face of this fundamental principle. In pretence we deliberately distort reality. How odd then that this ability is not the sober culmination of intellectual development but instead makes its appearance playfully and precociously at the very beginning of childhood.... How is it possible for a child to think about a banana as if it were a telephone, a lump of plastic as if it were alive, or an empty soap dish as if it contained soap?⁴⁵

According to Leslie, the reason pretence is so important, along with the reason it is so essential that it appear this early in childhood development (usually around 18 months), is that pretend play involves the same distinction between propositional attitudes and propositional contents that enables subsequent attributions of mental states (such as belief) to other persons. That is, before the full-blown acquisition of language and the web of propositional attitudes as such, pretend play *enacts* the logical distinction

⁴⁵ Alan Leslie, “Pretence and representation: The origins of ‘theory of mind’” in *Psychological Review* 94 (1987), pp. 412-426, p. 412. Cited in AEE 81.

between propositional attitudes and contents that constitute the building blocks of the space of reasons.

In pretend play, a three-way relationship is established, between an agent (usually the child), a primary representation (the actual object being played with) and a secondary representation that is de-coupled from the primary one (which represents the content of the pretence). Thus a child can pretend that a banana is a telephone while remaining aware that it is a banana as well: as Karmiloff-Smith and Russell explain, “the primary and decoupled representations involve different and separate levels of processing and obey distinct causal and logical inferential constraints” (CPM 254). Reality, in other words, is no longer identical with what someone may think about it. As Frith explains, once this decoupling is accomplished, the child can go on to attribute thoughts to others that are distinct from reality as well: “When decoupled, the representation are no longer copies of the real world. Therefore, they can be attached to a person’s wishes, thoughts, or memories. For instance, the child understands: mother *thinks* about the banana ‘*It’s a telephone,*’ and laughs” (AEE 81). This is an absolutely crucial step in the development of the child’s “theory of mind.” Once the innate ability to decouple is activated, the attribution of propositional attitudes such as belief towards others becomes common. As Frith notes: “Given sufficient learning experience, the mentalizing mechanism enables the child to learn surprisingly fast about beliefs and deception” (AEE 81).

Leslie’s theory of pretence therefore predicts that children with autism, who do not exhibit spontaneous pretend play, should not be able to grasp the concept of belief,

since the understanding of this propositional attitude is developmentally dependent upon the earlier mastery of the ability to pretend. Dennett has argued that the best way to test if a child has a concept of belief is to see if the child understands that another person might hold a false belief: “this,” explains Baron-Cohen, “might constitute a litmus test of whether an organism had a ‘theory of mind,’ in that in such cases it becomes possible to distinguish unambiguously between the child’s (true) belief and the child’s awareness of someone else’s different (false) belief” (MB 69-70). Following Dennett’s suggestion, Baron-Cohen, Leslie and Frith devised an experiment using two dolls (named Sally and Anne) in order to test the understanding of belief among three different child populations: children with autism, children with Down’s syndrome and normal children. Frith describes the “Sally-Anne Experiment” this way:

Sally has a basket and Anne has a box. Sally has a marble and she puts it into her basket. She then goes out. Anne takes out Sally’s marble and puts it into her box while Sally is away. Now Sally comes back and wants to play with her marble. At this point we ask the critical question: “Where will Sally look for her marble?” The answer is, of course, “In the basket.” This answer is correct because Sally has put the marble into the basket and has not seen it being moved. She *believes* the marble is still where she put it. Therefore she will look in the basket even though the marble is not there any more. (AEE 83-84)

As Frith remarks, the “results were striking”: most of the normal children and children with Down syndrome correctly answered the question “Where will Sally look for her marble?” In contrast, nearly all of the children with autism pointed to the box. (The results were later replicated using live humans in the roles of Sally and Anne.) In accordance with the predictions of Leslie’s theory of the developmental role of

pretence, they were unable to infer from the situation that Sally would have a false belief about the location of her marble: in other words, they showed that they had no intuitive grasp of the concept of belief and thus could not see that another person's thoughts might be different from their own. Without prior mastery of the ability to decouple representations from reality through pretence, the autistic children were unable to attribute the propositional attitude of belief to Sally: they were blind to the otherness of Sally's mind.

In a negative way, this confirms Davidson's point that surprise is criterial of rationality. As we already noted, Davidson holds that "surprise about some things is a necessary and sufficient condition of thought in general," for it demonstrates that the surprised person grasps the distinction between "what is believed and what is the case" (SIO 96). Here, however, it seems that we need to add to Davidson's criterion (though perhaps it is already implicit in it) the requirement that one be able to understand the possibility of *another* person experiencing surprise. Interestingly, Frith notes that the anticipation and observation of surprise in others are important and regular aspects of children's entertainments (as, of course, are deception and disguise, which also presuppose the ability to understand that other people might hold false beliefs):

A common feature in children's stories and puppet plays all over the world is the surprise created by one actor knowing something that another actor does not. For instance, Punch is hit over the head by Judy. This is funny because, unbeknown to Punch, Judy was coming up behind him with a rolling pin. Children from about age three watch such shows with every sign of apparent pleasure and anticipation. They know that something that a person has not seen cannot be in the mind of that person, and will therefore cause a surprise. If a child can implicitly take account

of another person's thoughts, this kind of inference will be obvious. (AEE 82)

Sadly, it is this very "obvious" kind of inference that children with autism are blocked from readily seeing, as the Sally-Anne experiment clearly demonstrated.

The studies and analyses of autistic mindblindness by Baron-Cohen and his colleagues foreground what kinds of cognitive capacities are taken for granted in the theories of philosophers such as Quine and Davidson, while at the same time confirming that empathy (Quine) and triangulation (Davidson) are absolutely necessary aspects of normal human cognitive development. Indeed, it appears that the fundamental role of pretence in our ability to grasp the mental states of another person obliquely supports Quine's treatment of the attribution of propositional attitudes as a kind of dramatic idiom: without the ability to pretend, we are blind to the existence of other minds (other *behavioral* entities will be perceptible, for sure, but those entities will not be endowed with the full range of propositional attitudes absent the prior mastery of pretence). Quine, it turns out, is also absolutely right when he suggests that empathy plays a crucial role in language acquisition: Baron-Cohen's findings about the centrality of the eyes to the establishment of joint attention corroborates Quine's intuitive analogy between empathetic response and facial recognition. Indeed, it seems that mindblindness is intimately related to abnormalities in facial recognition and perception. As Frith reports, "experiments have shown that people with autism cannot remember faces as well as they can remember buildings or landscapes"⁴⁶ and a

⁴⁶ Blair, R.J.R., Frith, U., Smith, N., Abell, F., and Cipolotti, L., "Fractionation of visual memory: Agency detection and its impairment in autism" in *Neuropsychologia* 40 (200), pp. 108-118.

“neurophysiological study by Robert Shultz and colleagues at Yale has demonstrated that the part of the brain that is normally specialized for faces is not specialized in autistic people”⁴⁷ (AEE 104). In fact, the studies of Shultz showed that when processing faces the brains of autistic subjects showed activity in the same areas activated by the visual processing of nonface objects in normal control subjects (AEE 204). For people with autism, it appears that there does not seem to be anything particularly special about the human face.

The inattentiveness of autistics to the appearance of mentality in the face negatively affects their ability to learn language, consistent with Quine’s correlation of empathy with language acquisition. Studies of language learning by the developmental scientist Paul Bloom show that a meeting of minds by means of a meeting of the eyes plays a crucial role in normal language learning.⁴⁸ As Frith describes Bloom’s findings:

One old idea is that the sound of a word has to be paired with the sight of a stimulus, and that from such pairings lasting representations are formed in memory. According to Bloom such a mechanism will not be sufficient. It would lead to frequent incorrect pairings of word sound and word meaning, which are actually quite rare in young children’s language. Consider the novel word “fendle” spoken when looking at a novel object, an unusual red ball with yellow spikes. Does “fendle” refer to the whole object, to the yellow spikes, or perhaps to one particular spike? If you follow the speaker’s gaze, and if you take into account what they said before (e.g., “Here is a strange one”), you would get clues to what the speaker meant (e.g., “fendle” refers to a red ball with yellow spikes). To understand the speaker’s intention, the intuitive mentalizing mechanism... will play a role. The 18-months revolution, which may coincide with a leap in the

⁴⁷ Schultz, R.T., Gauthier, I., Klin, A., et al., “Abnormal ventral temporal cortical activity during face discrimination among individuals with autism and Asperger’s syndrome” in *Archives of General Psychiatry* 57 (2000), pp. 331-340.

⁴⁸ Paul Bloom, *How Children Learn the Meaning of Words* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

maturation of the brain system that underpins mentalizing, also coincides with a leap in word learning. Bloom argues that this is more than coincidence. (AEE 120)

Consistent with the theories of mind-reading and mind-blindness proposed by Baron-Cohen and others, Bloom has shown that the direction of the adult's gaze plays a crucial role in the child's acquisition of words: after all, we have already noted that the first place people generally look in order to detect another person's goal or mental state is his or her eyes. It is unsurprising, therefore, that autistic children, while showing themselves capable of learning language, acquire it in ways radically different from normal children. In one study, for example, both normal and autistic children were individually placed in a room in which no other person was present. Instead, a voice was pumped in from a speaker above, saying "fendle" at the same time as the child touched a novel object. As Frith explains, "this situation has all the prerequisites for learning a sound and sight association, but not the prerequisites for intention tracking, as there is only a disembodied voice" (AEE 120). Consistent with the mindblindness explanation, the children with autism were able to learn the novel word under these conditions while the normally developing children did not. As Frith comments, "While normal children ignored the sound from above when no speaker was present, so autistic children may well ignore the subtle cues to intentions when face to face with a speaker" (AEE 120-121). Of course, as we noted earlier, it makes no sense to suggest, as Quine does, that in a normal language-learning situation, empathy is exercised by one or another of the parties: clearly both teacher and student, adult and child, native and linguist need to be empathetic for effective language training to occur. Bloom agrees:

he suggests that “given the ability to attribute intentions and other mental states to others, it is after all not such a mystery that young normal children manage to acquire language without much trial and error. It is not only the children, but the other people around them, who continuously monitor mental states.... When a child learns the word for ‘pudding,’ it is most likely that the word will have been uttered at exactly the right moment so that the child does not mistakenly learn to use the word ‘pudding’ to mean ‘raisin,’ or ‘yellow,’ or ‘stop it’” (AEE 121). So when we read the literary critic Paul de Man declare that “Man can address and face other men... because he has a face,” we can nod and agree.⁴⁹ But when he goes on to add that “he has a face only because he partakes of a mode of discourse that is neither entirely natural nor entirely human,” we can understand that he is almost exactly wrong. Whatever “modes of discourse” we may be able to partake of, we can do so only because we always already (as the saying goes) perceive the significance of the human face beforehand: the meaningfulness of the face lies at the cognitive ground of our linguistic capacities and is certainly not the mere “product” of any figures of speech.⁵⁰ By arguing that self and interpersonal communication are reducible to the autonomous workings of “language” (whatever that

⁴⁹ Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1984), p. 90.

⁵⁰ For example, prosopopoeia. On de Man’s view of the rhetorical trope of prosopopoeia, see esp. “Autobiography As De-Facement” and “Shelley Disfigured” in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, pp. 67-81 and pp. 93-123. In “Shelley Disfigured,” for example, we are told that the human face (along with the sense of subjectivity the figure of the “face” is said rhetorically to produce) endlessly emerges and dissolves within a tropological play of face-giving and defacement, which he calls “prosopopoeia” (from “*prosopon poiien*, to confer a mask or a face”). For de Man, there is no end to prosopopoeia for it is the very “madness of words” and “no degree of knowledge” can stop it (122). Incurable, the only therapy possible for this condition is the ironic insight that there is no point celebrating or denouncing it, since we readers and subjects “are its product rather than its agent” (122).

word might mean abstracted from the intentions of humans who actually *use* words), de Man has put matters entirely backwards.

- The Nature of Reason: Brains and Minds, Syntax and Semantics

As I hope is evident, the study of autism has added immensely to our understanding of the crucial role played by the human face and facial perception in the normal development of the human mind, including our ability to acquire, to recall Davidson's phrase, "the gift of tongues." If the intentional stance is, as Dennett likes to say, a kind of pattern recognition, it seems that one of the most important perceptual patterns may be that of the human face (cf. Dennett's "Real Patterns"⁵¹). To return full circle to the Aristotelian view of humans as "rational animals" with which we began, developmental psychology so far bears out our contention that faces do play a special role in the cognitive transformations that bridge the animal and the rational sides of our being, while at the same time making clear that, of course, no *real* chasm exists between these two terms. In a way, the conceit of a bridge is an idle one: as developmental psychology and cognitive neuroscience (often working in concert) continue to show,

⁵¹ Daniel Dennett, "Real Patterns" in *Brainstorms: Essays on Designing Minds* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), pp. 95-120. On p. 98 we find: "Where utter patternlessness or randomness prevails, nothing is predictable. The success of folk-psychological prediction, like the success of any prediction, depends on there being some order or pattern in the world to exploit. Exactly where in the world does this pattern exist? What is the pattern *of*? Some have thought, with Fodor, that the pattern of belief must in the end be a pattern of structures in the brain, formulae written in the language of thought. Where else could it be? Gibsonians might say the pattern is 'in the light'—and Quinians (such as Davidson and I) could almost agree: the pattern is discernible in agents' (observable) behavior when we subject it to 'radical interpretation' (Davidson) 'from the intentional stance' (Dennett)."

rationality is inextricable from the particular biological nature of the human organism. The development of reason, while wondrous, is nonetheless utterly natural.

However, while it seems reasonable to assume that no one has come across a rational being that is not at the same time an animal as well, there are aspects of rationality that seem to resist reduction to *mere* biology. Descartes' untenable distinction between the mental (*res cogitans*) and the corporeal (*res extensa*) is only the most exaggerated form that the perceived antinomy between reason and nature has taken in the philosophical tradition. But even to many anti-Cartesian philosophers, the web of propositional attitudes that constitute the space of reasons seems clearly *sui generis* when judged against the kind of law-like causal regularities that structure the space of nature. This was Davidson's point when he remarked that "whichever way we talk, there remains the difference, with respect to rationality, between the infant and the snail on the one hand, and the normal adult person on the other" (SIO 95). For Davidson, the normative—that is, rational—inter-relationships that characterize the propositional attitudes "have no echo in physical theory" and therefore cannot be reduced to the kinds of empirical descriptions available from the natural sciences.⁵² This is consistent with Wilfrid Sellars' point that since mental states are inherently normative, descriptions of them cannot be characterized as empirical: "In characterizing an episode or a state as that of *knowing*, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and

⁵² Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 231.

being able to justify what one says.”⁵³ Sellars’ point is that mental states or episodes are not law-bound as are phenomena in the space of nature. John McDowell, who has made Sellars’ distinction between the space of reasons and the space of nature the conceptual crux of his own philosophical views, explains the distinction this way:

What would the logical space of nature be? I think we capture the essentials of Sellars’s thinking if we take it that the logical space of nature is the logical space in which the natural sciences function, as we have been enabled to conceive them by a well-charted, and in itself admirable, development of modern thought. We might say that to place something in nature on the relevant conception, as contrasted with placing it in the logical space of reasons, is to situate it in the realm of law. But what matters for Sellars’s point is not that or any other positive characterization, but the negative claim: whatever the relations are that constitute the logical space of nature, they are *different in kind* from the normative relations that constitute the logical space of reasons. The relations that constitute the logical space of nature, on the relevant conception, do not include relations such as one thing’s being warranted, or—for the general case—correct, in the light of another. This is what Sellars is saying when he insists that “empirical description” cannot amount to placing something in the logical space of reasons. (MW xv)⁵⁴

Sellars’ point, surely correct, poses a serious challenge to the integration of scientific research (especially that of contemporary cognitive neuroscience) with philosophical reflection. After all, the distinction Sellars and McDowell are insisting on can easily be interpreted as one between the brain as a physical object studied by the natural sciences

⁵³ Wilfrid Sellars, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” in Herbert Feigl and Michael Scriven, eds., *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956), pp. 253-329, pp. 298-9.

⁵⁴ John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1994). Reference to this text will be given parenthetically with the abbreviation MW.

and the mind as a rational consciousness understandable only according to what Davidson likes to call the “constitutive ideal of rationality.”⁵⁵

Indeed, McDowell has tackled this very issue in a critique of Dennett’s essay “Toward a Cognitive Theory of Consciousness”: as its title suggests, Dennett’s piece attempts to explain consciousness by means of the kinds of sub-personal cognitive mechanisms that play such an important explanatory role in the theories of Baron-Cohen and others working at the forefront of contemporary science of mind.⁵⁶ McDowell has no problem with cognitive science as such: he disavows any “know-nothing refusal to acknowledge the rich promise of cognitive science” (MVR 356). However, he believes that we must be careful when interpreting and articulating the relationship between a person’s mind and the cognitive mechanisms that play an enabling causal role in the biological existence of that mind: that is, between two levels of being and explanation that McDowell calls the “personal” and the “sub-personal.” The sub-personal cognitive systems, such as the clustered populations of face cells that Martha Farah hypothesized make up a distributed neural network geared toward the recognition of particular faces, belong, according to McDowell, to the space of nature: they are bound, as are all physical matter and energy, by causal laws. Such face cells may, and clearly do, ultimately enable a rich phenomenological experience of the faces of family, friends and strangers, yet the full-blown conscious experience of facial

⁵⁵ This phrase comes from Davidson’s “Mental Events” in *Essays on Actions and Events*, p. 223.

⁵⁶ Daniel Dennett, “Towards a Cognitive Theory of Consciousness” in *Brainstorms: Philosophical Essays on Mind and Psychology* (Montgomery, VT: Bradford Books, 1978), pp. 149-173. McDowell’s critique is called “The Content of Perceptual Experience” in John McDowell, *Mind, Value and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1998), pp. 341-358. References to *Mind, Value and Reality* will be given parenthetically with the abbreviation MVR.

recognition and perception is distinct in kind, and not merely in degree, from the information-processing that goes on at the sub-personal levels in various regions of the brain. McDowell's fundamental point is that a whole *person* recognize the faces of others, not parts of that person's *brain*: to identify the brain with the person is to conceptually confuse radically distinct levels of description. The brain is a physical part of the space of nature, while the person lives and thinks in the space of reasons. However, this point is not fundamentally incompatible with Dennett's own (though Dennett does open himself up to criticism by occasionally blurring the distinction, but I think this is often simply due to rhetorical and conceptual enthusiasm). Intentional states, according to Dennett are after all only attributable to whole "systems," not parts or subsystems. As Andrew Brook and Don Ross explain: "...intentional states are not ascribed to parts of a person, even parts as large as the brain. Intentional states are states of the *whole person*, indeed a person/environment whole. If intentional states are complex triangulations of behavior/brain/environment interactions, then they cannot be reduced to brain-states."⁵⁷

Another way of getting at the distinction that McDowell is keen to bring forth is by thinking of the gap between syntax and semantics. In fact, Dennett himself is the one who first articulated the conceptual distinction between brains and persons this way: brains and their parts, according to Dennett, are syntactic engines, while whole persons are semantic ones. Sub-personal information-processing systems that make up

⁵⁷ Andrew Brook and Don Ross, eds., *Daniel Dennett* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), p. 18.

the structure of the brain are physical in nature, and thus they do not know the first thing about “meanings.” As McDowell puts it:

A sub-personal... informational system is a physical mechanism, connected to its surroundings by transducers that convert physical impacts from outside into events of the sort that the system can work on, and perhaps by transducers that convert the system's end products into physical interventions in the exterior. The system knows nothing even about the character of the immediate physical impacts on the input transducers, or the immediate physical interventions in the exterior that result from its operations by way of the output transducers, let alone about the nature and layout of the distal environment. The operations of the system are determined by structures exemplified in the initial contributions of the transducers, and in intermediate events and states in the system, which have no *meaning* for the system. In short, in Dennett's own memorable and exactly right phrase, the system is a syntactic engine, not a semantic engine. (MVR 350-351, emphasis added)

Because the operations of the brain are fully determined by its material structure along with the input it receives from the environment, it cannot be said to “know” or “understand” or “communicate” anything, even to the mind of the person who possesses that very brain. That is to say, McDowell goes on, “we have inside us something that is not intelligent at all (it knows nothing and understands nothing)” (MVR 353). And yet clearly, “That is not the truth about us” (MVR 354). We, as *persons*, understand, know, communicate, reason, perceive, recognize and so on. Our lives are meaningful through and through. Structure never, in and of itself, produces meaning (and this, of course, is what is fundamentally wrong about all structuralist theories of language: they account for the abstract inter-relationships of sign-systems, but are incapable of explaining how signs can *mean* something to language users). When we recognize the familiar face of

another person standing before us, for example, we certainly can do so only because an array of sub-personal information-processing systems participate in and enable the accomplishment of that everyday cognitive task, but for the whole person, facial recognition is simply the recognition of the presence of a particular person whom we know. The syntactic workings of the cognitive subsystems enable, but do not constitute, the meaningful experience of interpersonal recognition. As McDowell explains:

At the level of internal machinery, it is useful to talk of sensory systems as information-processing devices; but for the animal its sensory systems are modes of openness to features of its environment. Information-processing characterizations of the internal machinery figure in explanations of how it can be that animals are in touch with their environments. The “as if” content that is usefully deployed at the lower level helps make intelligible the genuine content that appears at the higher level by way of “enabling” explanations, not as somehow constituting that content. Since there is no getting around the fact that the internal machinery is really only a syntactic engine, the attempt to see a constitutive relation between the lower and the upper levels undermines our hold on the fact that animals are semantic engines. (MVR 354-354)

We might put the consequences of McDowell’s point this way: if Dennett (following Quine) had already acknowledged that there was no fact of the matter which could ground our attribution of a particular propositional attitude to *another* person, then perhaps there is no fact of the matter (in our own brain) which constitutes our ability to attribute propositional attitudes at all.

Consciousness, in other words, is still unexplained. As McDowell concludes, “consciousness itself escapes Dennett’s cognitivist net; he offers what may be an

enabling explanation of consciousness, but not a constitutive one. And in one sense, this leaves us without an account of consciousness. We lack an account of what it is, even if we have an account of what enables it” (MVR 357). For McDowell, this does not mean, however, that consciousness is now relegated to an immaterialist ontology: “as if, in denying that consciousness is a matter of configurations in the satisfyingly material medium of the nervous system, we were committed to regarding it as a matter of configurations in an immaterial medium instead” (MVR 357). It seems to me that McDowell’s conclusion here, while on the one hand providing a salutary check to certain tendencies in Dennett’s thought that would problematically *identify* sub-personal cognitive structures with consciousness, on the other hand supports Dennett’s more fundamental point that mentality is not factual in nature, and is simply the result of the intentional stance we take towards human entities, both ourselves and others. To confirm McDowell’s point in a spirit with which I suspect he would not agree: mind, we can agree, is not a fact of nature, even if there is nothing more natural in the world.

The outcome of these reflections, however, is that we are left without a satisfying account of how we perceive meaning and mentality in the faces of other humans. We have learned a great deal from the scientific literature about the structural reasons *why* the face would be a perceptual object of singular importance to the human organism: but the way we grasp *mentality* in the face of another is still unclear. After all, as Karmiloff-Smith and Russell note, “there is nothing specifically *mental* about human faces” (CPM 253). This is certainly so because there is nothing specifically *mental* about anything at all. It is evident from the development of this argument that

cognitive science alone—while full of tantalizing clues and immensely enlightening about the underlying cognitive structures—cannot provide a full account of the rich semantics of the human face. For this, we will have to turn elsewhere. Luckily, as we have already noted, Wittgenstein found facial perception (and the related art of physiognomy) profoundly significant and his later philosophical writings tell us a great deal about how we perceive meaning and mentality in the faces of other people. Considering the great and wide-ranging importance he attributed to the ancient art of face reading, we could even call his whole later philosophy a form of conceptual physiognomy: as he himself rather cryptically noted at one point in the *Investigations*, “Meaning is a physiognomy” (PI §568). Having now reached the present limit of scientific explanation (though who knows what the future will bring?), we can turn in the following chapter to Wittgenstein’s philosophical reflections on the meaning of the face.

2. Wittgenstein's Face of Meaning

Wittgenstein's interest in faces and physiognomy can be traced to his early and enthusiastic reading of Otto Weininger's *Sex and Character*, a treatise on the nature of sexual difference that we know Wittgenstein highly esteemed.⁵⁸ Weininger regarded physiognomy as possessing great methodological importance, since he understood it to study the visible manifestation of the parallelism between the psychic character and the physical morphology of a given man or woman: "the parallelism between characterology and morphology in the widest application," Weininger wrote, "makes us look forward to the time when physiognomy will take its honourable place amongst the sciences..." (SaC 36). Wittgenstein was intimately familiar with this text, and so it is unsurprising that elements of its discussion of faces would find their way into his later physiognomic remarks. For example, the term *aspect*, which appears in Weininger's comments on the facial expressions of men of genius ("the number of different aspects that the face of a man has assumed may be taken almost as a physiognomical measure of his talent" [SaC 65]), would later come to constitute the subject of the longest section of Part II of the *Philosophical Investigations* (sec. xi: on seeing aspects, which also happens to include the discussion of the "physiognomy of a word"). That this terminological echo is not unintended is suggested by the fact that in earlier versions of

⁵⁸ Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character*, trans. of 6th German ed. (London: William Heinemann, 1906). References to this text will be given parenthetically with the abbreviation SaC. On Weininger's influence on Wittgenstein, see Ray Monk's excellent biography, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: the Duty of Genius* (New York: Penguin, 1990). References to Monk's biography will be given parenthetically with the abbreviation WDG. I am indebted to Monk's text for drawing to my attention the connections between Weininger's, Spengler's and Wittgenstein's ideas.

the remarks that would eventually become §§536-537 of the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein explicitly cites Weininger in conjunction with the idea of an “aspect of the face itself” (PI §536).⁵⁹ Moreover, this physiognomic association helps to explain why Wittgenstein’s initial definition of the concept of “noticing an aspect” would make reference to an experience of facial perception: “I contemplate a face, and then suddenly notice its likeness to another. I *see* that it has not changed; and yet I see it differently. I call this experience ‘noticing an aspect’” (PI p. 165). But while Wittgenstein’s interest in *aspects* appears to be indebted to his reading of Weininger, the conceptual use he makes of the term (which we will turn to later) is both stranger and broader than the relatively ordinary use it has in *Sex and Character*. On the whole, in fact, it appears that aside from an occasional and loose terminological borrowing, the most significant lesson Wittgenstein learned from Weininger’s physiognomy was simply the importance of physiognomy itself, especially its fundamental belief in the expressive meaningfulness of the human face. For example, commenting upon a timid face (in the passage that in earlier versions cites Weininger), he writes: “the timidity does not seem to be merely associated, outwardly connected, with the face; but fear is there, alive, in the features. If the features change slightly, we can speak of a corresponding change in the fear” (PI §537).

In addition to absorbing a physiognomic regard for the face from Weininger’s *Sex and Character*, the later Wittgenstein, inspired by Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline*

⁵⁹ For example, we find in the manuscript text now available as the *Philosophical Remarks*: “Wenn ich sage, dieses Gesicht hat den Ausdruck der Milde, Güte, Feigheit, so scheine ich nicht nur zu meinen daß wir die und die Gefühle mit dem Anblick des Gesichts assoziieren, sondern ich bin versucht zu sagen, daß das Gesicht ein Aspekt der Feigheit, Güte, etc., selbst ist. (Vergleiche z.B. Weininger.)”

of the West, would come to perceive in the art of physiognomy conceptual implications reaching far beyond its original focus on the face.⁶⁰ *The Decline of the West* is a work of cultural historiography that conceives of cultures as cyclical and organic in nature, each having its own individual character and destiny: "Each Culture has its own possibilities of self-expression which arise, ripen, decay, and never return. There is not one sculpture, one painting, one mathematics, but many. Each is in its deepest essence different from the others, each limited in duration and self-contained" (DoW 17).

According to Spengler, cultures are not susceptible of scientific interpretation, since the methods of science grasp nothing but the laws of causality. Destiny, not causality, is what structures the history of cultural forms (as it does the teleological life-cycles of organisms) and so the proper method of cultural study will not be scientific, but morphological, or as Spengler preferred to put it, *physiognomic*: "The Morphology of the organic, of history and life and all that bears the sign of direction and destiny, is called Physiognomic" (DoW 71). In keeping with this characterization of the historian's methodology, Spengler called the capacity to perceive the morphological destiny of a culture a "physiognomic flair," about which Helmut Werner, the editor of the 1959 abridgement of the *Decline*, offered the following explanation: "The word 'destiny' expresses an indescribable inward certainty: causality carries the notion of law. The physiognomic flair, by which it is possible to read a lifetime, a fate, from a face, operates without deliberate effort or any system. It is far removed from cause and effect" (DoW 76). Discussing the study of economics, Spengler wrote: "Economics has

⁶⁰ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (1918). References to this text will be given parenthetically with the abbreviation DoW.

no system, but a physiognomy. To fathom the secret of its inner form, its *soul*, demands the physiognomic flair” (DoW 399). Since cultures are not structured by the mechanistic laws of causality, attempts at causal explanation are misguided. An entirely novel methodology is required to see and describe the morphological destiny that each culture obeys, and Spengler can think of no better way to describe this form of seeing than the analogy of physiognomy provides: we see the form of a culture’s destiny in the same way we see the truth revealed by a person’s face. Physiognomy is the key to morphological analysis.

Wittgenstein found this methodological orientation compelling, and it strongly influenced the development of his later descriptive, anti-theoretical philosophical views. For if the later Wittgenstein found theoretical explanations of philosophical problems to be profitless (“*For me*”, he said in 1930, “a theory is without value. A theory gives me nothing”), morphological description seemed a viable methodological alternative: “What I give,” he said in one lecture, “is the morphology of the use of an expression” (WDG 304, 303). This later orientation is forcefully expressed in his critical response to Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*. Wittgenstein reacted with great hostility to Frazer’s rationalistic explanations of “primitive” rituals as mistaken, proto-scientific experiments. Rather than attempt to *explain* the meaning of the rituals, which Wittgenstein regarded as foolish, he suggested (invoking Spengler) that they should simply be described, or *shown*, in a “perspicuous presentation”

... by arranging the factual material so that we can easily pass from one part to another and have a clear view of it – showing it in a perspicuous way. For us the conception of a perspicuous

presentation is fundamental. It indicates the form in which we write of things, the way in which we see things. (A kind of *Weltanschauung* that seems to be typical of our time. Spengler.) This perspicuous presentation makes possible that understanding which consists just in the fact that we “see the connections.” (cited in WDG 311)

Wittgenstein never wavered from this new methodological commitment, and an essentially unmodified restatement of it appears in the *Philosophical Investigations*: “A perspicuous representation produces just that understanding which consists in ‘seeing connexions’.... The concept of a perspicuous representation is of fundamental significance for us. It earmarks the form of account we give, the way we look at things” (PI §122). Wittgenstein’s notion of perspicuity appears to be directly indebted to Spengler’s “physiognomic flair”: perspicuity characterizes a form of sight (“the way we look at things”), and a corresponding form of description, which is analogous to Spengler’s characterization of the way we perceive both faces and cultures (“without any deliberate effort or system” and “far removed from cause and effect”). Just as Spengler’s physiognomic or morphological analysis of cultures can reveal connections that evade the grasp of casual explanation, Wittgenstein’s perspicuity characterizes a form of sight and description that, as he puts it, “produces just that understanding which consists in ‘seeing connexions’.” One might say that for both Wittgenstein and Spengler, understanding and meaning are produced by, and as, a physiognomy.

Or to put it simply: “Meaning is a physiognomy” (PI §568). Seeing the connections between the physiognomic methods of Spengler and Wittgenstein helps us now to understand this remark, which appears parenthetically following a discussion of

whether a certain rule (that “the kings are to be used for drawing lots before a game of chess”) should be considered essential or inessential to the game. Using the language of physiognomy, Wittgenstein concludes: “If I understand the *character* of the game aright—I might say—then this isn’t an essential part of it. ((Meaning is a *physiognomy*.)” (PI §568, emphasis added). The importance of this discussion lies in its relevance to the related issues of meaning and rule-following: if the meanings within a given language-game are determined solely by the following of rules, then there should be no possible (or at least meaningful) recourse beyond those rules – indeed, what would constitute such a beyond? There would be no sense, if this were the case, in making a distinction between the essential or inessential rules of a given game, and Wittgenstein gives voice to this view when he exclaims in the midst of this discussion: “But, after all, the game is supposed to be defined by the rules!” (§567). But in propria persona, he makes it clear that rules do not exhaust the parameters of a game: “The game, one would like to say, has not only rules but also a *point*” (PI §564, emphasis in original). Wittgenstein’s introduction of the concept of a “point” suggests that meaning is not completely determined by the totality of the rules of a game. The point of a game cannot be gathered by reading off a complete list of its rules; it is something graspable in addition to those rules (“not only rules but *also* a point”). Yet there is no suggestion that the point of a game is some kind of mental or spiritual entity added to the rules. Indeed, to take the point of a game as something simply added to the totality of rules would leave it indistinguishable from a rule at all, or would force us to call it some kind of super-rule which controlled the sense of all the other rules of the game, allowing us

to determine which of them were essential or not. Wittgenstein's idea of a "point" is clearly different in kind, and not simply in degree, from the concept of a rule; yet it is difficult to know how further to specify what a "point" is. But it is not clear that Wittgenstein means us to be able to. The *point* of a game—and the idea of a "point" here suggestively recalls Spengler's concept of destiny—seems to be something one can simply *see*, as Spengler said one could read a fate from a face. It appears that Wittgenstein can assert that a rule is inessential to the game of chess simply because he grasps the game's "character" – in the form of its physiognomy. Strange as this may sound, it seems that for Wittgenstein, meaning *is* a physiognomy, and understanding a kind of physiognomic flair.

Strange indeed. There is an almost mystical quality to the emphasis on direct seeing expressed in these physiognomically inflected remarks of Wittgenstein. Yet to call his flair for physiognomy "mystical" would misleadingly give the impression that what he regards as meaningful about any given physiognomy (whether of a game, a word, or an actual face) is somehow hidden, transcendent or otherwise mysterious. This could not be farther from the truth: for the radical innovation of Wittgenstein's physiognomy, as with the whole of his later philosophy (and we can now appreciate, I think, how significant physiognomy is to the later writings), consists of his view that meaning and mentality are not occult phenomena which accompany the physiognomy of a game, a word, or a face, but are rather directly visible to anyone who cares to look. On our ability to perceive mentality, or consciousness, in the faces of other people, he writes:

Consciousness in another's face. Look into someone else's face, and see the consciousness in it, and a particular *shade* of consciousness. You see on it, in it, joy, indifference, interest, excitement, torpor and so on. The light in other people's faces. Do you look into *yourself* in order to recognize the fury in *his* face? It is there as clearly as in your own breast. (Z 220)

We need not refer, by analogy, to our own mental states (that is, look into ourselves) in order to perceive the mentality of another (as claimed, for example, by Edmund Husserl's phenomenological theory of intersubjectivity in the *Cartesian Meditations*); nor, for that matter, is there any need to refer to some private psychological realm within the other person, lying behind or beneath the expressions of his or her face.

No *inner* facts at all, whether in ourselves or in the other person, are required in order to explain our ability to directly *see* mentality in the appearance of another's face. Wittgenstein's point is simply that such direct seeing is always a *possibility* (an everyday occurrence even), not that we can have epistemological *certainty* with regard to the mental states exhibited by the expressions of others – that, of course, would be patently implausible. Without a doubt, the other person could be feigning or suppressing their facial expressions; just as we may be deceived, or simply mistaken, about their significance. Indeed, perhaps it is the very real possibility of these kinds of deceptions and mistakes that gives rise to the common picture of human psychology that postulates a division between the inner and the outer, the inner constituting a privileged and essentially private domain accessible solely by subjective introspection. Consider, for example, the following passage from Augustine's *Confessions* which imagines the mind, even of an infant, in precisely those terms:

Little by little I began to realize where I was and to want to make my wishes known to others, who might satisfy them. But this I could not do, because my wishes were inside me, while other people were outside, and they had no faculty which could penetrate my mind. So I would toss my arms and legs about and make noises, hoping that such few signs as I could make would show my meaning, though they were quite unlike what they were meant to mime.⁶¹

In this passage, the contents of Augustine's mind, including his "wishes," are quite explicitly represented as fully formed even prior to the acquisition of language. Later, words would be learned that could point to, and therefore publicly communicate, these inner mental states, but the fundamental privacy and inwardness of these states is made perfectly clear.

As is well known, however, Wittgenstein's remarks on the idea of a "private language" in the *Investigations* show this Augustinian (and, of course, Cartesian and later, Lockean) picture of mind to be conceptually incoherent (recall that the *Investigations* opens with a critique of a passage about language learning from Augustine's *Confessions*). A private language, as Wittgenstein conceives of it, would be one in which the words "refer to what can only be known to the person speaking; to his immediate private sensations. So another person cannot understand the language" (PI §243). Our ordinary talk of sensations do not fall under this definition of a private language, for phrases such as "my arms itch," or "my head throbs," or "I feel pain in my lower back" are perfectly understandable public expressions. A problem arises, however, when these phrases are treated as *reports* that are distinct from the sensations

⁶¹ St. Augustine, *Confessions* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), p. 25.

that they are understood to describe. According to this view, the sensation itself (e.g., pain) is inner and absolutely private, and the outer public report describing it merely associated with it by an introspective act of ostensive definition (i.e. THIS is what the word “pain” refers to, and only I can know the sensation itself; correlatively, I can only know the pain of others by analogy to THIS).

Questioning this way of regarding sensations, Wittgenstein asks, “how does a human being learn the meaning of the names of sensations?—of the word ‘pain’ for example” (PI §244). Countering the descriptivist model of sensation-language required by Augustinian psychology, Wittgenstein proposes an expressivist one: “words are connected with the primitive, the natural, expressions of the sensation and used in their place. A child has hurt himself and he cries; and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations, and later, sentences. They teach the child new pain-behaviour.... [T]he verbal expression of pain replaces crying and does not describe it” (PI §244). Contrary to the Augustinian model, Wittgenstein makes no recourse to private objects of any kind. Sensation-words do not *designate* private objects but rather *express* feelings in the form of publicly shareable (and thus meaningful) verbal behavior. Wittgenstein clearly finds this view acceptable, and the Augustinian one not. But simply presenting an alternative model of sensation-language would do little to change the minds of those who find it intuitively incontrovertible that private sensations are, at bottom, what public sensation-words refer to. So Wittgenstein goes on to present a thought-experiment in which he attempts to imagine an actual scenario in which words or terms would be understood to designate private objects:

Let us imagine the following case. I want to keep a diary about the recurrence of a certain sensation. To this end I associate it with the sign “S” and write this sign in a calendar for every day on which I have the sensation.—I first want to remark that a definition of the sign cannot be formulated.—But still I can give myself a kind of ostensive definition.—How? Can I point to the sensation? Not in the ordinary sense. But I speak, or write the sign down, and at the same time I concentrate my attention on the sensation—and so, as it were, point to it inwardly.—But what is this ceremony for? For that is all it seems to be! A definition surely serves to establish the meaning of a sign.—Well, that is done precisely by the concentrating of my attention; for in this way I impress on myself the connexion between the sign and the sensation. (PI §258)

At first, this description of a private language might seem unproblematic, though Wittgenstein clearly has his doubts, as his jibe about a “ceremony” makes evident. It is not, however, clear what, if anything, might be objectionable about the kind of introspective act of ostensive definition that he imagines here (“S” = private sensation).

But, in fact, Wittgenstein finds this whole scenario incoherent:

But “I impress it on myself” can only mean: this process brings it about that I remember the connexion *right* in the future. But in the present case I have no criterion of correctness. One would like to say: whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that here we can’t talk about ‘right’. (PI §258)

The problem is simply that it is conceptually incoherent to speak of the term “S” being given any kind of definition at all in a private language, since there is no possibility of a solitary speaker drawing a coherent distinction between correct and incorrect usages of words that refer to private objects. In “the present case” of private ostensive definition, anything would go, and thus no particular definition would be meaningful. It follows, therefore, that such private objects cannot ground our understanding of the meaning of

sensation-words or, for that matter, the meanings of concepts which apply to mental states of any kind (such as emotions, intentions, meaning or understanding). The point is not that such private entities do not exist: any attempt to deny them would already presuppose the meaningfulness of any talk about them, and would therefore fall prey to the same critique. The point is simply that when we understand or use a psychological concept (such as the “fury” Wittgenstein notes we can simply *see* upon the face of another), this understanding or use does not require recourse to some private inner fact, whether in ourselves or in other people.

But if meaning and mentality are not explained by hidden *inner* facts, this does not mean that they are reducible to simply *outer* ones either: Wittgenstein’s later philosophy is neither a crude behaviorism nor a reductive physicalism. Indeed, as John Koethe has argued (following Saul Kripke’s pioneering lead), Wittgenstein’s view is that meaning and mentality are not reducible to facts of any kind at all.⁶² Certain verbal and non-verbal behaviors (such as trembling, an accelerated pulse, or saying “I’m afraid”) may serve as definitional elements (or criteria) of what we mean by the concept *fear*, yet fear is not reducible to those, or any other, behaviors (and here we must resist the temptation to say: well, that’s obvious, fear is THIS inside me!). According to Koethe, criteria are “forms of behavior (among other things) that manifest or exhibit

⁶² See Koethe’s *The Continuity of Wittgenstein’s Thought*, which has strongly influenced the interpretation of Wittgenstein in this essay. It is also due to Koethe’s suggestion, in the final chapter of his book, that Wittgenstein’s notion of direct seeing might profitably be compared to the philosophical theories of Dennett and Davidson that first led me to explore the connections that I exploit in the present chapter. John Koethe, *The Continuity of Wittgenstein’s Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1996). References to this text will be given parenthetically with the abbreviation CWT. For Kripke’s reading of Wittgenstein, see: Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982).

mental states,” but criteria are not equivalent to those mental states: fear-behavior is not fear, though we only see fear manifested in the form of fear-behavior (CWT 110-111). Mentality, in other words, is reducible to neither inner states *nor* outer behavior. The conceptual implications of this two-fold denial are startling, as is made evident by the following exchange in *Zettel*:

“But I do have a real *feeling* of joy!” Yes, when you are glad you really are glad. And of course joy is not joyful behavior, nor yet a feeling around the corners of the mouth and the eyes.

“But ‘joy’ surely designates an inward thing.” No. “Joy” designates nothing at all. Neither any inward nor any outward thing. (Z 487)

This striking conclusion about the non-factuality of mental states leaves us facing a perceptual paradox: on the one hand, Wittgenstein argues that our words for mental states (like joy and fury) designate *nothing* at all, while on the other hand, he insists that mentality is immediately and directly visible in the face of another (“Do you look within *yourself*, in order to recognize the fury in *his* face? It is there as clearly as in your own breast”). How are we to reconcile these apparently conflicting claims?

We can dissolve this conceptual problem if we turn our attention from the question of *what* we see (the factuality of mind) to the more fruitful question of *how* we see (the recognition of mentality). If, despite the non-factuality of mental states, we can nonetheless *see* mentality in another’s face, that is only because of the attitude (like Dennett’s “intentional stance”) that we take towards the appearances and expressions of mind in human forms of life. As Koethe puts it: “Thus to call a face, a body, or a form of behavior a picture of mentality—or to say that we recognize mentality in it—is a way

of characterizing our direct and natural *response or attitude* toward it” (CWT 112; emphasis in original). The attitude which discloses mentality is not ratiocinative in nature: when we see that someone is joyful or enraged, this is not due to a process of inference or interpretation. As Wittgenstein puts it in a passage in *Zettel* that we have already cited: “We do not see facial contortions and make inferences from them... to joy, grief, boredom. We describe a face immediately as sad, radiant, bored” (Z 220). Or as he puts it in the *Investigations*, “My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul” (PI p. 152). Consciousness, or mentality, in other words, is simply and quite directly *recognizable* — even if the conceptual account of such recognitional seeing will not necessarily seem so simple or direct.

This does not mean that we do not occasionally need to consciously interpret or make explicit inferences about someone’s appearance or behavior to ascertain their mental state: perhaps a good friend’s disposition has suddenly become strange to us and we do not understand the significance of her “stony” facial expression (is she depressed? quietly seething? or on the verge of exhaustion?) – it would behoove us to think carefully about what might have happened, or even what we may have unknowingly done, to bring about this change. But lest we generalize such experiences as this, and conclude that all instances of facial perception can be conceptually reduced to conscious acts of interpretation, Wittgenstein offers the following wry remarks in *Zettel*:

I interpret words; yes—but do I also interpret looks? Do I interpret a facial expression as threatening or kind?—That *may* happen.

Suppose I said: “It is not enough to perceive the threatening face, I have to interpret it.”—Someone whips out a knife at me and I say “I conceive that as a threat.” (Z 218)

Wittgenstein acknowledges that we may occasionally need to interpret the “look” of a face, but as the negative example of the knife-wielding assailant makes clear, it would be wrong to believe that interpretation is the way we regard faces in general. So while he does not claim that direct seeing of mental states is the only form facial perception takes, Wittgenstein holds that direct understanding of a mental state in a person’s face is absolutely common (and also philosophically significant), and that, in fact, the attitude that discloses mentality in the appearance of another’s face is more fundamental than the ratiocinative one we occasionally need to employ. Even in those cases where we are unsure as to what mental state a certain person’s face might be expressing at a given moment, it makes little sense to say—unless the person is in an unusual condition, such as a coma—that we do not at least recognize mentality as such (what would it mean to sincerely think otherwise?). And when we do need to “think” about what a puzzling face means, the interpretive reasoning we bring to it does not usually concern the spatial organization of the facial features (e.g., does the contraction of his forehead musculature indicate anger?), but naturally tends to focus on psychological questions of a narrative nature (e.g., he looks like he might be angry... I wonder if so-and-so insulted him again?).

Consciousness—“the light in the face of another”—shines forth even if we are uncertain as to what particular aspect of mind we are seeing. When looking at a face, our regard does not choose between, on the one hand, a certain configuration of bone, cartilage, muscle and skin, and on the other hand, an appearance of joy, for example; but rather amongst such possible mental states as “joy, indifference, interest, excitement, torpor and so on” (Z 220). The face is not perceptually constituted in parts (as in an empiricist view of sense-perception), but rather the face *faces* us all at once, instantaneously, as a meaningful expression of mind — even when we cannot see the whole of it at once (think of the deep significance we can glean from a sideways glance). Wittgenstein found it conceptually significant that we can often grasp the expression of a face while at the same time being unable to give any spatial description of its features: “One may note an alteration in a face and describe it by saying that the face assumed a harder expression – and yet not be able to describe the alteration in spatial terms. This is enormously important” (WR 221).⁶³ To Wittgenstein, this absolutely ordinary fact about facial perception indicated the deep poverty of empiricist models of visual perception: “One may also say: ‘He made *this* face’ or ‘His face altered like *this*’, imitating it – and again one can’t describe it in any other way. ((There just are many more language-games than are dreamt of in the philosophy of Carnap and others.))” (WR 221). Those committed to sense-data theories of perception, for example, cannot account for the obvious visibility of the “glance” in someone else’s eyes:

⁶³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Wittgenstein Reader*, Ed. Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994). References to this text will be given parenthetically with the abbreviation WR.

“If you only shake free from your physiological prejudices, you will find nothing queer about the fact that the glance of the eye can be seen too.” For I also say that I see the look that you cast at someone else. And if someone wanted to correct me and say that I don’t really *see* it, I should take that for pure stupidity. (Z 223)

The blindness of empiricism to the human gaze follows from its conception of the eye as a passive organ of sensation, yet Wittgenstein notes that this theoretical assumption is not true to our everyday ways of regarding the powers of the eyes:

We do not see the human eye as a receiver, it appears not to let anything in, but to send something out. The ear receives; the eye looks. (It casts glances, it flashes, radiates, gleams.) One can terrify with one’s eyes, not with one’s ear or nose. When you see the eye you see something going out from it. You see the look in the eye. (Z 222)

But our ability to *see* sight itself cannot be explained by merely broadening the reach of the senses. The “glance” is not an empirical fact like the color of an iris, or the dilation of a pupil: “I should contradict anyone who told me I saw the glance ‘just the way’ I see the shape and colour of the eye” (Z 223). But then what kind of sight is it (if not that of “Carnap and others”) that can *see* something like a flashing glance, the “hardness” of a face, or the fury of a friend?

Wittgenstein found the question of seeing so intriguing and philosophically significant that he devoted the longest section of Part II of the *Investigations* to its consideration: sec. xi, on seeing aspects and aspect-blindness. As we have already noted, Wittgenstein associated the term “aspect” with Weininger’s physiognomic writings, and, as this connection suggests, the question of *faces* was central to Wittgenstein’s interest in aspects of all kinds (not only those of faces, but also cubes,

duck-rabbits, and words as well). Indeed, one primary but unstated goal of Wittgenstein's treatment of aspect-seeing, I would argue, was to produce a philosophical description of "seeing" that would account for our physiognomic ability to recognize different aspects of mind in the faces of others. In *Sex and Character*, Weininger claimed that geniuses have particularly fluid and changeable facial expressions: "Physiognomists, therefore, must not be surprised that men of genius, in whose faces a new side of their minds is continually being revealed, are difficult to classify" (SaC 65). Weininger found his theory confirmed when he compared a number of portraits, executed at different times, of such figures as Goethe, Beethoven, Kant and Schopenhauer. "The number of different aspects that the face of a man has assumed," he concluded, "may be taken almost as a physiognomical measure of his talent" (SaC 65). Wittgenstein took this section of *Sex and Character* to heart: we know, for example, that he took Weininger's distinction between talent and genius very seriously (in one particularly tormented and disturbing entry in his notebooks, he declared that he was "no more than talented").⁶⁴ We can imagine Wittgenstein carefully studying these physiognomic remarks in *Sex and Character* and wondering: what does it mean to say that one can see a "new side" or "aspect" of mind in the appearance of a face? I believe that Wittgenstein's discussion of aspects was essentially an attempt to answer this pressing and fundamental question about physiognomy.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ *Culture and Value*, p. 19. See Ray Monk biography for Weiningerian and psychological context of this remark, p. 316.

⁶⁵ Even the fact that Weininger compared faces in *portraits* seems to have caught Wittgenstein's attention: sec. xi contains a number of remarks on the way we regard portraits, such as: "I say: 'We regard a portrait as a human being,'—but when we do we do so, and for how long? *Always*, if we see it at

In the *Investigations*, he addresses the question of facial aspects directly in §§536-537 (earlier versions of these sections, as we noted earlier, make explicit reference to Weininger) by asking what it would mean to see a timid face *as* courageous:

I say: "I can think of this face (which gives an impression of timidity) as courageous too." We do not mean by this that I can imagine someone with this face perhaps saving someone's life (that, of course, is imaginable in connexion with any face). I am speaking rather of an aspect of the face itself. Nor do I mean that I can imagine that this man's face might change so that, in the ordinary sense, it looked courageous; though I may very well mean that there is a quite definite way in which it can change into a courageous face. (PI §536)

Wittgenstein makes it clear that when he claims to be able to see a timid face *as* courageous, he is not making any empirical claims, either about what a person with such a facial expression might be capable of doing, or about a possible change in the spatial configuration of the face's features. He insists that he is speaking of a change in the way he can regard the face, which he associates with the idea of "an aspect of the face itself." Without any actual change occurring in the appearance of the face, he is simply able to see it in a new light: "a quite definite way in which it can change into a courageous face." Aware, perhaps, that his point is rather unclear, he approaches the same question from a different angle in the following section:

It is possible to say "I read timidity in this face" but at all events the timidity does not seem to be merely associated, outwardly connected, with the face; but fear is there, alive, in the features. If the features change slightly, we can speak of a corresponding change in the fear. If we were asked "Can you think of this face

all (and do not, say, see it as something else)? I might say yes to this, and that would determine the concept of regarding-as" (PI p. 175).

as an expression of courage too?”—we should, as it were, not know how to lodge courage in these features. Then perhaps I say “I don’t know what it would mean for this to be a courageous face.” But what would an answer to such a question be like? Perhaps one says: “Yes, now I understand: the face as it were shews indifference to the outer world.” So we have somehow read courage into the face. Now once more, one might say, courage *fits* this face. But *what fits what* here? (PI §537)

In this passage, Wittgenstein elaborates on what might be involved in seeing a face under a new aspect: in this instance, it would involve incorporating the timid face into a new kind of psychological narrative, which would permit us to see the unchanged facial expression in a different light. Wittgenstein seems satisfied that this account does indeed explain one possible way of seeing a new aspect of the face (“Now... courage *fits* this face”), yet his closing question suggests that he is a bit troubled by (or even uncertain about) the potential implications of his explanation. His question—“But *what fits what* here?”—seems to warn us from taking the appearance of the face and the meaning of its expression as distinguishable entities: as a subjective reading or interpretation *fitting* into the objective appearance of the face-itself. His fear that we may misinterpret his account this way seems to be the point behind the opening of the passage, which prepares us for the aspect-conversion by insisting on the indistinguishability of the face from its expression of timidity. He admits that it is meaningful to say “I read timidity into this face,” but insists that we should not regard the feeling as “merely associated” with the face. The mental state is not “outwardly connected” to the face’s appearance, but is rather “there, alive, *in* the features.” Hence the point of his question: “But *what fits what* here?” Having claimed that we can

incorporate the face into a new psychological narrative (timidity becoming visible as courage), Wittgenstein seems to worry that this suggests that aspects are arbitrary, subjective associations we can *fit* into our visual impression of a face's appearance.

While it is clear that he thinks it incorrect to think of aspects as subjective interpretations of visual impressions, he breaks the discussion off at this point and does not return to the question of aspects until he treats it at length in section xi. Despite the fact that he also examines such diverse phenomena as schematic cubes, triangles and duck-rabbit illustrations, the discussion of seeing aspects and aspect-blindness in section xi clearly extends and elaborates upon the question of facial aspects that concerned Wittgenstein in §§536-537 (the only other passages in the *Investigations* that discuss the subject of aspects at all). In the opening lines of section xi, Wittgenstein obviously still has the human face in mind as he begins his discussion of aspects by distinguishing between two different kinds of seeing:

Two uses of the word "see".

The one: "What do you see there?"—"I see *this*" (and then a description, a drawing, a copy). The other: "I see a likeness between these two faces"—let the man I tell this to be seeing the faces as clearly as I do myself.

The importance of this is the difference of category between the two 'objects' of sight.

The one man might make an accurate drawing of the two faces, and the other notice in the drawing the likeness which the former did not see. (PI p. 165)

Wittgenstein finds it significant that one person can notice something about two faces (a likeness) that another person, who also sees the very same faces, might not. He is careful to establish that this difference would *not* be due to any differences in the visual

facts perceptually available to the two people (e.g., differences in angle, lighting, disposition of features, etc.): in fact, he goes so far as to say that the likeness can be perceived by the second person *in* an “accurate drawing” made by the first. The two people, in other words, see the very same faces – only they see them in very different ways. The curious visual experience of the second person captures what Wittgenstein means by aspect-seeing: “I contemplate a face, and then suddenly notice its likeness to another. I *see* that it has not changed; and yet I see it differently. I call this experience ‘noticing an aspect’” (PI p. 165). An aspect, therefore, is evidently not equivalent to an exhibition of mentality, though, as with the courage in §536, this is clearly one of its possible, and I would suggest primary, meanings. Rather, it more generally signifies something visible in an object—certainly in faces, and later, in a variety of other objects besides—that exceeds (like a glance) what is “empirically” or “factually” available to sight: something, to recall Wittgenstein’s Shakespearean quip, not dreamt of in the Horatian philosophies of “Carnap and others.”

Since the two people in Wittgenstein’s example see exactly the same visual facts, we might think—as he appears to have been worried that we might think of the courageous expression in §537—that the difference in visual experience is due to an interpretation introduced by the second person. This explanation would certainly be consistent with empiricist and phenomenalist models of sense-perception that posit a private visual impression (or “inner picture,” as Wittgenstein calls it) constituted from the data of sensation. According to this view, since an aspect is not anything actually attributable to the object, it must be an interpretation originating in the subject.

Wittgenstein, however, finds the “inner picture” model of visual perception incoherent. To illustrate one problem with it, he introduces the following schematic illustration:

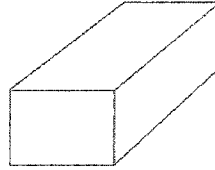


Fig. 2

He asks us to imagine that we find this illustration in several places throughout a text-book, each time accompanied by a different textual gloss instructing us how to regard the figure: “here a glass cube, there an inverted open box, there a wire frame of that shape, there three boards forming a solid angle. Each time the text supplies the interpretation of the illustration” (PI p. 165). He notes that as we read each set of interpretive instructions, we not only can think of the figure that way, but can actually *see* the figure differently each time: “we can also *see* the illustration now as one thing now as another.—So we interpret it, and *see* it as we *interpret* it.” The similarities to the discussion in §537 of the timid and courageous face are striking: there he came up with a new psychological interpretation that allowed him to *see* the timid face differently, even though, as with the schematic illustration seen in different ways here, nothing “factual” about the spatial configuration of the face had changed.

And as with the conclusion of §537, the question arises as to how we should understand the new visual experiences prompted by the various interpretive glosses on the schematic illustration: in other words, *what* fits *what* here? For instance, if we see the figure as an “inverted open box,” it might make sense to think of our visual

experience as one that interprets what we see in that particular way. In other words, we have a direct visual impression of the schematic diagram which, when provided with the appropriate instructions, we can interpret *as* an upside down box. As Wittgenstein puts it, this would be to characterize the visual experience of the inverted open box as an *indirect* one:

Here perhaps we should like to reply: The description of what is got immediately, i.e. of the visual experience, by means of an interpretation—is an indirect description. “I see the figure as a box” means: I have a particular visual experience which I have found that I always have when I interpret the figure as a box or when I look at a box. (PI p. 165)

In other words, the interpretation must be something which indirectly modifies our direct visual impression of the schematic illustration. But Wittgenstein goes on to question the use of the word “indirect” in this explanation. He notes: “But if it meant this I ought to know it. I ought to be able to refer to the experience directly, and not only indirectly. (As I can speak of red without calling it the colour of blood.)” (PI p. 165). In other words, the problem with calling our visual experience of the figure (as an inverted open box) an *indirect* one implies that there is some more *direct* way of describing that particular visual experience as well. But no more direct alternative is available, as it would be if we were to say that a red object is “the colour of blood,” since we could also simply call the object red. The box-ness of the figure that we see (if we see it *as* a box) is simply there, not something we have added to a more direct visual experience of an arrangement of line-segments. Of course, one might suffer from what Wittgenstein calls “aspect-blindness,” and be unable to see the box-aspect (i.e. not be

able to see it *as* a box), in which case one would have to infer that such an arrangement of lines, according to certain illustrative conventions, can be *understood* as a box. But this would be a different relationship to the box altogether, ratiocinative rather than visual: for the aspect-blind, the words “indirect” and “interpretation” would be appropriate to describe how they regard the figure as a box. But if we actually *see* the figure as an inverted open box, what more direct way is there to describe our visual experience?⁶⁶

The implications of this example clearly apply to the discussion of the aspect of courage in §537. In response to Wittgenstein’s closing question there—“But *what* fits *what* here?”—we can now say with certainty that it is *not* an interpretation that fits onto a visual impression: in fact, there are not two “what’s” involved at all. Wittgenstein’s cautionary question is simply rhetorical in nature. If we can discern courage in a timid face, it is no more “outwardly associated” with the features than was the original expression of timidity. Courage simply *is* an aspect of the face. But this does not mean that we can willfully see anything anywhere we like: “I can see the schematic cube as a box;—but can I also see it now as a paper, now as a tin, box?—What ought I to say, if someone assured me *he* could?—I can set a limit to the concept here” (PI p. 177). That Wittgenstein made it clear that it was difficult to see the timid face as courageous in §537—“we should, as it were, not know how to lodge courage in these features”—was

⁶⁶ Interestingly, the research of Uta Frith and her colleagues has demonstrated that children with autism—who in many ways bear a striking resemblance to the aspect-blind in Wittgenstein’s later writings—show an impairment in their ability to perceive visual *gestalts*. Instead of seeing cohesive wholes, they seem particularly sensitive to fragments and parts: autistics, that is, seem indifferent to contexts and the meanings of wholes. Cf. AEE, ch. 9: “A Fragmented World.”

perhaps intended to demonstrate that aspect-seeing, while being “subject to the will” is not necessarily easily, or even wholly, so (PI p. 182). An aspect of mind is not in the mind of the beholder, but is, as Wittgenstein put it quite clearly, “of the face itself.”

But, of course, we do not usually go around asking ourselves if we can manage to see this or that person’s face as joyful or angry. Mentality strikes us, *faces* us directly. Wittgenstein’s excursus on the schematic box is invaluable in helping to clarify the concepts involved in our understanding of what it means to see something *as* something: the figure *as* a box or the features *as* courageous. But because it focuses on experiences of aspect-seeing that are triggered by volition, it does not fully account for our everyday recognition of aspects of mind in the faces of others, a kind of recognition that is often characterized by an absolute absence of volition. “He must be in pain”... “she looks relaxed”... “he seems anxious”: such common expressions are often immediate responses to the way people look. To help us understand this type of everyday form of non-volitional recognition, Wittgenstein discusses a variety of phenomena that are related to what he calls aspect-dawning. To explain what he means by this, he introduces Joseph Jastrow’s famous illustration of a duck-rabbit:



Fig. 3

He notes that “The picture might have been shewn me, and I never have seen anything but a rabbit in it” (PI p. 166). Such a person would have continuously seen the rabbit-aspect, and would be completely unaware that there was also a duck-aspect in the

figure. If presented with the illustration, and asked what he saw, he would naturally respond with something like, "I see a picture of a rabbit." It would make no sense for him to say, "I see this picture *as* a rabbit," since what other possibility would exist?

But if this illustration were put amongst a number of unambiguous images of ducks, this person would likely recognize (that is, experience the "dawning" of) the duck-aspect of the figure, and it is easy to imagine some type of exclamation accompanying this experience: "I saw it quite differently, I should never have recognized it!" (PI p. 167). From this moment on, it would make sense for the person to say: "I see this picture *as* a duck" or "*as* a rabbit." Seen one way, and then another, the duck-rabbit figure appears completely different, though it is just as clear that the figure has not changed at all: "The expression of a change of aspect is the expression of a *new* perception and at the same time of the perception's being unchanged" (PI p. 167).

Wittgenstein asks: "But what is different: my impression? my point of view?" He cautions against regarding the changed perception as the result of an alteration in the "organization" of some inner visual impression: in other words, against theorizing that the lines are subjectively re-organized now as a rabbit-picture, now as a duck-picture. This would entail thinking of "organization" as a property of the visual impression, on the same level as colour and shape. But "If you put 'organization' of a visual impression on a level with colours and shapes, you are proceeding from the idea of the visual impression as an inner object. Of course this makes this object into a chimera; a queerly shifting construction. For the similarity to a picture is now impaired" (PI p. 168). If one thinks of the inner picture as being organized differently when the figure is

seen as a rabbit or as a duck, then while this might explain the change in how we regard what the figure represents, it would conflict with the presupposition that the inner picture is a reflection of the outer picture in the first place, rendering the entire “inner picture” theory of perception conceptually incoherent. According to the explanation by re-organization, the inner picture would become a “queerly shifting construction” – no longer an inner *picture* at all. Moreover, if one asked two people who saw the figure differently (one as a duck, one as a rabbit) to make copies of what they saw, the two copies would be identical. One cannot point to anything factual in the figure that accounts for it now appearing as a duck or as a rabbit: “If I saw the duck-rabbit as a rabbit, then I saw: these shapes and colours (I give them in detail)—and I saw besides something like this: and here I point to a number of different pictures of rabbits” (PI p. 168). The rabbit-aspect is not reducible to a factual property of the figure on a par with shape and colour: “what I perceive in the dawning of an aspect is not a property of the object, but an internal relation between it and other objects” (PI p. 180). That is why Wittgenstein claims that “‘Seeing as....’ is not a part of perception. And for that reason it is like seeing and again not like” (PI p. 168).

Because visual experiences of aspects are not wholly perceptual in nature—as sense-perception has been understood by empiricism and phenomenism, at least—verbal descriptions of aspects should not be understood as mere perceptual reports. Wittgenstein claims that they should rather be regarded as *expressions* of visual experience (like cries of recognition):

I look at an animal and am asked: "What do you see?" I answer: "A rabbit".

—I see a landscape; suddenly a rabbit runs past. I exclaim "A rabbit!"

Both things, both the report and the exclamation, are expressions of perception and of visual experience. But the exclamation is so in a different sense from the report: it is forced from us.—It is related to the experience as a cry is to pain. (PI p. 168)

It is not that the exclamation (and one can imagine a silent one to oneself) is without conceptual content: after all, it too is a perceptual description of what is seen. What differentiates an exclamation from a report, rather, is that the conceptual content of an exclamation is not the result of a process of ratiocination, though one can still call it a kind of "thinking": "If you are looking at the object, you need not think of it; but if you are having the visual experience expressed by the exclamation, you are also *thinking* of what you see" (PI p. 168). One directly sees "*a rabbit!*" and the exclamation expresses the thought infolded into this visual experience, which Wittgenstein therefore characterizes as a strange amalgam of sight and reason: "Hence the flashing of an aspect on us seems half visual experience, half thought" (PI p. 168). Or as he puts it elsewhere: "'The echo of a thought in sight'—one would like to say" (PI p. 181).

Of course, this is a very strange idea: half sight, half thought? One can imagine someone dismissing this idea as logically absurd. And indeed, one cannot be led to accept or even see Wittgenstein's point simply by means of logical argumentation. Wittgenstein is not claiming that the concept of "seeing" that he is discussing is theoretically deducible *a priori*. Rather, he is simply describing an everyday kind of

visual experience with which we are all perfectly familiar, but before which empiricist theories of perception are conceptually blind. For example:

Someone suddenly sees an appearance which he does not recognize (it may be a familiar object, but in an unusual position or lighting); the lack of recognition perhaps lasts only a few seconds. Is it correct to say he has a different visual experience from someone who knew the object at once? (PI p. 168)

One might answer *yes and no*: no, for each person in this thought-experiment sees precisely the same visual data (that is, they both can be understood to have identical sensory impressions); but *yes* as well, for one person at first sees *only* the visual data while the other person immediately recognizes (like the running rabbit above) what the object is. According to sense-data perceptual theories, however, the visual experience of each person would be identical, one of them merely taking a bit longer to locate the appropriate concept under which to place the visual impression. And perhaps the sense-data theory is correct, for it does manage to account for the basic facts of the situation. After all, “might not someone be able to describe an unfamiliar shape that appeared before him just as *accurately* as I, to whom it is familiar?” (PI p. 168). For if both persons experienced the same visual impression, as presupposed by the sense-data view, then there should be no difference in the way each could describe the familiar or unfamiliar object, for each would have *seen* the same thing, only understanding it differently. But, as Wittgenstein retorts, “Of course it will not generally be so. And his description will run quite differently. (I say, for example, “The animal had long ears”—he: “There were two long appendages”, and then he draws them.)” (PI p. 168). Recognized, the shape is seen *as* an animal, and everything comes into view differently

(those are not “appendages” but *ears*). But seen without recognition, it is merely a shape. The visual experience *itself* is completely different depending on whether recognition is involved or not: whether or not, in other words, one experiences “the echo of a thought in sight,” however strange this may sound.

One implication of Wittgenstein’s notion of aspect-seeing is that, though the experiencing of aspects is not entirely conceptual in nature, a mastery of certain concepts is necessary to have certain aspect-related experiences. Without a mastery of the concepts of “duck” and “rabbit” (which would include familiarity with their shapes), one could not experience the dawning of their aspects in the duck-rabbit figure: “You only ‘see the duck and rabbit aspects’ if you are already conversant with the shapes of those two animals” (PI p. 177). Wittgenstein pursues this line of thought by discussing a kind of aspect-experience that he calls “aspects of organization,” in which “when the aspect changes parts of the picture go together which before did not” (PI p. 177):

In the triangle I can see now *this* as apex, *that* as base—now *this* as apex, *that* as base.—Clearly the words “Now I am seeing *this* as the apex” cannot so far mean anything to a learner who has only just met the concepts of apex, base, and so on.—But I do not mean *this* as an empirical proposition.

“Now he’s seeing it like *this*”, “now like *that*” would only be said of someone *capable* of making certain applications of the figure quite freely.

The substratum of this experience is the mastery of a technique. (PI p. 178)

Wittgenstein acknowledges that there is something quite odd about this claim, for he is insisting that various forms of purely visual experience are unavailable to those who have not adequately mastered certain conceptual “techniques”: “how queer for this to be

the logical condition of someone's having such-and-such an *experience*! After all, you don't say that one only 'has toothache' if one is capable of doing such-and-such" (PI p. 178). The point is not that one would simply be unable to describe the duck-rabbit figure as a duck if one did not know the concept (including the shape) of a "duck," but rather that one would not even be able to *see* it as a duck. A person who was clumsy with, or ignorant of, the concept of a "duck" would have access to one fewer visual *experiences*, not merely one fewer descriptive terms.

In other words, aspect-seeing reveals *seeing* to have its own kind of intelligence, which therefore requires, as all forms of intelligence do, enculturation and education: "For how could I see that this posture was hesitant before I knew that it was a posture and not the anatomy of the animal?" (PI p. 178). Unless we have somehow become intimately familiar with the concept of animal postures, we would be unable to directly see a particular disposition of an animal's body *as* this or that psychological state. If, on the other hand, we happen to have been raised by and among humans who consistently related to a particular kind of animal—dogs, for example—as relatively complex psychological beings, we might very well be able to see hesitation manifested in the mere curve of a dog's spine. But for those who have not experienced such enculturation into the psychic lives of dogs, an array of psychological concepts having to do with canine postures (such as hesitation, aggression, submission and so on) would literally *not be visible*: they would be blind to those aspects of a dog's mental life – or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that for them those psychological states would simply not exist in a dog. Hence, the way humans perceive dogs varies widely from culture to

culture: some societies treating them with the kind of care usually reserved for humans (that is, “humanely”); others treating them as little more than a nuisance, sometimes even as food.

The conceptual analogy with the psychological states visible in the human face is obvious, and Wittgenstein does not neglect to consider it (again returning to the example of §§536-537): “Might I not ... have a purely visual concept ... of a timid face?” (PI p. 178).

We react to the visual impression differently from someone who does not recognize it as timid (in the *full* sense of the word).— But I do *not* want to say here that we feel this reaction in our muscles and joints and that this is the ‘sensing’.—No, what we have here is a modified concept of *sensation*.

One might say of someone that he was blind to the *expression* of a face. Would his eyesight on that account be defective? (PI p. 179)

Recognizing the aspect of timidity in a face is something that one who has mastered the concept of timidity can do without a thought, so to speak. We can have a “purely visual concept... of a timid face”: wholly visual, yet conceptually rich. But for one who has not mastered the concept of timidity, a timid aspect would not be directly recognizable upon the face of another, and this blindness would be made evident by the fact that he would “react to the visual impression differently”: perhaps, for example, showing indifference where another might have shown concern. The way a person responds, or does not, to an aspect of mind in the face of another *shows* whether that person can experience (that is, *fully* knows the concept for) that aspect of mind at all. Following this line of thought, it is clear that an important ethical function of cultural practices

such as art and literature is the conceptual training (that is, sensitization) of humans to recognize more and finer shades of mental experience, both in ourselves and others, though it is, of course, always a possibility that such “sensitization” could be perverted into a self-regarding and decadent end-in-itself. Seen as a kind of conceptual training, art would not be understood as a form of “expression” (bringing out what is latent and within) but rather as a kind of “cultivation” that plants the seeds of new intersubjective cognitive possibilities. We should also say that those who are blind to a particular expression on a face are not suffering from some type of physiological defect in their eyesight, but rather from a kind of partial or selective *mind*-blindness, which we can always hope might be corrected by conceptual familiarization with the “unseen” state of mind. However, we also now know that such sight is tragically beyond the reach of those who suffer from severe autism, a biological form of full-blown mind-blindness. As we have seen, research into the condition of autism confirms the intersubjective implications of Wittgenstein’s theory of aspect seeing: seeing states of mind in other humans, like the ability to *see* a particular side of a triangle as the base, is the result of the “mastery of a technique” which one can sadly lack.

The “modified concept of sensation” Wittgenstein uses to describe aspect-seeing bears a striking similarity to the kind of direct seeing—or Spenglerian “physiognomic flair”—that we saw implied by the phrase, “Meaning is a physiognomy” (PI §568). In fact, Wittgenstein confirms the association we have already suggested between aspects and physiognomy when he remarks that the experience of seeing a face might be “explanation enough” for the concept of an aspect: “The aspect presents a physiognomy

[Physiognomie] which then passes away. It is almost as if there were a face there which at first I *imitate*, and then accept without imitating it.—And isn't this really explanation enough?—But isn't it too much?" (PI p. 179). Perhaps we see revealed in these ambivalent remarks the underlying physiognomic motivation for the whole investigation of aspects in the first place. The suggestion about "imitation" here recalls the remark he made about facial perception in the context of his jibe about the perceptual theories of "Carnap and others": "One may also say: 'He made *this* face' or 'His face altered like *this*', imitating it – and again one can't describe it any other way" (WR 221). Aspects, like the facial expressions in this remark, are clearly *visible* yet impossible to describe in factual terms: an aspect is *there* to be seen, but *what* is there? *Nothing*, and yet everything that makes us "human." Faces, and the aspects that play across their features, inspired Wittgenstein to radically reorient our understanding of seeing in general, turning us away from the question of *what* we see (factuality) to that of *how* we see (recognition). We could say that his entire investigation of aspects emerged from his sense that no available theory of perception could help him answer one basic question about the foundations of physiognomy: what does it mean to say that one can simply recognize mind in the appearance of a person's face?

Wittgenstein's discussion of aspect-seeing, however, has conceptual implications that go far beyond its initial focus on the human face and the sense of sight. For example, in his discussion of the timid and courageous face in §536, Wittgenstein compares the experience of aspect-conversion with that of tonal modulation: "The reinterpretation of a facial expression can be compared to the

reinterpretation of a chord in music, when we hear it as a modulation first into this, then into that key.” Tonal modulation is not something factually inhering in the notes of a given chord, but neither is it something merely subjectively apprehended in the mind of the listener, as when, to take a simple example, we can hear the notes C, E and G played together as the tonic of C Major, and then as the sub-dominant of the key of G. Just as courage was called “an aspect of the face itself,” tonality can be thought of as an auditory *aspect* of the musical notes (PI §536). Later, in the context of his discussion of the “purely visual concept ... of a timid face” in section xi, Wittgenstein again associates aspects with various experiences of musical perception:

Think of this too: I can only see, not hear, red and green,—
but sadness I can hear as much as I can see it.

Think of the expression “I heard a plaintive melody”. And
now the question is: “Does he *hear* the plaint?”

And if I reply: “No, he doesn’t hear it, he merely has a sense
of it”—where does that get us? One cannot mention a sense-
organ for this ‘sense’. (PI p. 178)

Wittgenstein’s remarks here make clear that though aspects are first discussed in the context of visual perception, aspect-like experiences are not limited to the sense of sight. Wittgenstein even suggests that “Aspect-blindness will be *akin* to the lack of a ‘musical ear’” (PI p. 182). There is, after all, no specific “sense-organ” associated with aspect-experiences, and, in any case, aspects are not attributable to the factual contents of any sensory manifold or impression. So it follows that they can be experienced in any field of human life, not simply the visual, but the auditory too, and even the purely conceptual as well, as suggested by the example of the direct seeing of the “physiognomy” of the game of chess in §568.

According to Wittgenstein, however, the most important implications of his discussion of aspect-seeing are related to the concept of “experiencing the meaning of a word,” for Wittgenstein thinks of words as he thinks of faces: “The familiar physiognomy [Gesicht] of a word, the feeling that it has taken up its meaning into itself, that it is an actual likeness of its meaning” (PI pp. 182, 186). A word, that is, exhibits meaning as a face exhibits mind: while we may occasionally need to interpret a word, just as we may sometimes need to think about the “look” of a face, the ordinary way of experiencing the meaning of a word is *recognitional*, characterized by immediacy and an absence of ratiocination. Wittgenstein acknowledges that “there could be human beings to whom all this was alien” (PI p. 186). For them, a word’s meaning would seem arbitrarily connected to its appearance, and—as with those who cannot *see* timidity in a face—this meaning-blindness would be shown by the way they behaved towards words: “They would not have an attachment to their words” (PI p. 186). Language, for such humans, would be like a code “in whose use the ‘soul’ of the words played no part. In which, for example, we had no objection to replacing one word by another arbitrary one of our own invention” (PI §530).

But, of course, such a picture of language does not capture our familiar relationship to words. To illustrate his point, Wittgenstein asks us to imagine a hypothetical case of word-substitution: “Suppose I had agreed on a code with someone; ‘tower’ means bank. I tell him ‘Now go to the tower’—he understands me and acts accordingly, but he feels the word ‘tower’ to be strange in this use, it has not yet ‘taken on’ the meaning” (PI p. 182). Wittgenstein is certainly not claiming that words have a

necessary or *a priori* connection to their meanings. That is, he is not talking about some kind of Adamic tongue (though his idea that we see words in the way we see faces does happen to explain why humans would believe in the existence of a divine language in which words and objects are *necessarily* connected, as a face is to a mind). On the contrary, the meanings of words are still to be understood as conventionally determined by their use, and he even implies that the word “tower” in this example could eventually (if “not yet”) *take on* its new meaning. Nor is he saying that the arbitrarily chosen word in this scenario would be incomprehensible: the person in this example “understands ... and acts accordingly.” The point, rather, is that linguistic theories that conceive of words as arbitrary signs (like that of Saussure) are unable to adequately account for the familiar ways in which we ordinarily use and understand (that is, relate to) words. The meaning of a word is not merely associated or “outwardly connected” with its appearance but is an *aspect* of the face (or appearance) of the word itself.

And just as we can see a variety of psychological states in a face, a word can be understood in a number of different ways, or under different aspects. For example, “You can say the word ‘March’ to yourself and mean it at one time as an imperative, at another as the name of a month” (PI p. 184). A person who was blind to the “faciality” of the appearance of a word would not understand what it feels like to take a word now one way, now another: “What would you be missing, for instance, if you did not understand the request to pronounce the word ‘till’ and to mean it as a verb” (PI p. 182). But because we are able to say “till” and mean it as a verb, and also as a noun, and even as a preposition, we know that we are not blind to the meaning-aspects of

words. We are already physiognomists of language: we naturally see words as we see faces, along with the affective implications face-to-face relations often imply (the aspect-blind, on the other hand, would “not have an *attachment* to their words” [PI p. 186]). Put plainly, we care about words. Wittgenstein, therefore, finds it revealing that we often obsess about finding the “right” word for a particular occasion:

How do I find the ‘right’ word? How do I choose among words? Without doubt it is sometimes as if I were comparing them by fine differences of smell: *That* is too..., *that* is too...,—*this* is the right one.—But I do not always have to make judgments, give explanations; often I might only say: “It simply isn’t right yet”. I am dissatisfied, I go on looking. At last a word comes: “*That’s* it!” *Sometimes* I can say why. (PI p. 186)

It is not unusual for us to care deeply about finding the right word for a particular use. We might struggle to find it, but this does not mean that we necessarily cogitate in some rational manner (i.e. “make judgments”), as though consciously processing the options available in an internal dictionary or lexical memory-bank. We may not be able to infer what the right word will be; but we can often recognize that we have found it. We may not even be able to say how we found the right word, or even precisely why it is right. We just *see* or *hear* that it fits.

Who has not had linguistic experiences like these? Yet this discloses a dimension of our ordinary relationship to words that cannot be accounted for by traditional philosophies of language. On the other hand, such experiences of looking for and finding words are quite understandable if, along with Wittgenstein, we think of words as having faces – and conceive of linguistic understanding as a form of physiognomy. This, of course, does not mean that words *literally* have faces: that is,

have appearances which are somehow perceptually analogous to the features of human faces. What would a claim like that mean? And where would it get us anyway? After all, Wittgenstein has already established that if we see mentality exhibited by a face, that experience is not attributable to anything factual about the face. If we see mind in a face, it is not because mind is somehow literally *there*, but because we take a recognitional attitude or stance towards the appearance of the face's features. So to say that a word has a face is not to say that it somehow looks like a face, which would establish nothing, but rather to say that we approach words in the recognitional way we approach faces.

And, of course, Wittgenstein can understand words by analogy to faces only because he already regards faces physiognomically. For him, the human face is the paradigmatic form in which mind and meaning are directly recognizable: meaning *is* a physiognomy. If references to physiognomy in the later writings are often meant in a figurative or analogical sense (we see words or games *as* we see human faces), this figurative usage is clearly and quite explicitly tied to the primary senses of "physiognomy" as the human face itself and the art involved in its interpretation. Wittgenstein's later philosophical outlook, in other words, is profoundly anthropomorphic: not, however, because he projects the human form beyond the class of human beings, but rather because he implies that humanity itself is the outcome of a kind of anthropomorphic projection. The recognition of mentality in the face of another person is not grounded upon some deep fact of the matter about that person's mind, but is simply the result of the intentional stance we naturally adopt towards him or her: "My

attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul,” as he put it (PI p. 152). Though their respective idioms are quite different, Wittgenstein’s explanation of the way we see aspects of mind in the human face is not fundamentally unlike Quine’s notion of the “essentially dramatic idiom” that we use to attribute propositional attitudes to intentional entities. In each case, it is explicitly denied that attributions of mentality are grounded upon the existence of private mental entities. If we see mentality all around us, that is not because there are such things as minds: as Davidson rather dryly states the point, “There are no such things as minds, but people have mental properties” (CPM 231).

We might say that Wittgenstein encourages us to take others at face value: that is another way of saying that he teaches us to properly value the face. Physiognomy is possible and necessary not because the outward face reliably mirrors the inward soul (as the physiognomic tradition, including Weininger, mistakenly believed), but rather because there is nothing behind the face to which we can turn. After all, appearances and behavior (including, of course, linguistic testimony) are all we have to go on, and there are no deeper facts that will settle residual uncertainties about competing mentalistic attributions. Thus, it might be possible to see a given face as “timid” *or* “courageous”: if so, how is one to decide the matter? Simply by deciding the matter, as we naturally do in any case. As Dennett puts it in a passage that we have already noted, it is always possible (though unlikely) that “rival intentional interpretations” might arise “that did equally well at rationalizing the history of behavior of an entity. Quine’s thesis of the indeterminacy of radical translation carries all the way in, as the thesis of

the indeterminacy of radical interpretation of mental states and processes” (CPM 239). Wittgenstein’s discussion of the timid and courageous face in the *Investigations* suggests that he would not have found Dennett’s point difficult to understand. But if, following Wittgenstein, we detach the face from the inner mind that appears to animate it, are we not left with a mere mask? What then becomes of all our notions about the person?

- Dramatic Idioms: Personae and the History of Personhood

Considering Quine’s talk of “dramatic idioms,” it is curious, but probably not accidental, that the modern word person derives from the Latin word *persona*, which at first had an exclusively theatrical meaning: it referred to a mask used by an actor, but could also designate the one who performed or the part acted (as in *dramatis personae*, as we still say).⁶⁷ In turn, the Latin word *persona*, by way of the Etruscan term *phersu* (for mask), comes from the Greek word *prosopon*, which could also mean a mask, a dramatic part, or a face. The metaphoric connections to faces, masks and theater that are implicit in the history of the word person “can still haunt us,” Raymond Williams observes in his etymological discussion of the English word “personality” (in *Keywords*).⁶⁸ But the attenuation implied by Williams’ use of the word “haunt” is

⁶⁷ Etymology is given in A. David Napier, *Masks, Transformation, and Paradox* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1986), p. 8 and p. 20. References to this text will be given parenthetically with the abbreviation MTP.

⁶⁸ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1983), pp. 232-235.

telling: while the theatrical associations implicit in its etymological history still have some bearing on our understanding of the word “person,” such associations constitute a rather pale and ghostly semantic aura. Moreover, the theatrical associations, while certainly adding some color to a rather abstract legal and philosophical category, are usually invoked only in a pejorative sense: to suggest that a person is playing a part, wearing a mask, or fulfilling a role are not generally considered forms of high praise. This has a great deal to do with the ambivalence about theatricality that lies deep in the culture of the West, an attitude that can be traced to the rise of early Christianity. It is the early Church that decisively purged the Latin word *persona* of its primarily dramatic meanings and replaced them with the qualities of depth, interiority and subjectivity that we associate with the modern self.

From the earliest days of the Church, the *persona* was a fundamental category in Christian theology, referring not only to individual believers but also to the divine persons of the Trinity. At the same time, however, the persistent theatrical associations of the Latin word *persona* were a source of great tension in early Christian thought. Anti-theatricality in general was vigorous and widespread among early Christian writers, who believed that the classical theater was radically incompatible with a Christian worldview. As Charles Garton puts it:

the continuing intent to glorify the god, the fundamentally religious character of theatrical events—that is, in Christian eyes, their fundamentally pagan character—is emphasized and reemphasized in patristic writings down to the end of antiquity....

A man cannot be a Christian and remain an actor, because he is serving pagan gods, and the audience are his abettors.⁶⁹

In his anthropological study of masks, David Napier persuasively argues that profound metaphysical differences motivated early Christian anti-theatrical polemics (rather than mere disdain for the immorality of the theater, for example): “only a direct epistemological incompatibility can account for the Church’s persistent criticism of the stage” (MTP 11). Napier suggests that the crux of the incompatibility between Church and theater lay in the radical differences between polytheistic and monotheistic attitudes towards *appearances*, an epistemological issue with obvious implications for the meaning of masking practices. Polytheistic traditions, Napier notes, exhibit a “tolerant disposition toward the possible significance of appearances”: in “the cases where one finds a genuine pantheon, there is, in the advent of unusual phenomena or events, a natural tendency toward uncertainty and divination that at least in part results from not knowing which member is to be held responsible” (MTP 14, 5). In a monotheistic tradition, however, appearances are regarded as merely superficial in nature, ultimately to be explained away:

A primary consequence of a world generated by a single omniscient force is that all change can be made accountable to that one ideation.... [A]ny unaccountable transition or inexplicable manifestation may be attributed in the end either to God or to Satan; traffic between supernatural forces and multiple conflicts among them become highly improbable.... For the mortal’s part, the understanding arose that beneath the guise of appearance, beneath *prima facie* evidence, was an innate reality that was not diverse, but devoid of unaccountable diversities.
(MTP 5)

⁶⁹ Charles Garton, *Personal Aspects of the Roman Theatre* (Toronto, 1972), p. 37. Cited in MTP, p. 6.

The use of the mask in the classical theater was consistent with a polytheistic tolerance for the ambiguity and mutability of the realm of appearances. Indeed, John Jones notes that for the Greeks, the dramatic mask was “known to have no inside”:

Its being is exhausted in its features. To think of the mask as an appendage to the human actor is to destroy the basis of the ancient masking convention by inviting the audience to peer behind the mask and demand of the actor that he shall cease merely to support the action, and shall begin instead to exploit the action in the service of inwardness.⁷⁰

Rather than express the inward essence of the actor, masks were used to make manifest transitions or transformations at the level of appearances: that is, to dramatically address the question of mutability. In this, Napier points out, the use of the mask in the classical theater is wholly consistent with the use of masks in other cultures and social contexts:

The presence of masks in situations relating to transition is so commonly the rule that exceptions to it are hard to find. Whether the change is from one social status to another or in the conscious states of the mask wearers or their audiences, again and again mask users or their observers or both attest to some change in conjunction with a mask's presence. These transitions from one state to the next may occur in any number of easily recognizable categories, the most common being rites of passage, curative ceremonies and exorcisms, and religious and secular dramas. (MTP 16)

In light of the transformational significance of the mask across cultures, it is worth noting that the Greek word for mask (*prosopon*) properly signified a manifestation or a figure, and not simply a material thing; as Napier notes, “such a primary meaning

⁷⁰ John Jones, *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy* (London, 1971), pp. 44-45. Cited in MTP, p. 9.

implies that masks were conceived of as belonging to a much broader class of phenomena than the mere object (mask) *prosopon* is usually taken to mean” (MTP 8).

Christianity’s insistence on the mere superficiality of diverse appearances militated against their acceptance of the classical notion of *personae*. Only for the devil were apparent changes real. Anti-theatricality was therefore not an accidental, but an essential, aspect of early Christian theological self-definition. This accounts for the radical constriction and simplification of the meaning of the mask in Medieval drama:

Though the mask survived in several forms into the Middle Ages, interestingly what did not survive beyond the classical period was a sophisticated theater of *personae*, an extensive pantheon of mask types. Theatrical masking of the postclassical and early medieval eras was in fact far less organized and complex than in earlier times, so that when *personae* did appear, they did so in the standard plots common to the mystery plays and folk performances that may be witnessed in some European villages to the present day. In the absence of complex *personae*... masks naturally lost some of the easy familiarity given to them on stage and came more frequently to be associated with the sinister and the evil. (MTP 7)

Here we see the emergence of the limited and pejorative meaning that is so often attributed to masks in modernity. Eventually, writes Napier, “the association between a diabolical nature and a mask that disfigures and conceals came to exclude nearly all other interpretations” (MTP 12).

At the same time, Christian writers were redefining the very meaning of the Latin word *persona* itself. Boethius formulated the theological definition that would eventually be adopted by the Scholastics: “*naturae rationabilis individua substantia*” – an individual substance of a rational nature. The conceptual distance traveled between

mask and individual, appearance and substance measures the radical transformation undergone by the classical notion of the *persona* in the early centuries of the Church. Napier suggests that we see this radical shift in the meaning of *persona* as part of a general drive towards objectification that characterized the Church's attitude towards a number of different phenomena, including the Trinity and the Sacraments. In this light, it is telling that the fundamentally dramatic explanation proposed by Sabellius to the paradox of the Trinity would be rejected as heresy, for he argued that "the three forms of divine presentation were mere forms and nothing more, that behind each mask there stood individually the same actor, portraying in succession the roles of creation, redemption, and sanctification."⁷¹ Marcel Mauss also suggests that the historical development of Christian beliefs about the unity of the human person were closely linked to early debates about the unity of the persons of the Trinity, a theological issue that was resolved by the Council of Nicaea (325 C.E.) only when (in response to the perceived threat of Arianism) it decisively asserted the distinctness and consubstantiality (*homoousios*) of the three divine persons. As Mauss puts it, "*unitas in tres personas, una persona in duas naturas*" (that is, unity of the three persons of the Trinity, unity of the two natures of Christ).⁷² Modern personhood and Christian monotheism, Mauss explains, are closely connected: "It is from the notion of the 'one' that the notion of the 'person' (*personne*) was created – I believe that it will long remain

⁷¹ G.L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London, 1936), p. 113. Cited in MTP 7.

⁷² Marcel Mauss, "A category of the human mind: the notion of person; the notion of self," trans. W.D. Halls, in *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History*, eds. Michael Carrithers, Steven Collins, Steven Lukes (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 1-25. Subsequent references to Mauss' essay will be given parenthetically with the abbreviation CP.

so – for the divine persons, but at the same time for the human person, substance and mode, body and soul, consciousness and act” (CP 20).

The theological conception of the person as an enduring substance underlying all apparent changes of state completed the Christian objectification of the *persona*: it is this transformation that enabled Augustine to attribute an entirely novel—and historically momentous—importance to interiority as the privileged space of mental and spiritual life. For as we have already seen, he regarded the human mind as a private, interior space fully formed even prior to the acquisition of language. According to Augustine, this interior space was to be understood as the proper field of spiritual cultivation. “Do not go outward,” as he put it in *De vera Religione*, “return within yourself. In the inward man dwells truth” (“Noli foras ire, in teipsum redi; in interiore homine habitat veritas”).⁷³ Considering the crucial role he accorded to inwardness for the spiritual welfare of the person, it is no wonder that Augustine “viewed theater and its personae as antithetical to true identity” (MTP 8; for examples of Augustine’s anti-theatricality, see Book 3 of the *Confessions*).

Augustine’s writings about the Christian person laid the ground for all subsequent philosophical reflections on personhood, interiority and consciousness: indeed, it is due to Augustine’s influence that these three terms can so easily appear to refer to the same conceptual terrain in the first place. For the Augustinian turn inward entailed a fundamental re-orientation of the *direction* of spiritual and philosophical

⁷³ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1989), p. 129. References to this text will be given parenthetically with the abbreviation SoS. Augustine cited on same page.

reflection: introspection and the first-person standpoint would from then on constitute privileged ways to access truth, whether about oneself, the world, or God. Charles Taylor, sees Augustine's contribution as historically decisive:

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that it was Augustine who introduced the inwardness of radical reflexivity and bequeathed it to the Western tradition of thought. The step was a fateful one, because we have certainly made a big thing of the first-person standpoint. The modern epistemological tradition from Descartes, and all that has flowed from it in modern culture, has made this standpoint fundamental—to the point of aberration, one might think. It has gone as far as generating the view that there is a special domain of “inner” objects available only from this standpoint. (SoS 131)

Seen against the background of this Augustinian legacy, of which Wittgenstein was clearly both conscious and critical, his later philosophy's aspect-seeing model of physiognomy shows us how “person” and “persona” might be conceptually re-united. Like the mask of the classical stage, the face of Wittgenstein's later philosophy has no inside: his physiognomy takes us beyond the conceptual distinction between appearance and essence (significantly, the *Investigations* replaces the notion of essences with that of family resemblances, a concept that clearly trades heavily on the special role that faces play in human forms of life⁷⁴). The mentality that we can quite simply see when we

⁷⁴ Here is Wittgenstein's introduction of the concept of family resemblances: “Consider for example the proceedings that we call ‘games’. I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all?—Don't say ‘There *must* be something common, or they would not be called “games”’—but *look and see* whether there is anything common so all.—For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don't think, but look!.... I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than ‘family resemblances’; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc., etc., overlap and criss-cross in the same way.—And I shall say: ‘games’ form a family” (PI §66-67). The direct seeing he exhorts us to engage in (“don't think, but look!”) is clearly the same kind developed throughout his various physiognomic reflections, and the common presence of faces is, of course, no accident. Dennett, in his essay “Real Patterns,”

adopt the right stance towards the faces of other people reflects a “dramatic idiom” that we have quite naturally mastered. Read this way, we can discern the logic underlying Wittgenstein’s choice of Augustine as a philosophical foil in the *Investigations*, for we might say that Wittgenstein’s version of physiognomy constitutes a modern philosophy of the persona, overturning at once both Augustinian anti-theatricality and interiority. But I am not implying that we should (or could) alter the way we regard actual persons: the point is to offer a truer account of our intuitive grasp of “folk psychology,” not to change folk psychology as such (an impossible task, in any case). Rather, I believe that philosophical “dramatists” of the mind, such as Quine and Wittgenstein, simply reveal how persons always have been like personae to begin with, a truth the ancients may have grasped but that we have since lost touch with. The modern personae of the intentional stance, therefore, call for a fundamental rethinking of the concept of theatricality: for, as we have seen, the historical development of the Christian soul was predicated upon the denigration of the earlier personae of the classical stage, and the effects of that corrosive anti-theatricality are still alive and well. Masks are still commonly associated with mere superficiality and appearances; the *truth*, on the other hand, is to be found in depths and essences. As a result, our vocabulary to describe surfaces can seem profoundly impoverished.

exhorts us to the same kind of direct seeing during a discussion of whether a particular (partially garbled) visual image (labeled “A”) can be said to contain a particular visual *pattern* that he calls “bar-code”: “... a real pattern in frame A is *bar-code with 25% noise*. And sometimes, we can simply tolerate or ignore the noise. From this perspective, a real pattern in frame A is simply: *bar-code*. But is bar-code really there in frame A? I am tempted to respond: Look! You can see it with your own eyes” (p. 103). Dennett’s point is that intentionality, like any pattern, is not a concrete fact, but nonetheless *real*: at another point in the essay he calls folk psychology one of the “pattern-making perspectives we have on the buzzing blooming confusion that bombards us with data” (p. 104).

John Ashbery touches upon this very constellation of issues in his major poem, "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror." As Ashbery says to the face of Parmigianino in his "Self-Portrait": "... But your eyes proclaim / That everything is surface. The surface is what's there / And nothing can exist except what's there" (190).⁷⁵ Ashbery sees the primary meaning of Parmigianino's *Self-Portrait*, especially its exquisite rendering of the artist's face, as having primarily to do with the question of personal identity, or what—invoking theological categories—he calls the *soul*. "The soul has to stay where it is," Ashbery gathers from the depiction of the face in the painting: "It must move / As little as possible. This is what the portrait says." The soul must remain so still, according to Ashbery, because it exists only in the mirroring (that is, speculative) moment of one's regard and attention. Put quite literally, Parmigianino could see his face only while he looked straight into his reflection in the convex mirror. Any movement of the face or eyes (or even attention) would have broken the specular relationship between self and self. Understood metaphorically, Ashbery's point is that introspective reflection is at once master and slave of its own existence. So he reads the painting as the record of a kind of incarceration that characterizes the existence (we might say, is the condition of the possibility) of the soul in the first place: "the soul is a captive, treated humanely, kept / In suspension, unable to advance much farther / Than your look as it intercepts the picture." Parmigianino's painting shows that one's attention, and nothing else, is what lends being to the soul. Indeed, the painful "secret" that the painting reveals is that, in fact, "the soul is *not* a soul" at all (at least as

⁷⁵ John Ashbery, *Selected Poems* (New York: Penguin, 1986).

Christianity has conceived of it) since it has no substance or identity of its own: "The secret is too plain. The pity of it smarts, / Makes hot tears spurt: the soul is not a soul, / Has no secret, is small, and it fits / Its hollow perfectly: its room, our moment of attention" (189). From a theological perspective, this knowledge is bitter indeed. But seen differently, this "secret" (that the soul "has no secret," since it is not some kind of occult entity) is not painful at all, but rather liberating. This change in perspective is registered by an alteration in poetic tone, the aqueous (and melodramatic) image of spurting tears giving way to a jet of water playfully holding aloft the soul now pictured as a bobbing ping-pong ball: "The whole is stable within / Instability, a globe like ours, resting / On a pedestal of vacuum, a ping-pong ball / Secure on its jet of water" (190). A ping-pong ball, of course, is hollow, nothing but surface all around. But Ashbery does not rest content with this new, quite literally superficial, knowledge; perhaps uneasy with the ease with which it was possible to assert that "everything is surface," he immediately puts into question our very ability to describe surfaces accurately: "there are no words for the surface," he concludes, "that is, / No words to say what it really is, that it is not / Superficial but a visible core..." (190).

Ashbery apparently disdains a mere transvaluation of the psychological distinction between inner and outer. That is, he cautions us against simply inverting our traditional privileging of interiority in order to revel in a meaningless postmodern play of surfaces. Our inherited conceptual schemes are not so easily overthrown, he suggests. Indeed, he heaps scorn upon those who would take this all too easy route, calling them "beside the point": "those assholes / Who would confuse everything with

their mirror games” ... “that would corrode the architecture / Of the whole in a haze of suppressed mockery” (200). “They are out of the game,” he concludes, as if wiping his hands clean, “Which doesn’t exist until they are out of it” (200). That life may be a “game,” Ashbery implies, does not mean that it has no point, just as by denying the interiority (or “secrecy”) of the soul he does not intend to deny its reality. The soul is not an illusion, but a “visible core,” as he puts it. One can see why, after briefly toying with a superficial conception of the self, he reconsiders and declares that “there are no words for the surface.” For to speak of the soul as superficial would be to partake still of a logic that opposes it to an essence. The two concepts go together and neither, Ashbery suggests, captures the truth about the soul. As Nietzsche put a parallel point in *The Gay Science*, tellingly invoking the figure of a mask: “What is ‘appearance’ for me now? Certainly not the opposite of some essence: what could I say about any essence except to name the attributes of its appearance! Certainly not a mask that one could place on an unknown X or remove from it!”⁷⁶ How, with the conceptual pictures we have inherited, can we speak of the nature of the soul or the person without betraying the truth one way or another? Ashbery’s feeling that “there are no words for the surface” is understandable and apposite to our broader discussion of the historical fate of the persona in the West: it is perhaps too easy for us to understand such families of concepts as surface, theater and masks as opposed to depth, sincerity and faces. But I hope this dissertation demonstrates that developments in the philosophy and science of

⁷⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 54.

mind throughout the twentieth-century have been busy formulating the very words we might use to characterize the “visible cores” that Ashbery rightly suggests we truly are.

3. Seeing As: Pictures, Perception and Persons

Like the sight of the human face itself, visual representations of the human countenance have always exerted a special power upon those who behold them, whether one prefers to characterize this power as religious or aesthetic (or some other way). When it comes to understanding the presence or aura often associated with pictures of the human face, one of the single most powerful and illuminating points was made by E.H. Gombrich in his popular art history survey, *The Story of Art*. At the beginning of the first chapter (“Strange Beginnings”), devoted to the art of “prehistoric and primitive peoples,” Gombrich takes a moment to discuss the magical beliefs “so-called primitive peoples” have about images of all kinds, but especially those representing persons: “the absurd feeling that what one does to [a] picture is done to the person it represents” (SA 40). Gombrich suspects that his readers may find such ideas radically alien, even unintelligible. But he argues that, in fact, such “irrational” feelings are very much alive and well within us, even if we may not be consciously aware of them. He insists that we need to sympathetically understand such feelings if we hope to attain a proper understanding of the function of images in prehistoric cultures: “these strange ideas are important because they may help us to understand the oldest paintings which have come down to us.”⁷⁷ So he goes on to suggest a hypothetical exercise designed to elicit a conscious first-person recognition of the “absurd” feelings he believes we still

⁷⁷ E.H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 1995), p. 40.

(unconsciously) have about images. Tellingly, the exercise he recommends focuses particularly on a picture of a person's face:

We cannot hope to understand these strange beginnings of art unless we try to enter into the mind of the primitive peoples and find out what kind of experience it is which makes them think of pictures, not as something nice to look at, but as something powerful to *use*. I do not think it is really so difficult to recapture this feeling. All that is needed is the will to be absolutely honest with ourselves and see whether we, too, do not retain something of the 'primitive' in us. Instead of beginning with the Ice Age, let us begin with ourselves. Suppose we take a picture of our favorite champion from today's paper – would we enjoy taking a needle and poking out the eyes? Would we feel as indifferent about it as if we poked a hole anywhere else in the paper? I do not think so. However well I know with my waking thoughts that what I do to his picture makes no difference to my friend or hero, I still feel a vague reluctance to harm it. Somewhere there remains the absurd feeling that what one does to the picture is done to the person it represents. Now, if I am right there, if this queer and unreasonable idea really survives, even among us, into the age of atomic power, it is perhaps less surprising that such ideas existed almost everywhere among the so-called primitive peoples. In all parts of the world medicine men or witches have tried to work magic in some such way – they have made little images of an enemy and have then pierced the heart of the wretched doll, or burnt it, and hoped that their enemy would suffer. (SA 41)

Whatever one thinks of the surrounding discussion – and a certain amount of cultural condescension admittedly colors Gombrich's remarks – the moment where he asks us how it would feel to poke out the eyes of a person's photograph is pedagogically brilliant: indeed, I recommend that my own reader take a moment to follow Gombrich's directions before reading on (I believe, however, that the impact of the exercise is more powerful if one selects a photograph of a personal acquaintance rather than simply of a public figure). Gombrich is, of course, right that most of us will not "feel as indifferent

about” poking out the eyes of the person in the photograph “as if we poked a hole anywhere else in the paper.” This is a phenomenological fact of the utmost importance for a clear understanding of the perceptual and cognitive dynamics that underlie the making and beholding of visual representations of the human face. The strange and unpleasant feeling (and the “vague reluctance”⁷⁸) one naturally experiences while poking out the person’s eyes in a photograph immediately makes clear what page after page of abstract discussions about the face could never get across.

In this context, it’s worth considering the sense of “violence,” even “brutality,” that is so frequently associated with the distorted physiognomies painted by Francis Bacon. Keeping Gombrich’s point in mind, imagine, just for a moment, what the visceral feeling associated with the disfiguration of the “mere” image of a face suggests about how Bacon might have felt *while* painting a distorted portrait of an intimate friend, such as his lover George Dyer or friend Isabel Rawsthorne. Imagine, as well, how the friends he portrayed in such a distorted way might have felt about it too. A brief and fascinating exchange between Sylvester and Bacon speaks directly to this issue. Explaining to Sylvester why he preferred painting portraits of people from photographs and memory rather than in the presence of the person, Bacon said: “They inhibit me. They inhibit me because, if I like them, I don’t want to practice before them

⁷⁸ Gombrich’s expectations about our response to this exercise were empirically confirmed by a class of mine in which I assigned it. I asked the students in the class, which was on the subject of modernist portraiture, to each bring in a photocopy of a photograph of a person they cared about (friend, spouse, family member). In class, I then asked them to poke two holes in some insignificant area of the photograph. All the students quickly complied, surely wondering all the while what I was up to. I then asked them to poke out both eyes of the person in the photograph. Much consternation and hesitation ensued, with some students taking widely varying amounts of time to comply with my instructions, and with a number of other students ultimately refusing to finish the exercise (interestingly, many of those who refused were parents who had brought in a photograph of a child).

the injury that I do to them in my work. I would rather practice the injury in private by which I think I can record the fact of them more clearly” (IFB 41). In response to a follow-up question from Sylvester (“In what sense do you conceive it as an injury?”) Bacon reverses his position and implies that in fact the injury is real only from the (mistaken) perspective of the person being portrayed: “Because people believe – simple people at least – that the distortions of them are an injury to them – no matter how much they feel for or how much they like you” (IFB 41). Luckily, Sylvester presses the issue, and after asking Bacon whether he does not think this feeling on the part of his friends is “probably right,” he receives a thoughtful and tentative acknowledgement from Bacon: “Possibly, possibly. I absolutely understand this. But tell me, who today has been able to record anything that comes across to us as a fact without causing deep injury to the image?” (IFB 41).

A number of important insights into Bacon’s art can be gleaned from this searching exchange. The multiple reversals in Bacon’s position during the course of the conversation, however, need to be approached with great care. Rather than take his reversals and self-contradictions as signs of inconsistency or equivocation, or worse yet, choose one of his statements over the others as indicative of his true belief, I think we need to take all of his remarks together at once – they are probing and uncertain acknowledgements of many sides of a single, very complicated truth about the power of figuration and disfiguration. One thing that the exchange makes clear is that both Bacon and those he painted did indeed recognize an element of violence (that is, “injury”) in his use of distortion. What he does when he distorts the images of people

is, in a way, injurious. And then again, of course, it is not: only a “simple” person would think that. And yet again, “possibly” injury is in fact involved, though it is *necessary* and done to the *image*, not the person: after all, “who today has been able to record anything that comes across to us as a fact without causing deep injury to the image?” But consider, for a moment, how readily Bacon speaks here of “causing deep injury” to an image, as if that made any more sense than the possibility of injuring persons by distorting pictures of them (would one speak of “injuring” a stone, for instance?). The perceptual and affective boundary between image and person is profoundly ambiguous here. In fact, he ends up voicing a quasi-magical sentiment not all that far from where he began in this particular exchange: “I don’t want to practice before them the injury that I do to them in my work.”

Gombrich’s general psychological point about the contemporary existence of “magical” image-related feelings is certainly confirmed: Bacon and his friends were apparently quite familiar with (if also ambivalent about) the “queer and unreasonable” idea that “what one does to the picture is done to the person it represents.” Indeed, I suspect that the “feeling” to which Gombrich draws our attention has a profound affinity to the “sensation and the feeling of life” that Bacon often refers to in so many different ways as he tries to explain his art to Sylvester (IFB 43). As Bacon was fond of saying, he wanted his images to directly strike the “nervous system” of those who viewed them: explaining his use of distortion, he once said “it’s an attempt to bring the figurative thing up onto the nervous system more violently and more poignantly” (IFB 12). I propose that whatever other significance Bacon’s references to violent “feelings”

might have, one of them – and perhaps the most important – is the unpleasant “feeling” that Gombrich calls “absurd,” which all of us have when we disfigure (or even contemplate disfiguring) a representation of a person’s face. But this point, as important as it may be as a beginning, only gets us so far, for we still need to understand *why* we have this feeling when we disfigure images of persons. After all, no actual – shall we say *physical* – injury is done to the person portrayed when Bacon distorts his or her mouth or nose or eyes (“I don’t think it is damage,” as Bacon puts it later in the same conversation). Yet is the “feeling” we are trying to put our finger on, as Gombrich says it is, really “absurd”? How, in any case, can a feeling *be* absurd? That an *idea* (which is formulated as a proposition) can be absurd is understandable, but one wonders whether this adjective can appropriately be used to modify the kinds of mental states referred to by the word “feeling.” Indeed, it appears that Gombrich has been eliding the distinction between ideas (which must be expressible in propositional form) and feelings (which, at least, do not *need* to take propositional form). The “queer and unreasonable idea” Gombrich discusses (“that what one does to the picture is done to the person it represents”) surely *is* absurd, but the vague, unpleasant feeling that underlies this idea is not the same thing as the idea itself, and I would say is not absurd at all. Indeed, one can have this feeling without it ever taking the propositional form of the idea Gombrich refers to. Though the feeling can provoke the formulation of the idea, the two are conceptually distinct, and each can exist in the absence of the other. It is perfectly plausible that a person could hold the belief expressed in Gombrich’s magical “idea” without that person ever experiencing the feeling beforehand, in the very

way that many people express articles of religious faith without ever experiencing any corresponding first-person religious “feelings” of grace, absolution, enlightenment or what have you. Just so, ideas about magic can be transmitted and absorbed simply by means of linguistic communication rather than first-hand experience. While it is very likely that there is an intimate – though historically and culturally contingent – association between the feeling Gombrich speaks of and the magical idea he calls “queer and unreasonable,” the two have no *necessary* logical connection to each other. We do not need history in order to explain the contemporary presence of this feeling; in fact, I would go further and say that it is our ability to experience this feeling in the present that enables us, in the first place, to grasp its cultural function in the past.

It is because Gombrich fails adequately to distinguish between idea and feeling that he ever mistakenly labels this feeling “primitive” in the first place and then proceeds to wonder at its “survival” into the “age of atomic power.” If the *idea* Gombrich discusses may very well be primitive, the feeling is most definitely not. If we found modern people who expressed absolute certainty in the belief that one can harm others simply by disfiguring pictures of them, *that* would be something to marvel at. On the other hand, I would argue that the odd feeling we all experience when we consider poking out the eyes of a person’s photograph (publicly observable in the hesitation we manifest while contemplating the unpleasant task) is simply part of our natural biological and cognitive makeup: I suspect Bacon was quite close to the literal truth when he insisted on the importance of our “nervous systems” to the effect of his art. But it’s still not clear why we have this feeling. After all, as we have already

noted, we are not gouging out the eyes of a living person who can experience pain and suffering: physical revulsion at the thought of that bloody act would require little explanation. And clearly we do not perceptually *mistake* a picture for a person, for then the quality and intensity of our feeling would be the same in both instances. So the reason why we might experience a feeling of “vague reluctance” when contemplating “injury” to the eyes of a person in a pictorial representation is not self-evident.

Wittgenstein’s discussion of aspect-seeing can help us here. Consider, for example, his comments about our ability to see mentality in the eyes of other people, which we discussed in chapter two:

We do not see the human eye as a receiver, it appears not to let anything in, but to send something out. The ear receives; the eye looks. (It casts glances, it flashes, radiates, gleams.) One can terrify with one’s eyes, not with one’s ear or nose. When you see the eye you see something going out from it. You see the look in the eye. (Z 222)

As we noted when we first cited this passage, Wittgenstein is simply acknowledging the everyday fact that we do not see eyes – as we would if we conformed to empiricist theories of sense perception – as purely passive organs of sensory reception. Rather, we clearly recognize in them the active life of the mind: eyes, that is to say, flash, radiate, and gleam (and Wittgenstein’s point is that these are not mere figures of speech but rather perceptual descriptions). But this is not because such aspects of mind are really there, just like any other factual trait of the eyes. As Wittgenstein insists, the “glance” is not an empirical fact like the color of an iris, or the dilation of a pupil: “I should contradict anyone who told me I saw the glance ‘just the way’ I see the shape and

colour of the eye” (Z 223). If we can see mentality in the appearance of a person’s eyes, that is simply because of the recognitional attitude we naturally take towards them. The “look in the eye,” in other words, is an aspect of their appearance, not a physiological fact.

But because there is no fact of the matter in the physical eyes themselves that determines our recognition of mentality in their appearance, it follows then that there is no reason why we should not be able to recognize such aspects of mind in pictorial representations of eyes as well. All of this, of course, applies equally to the face as a whole. Recognition of mentality in the *picture* of a face, however, is additionally colored by a simultaneous recognition that we are beholding a representation, and not an actual face. But as Gombrich’s point about newspaper photographs and Bacon’s remarks about “injury” make clear, the awareness of the difference between seeing an actual person and a mere representation of a person can, at times, become experientially blurred or problematic. Ideas are one thing, our feelings another. In other words, though we consciously know that we are seeing a person *in* a picture, we may at the same time experience a vague sense of seeing the picture *as* a person too. Consider for instance, Velázquez’s portrait of Innocent X, a masterful painting that somehow provokes this kind of perceptual blurring (unfortunately, I suspect that if one does not immediately see the truth of this claim when looking at Velázquez’s painting, then no amount of argument will help). By stressing the phenomenological difference (and occasional confusion) between seeing “in” and seeing “as,” I am of course invoking – but also marking a disagreement with – Richard Wollheim’s well-known philosophical

account of the distinction between these two kinds of visual perception in the second edition of his *Art and its Objects* (“seeing-in” then goes on to serve as the theory of representational seeing in his magisterial *Painting as an Art*).⁷⁹ In the first edition of *Art and its Objects*, Wollheim had employed Wittgenstein’s notion of seeing-as from section xi of the *Investigations* as a general theory for the visual perception of pictorial representations. In the second, and expanded, edition of *Art and its Objects*, however, Wollheim came to view his earlier use of seeing-as as incorrect, and argued instead for another closely related phenomenon that he called “seeing-in” as a better way to characterize the type of perception we appropriately bring to pictorial representations. As he explains, in a chapter entirely devoted to marking the conceptual distinction between seeing-in and seeing-as: “Where previously I would have said that representational seeing is a matter of seeing x (= the medium or representation) as y (= the object, or what is represented), I would now say that it is, for the same values of the variables, a matter of seeing y in x ” (AO 209). According to Wollheim, in other words, it is a conceptual mistake to claim, as I – along with Gombrich and Bacon – ventured a moment ago, that one ever sees a picture *as* a person.

Wollheim’s discussion of the differences between these two forms of seeing raises a number of distinct issues, yet I think what is at stake in the discussion as a whole is neatly captured by what he calls the “twofold thesis”: “The thesis says that my visual attention must be distributed between two things though of course it need not be equally distributed between them” (AO 213). The two “things” Wollheim is referring

⁷⁹ See Richard Wollheim, *Art and its Objects*, ch. 5.

to here are, on the one hand, the “medium or representation” and, on the other, “the object, or what is represented.” According to Wollheim, seeing-in respects the phenomenological difference between these two components of representational seeing, whereas seeing-as does not, the latter, he claims, dissolving an awareness of the medium *into* an all-consuming perception of the thing *represented*. In other words, according to Wollheim, when I see *x* as *y*, I am only conscious of *y*, and no longer of *x*, though I can consciously bring my attention back to *x* if I wish (then losing sight of *y*). But Wollheim points out that when I see a face *in* an oil painting, I am *simultaneously* aware of the face represented and the various markings that make up the medium of the representation (though, depending on one’s state of mind and the kind of handling exhibited by the medium, the distribution of attention between these two aspects of a representation may vary: looking at Ingres’ portrait of Louis-Francois Bertin I may attend more to the face represented, while seeing Matisse’s portrait of his wife with a green stripe, I may very well attend more to the medium of representation).

The major target of Wollheim’s argument is Gombrich’s account of perception in *Art and Illusion* (“I have argued for [the twofold thesis] in arguing against Gombrich,” as he acknowledges):

For it is a central thesis of *Art and Illusion* that, in looking at representational pictures, I am incapable of this kind of twofold perception. Gombrich attempts to clinch the point by assimilating what he calls the ‘seeing canvas’/‘seeing nature’ disjunction, or what I have expressed as seeing the medium versus seeing the object, which holds for picture perception generally, to the seeing the duck/seeing the rabbit disjunction, which holds for the special case of looking at the ambiguous duck-rabbit picture. Everyone would recognize that the second

disjunction is exclusive, or that we cannot simultaneously see the duck and the rabbit in the picture, and through assimilating the two disjunctions Gombrich is able to claim that the first disjunction is exclusive too. I cannot be simultaneously aware of the medium and of the object of the representation and to perceive both I have to switch perception. (AO 213-4)

Of course, Wollheim is right to oppose any theory of picture perception that would deny the possibility of a simultaneous awareness of medium and object, to use his own terminology. And he is surely correct to dispute Gombrich's assimilation of the duck-rabbit disjunction to visual perception in general: only particular types of perceptual objects exhibit the ambiguity shown by Jastrow's duck-rabbit. Indeed, Wollheim need only have noted that even the duck-rabbit picture exhibits twofoldness: while one cannot simultaneously see the duck *and* the rabbit, one can see the duck aspect while remaining aware that one is seeing that aspect *in* a drawing, and likewise with the rabbit aspect. But my primary concern is whether in having achieved such conceptual clarity – firmly marking off seeing-in from seeing-as so as to preserve the twofoldness of pictorial representations – Wollheim does not blind himself to the kind of phenomenological datum about our relationship to images that Gombrich's exercise in *The Story of Art* so vividly brought to our attention. How would Wollheim account for the “feeling” Gombrich and Bacon each refer to, except by denying its possibility altogether?

On this score, it is interesting to see that Wollheim chooses to discuss a portrait in order to demonstrate what is wrong with Gombrich's account of perception. Arguing that the twofold thesis, unlike Gombrich's view, can respect “what is distinctive

phenomenologically... about seeing something or someone in a representation,”

Wollheim offers the following illustration, which implicitly rules out the possibility that

we might see a picture *as* a person:

[The twofold thesis] tells us what is experientially different, for example, seeing Henry VIII in Holbein's portrait, as opposed to seeing him face to face. The suggestion favoured by Gombrich, which is that, while looking at Holbein's portrait, I can always stop seeing Henry VIII, switch my perception, and then be visually aware of the canvas, clearly does not fill this need. For instead of citing some actual characteristic of a present experience, it merely invokes the possibility of an alternative experience, and this is not phenomenology. Indeed, it is Gombrich's failure to assign to the seeing appropriate to representations a distinctive phenomenology that impels him towards the view that there is nothing distinctive about the seeing of representations, or that seeing someone's representation is quite continuous with seeing that person face to face – with all that such a view implies or suggests. (AO 214-5)

Now, it is clear that Wollheim is again right when he notes that any failure to distinguish between actual face-to-face perception and the perception of a face in a painting is conceptually faulty. As I stated earlier, recognition of mentality in the picture of a face is necessarily colored by the awareness that the recognition is in response to a *picture*. Otherwise, one would feel no differently whether cutting into an actual person or a photograph of that person. In other words, art is not illusion, as Wollheim rightly insists (but as does Gombrich as well). However, Wollheim's account is unable to account for the phenomenological “fact” that poking out the eyes in a photograph of a person will not feel the same as poking two holes in the middle of a blank sheet of paper. Much of Wollheim's discussion is absolutely convincing and helps advance our understanding of representational seeing, especially since it explicitly

accounts for the awareness of artifice that is involved when we look at pictures, but seeing-in and seeing-as are not as phenomenologically distinct as Wollheim's conclusions suggest. In this respect, I would say that while Gombrich's explanations may not be as philosophically acute as those of Wollheim, the former nonetheless show an intuitive feel for an important aspect of our experience of images that Wollheim's arguments seem inadequately sensitive to (perhaps the difference in their sensibilities accounts for the fact that it is Gombrich who has produced some of the most important studies yet of physiognomic expressions in the literature on the psychology of art⁸⁰).

Gombrich, that is, rightfully acknowledges that the distinction between persons and pictures can, at times, become phenomenologically confused, however difficult and problematic this acknowledgement makes our understanding of pictorial representation in general. The problem such perceptual confusions introduce into our theories of art, I would suggest, are not simply the result of misformulated theories (on the part of Gombrich) but rather evidence of something essential to the nature of pictorial representation and perception. That Gombrich's explanation is partly mistaken does not show that the problem he draws our attention to is not real: on the contrary, he has put his finger on a fact that must be adequately accounted for in any comprehensive psychology of art. In fact, I would call it a serious fault of Wollheim's otherwise powerful theory of art that the best "solution" he can suggest is to deny the reality of the problem in the first place. Therefore, I would reproduce one of Wollheim's criticism of

⁸⁰ See *Art and Illusion*, ch. 10 ("The Experiment of Caricature") and "The Mask and the Face: the Perception of Physiognomic Likeness in Life and in Art" in *Art, Perception, and Reality*, Ed. Maurice Mandelbaum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 1-46.

Gombrich's theory, though this time taking it as a summation of one of Gombrich's most valuable insights: that "seeing someone's representation is quite continuous with seeing that person face to face – with all that such a view implies or suggests." Continuous, however, *not* identical. It is only because there is such a continuity ("absurd" as it may sound) that a pictorial representation of another human being can *face* us with a quasi-moral injunction not to do harm (evident in our "vague reluctance" to poke out his or her eyes). This does not mean that such continuity between image and person is incompatible with the "twofold" awareness upon which Wollheim insists: on his sense of the importance of "twofoldness" to a proper understanding of representational seeing, I completely agree. As Wollheim argues, Gombrich is surely mistaken to categorically deny its possibility. But I would suggest that there is something wrong with Wollheim's account as well, for it appears that the phenomenological qualities he associates with seeing-in and seeing-as can actually co-exist in a single experience of representational seeing – at least, we may need to add, when the representation we are seeing is of a human face. Faces, it appears, are in a representational category all their own. It follows, then, that we may need a theory of visual perception specific to seeing representations of faces. There is, after all, no reason to think that an absolutely general and homogeneous theory of representational seeing is even possible, let alone desirable. It may be the case that certain types of representational objects call upon different kinds of seeing than do others (real faces certainly do, as cognitive neuroscience has shown us). We may naturally have different kinds of perceptual relationships to different kinds of represented objects. Wittgenstein

seems to have suggested as much when he said, “You need to think of the role which pictures such as paintings (as opposed to working drawings) have in our lives. This role is by no means a uniform one” (PI 175). Pictures of faces, at least, appear to elicit a kind of perception that is special, and it seems also especially difficult to understand. Indeed, perhaps Wollheim’s mistake was simply to attempt to specify a single form of seeing that would encompass all instances of representational seeing in general.

But I believe another problem with Wollheim’s account is linked to the way he reads section xi of the *Philosophical Investigations*, the text from which he derived his original account of seeing-as. Indeed, one senses that something may be wrong with Wollheim’s interpretation of section xi as soon as he claims that “seeing-as” is fundamentally related to what he calls the “straightforward perception” of objects present to the senses. Because so much depends on the cogency of Wollheim’s reading of Wittgenstein here, I will quote his interpretation at length:

... seeing-as draws upon no special perceptual capacity over and above straightforward perception. Rather it partially is, partially is a development out of, an aspect of straightforward perception. The aspect is this: Whenever I straightforwardly perceive something, which *ex hypothesi* is present to the senses, my perception of it is mediated by a concept, or in perceiving it I subsume it under a concept. For any x , whenever I perceive x , there is always some f such that I perceive x as f . But it is crucial to an understanding of seeing-as to recognize that my seeing x as f is not just the conjunction of my seeing x and my judging it to be f . Such a view, which has gained currency among perceptual psychologists who talk of perception as hypothesis, errs in that it leaves the judgment external to the perception. It was just this view that Wittgenstein tried to combat when he asked us to consider cases where we switch from seeing something or other as this to seeing it as that. For the relevance of such cases is that they allow us to observe how experience and concept change not

merely simultaneously but as one. It is a misfortune of Wittgenstein's exposition of his argument that he chose as examples of alternating perception cases of alternating perception of representations: notably, the duck-rabbit drawing. For such cases introduce additional complexities, which can be the source of confusion. But the fundamental point in Wittgenstein's argument, which remains, is that, when I see x as f , f permeates or mixes into the perception: the concept does not stand outside the perception, expressing an opinion or conjecture on my part about x , and which the perception may be said to support to this or that degree. (AO 219-220)

I will begin by saying – in order to immediately establish the nature of my interpretive disagreement with Wollheim – that “the fundamental point” or, better yet, motivating concern of Wittgenstein's discussion in section xi is to understand how we can see mentality in the appearance of a face (as well as other phenomena) and not, as Wollheim claims, simply to argue that “when I see x as f , f permeates or mixes into the perception.” Certainly, the point that Wollheim emphasizes is a crucial part of the larger project of section xi (as confirmed by our discussion in chapter two), but it is *only* a part: that is, Wollheim does not misread Wittgenstein (or at least the part he reads), but he ultimately fails to see the underlying motivation or *point* of the whole discussion. Wittgenstein's “fundamental point” is not to explain how we see what is there, but to understand how we see what can *not* be there, as a *fact* of the matter, that is (such as the mental states of timidity, sadness, or courage): after all, as philosophers of mind working in the field of developmental psychology have pointed out, “there is nothing specifically *mental* about human faces” (CPM 253).

I should note, however, that Wollheim's “straightforward” way of approaching section xi is not uncommon. In fact, few of Wittgenstein's readers (even very careful

ones) have grasped the motivating importance of physiognomy and the face to the discussion of aspect-seeing in the *Investigations*, perhaps because this understanding requires a grasp of the genesis of Wittgenstein's concern with faces in his reading of Weininger's physiognomic treatise, *Sex and Character*, and his subsequent study of Spengler's "physiognomic flair" in *The Decline of the West*.⁸¹ Close reading of the *Investigations* alone, in other words, may not be enough. As noted in chapter two, it is from Weininger's physiognomic remarks about the portraits of men of genius that he borrowed the term "aspect" in the first place, and it is by reading Spengler's *Decline* that he realized the methodological superiority of morphological description over systematic theorization. Indeed, an incident recollected by Wittgenstein's friend Miles Drury shows how much a part of his everyday thoughts the ideas of Spengler eventually became. One day in the autumn of 1930, Drury reports, Wittgenstein came to visit him after strolling through Cambridge and declared, with great distress, that he had just seen a pictorial representation – tellingly in the form of a series of portraits – of Spengler's theory of cultural decline:

I was walking about in Cambridge and passed a bookshop, and in the window were portraits of Russell, Freud and Einstein. A little further on, in a music shop, I saw portraits of Beethoven, Schubert and Chopin. Comparing these portraits I felt intensely the terrible degeneration that had come over the human spirit in the course of only a hundred years.⁸²

⁸¹ I again refer the reader to Ray Monk's magisterial biography of Wittgenstein, *The Duty of Genius*, for a meticulous account of the importance of both Weininger and Spengler to Wittgenstein's whole approach to philosophy, and indeed life. For instance, Monk notes that in 1931, "references to Weininger and Weiningerian reflections abound in Wittgenstein's notebooks and conversations. He recommended *Sex and Character* to his undergraduate friends, Lee and Drury, and to [G.E.] Moore" (312). He likewise recommended *Decline of the West* to his friends, even after Spengler's association with the National Socialists rendered it a politically suspect work to many (cf. p. 315).

⁸² Rush Rhees, ed., *Recollections of Wittgenstein* (Oxford: OUP 1984), p. 112. Cited in WDG 299.

Portraiture is considered the most important and culturally characteristic kind of Western (or Faustian) art in *The Decline of the West*: “Faustian man... found the most genuine, the only exhaustive, expression of his life-feeling in the *Portrait*” (DoW 136, italics in original). And, Wittgenstein could not have thought of Spengler and portraiture without recalling Weininger’s remarks on portraits and genius. In *Sex and Character*, Weininger observes that “men of genius” will exhibit “incredibly great changes” in “personal appearance... from time to time,” a physiognomic indication of great mental power that can be verified simply by looking at their portraits:

“Comparisons of the portraits at different times of Goethe, Beethoven, Kant, or Schopenhauer are enough to establish this” (SaC 65). It is this that leads Weininger to conclude that the “number of different aspects that the face of man has assumed may be taken almost as a physiognomical measure of his talent” (SaC 65). It is likely this very passage that Wittgenstein has in mind when, in early drafts of §§536-537 of the *Investigations* where he first considers the timid or courageous face, he explicitly cites Weininger in connection with the idea of an “aspect of the face itself” (cf. the draft version published in the *Philosophical Remarks*, for example, which preserves the parenthetical citation of Weininger). Aspects are, therefore – and from the moment of their genesis in Wittgenstein’s philosophical reflections – a physiognomic concept. And seeing-as is, first and foremost, a seeing of *aspects*: seeing a face *as* fearful, for example. One can now see how misplaced is Wollheim’s complaint that it is a “misfortune of Wittgenstein’s exposition of his argument that he chose as examples of

alternating perception cases of alternating perception of *representations*: notably, the duck-rabbit drawing.” Far from being a “misfortune,” Wittgenstein’s choice of such visual objects as duck-rabbit drawings for his exposition reflects the pictorial origins of his interest in aspects in the first place: aspects of mind exhibited in portraits. The representational nature of such examples is not somehow extrinsic to Wittgenstein’s concern with aspects – a factor that would merely “introduce *additional* complexities,” as Wollheim puts it – but rather present from the very beginning in Wittgenstein’s reading of the discussion of portraits and physiognomy in *Sex and Character*.

Of course, Wittgenstein radically alters Weininger’s notion of physiognomy, reversing Weininger’s insistence on a parallelism between inner and outer in favor of the radical visibility of mental states. But even if he did not follow him on every point (and in fact, reversed him on most) Wittgenstein knew clearly, and candidly acknowledged, how much he owed to Weininger’s inspiration. When he received a cool response after warmly recommending *Sex and Character* in 1931 to his colleague G.E. Moore, Wittgenstein wrote to Moore in terms that show not only the intensity of his feeling for Weininger but also the complicated nature of his relationship to his ideas:

It is true that he is fantastic but he is great and fantastic. It isn’t necessary or rather not possible to agree with him but the greatness lies in that with which we disagree. It is his enormous mistake which is great. I.e. roughly speaking if you add a ~ to the whole book it says an important truth. (cited in WDG 313)

It was by “negating” the inner-outer picture that underlay Weininger’s physiognomy that Wittgenstein was able to grasp the “important truth” his physiognomic ideas expressed. Many elements in Wittgenstein’s later writings, such as Part II of the

Investigations, the *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, and much of *Zettel*, can profitably be read as late flowerings of the conceptual seeds first planted in Wittgenstein's mind by his study of Weininger, and then Spengler. But only by adopting a genetic and developmental approach to Wittgenstein's later philosophy can we see how important physiognomy actually was for him.

Another reason that it is difficult to see the importance of the face to the later writings is that physiognomy was not primarily an *object* of investigation, but rather the source of Wittgenstein's methodological *orientation*. He suggests as much in citing Spengler during his essay on Frazer's *Golden Bough*:

For us the conception of a perspicuous presentation is fundamental. It indicates the form in which we write of things, the way in which we see things. (A kind of *Weltanschauung* that seems to be typical of our time. Spengler.) This perspicuous presentation makes possible that understanding which consists just in the fact that we "see the connections." (WDG 311)

In other words, physiognomy (that is, Spengler's "physiognomic flair") shaped *how* he came to think, but was far from the only thing he was interested in thinking about: understanding how we recognize the "familiar physiognomy [*Gesicht*] of a word," as he tellingly put it, was certainly as important as understanding how we recognize the expression of a timid face (PI 186). Yet, as we stated earlier, Wittgenstein could express his understanding of how we experience the meaning of a word by likening a word to a face (*Gesicht*) only because he already regarded faces physiognomically. Without a sense of the continuity of Wittgenstein's interest in physiognomy, the scattered mentions of faces in section xi can easily seem but one kind of example

among many (no more important than duck/rabbit drawings, for instance). But the other phenomena discussed in section xi (words, duck/rabbits, triangles, melodies, portraits, etc.) are linked to, and emerge out of, a more fundamental interest on Wittgenstein's part in the recognition of mental states in the perception of faces (i.e. physiognomy). Physiognomy can explain the meaning of these nonface phenomena because, as he put it earlier in the *Investigations*, meaning *is* a physiognomy ("Die Bedeutung eine Physiognomie," PI 568). As I suggested earlier, however, I think it would be quite difficult to see this simply by closely reading section xi on its own: perhaps one must situate the discussion of seeing-as and aspect-seeing within the wider context of Wittgenstein's intellectual development in order to "see the connections" I am gesturing towards.⁸³ This, I suspect, is why Wollheim does not clearly grasp the "fundamental point" of section xi himself.

In any case, only a failure to see the ultimate importance of mentality in general to the whole of section xi could lead Wollheim, a little later in his discussion, to choose a perception of an oak tree in order to illustrate how seeing-as works: "The concept *f* enters the mind along with the perception of *x*, blends with this perception, and stays in the mind to form the belief that *x* is *f*. So I look out of the window of a train and see a tree which I straightaway see as an oak, which I thereupon believe it to be" (AO 220). Wollheim's point is not incorrect, but by using a "straightforward" and trivial object

⁸³ Indeed, as I noted in chapter two, it is John Koethe's study, *The Continuity of Wittgenstein's Thought*, that led me to search out these connections in the first place. In that text, Koethe even tentatively noted "a faint parallel with seeing Jastrow's figure as either a duck or a rabbit in the discussion in *Investigations*, 537 of the possibility of seeing a face as timid or as courageous" (CWT 113). I hope it is now clear why Koethe is absolutely correct to see these moments as connected.

such as an oak tree in order to illustrate the nature of seeing-as, he minimizes the conceptual novelty and importance of section xi, the point of which is to understand precisely those instances of perception that are not at all straightforward, such as the fearful expression of a face, the sadness of a musical melody, the meaning of a word, or the striking likeness between two different faces. If Wollheim's account of seeing-as was all it really amounted to, one would not wonder at his decision to abandon it as hopelessly inadequate to the understanding of art.

He comes closer to suggesting the conceptual reach of Wittgenstein's theory of seeing-as, however, when he discusses instances of seeing in which we attempt to see some x as an f we think or know the x actually is not; for example, a line of trees as a row of pirates; a church as an overturned footstool; or a mountain range as a naked woman's body (all Wollheim's examples; AO 222). Here, however, Wollheim actually misinterprets Wittgenstein, rather than simply failing to see his underlying point. According to Wollheim's explanation of the mental processes related to such "pretend" forms of seeing-as, the mind actively imagines what would have to change about x in order for it to be seen or experienced as f : "we must be able to imagine how x would have, or would have had, to change or adapt itself in order to take on the property of being f . We would have to be able to imagine just how much of x would have to go, and just how much could stay, under this transformation" (AO 222). Anyone who has witnessed children playing pretend will know that this is a mischaracterization of the kind of seeing that occurs under conditions of pretence. To see a banana *as* a telephone does not require that the child engage in any kind of imaginary process of visual

alteration or adaptation: would a child really have to grasp how much of a banana would have to go, how much stay, before the child could see a banana *as* a telephone? Putting it this way immediately shows how overly intellectualized Wollheim's account is. The transformation of a banana into a telephone is not *visual* but *conceptual*. It is appropriate for us to say that the child *sees* the banana as a telephone, but not because he imagines the banana as looking *like* a telephone. Indeed, developmental psychologists, as we noted earlier, have found that pretence operates by decoupling (rather than altering or adapting) primary and secondary representations: as Karmiloff-Smith and Russell explain, "pretending that a simple block of wood has a steering wheel, a horn and four wheels in no way detracts from toddlers' understanding of the real properties of the block of wood and of real cars, nor does it change their representations of such properties" (CPM 254). According to Wollheim's account, on the other hand, during the time a toddler pretended to see a block of wood as a car, he would not be able to see the wood underlying the pretence: he would only be able to see it *as* a car. Seeing-as, after all, is supposedly incompatible with twofoldness. And in the following discussion, Wollheim follows his methodical reasoning all the way to the unpersuasive conclusion that seeing-as necessarily precludes twofoldness:

We have already noted that, in those cases [such as the oak tree] where x is indeed believed to be f , seeing x as f goes beyond merely seeing x and simultaneously judging x to be f : seeing x as f is a particular visual experience of x . So in the same way, in the case where x is not believed to be f , or is even believed not to be f , seeing x as f [such as a line of trees as a row of pirates] goes beyond seeing x and simultaneously imagining it to be f : it also is a particular, though a very different, experience of x . Now, just because it is, there is no room when seeing x as counterfactual f

also to be visually aware of those properties of x which would have to change if x were actually to be or become f . In other words, the properties that sustain my perception of x as f would have themselves to be perceptually masked if I am – as I have put it – to try out the appearance of f upon x . So twofoldness in the case of seeing-as is ruled out. (AO 222-223)

Key phrases such as “were actually to *be* or *become*” and “to try out the *appearance* of f upon x ” betray what is wrong with Wollheim’s interpretation. He seems to believe that seeing x as “counterfactual f ” (the way he characterizes the f we know x actually is not) would entail some form of alteration in an inner, or phenomenal, picture of x (which then perceptually “masks” the “properties that sustain my perception of x as f ”). But, oddly enough, one of the most important elements of section xi is Wittgenstein’s argument against the inner picture theory of visual perception: “The concept of the ‘inner picture’ is misleading, for this concept uses the ‘outer picture’ as a model; and yet the uses of the words for these concepts are no more like one another than the uses of ‘numeral’ and ‘number’. (And if one chose to call numbers ‘ideal numerals’, one might produce a similar confusion.)” (PI p. 167). Wittgenstein especially cautions against placing the “organization” of the visual impression on a level with color and shape, which Wollheim surprisingly appears to do when he states that we must “be visually aware of those properties of x which would have to change if x were actually to be or become f .” Wittgenstein’s response to this kind of theory, which we have already cited in chapter two, is clear about the conceptual problems it entails: “If you put the ‘organization’ of a visual impression on a level with colours and shapes, you are proceeding from the idea of the visual impression as an inner object. Of course this

makes this object into a chimera; a queerly shifting construction. For the similarity to a picture is now impaired” (PI p. 168). Wollheim’s “*x* seen as counterfactual *f*” can certainly be called a “queerly shifting chimera,” as it entails the transformation of the appearance of *x* along with a perceptual masking of those properties of *x* which sustain the transformation into the appearance of *f*. Indeed, the implausibility of Wollheim’s conclusion provides strong confirmation of Wittgenstein’s argument that the inner picture theory leads inevitably to mistaken, even incoherent, conceptual conclusions.

I suspect that Wollheim’s discussion of pretence seeing may have been prompted by the following discussion of Wittgenstein’s in section xi about children’s pretend play, which, if not carefully read, could easily be taken to support Wollheim’s incorrect point about “perceptual masking”:

Here is a game played by children: they say that a chest, for example, is a house; and thereupon it is interpreted as a house in every detail. A piece of fancy is worked into it.

And does the child now *see* the chest as a house?

“He quite forgets that it is a chest; for him it actually is a house.” (There are definite tokens of this.) Then would it not also be correct to say he *sees* it as a house? (PI 176)

The answer to both questions is clearly *yes*: the child *sees* the chest as a house.

However, Wittgenstein’s point here must be carefully specified and delimited.

Wollheim’s argument above about *x* seen as counterfactual *f* would find support in this passage if one read the interlocutor’s declaration that the child “quite forgets that it is a chest” as evidence that Wittgenstein too believes the child is no longer aware of the properties of the chest that sustain his “perception of *x* [=chest] as *f* [=house].” It is, however, always dangerous to attribute remarks of the interlocutor unambiguously to

Wittgenstein himself. For here, Wittgenstein is only agreeing that one could and should *say* of the child that “for him it actually is a house”: but there is absolutely no reason to go further and take Wittgenstein’s use of “see” here as a claim about the actual visual perception experienced by the child. Indeed, one cannot imagine Wittgenstein venturing that type of claim in the first place (recall the “inner picture” argument): what matters is not whether the child quasi-hallucinates the chest into a house, but that, for all intents and purposes, one can see the child’s behavior as criterial of the fact that he is regarding the chest as a house, period. A “piece of fancy” (that the chest is a house) has been worked into the chest, but there is no reason to think the imagined “house” has eclipsed or masked the appearance of the “chest” altogether. The transformation is conceptual, not visual, though the only way to accurately capture this transformation in language is to say that the child *sees* the chest as a house. After all, that’s how he treats it: “there are definite tokens of this.” (I would encourage my readers to take a moment and try pretend seeing-as on their own, in order to see for themselves which account better describes its phenomenology.)

That Wollheim’s interpretation of seeing-as is inaccurate, however, does not in any way vitiate his account of representational seeing in a text such as *Painting as an Art*, for Wollheim assimilates to seeing-in much of what properly belongs to seeing-as in the first place. This conceptual assimilation explains why the phenomenological boundary he attempted to establish between the two seemed problematic and at times confused, for the attributes he associates with each are in actuality but aspects of one (very internally diverse) form of seeing: that is, seeing-as or, better yet, aspect-seeing

(but the quasi-technical terms themselves are not important). It appears Wollheim mistakenly felt compelled to discard the theory of seeing-as in section xi of the *Investigations* simply because he held an overly narrow, and therefore skewed, conception of what seeing-as was like in the first place.

In other words, twofoldness is *not* necessarily ruled out by seeing-as. Seeing a picture of a face *as* expressive of mind (as one can easily do when seeing the face in Velázquez's *Innocent X*, for example) is perfectly compatible with a simultaneous awareness of the representational medium that supports our ability to recognize the Pope in the image in the first place. A consciousness of pretence and artifice, that is, naturally and inevitably accompanies our experience of the recognition of mentality in representations of faces. It might be better, however, to say that pretence is what *enables* us to see a picture *as* a person to begin with. Touching on this issue in section xi, Wittgenstein introduces what he calls a "picture-face":



Fig. 4

He then explains that, "In some respects I stand towards it as I do towards a human face. I can study its expression, can react to it as to the expression of the human face. A child can talk to picture-men or picture-animals, can treat them as it treats dolls" (PI 166). Wittgenstein's point is clearly that pretence, just like the imaginary play of children, is what enables us to "stand towards" a picture-face as we do towards a real

human face. He acknowledges that there is a difference in the quality of the “stand” one takes in each case (the phrase “in some respects” implies as much), yet he also makes it clear that it is a matter of taking a “stand” in each instance. After all, even the recognition of mind in flesh and blood humans requires that one adopt a certain (Dennett would say “intentional”) stance towards them: “My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul” (PI 152). It is a question of attitude whether the face one “studies” or “reacts to” is in a picture or not, though of course the difference matters a great deal. Wittgenstein’s talk of “stands” however does not mean that one can opt *not* to play the game: volition is not required in order to recognize the picture as a face. As if he is concerned that his point might be misunderstood just this way, a few paragraphs later he muses: “If you say ‘Now it’s a face for me’, we can ask: ‘What change are you alluding to?’” (PI 166). Wittgenstein’s querying response to the interlocutor’s remark here suggests that he does not see how one could see the picture-face as anything other than a face. This exchange immediately follows a comment that confirms this interpretation: “One doesn’t ‘take’ what one knows as the cutlery at a meal *for* cutlery; any more than one ordinarily tries to move one’s mouth as one eats, or aims at moving it” (PI 166). Just as one does not consciously *take* a knife for a knife, one does not need to consciously *take* a picture-face for a face. A particular “stand” is necessary, but this is a stand one cannot help but assume, just like Dennett’s intentional stance, which enables us to see others as mental entities, yet is not the result of any conscious interpretive decision.

Since aspect-seeing and the intentional stance partake of a certain form of “dramatic” pretence, the difference between the perception of a real face and a *picture* of a face – though obviously *immense* – will ultimately be one of degree, and not of kind: to again recall Wollheim’s characterization of Gombrich’s position, “seeing someone’s representation is quite *continuous* with seeing that person face to face – with all that such a view implies or suggests.” Quandaries, to recall Quine’s discussion of the projective nature of “dramatic idioms,” will therefore inevitably arise (even ethical ones: “with *all* that such a view implies or suggests,” as Wollheim pointed out): do I injure my friend if I poke out the eyes in a photograph of his face? Whatever I may rationally believe, I may not be able to help feeling so. That is, even if I am aware that a picture of a face is, ontologically speaking, *merely* a representation, mentality will be recognized in it nonetheless; and thus, though I will not blind my friend and cause him great pain, I may very well feel that I “injure” the aspects of mind that are “alive” in my perception of his eyes in the photograph. As with facial perception in general, volition need play no role here.⁸⁴ The intentional stance appears not only to be a natural power of the mind, but an almost irrepressible one as well: whenever given the opportunity, the mind will adopt an intentional stance towards entities and patterns in our environment. Indeed, even very simple geometric shapes (such as circles and triangles), when moving in patterns that can be intentionally interpreted, will spontaneously be

⁸⁴ It is possible to imagine a person “supressing” a mentalizing response to a representation of a face, but this would be a founded or derivative attitude, non-primary in just the way that Heidegger imagines it as possible for a person to assume a purely theoretical or present-to-hand attitude towards a tool despite the fact that the more fundamental (primordial) relationship of humans (or rather Daseins) to tools is characterized by what he calls readiness-to-hand.

understood *as* intentional agents: a classic study done in 1944 by Fritz Heider and Mary-Ann Simmel “found that when subjects were asked to watch a silent film in which geometric shapes moved around, and were then asked to describe what they had just seen, they tended to anthropomorphize (or ascribe agency to) the geometric shapes. These subjects used a rich vocabulary of volitional mental-state terms in their accounts, all of which they attributed to the shapes” (MB 35-6).⁸⁵ Since people will naturally adopt an intentional stance even towards images of mere circles and triangles, it is not so surprising that we spontaneously do the same to pictorial representations that are in any way recognizable as human faces.

And we are innately sensitized to see faces wherever we can. Indeed, we will unavoidably recognize *as* faces even configurations of objects that clearly are *not* “real” faces at all: consider, for example, the composite fruit and vegetable physiognomies of Giuseppe Arcimboldo (such as *Vertumnus*). Our perception of a face in *Vertumnus* is fully compatible with a consciousness of radical artifice. Indeed, one might say that Arcimboldo’s paintings are intended to exploit and heighten our sense of “twofoldness.” However, it would be a mistake to think that the configuration of nonface objects in Arcimboldo’s painting is somehow *interpreted* as a face. Rather, the perception of the nonface objects and the perception of a face-pattern happen *at the same time* and in different regions of the brain: face and object recognition, as cognitive neuroscientific studies of vision have established, are anatomically distinct and autonomous. Martha Farah, in fact, tells us of a patient who, suffering from a profound impairment in his

⁸⁵ F. Heider and M. Simmel. "An experimental study of apparent behaviour." *American Journal of Psychology*, 13, 1944.

ability to perceive nonface objects (a condition called “object agnosia”), saw in Arcimboldo’s *Vertumnus* only a “face, pure and simple” and did not even realize that any nonface objects were present (CNV 133-4). There is a part of our brain, in other words, that is innately sensitized to face-like patterns. Our face perception system will be automatically activated whenever an appropriate pattern of stimuli is present in our field of visual perception. As Wittgenstein suggested, we cannot help but see a picture-face as a face: we do not need to “take” Arcimboldo’s painting as that of a face.

And when we see a face, whether in a picture or in real life, we naturally see it as expressing mentality as well. Indeed, Gombrich has even formulated this point as a law of physiognomic representation, which, after the nineteenth-century inventor of the comic strip (Rodolphe Töpffer’s), he has named Töpffer’s law: “the proposition that any configuration which we can interpret as a face, however, badly drawn, will *ipso facto* have... an expression and individuality.”⁸⁶ Again, as with Gombrich’s exercise in *The Story of Art*, this “law” is worth trying out for oneself: experiment with a number of different shapes and configurations. One remarkable psychological fact this exercise makes clear is how *widely* one can distort the features, and indeed the whole outline of the head, before the images pass beyond physiognomic recognizability: after trying this exercise, one realizes why the various cubist transformations, biomorphic mutations and figurative distortions of Picasso and Bacon yield images that can still appropriately be called, and perceptually *seen* as, faces. That perceptual immediacy pertains even under conditions of minimal or radically altered visual input suggests a problem with those

⁸⁶ Gombrich, “The Mask and the Face,” p. 24.

popular semiotic accounts of Picasso's art that would "read" his cubist faces as conglomerations of purely conventional ideograms or signs for faces (but we will return to this matter later). The sideways faces – composed of configurations of punctuation marks – that have become such a regular feature of email correspondence in the last decade, also attest to the truth of Gombrich's point, at least about physiognomic expression if not individuality. Here is a representative sampling of such email faces, along with the mental-state attributions that are commonly associated with each:

: -)	happy	: -(sad
: -<	upset	: -	angry
: -(O)	yelling	: -d	laughing
; -)	winking	: -}	grinning
: -	apathetic	: -o	shocked

It is interesting that these "emoticons," as they are called, are often used to compensate for what some users of email perceive as the lack of affect (and thus tonal ambiguity) of the written word, as though only the immediacy of a face might breath life into electronic script (which, on the one hand, lacks the personal "touch" of handwritten notes and, on the other, the "tone" of voice messages). The felt need for such quasi-pictorial markers of affect, however, is probably but a sad reflection of the extent to which a wholly instrumental (information-carrying) conception of language has come to permeate our relationship to words as such. In any case, whatever pallid kind of "life" these "emoticons" first managed to convey – after all, such typographical innovations may have struck those who first stumbled upon them as quite affecting – has now

almost entirely died into convention: but not *completely* so, for so naturally sensitized are we to faces that their expressions can still sometimes stand out *as* faces.

Consistent with Töpffer's law, Wittgenstein said of his rudimentary picture-face: "I can study its expression, can react to it as to the expression of the human face." The cognitive systems that underlie and enable the recognition of aspects of mind in a face do not seem to respect the ontological difference between "real" faces and "pictures" of faces, though the difference is consciously registered (probably because different and distinct systems perceive the "faciality" and "representational materiality" of a given picture-face). If we can recognize mind in a real face, we can recognize mind in a picture-face as well. Remarkably, as Wittgenstein's schematic picture-face makes clear, it takes very little visual detail to activate what one might call our "physiognomic stance." Like Wittgenstein's modest drawing, the psychological studies that demonstrated an innate preference on the part of newborn infants for faces used highly rudimentary and schematic face-pattern images. The activation of our innate cognitive preference for faces does not require illusionistically rendered faces: a circular outline, two dots for eyes, perhaps a line or a dot for a nose, and a line for a mouth seem good enough to do the trick. Perhaps the perceptual requirements for neurological activation are not even this stringent or strict: the suggestion of orality in the "gaping" mouth of a painted cave, or the blank "stare" of an apple with its top pointed right at us in a Courbet still life, are often minimally sufficient to trigger our natural and highly sensitive anthropomorphizing tendencies, though responses will differ widely from viewer to viewer as debates about what elements are, and are not, anthropomorphic

within certain paintings is often hotly disputed. Gombrich, intuitively sensitive to just these aspects of the psychology of perception, expressed understandable wonder at this fact: “The most astonishing fact about ... clues of expression is surely that they may transform almost any shape into the semblance of a living being. Discover expression in the staring eye or gaping jaw of a lifeless form, and what might be called ‘Töpffer’s law’ will come into operation – it will not be classed just as a face but will acquire a definite character and expression, will be endowed with life, with a presence” (AI 342). Indeed, the Hebrew account of creation in *Genesis* powerfully suggests just how hungry the human mind naturally is for the appearance of a face, any kind of face:

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. (Genesis 1:1-3, *KJV*)

Bereshit bara Elohim et hashamayim ve'et ha'arets. Veha'arets hayetah tohu vavohu vechoshech al-peney tehom veruach Elohim merachefet al-peney hamayim. Vayomer Elohim yehi-or vayehi-or. (Genesis 1:1-3)

Prior to the invocation of light, there is already the metaphoric “figure” of a face, even if that face is of a void, absolutely without form: the “face” of the deep, the “face” of the waters. At the far reaches of the human imagination, imagining a time even before the creation of imagination as such, even then and there the mind naturally strains to see, and therefore makes out, a face.⁸⁷ But are we still surprised that the form such

⁸⁷ Cf. the beautiful and powerful account of the human hunger for the “outline, the figure, of the person” in the opening pages of chapter one of Susan Stewart’s *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*. This dissertation is, in many ways, simply a further exploration of some of the issues broached by Stewart in that inspiring study.

imaginings would take would be described by the word “face” (“*al-peney*,” from “*panim*” for face)? A religious text that can project a face even into the time before creation is one that understands the face’s fundamental importance: no wonder, then, that one of the defining traits of its God is that one cannot see his face and live: “You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live” (Exodus 33:20; the Torah has “*panim*” for “face,” the Septuagint “*prosopon*”). The Judaic prohibition on graven images is the ultimate acknowledgement of the face’s value and power.

As minimal as the number of visual clues triggering the recognition of a face may be, once we recognize an image or object as a face, we will be highly sensitive to the expressive significance of the spatial relations between its various physiognomic features. We will inevitably perceive (even if we cannot describe, as Wittgenstein noticed) the minutest alterations in the configurational relations. The psychologist Egon Brunswik performed studies that “confirm the extreme sensitivity of our physiognomic perception to small changes; a shift in the distance of the eye which would perhaps be unnoticeable in a neutral configuration may radically affect the expression of [a] mannikin, though how it will affect it is not always easy to predict.”⁸⁸ As Brunswik summed up his findings: “Human appearance and especially the face, constitute as tight a package of innumerable contributing variables as might be found anywhere in cognitive research.”⁸⁹ Apropos of this point, Gombrich relates an interesting anecdote first told by Max Friedländer, “of the bank official who insisted that German bank notes

⁸⁸ Gombrich, “The Mask and the Face,” p. 25.

⁸⁹ Egon Brunswik, *Perception and the Representative Design of Psychological Experiments*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley, 1956), p. 115. Cited in Gombrich, “The Mask and the Face,” p. 25.

should retain a portrait head in their design. Nothing, he said, was harder for the forger to imitate than precisely the right expression of these artistically quite insignificant heads, nor was there a quicker way of discovering a suspect note than simply observing the way these faces look at you.”⁹⁰ But it is the *configuration* of the features and not the quantity of visual details that matters most: caricaturists and cartoonists, as Gombrich has pointed out, have long recognized and exploited this fact of visual perception. Facial perception, after all, is simply a form of *pattern* recognition, and a pattern is a pattern as long as it has the minimal number of elements arrayed in the correct configuration. If not, life would have been much more difficult for cartoonists like Charles Schulz and James Thurber! It is because so very little is required to activate our facial recognition and perception systems that the minimally rendered faces of the characters in Schulz’s *Peanuts* strips or Thurber’s comics are so readily recognizable *as* expressive of mental states (even if, as with all facial expressions, our mentalistic attributions may end up being ambiguous or uncertain).

Anytime we see an appropriate “physiognomic” pattern, we see, to some degree or other, *mentality* as well. Thus, to recall Gombrich’s point about anthropomorphosis, we see in such shapes (inanimate as they may really be) “life” and “presence” too: “discover expression in the staring eye or gaping jaw of a lifeless form... [and] it will be endowed with life, with a presence.” The perception of aspects of mentality in the representation of faces is precisely what Wollheim’s misreading of section xi of the *Investigations* blinded him to: his account of seeing-in explains how we may see a face

⁹⁰ Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, p. 334.

in a picture, but not how we inevitably see that face (in the picture) *as* afraid, thoughtful, pensive, joyful, enraged. Seeing-in, on its own, does not adequately explain the recognition of mind which is such a crucial part of representational seeing. Of course, Wollheim does not dispute that we readily see thoughts and feelings in the people portrayed in paintings (his powerful interpretations of various works make liberal use of mental-state attributions): the point is simply that his misreading of Wittgenstein's notion of seeing-as precludes a satisfactory theoretical account of this obvious phenomenological fact. Wollheim's position unfortunately militated against any acknowledgement at all of the fact that pictures can sometimes be seen *as* persons (recall his critique of Gombrich on just this score). On the other hand, Gombrich, more intuitively sensitive as he was to this aspect of sight, never wavered from his sense that the perception of life and presence was a common part of our experience of physiognomic representations, even if he was not able, in the end, to produce a cogent, plausible account of how this was possible. As his use of the powerful term "presence" indicates, he was not embarrassed to admit that we can see images *as* mental beings. As I suggested earlier, I think that is why he was able to produce such powerful and insightful work on the history and workings of physiognomic expressiveness in visual art.

If neither Gombrich nor Wollheim managed to account for the perception of mentality in pictorial representations, however, it is important to remember that they both consistently asserted that the cognitive and perceptual capabilities underlying our ability to understand pictorial representations were likely biological in nature. As

Gombrich put it: “our reaction to faces and physiognomic expression may not be wholly due to learning, and that the mental set which makes us read faces into blots, rocks, or wallpapers may be biologically conditioned” (AI 341-2). Wollheim, in *Painting as an Art*, likewise said that “seeing-in appears to be biologically grounded. It is an innate capacity, though, as with all innate capacities, it requires an environment sufficiently congenial and sufficiently stimulating, in which to mature. A baby a few days old will respond to the drawing of a face: fleetingly, of course, but the same goes for all its responses to the external world” (PA 54). As Wollheim’s remark about the responsiveness of a baby to the picture of a face at the age of a few days suggests, he did not have access to the kind of empirical information we are lucky to have in such abundance today (recall that babies with a median age of but nine minutes show preferential attentiveness to visual face-patterns; and that a baby less than two days old will show an ability not only to discriminate between different facial expressions but also to imitate them; cf. chapter two). This is just to note that Gombrich and Wollheim both ultimately grounded their theories on an empirical and scientific foundation, and thus implicitly acknowledged that their claims were fallible in the face of new findings. Similarly to the way Quine regarded philosophy in general, Gombrich especially, but even Wollheim too, seem to have held the philosophy of art as fundamentally continuous (though not, of course, *identical*) with the natural sciences. Philosophy of mind, in other words, is not *absolutely* distinguishable from empirical psychology, nor is the philosophy of art. There is, in other words, no wholly *a priori* aesthetics: how could there be since judgments about art, as the term “aesthetics” itself implies, are

ultimately rooted in sense perception? Once we no longer accept the force of transcendental arguments, the perception of representations will naturally be understood as a conceptual field to be illuminated as much by experiments in the laboratory as by the introspections of the lover of art. If we are now able to understand better the workings of certain parts of the brain and mind that allow us to improve on the monumental and seminal accomplishments of thinkers such as Gombrich and Wollheim, that is surely only due to the fact that we simply enjoy an abundance of empirical information that simply was unavailable to them less than two decades ago. Of course, this does not mean that everything about perception will be reducible to scientific explanations: even Quine held that the “humanly indispensable” intentional idioms cannot be reformulated in the universal language of the natural sciences. Just so, *aspects*, which are such an important contribution of Wittgenstein’s to the fields of psychology and perception together, are not reducible to the outcome of physical processes (the dynamics of mental processes, as Davidson pointed out, have “no echo” in physical theory). Nonetheless, a kind of fallibility that the transcendentially minded Kant and Hegel would have found incomprehensible is now intrinsic to aesthetics. Considering how relatively new the synthesis of cognitive neuroscience is, along with developmental and evolutionary psychology, all theories of art that attempt to accommodate their scientific findings will be quite unstable for the foreseeable future. It may very well turn out that much of the scientific findings about cognition and perception that are made to bear such great explanatory weight in projects such as this will turn out to be falsified by new scientific findings, though the sheer amount and

theoretical convergence of recent years (especially concerning facial perception) suggest that the instability will lie more in the details rather than with the larger explanatory structures. But who knows? All we can do is formulate the best explanations we can with the best information we currently have.

In any case, Gombrich's important point about "life" and "presence" brings us back to the powerful role of the face in the art of Bacon and Picasso. Noting the



Fig. 5 from Rodolphe Töpffer, *Essai du physiognomie*

"astonishing fact" that our mind endows the appearance of a face (even in a formation of cracks in a wall) with the feeling of life and presence, Gombrich speculates on what this might tell us about the playful experimentation with facial expressions practiced by someone like Töpffer (fig. 5). In 1845, Töpffer published a treatise (*Essai du physiognomie*) intended to teach others how to create expressive "cartoon" characters without drawing from life or bothering even to examine the faces of real people (activities which Töpffer regarded as a waste of time). As Gombrich summarizes his advice:

... anybody who wants to try should be able to find out the traits in which [a particular facial] expression resides. All he must do is to vary his scrawl systematically. If his first mannikin looks stupid and smug, another with the eyes a little closer to the nose may look less so. By a simple reshuffle of these primitive traits,

our lonely hermit will find out how these elements and their combinations affect him and us. Thus a little experimentation with noses or mouths will teach us the elementary symptoms, and from here we can proceed, simply by doodling, to create characters. Töpffer maintains that the heroes of his [own comic strip] stories thus arose out of his penplays. (AI 340)

Because our recognition of facial expressions is *innate*, no study from life is necessary. One need only systematically vary one's drawings and then gauge one's psychological responses to the variations. Gombrich notes that masters at rendering facial expressions throughout the history of art (Rembrandt and Daumier premier among them) all doubted the value of life study when it came to the rendering of facial expressions: for facial expressions change too quickly to be captured by even the quickest draughtsman. Gombrich writes: "Daumier made fun of Courbet and despised Monet. To him who never drew from life, the study of 'plein-air' effects must have seemed nugatory compared with the study of human reactions" (AI 355). Those who wish to convey the appropriate expressions, therefore, are thrown back upon their own innate responses to the images they have put on paper or canvas.

All of this is fascinating for a number of reasons, but Gombrich is particularly struck by the fact that the method of playful variation advocated by Töpffer's manual is unprecedented in the history of art. He asks: "why does this method not develop much earlier?" Acknowledging that questions of "why" are "dangerous in history," he nonetheless proposes an intriguing speculative explanation. Considering the ease with which Töpffer was able to create a sense of mental life simply by means of systematically varied doodling, Gombrich wonders whether it may not have been the

“very power” to create a sense of mentality, exploited by Töpffer, that also “held it in check” in the past:

It needs the detachment of an enlightened nineteenth-century humorist to play with the magic of creation, to make up these playful doodles, and to question them for their character and soul as if they were real creatures. To the humble craftsman of earlier periods, the experience may not have been free from half-conscious or unconscious fears.... The very laws of proportion and style that held the schemata of beauty together in past centuries may have served this additional aim of preventing too much life from entering the artist’s creations. (AI 342)

Gombrich’s remarks are explicitly presented as speculations of the most adventurous sort, but our own lengthy exploration of the nature of the mind’s natural responses to visual images of the human face lends rational plausibility to his ideas. We cannot, of course, know how people regarded images of the face in the past, but we *do* know that an uncanny, almost magical, liveliness often strikes viewers of picture-faces even in our own modernity (recall Bacon’s remarks about “injury”), and there is nothing irrational about this. Who knows how such uncanny feelings of presence and life would have struck humans living under very different historical conditions, such as those prior to the development of technologies of mechanical reproduction, which led to the cultural ubiquity of images of all kinds. Whether or not people ever *entirely* confused images with persons (little depends on the unknowable answer to this question), we do know that it is still very common to experience, along with a full consciousness of the representational nature of a painting, a feeling that the painting has the presence *of* a person as well. “Her picture smiles down on me from the wall,” one can imagine someone feeling and saying of a portrait, as does Wittgenstein in the *Investigations* (PI

175). The experience of presence or life in a picture of a person, however, need not be continuous or uniform. As Wittgenstein notes: "I might say: a picture does not always *live* for me while I am seeing it. 'Her picture smiles down on me from the wall.' It need not always do so, whenever my glance lights on it" (PI 175, emphasis in original). Of course, this passage also makes clear that while the feeling of life need not be continuous, it definitely is an ordinary part of the way we relate to photographs and paintings. It depends on the stance one assumes, though the stance will not necessarily be a matter of volition. To recall our earlier formulation, we not only see persons *in* paintings, but also, at times, paintings *as* persons. Indeed, it may be that those paintings which conjure up this feeling of personal presence or life within us also naturally call forth feelings of aesthetic value as well: an intimation of aura, one might say.

4. Bacon's Sensational Portraiture

Picasso's art evinces a profound, life-long fascination with the human figure as a whole, but the sheer frequency and variety of his representations of the human head and face – sometimes reduced to a skull, sometimes transformed into a mask – suggest that they in particular held a special artistic and personal significance for him. Few other artists have so relentlessly experimented with different ways of representing and transforming the human physiognomy. In her 1938 monograph on Picasso, Gertrude Stein went so far as to claim that nothing else mattered for his art but “the head the face the human body”: “... these are all that exist for Picasso,” she flatly declared (PGS 13). Stein immediately followed this remark with a revealing anecdote meant to indicate the power of the face's hold upon Picasso's imagination: “I remember once we were walking and we saw a learned man sitting on a bench, before the war a learned man could be sitting on a bench, and Picasso said, look at that face, it is as old as the world, all faces are as old as the world” (PGS 13). “And so,” Stein went on to explain, “Picasso commenced his long struggle to express heads faces and bodies of men and of women in the composition which is his composition” (PGS 13).

The same might readily be said of Francis Bacon, whose art has been even more single-minded in its devotion to – or rather obsession with – the human figure, especially the human face. Bacon's art, too, was one long struggle to express heads faces and bodies of men and of women in the composition which was his composition. It is surely no accident, then, that he regularly expressed an affinity to Picasso in his

many recorded statements about art. But he did not inherit his interest in the figure from any other artist; on the contrary, he saw it as absolutely and quite literally natural. In one of his interviews with David Sylvester, he explained it this way: "I think art is an obsession with life and after all, as we are human beings, our greatest obsession is with ourselves. Then possibly with animals, and then with landscapes" (IFB 63). And tellingly – and from our perspective, unsurprisingly – this obsession "with ourselves" more often than not took the form of the painted portrait: the appearance of the face, pushed by means of distortion to the limits of resemblance and recognition, appears to have held the key to the sensation of "life" that Bacon's art so relentlessly strove to "trap" in the image, as he often liked to say in his various interviews. A tension between the appearance of the figure and the practice of disfiguration lies at the heart of Bacon's method: "I'm always hoping to deform people in to appearance," as he said about his portraits. This same tension also, of course, lies at the heart of Bacon's meaning, though one might more safely say meaningfulness: as anyone who has been struck by the power of his portraits knows, their "meaning" is difficult to articulate with words and often is simply experienced at the level of intense feeling. This is, however, perfectly consistent with Bacon's intent: to "unlock the valves of feeling and therefore return the onlooker to life more violently" (IFB 17). Why and how his art of disfiguration strikes us as it does, therefore, along with the significance of the feelings it evokes, has posed an enigmatic problem for his critics, and it turns out, even himself: "What has never yet been analyzed is why this particular way of painting is more

poignant than illustration” (“illustration” is Bacon’s term for realistic representation).⁹¹ In order to understand *why*, we will need a better grasp of the role of the face in the psychology of visual perception. The face is the key to much of Bacon’s art, as it is for much of Picasso’s as well. Continuing our study of the face, we will learn much about their art; likewise, by studying their art, we will learn a great deal more about the face.

* * *



Fig. 6 Pablo Picasso, *Self-Portrait*, 1972

On June 30, 1972, less than one year before his death and many years after his enigmatic remarks about faces to Stein, Picasso would draw a self-portrait that would betray no slackening in the psychological intensity of his relationship to the image of the face (fig. 6). Having finished it, he seems to have sensed that he had accomplished something radically new (one notices that faces often play important roles in “breakthrough” works by Picasso:

recall, for example, the *Portrait of Gertrude Stein*, *Les Femmes d'Alger*, or the *Weeping Woman* canvases). The next day, he would tell Pierre Daix: “I did a drawing yesterday, and I think maybe I touched on something. It’s not like anything I’ve done before.”⁹² In the bold, child-like crayon lines that forcefully demarcate the outlines of

⁹¹ IFB 17.

⁹² Pierre Daix, *Picasso créateur* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), p. 378. Cited in Kirk Varnedoe, “Picasso’s Self-Portraits” in *Picasso and Portraiture*, Ed. William Rubin (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), pp. 110-179, p. 170.

most of the face's features we see a clear stylistic echo of the linear structure of the 1907 *Self-Portrait* (fig. 7). The three-quarter pose of the earlier work, however, has given way to a fully frontal posture, obliquely suggesting the striking compositional convention once reserved for funeral effigies, though Picasso's unkempt appearance and lack of clothing in the 1972 drawing works against any hint of formality such a traditional generic association might import: indeed, we might say that this is a work that invokes the idea of death without summoning the socially-mediated protections of



Fig. 7 Pablo Picasso, *Self-Portrait*, 1907

rituals or conventions.

There is also a significant difference in the extent of the outlines of the 1907 and 1972 images.

In the 1907 *Self-Portrait*, the black outlines firmly and clearly demarcate the boundary between Picasso's head and the surrounding space. As Kirk Varnedoe has said about the 1907 work, the

organization of the lines conveys a strong sense of structural coherence: "Picasso conjures his likeness

here from a scaffolding of essentially flat, unmodulated, and evenly weighted angular slashes and rhythmical arcs, potently locked together by insistent parallelisms, repetitions, and alignments."⁹³ While the space implied by this canvas is far from being illusionistically straightforward (as Varnedoe notes, "the rear of the head is collapsed into the front ... [and] what seems the back of the skull is pulled around to profile

⁹³ Varnedoe, "Picasso's Self-Portraits," p. 136.

flatness”), what is remarkable is how the “locked” geometry of its linear patterning nonetheless projects a decisive sense of structural coherence. There is no confusion between figure and space within this image. One of the most obvious and striking formal differences then between the 1972 *Self-Portrait* and that of 1907 is the absence, in the left side of the later image, of any clearly demarcated outline separating Picasso’s head from the surrounding space. Absolute absence of outline would be striking enough, but Picasso leaves clear visual evidence that the shape of the head as a whole had originally been rendered in a relatively symmetrical (inverted pear-like) fashion, only to be severely re-worked and partially scrubbed out in the left side of the image. One can easily discern traces of various once-darker outlines now softened and half-effaced by an apparently unsystematic process of rubbing-out and over-drawing. So whereas the far right side of the image contains a large, relatively crisply bounded, area of untouched negative space, the left side harbors a wild jumble of faint marks of various kinds (thick outlines, thin scribbles, scrubbed-out passages) all ultimately unified by broad patches of mauve or green drawn in with roughly parallel strokes evincing great, almost frenzied, manual energy. Contrasted with the 1907 *Self-Portrait*, one feels that form as such has been put in question in the later work: bold geometry (arrows, diamonds, and circles) is juxtaposed with an antithetical dissolution of structure (Varnedoe aptly characterizes the right side of the head as “massively illogical”).⁹⁴ That the color field dominating the area of this formal dissolution is done in a blood-like hue, and that the whole right side of the head appears as if it is suffering

⁹⁴ Varnedoe, p. 172.

from a kind of structural *leak*, strongly suggests that the frenzied area on that side is meant to represent a kind of symbolic hemorrhage. The presence of a passage of mauve in the grossly dilated right pupil shows that the subject's vision is entirely colored by this terrifying, "late" knowledge.

To be sure, one cannot be certain what Picasso meant when, in his remarks to Daix on the day after he executed this drawing, he spoke of having "touched something" in it, that it represented a vision "not like anything" he had "done before." Nonetheless, the "massively illogical" dissolution of form in the left side of the image is surely an important aspect of whatever it is that Picasso felt he had "touched." Of course, one might object that a kind of formal dissolution had already been achieved by Picasso long before in the cubist works he executed during the summer of 1910, in which the "closed form" and continuous faceting of works such as the *Seated Woman* of 1909 gave way to the radically open forms of works such as *Woman with Mandolin*. As Pepe Karmel observes about the major transformations in Picasso's style during this period: "the shift from continuous to discontinuous faceting led Picasso to rethink the status of the space in the immediate vicinity of the figure. The opening of the closed form made the border between figure and space into a contested zone" (PIC 72). Whereas in the *Seated Woman* of 1909 the facets "lock together to make a continuous skin," no such structural closure is evident in *Woman with Mandolin* (PIC 69). Indeed, Karmel even notes that the "term 'faceting' no longer seems adequate to describe Picasso's approach here" (PIC 74). Sculptural solidity has given way to a space of "free-floating" marks: "Rather than translating the naturalistic contours of the figure

into a vocabulary of geometric facets, he completely re-imagined them as a series of free-floating lines and planes – a combination of curves, angles, and rectangular strips” (PIC 74). This development in Picasso’s style, moreover, led to figures that were “awkward and incoherent,” an obvious fact critically noted at the time even by Picasso’s friends and supporters (PIC 75). Such criticisms hit home with Picasso, for, as Karmel notes, the perceptual coherence of his figures mattered very much to him: “Picasso’s goal was to produce something recognizable as a figure” (PIC 77). A remark by Kahnweiler demonstrates at once the kind of uncomprehending response Picasso’s work of this period received, as well as the fact that that response appears to have bothered the artist: “Picasso himself often repeated the ludicrous remark made by his friend, the sculptor Manolo, before one of his figure paintings: ‘What would you say if your parents were to call for you at the Barcelona station with such faces?’” (RoC 11, cited in PIC 76). Kahnweiler himself later wrote of Picasso’s move to the open form during this period as a “decisive advance,” yet at the time, as Karmel notes, he “regarded them as ‘unfinished,’ and declined to purchase any of them” (PIC 77). The dealer Ambroise Vollard, speaking to Picasso’s close friend Max Jacob, even declared: “He’s gone mad, your friend” (PIC 77).

But if many contemporaries of Picasso, such as Manolo and Vollard, appear to have found the works of 1910 “massively illogical” in their own way, the openness of form (even figurative incoherence) these works exhibit needs to be carefully distinguished from the kind of dissolution of form we see in the 1972 *Self-Portrait*. If Vollard found Picasso’s work of 1910 incomprehensible – even “mad” – those works

were nonetheless the inevitable consequence of an almost systematic process of abstraction and experimentation (Karmel's recent study of this crucial period has done a great service by meticulously unpacking the logic of its development).⁹⁵ While the "irrationality" of these earlier works is accidental, that of the 1972 *Self-Portrait* is absolutely not. In fact, the reassertion of the closed form in the so-called "neoclassical" and "biomorphic" works that followed the cubist period indicates that the dissolution of form as such was never Picasso's fundamental goal or intent during those earlier years. Even in the most adventurous biomorphic mutations of the late 1920's and early 30's (*Bather with a Ball*, for instance), there is rarely any confusion about the spatial limits and boundaries of the radically altered and unfamiliar organic forms. Indeed, one suspects that the persistence of formal closure throughout so many different stylistic transformations belies an ultimately Apollonian bias for structural coherence on Picasso's part beneath all of his Dionysian experiments with distortion and metamorphosis. It is when seen against this life-long background that the "massively illogical" passage on the left side of the 1972 *Self-Portrait* stands out as novel ("not like anything I've done before"). The large passage of mauve exhibits a wild tactile energy fundamentally alien to even the most difficult and incoherent of the analytic cubist works: the latter exude a kind of crystalline, almost mathematical, order when compared to this late drawing. In fact, Picasso would permit himself, or rather feel himself able, to exhibit such child-like looseness of technique only in his later years: "it took me a

⁹⁵ Pepe Karmel, *Picasso and the Invention of Cubism* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2003).

lifetime to learn to draw like them,” as he once said of children’s drawings.⁹⁶ Of course, I do not intend to suggest that the novelty of this late work is entirely technical or formal: it is only against the obvious representational meaning of the image that this irrational passage *signifies* as powerfully as it does. In other words, it is crucial that the figure that faces us is in fact recognizable as a *face*: that is what lends the mauve passage on the left side its affective force. Indeed, there are other works of Picasso’s last decade that hint at the looseness of technique we see in this final *Self-Portrait*, yet it is perhaps the fusing of disorder *with* a clearly recognizable physiognomy that provoked Picasso to see in it something fundamentally new. That Picasso, even in the last year of his life, would come to this new knowledge by means of the representation of a face, is consistent with the artistic trajectory of his whole career. As Daix, the friend to whom Picasso first showed this late drawing, put it: “For Picasso, unlike Braque, the face was the ultimate test of the validity of pictorial experimentation, and the portrait would become the ultimate stake” (perhaps this explains why Picasso went around repeating Manolo’s jibe about the way his cubist faces looked).⁹⁷

As suggested earlier, only Bacon, among twentieth-century artists, has shown a concern with the visual representation of the face that matched the obsessive intensity of Picasso’s own. It is telling, then, to hear Bacon, in connection to his own art, speak approvingly of the biomorphic works Picasso executed in the late 1920’s: “I think there’s a whole area there suggested by Picasso, which in a way has been unexplored, of organic form that relates to the human image but is a complete distortion of it” (IFB

⁹⁶ Roland Penrose, *Picasso: His Life and Work* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), p. 275.

⁹⁷ Pierre Daix, “Portraiture in Primitivism and Cubism,” in *Picasso and Portraiture*, pp. 254-295, p. 257.

8).⁹⁸ Reading this statement, made during one of Bacon's interviews with David Sylvester, Milan Kundera incisively notes: "With this very precise remark, [Bacon] defines the realm whose exploration is actually his alone" (BPSP 10).⁹⁹ But if, following the "suggestion" offered by Picasso's biomorphic images, Bacon came to explore a "realm" of figurative distortion all his own, the dimensions of this realm were never quite as expansive as that first mapped out by Picasso himself. If Bacon's relentless deformations of the human face reach a ferocious intensity never attained by Picasso's ultimately more controlled and controlling imagination (only the 1972 *Self-Portrait* comes at all close), that violent power is achieved (perhaps is even enabled) by a single-mindedness of vision that precluded the range of formal experimentation evident in Picasso's own widely varying treatments of the face. Ultimately, this difference of style bespeaks a fundamental difference of vision: both Picasso and Bacon found the ultimate test of their artistic skills in the figuration of the face, yet for very different (though not ultimately incompatible) reasons. Picasso appears to have been fascinated by the extent to which the "form" of the face could lend coherence and structure to a world ever threatened by chaos (hinted at by the mauve that swirls in the dilated right eye of the 1972 drawing), whereas Bacon appears to have marveled at the way in which a world that ultimately *was* nothing but chaos could ever – solely by "chance," as he liked to say – give rise to the absolutely contingent form of the individual human face. Rather than the biomorphic works of the late 1920's that Bacon

⁹⁸ *Interviews with Francis Bacon: 1962-1979*, new and enlarged ed., David Sylvester (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), p. 8. References to this text will be given parenthetically with the abbreviation IFB.

⁹⁹ *Bacon: Portraits and Self-Portraits*, Ed. France Borel, intro. Milan Kundera (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996). References to this text will be given parenthetically with the abbreviation BPSP.

approvingly points out to Sylvester, it seems to me that Picasso's June 30, 1972 *Self-Portrait*, with its "massively illogical" dissolution of structural coherence, marks the closest point of proximity between the two artists. Of course Bacon was already far along on his own path by then (the *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* were painted in 1944; fig. 8).

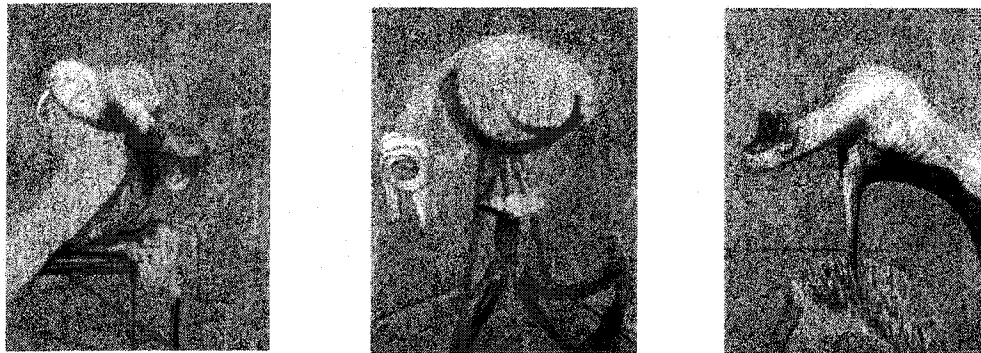


Fig. 8 Francis Bacon, *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*, 1944

What is remarkable, though I think far from accidental, is that both artists found in the image of the face a crucial and fixed reference point for their far-reaching artistic explorations. Though each would transform the face *almost* beyond recognition – and indeed, sometimes they did inadvertently step across that cognitive and perceptual threshold – each appears to have held dearly to, and put great stock in, the importance of visual recognition, resemblance and even identity. Significantly, it seems to have mattered very much to them that a face of theirs be recognizable *as* a face, and often even as the face of a *particular* person: no other artists, since the invention of the photograph, have done more to expand the possibilities of the painted portrait. As

Bacon put it quite clearly while speaking to David Sylvester about two portraits he painted of his friend Michel Leiris, "I really wanted these portraits of Michel to look like him: there's no point in doing a portrait of somebody if you're not going to make it look like him" (IFB 146). The point of their distortions was never to go *beyond* the human face, but rather to more fully explore the strange, even auratic, aspects of its appearance.

* * *

Michel Leiris, a good friend of Bacon's, emphasized the powerful experience of "presence" he consistently felt when looking at his paintings, in one of the best essays written on Bacon's art. Here is how Leiris put it:

As if the picture had its own life, and constituted a new reality instead of being a mere simulacrum... that feature in a Bacon canvas which is immediately apprehended and asserts itself unequivocally and independently of any sense of agreement or disagreement... is the kind of *real presence* to which his figures attain, even though this presence has no connection at all with any kind of theology. Through the agency of the figures, the spectator who approaches them with no preconceived ideas, gains direct access to an order of flesh-and-blood reality not unlike the paroxysmal experience provided in everyday life by the physical act of love. And this presence is graced with a wild ambiguity, an alluring iridescence, which makes it a sensuous delight, but one so intense that, despite the attractiveness of its painterly vehicle, to some people, repelled perhaps by its searing impact, it can appear wholly abhorrent.¹⁰⁰

Bacon frequently spoke of trying to trap what he liked to call the fact of life in his paintings ("fact" and "life," both terms of approbation in Bacon's theoretical lexicon, appear to be synonyms, though little else is self-evident about their meanings): "as an

¹⁰⁰ Michel Leiris, "Francis Bacon, full face and in profile," trans. John Weightman, in *Francis Bacon* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1987), p. 6.

artist you have to, in a sense, set a trap by which you hope to trap this living fact alive” (IFB 57); “It’s really a question in my case of being able to set a trap with which one would be able to catch the fact at its most living point” (IFB 54); and, to circle round to where we began, “I would rather practise the injury in private by which I think I can record the fact of them more clearly” (IFB 41).

The “real presence” that Leiris notes, and which Bacon himself calls by various different names (such as fact, life, sensation), is profoundly (and I hope now clearly) related to the simple fact that Bacon is fundamentally a painter of *faces* and *figures*. That, I would propose, is one reason that “appearance” is also such an important theoretical idea *and* practical goal for Bacon: “What I want to do is distort the thing far beyond the appearance, but in the distortion to bring it back to a recording of the appearance” (IFB 40). While by realistic, or what he calls “illustrational,” standards, he may be seen to radically distort the images he paints, from his own point of view, he nevertheless brings things *back* to a recognizable appearance. It’s worth noting that while the extent to which Bacon’s canvases actually manage to remain recognizable likenesses of their models cannot be determined by “objective” criteria, their achievement of resemblance is attested to by a number of different critics. As Kundera remarks, not without much wonder at the achievement of identity under conditions of radical disfiguration:

Looking at Bacon’s portraits, I am amazed that, despite their ‘distortion,’ they all look like their subject. But how can an image look like a subject of which it is consciously, programmatically, a distortion? And yet it does look like the subject; photos of the persons portrayed bear that out; and even if

I did not know those photos, it is clear that in all the series, in all the triptychs, the various deformations of the face resemble one another, so that one recognizes in them some one and the same person. However 'distorted', these portraits are *faithful*. That is what I find miraculous. (BPSP 11-12; emphasis in original)

As Bacon himself said of his portraits of Leiris: "there's no point in doing a portrait of somebody if you're not going to make it look like him" (IFB 146). This last remark indicates not only the importance of personal identity to Bacon's conception of portraiture, but the more general importance of the perceptual category of the face to its violent force: faces are (and must be) perceivable *as* faces, if the images are to have the effect and power he intends. For we do not need to be able to recognize Leiris in order to feel the force of the portraits Bacon comments upon (we may not even know who he is, nor what he looked like); but if we did not recognize Leiris' face as a *face*, our experience of the portrait would be a radically different one. Anyone who claims that paint *as such* can exhibit violent force is already speaking metaphorically: one does not injure stretched canvas anymore than one hurts stones. When Bacon, on the other hand, speaks of causing "deep injury" to an image, he is being as literal as he can be, since the image he refers to, having the appearance of a face, possesses the life and presence of a person.

Bacon never *intentionally* distorts a face beyond the point where that image is recognizable as a face. Of course, in the unpredictable course of actual practice, the image often would move beyond the point of resemblance nevertheless. Bacon's reaction to such moments is significant. Sylvester, at one point, asks about this: "Do you sometimes find in working on a portrait that, when it's developing in such a way

that the paint is very alive and strong, at the same time you're tending to lose the likeness of the specific person?" Bacon admits that, "More often than not that does happen." But when Sylvester goes on to ask: "Do you feel you want to pull it back by strengthening some illustrational component?" Bacon replies, tellingly: "No, I think you just lose it." Bacon, in other words, is not interested in following his paintings *beyond* recognition, into some realm of non-figurative abstraction (however, he does admit, in a comment we will turn to in just a moment, that he does sometimes "pull back" the image, but this only confirms the central importance of perceptual recognizability to his art). I think we have to understand his resistance to the abstraction that was dominant in the art world of his day as indicative of an intuitive sense of the affective power that was only available to him as long as he remained within the zone of figurative, and especially physiognomic, resemblance. Not because of what the figure *meant*, but because of how the figure could be *seen*. Seen *as*, if you will: as a presence, as alive, as a mind, as a person. At one point in his conversations with Sylvester, after he had been speaking quite a bit about how much he wanted his paintings to emerge as if by chance and wholly irrationally, he admits candidly that this is perhaps a theoretical fantasy on his part. In fact, he acknowledges that he works quite consciously to maintain the minimal visual (that is, illustrational) clues to foster the recognizability of the face in his images:

I think that in our previous discussions, when we've talked about the possibility of making appearance out of something which was not illustration, I've over-talked about it. Because, in spite of theoretically longing for the image to be made up of irrational marks, inevitably illustration has to come into it to make certain

parts of the head and face which, if one left them out, one would then only be making an abstract design. I think what I very often have talked about has been perhaps a particular theory of mine which is impossible to achieve. Of course one does put in such things as ears and eyes. But then one would like to put them in as irrationally as possible. And the only reason for this irrationality is that, if it does come about, it brings the force of the image over very much more strongly than if one just sat down and illustrated the appearance, which of course millions of art students all over the world can do. But I'm quite prepared to believe that mine is a really far-out and impossible theory. (IFB 126)

Illustration and irrationality, figuration and disfiguration: both sides of these oppositions are equally necessary to Bacon's art. His is not an art that moves from reality outwards, away from illustration, but one that circles and goes back and forth constantly, looking for a perfect tension between them. This passage also makes clear that he is constantly checking his responses to the image that unfolds, however haphazardly, however consciously, on his canvas, remarkably confirming the relevance of Gombrich's general argument about the role of schema and correction in art even in the extreme case of someone like Bacon. Bacon may not be sure what his "schemata" are, but he senses clearly when there is a need for correction. As with Töpffer and Daumier, Bacon's art relies on a circuit of perceptual interaction between hand and eyes. It is, after all, in the *response* to the image that the power of Bacon's art lies. Bacon is, as Wollheim would put it, the painting's *first* spectator.

By tenaciously holding to appearance, recognition and identity, Bacon maintained a tight grip on a fundamental source of power for his art in general. In the following remarks to Sylvester, he searchingly discusses this very constellation of issues:

When I was trying in despair the other day to paint that head of a specific person, I used a very big brush and a great deal of paint and I put it on very, very freely, and I simply didn't know in the end what I was doing, and suddenly this thing clicked, and became exactly like this image I was trying to record. But not out of any conscious will, nor was it anything to do with illustrational painting. What has never been analyzed is why this particular way of painting is more poignant than illustration. I suppose because it has a life completely of its own. It lives on its own, like the image one's trying to trap; it lives on its own, and therefore transfers the essence of the image more poignantly. So that the artist may be able to open up or rather, should I say, unlock the valves of feeling and therefore return the onlooker to life more violently. (IFB 17)

I think we can now say that the reason "why this particular way of painting is more poignant than illustration," is that Bacon is able to exploit our natural sensitivity to face patterns while forcing us to register violent distortions to an image we intuitively recognize *as* a face. The "violence" of the "sensation" entailed by the simultaneous registration of both of these "facts" upon our "nervous systems" creates a key element of the sheer power one experiences when beholding a Bacon canvas. The "physiognomic logic" that I am arguing underlies Bacon's art also explains why so little distortion is ever evident in his rather spare and flat spaces and backgrounds: distortion of non-human objects would add nothing to the overall effect of his images. Leiris remarks on this difference of treatment between figure and space as a crucial characteristic of his canvases: "In the case of Bacon's pictures – at least those I consider to be most curiously alive, irrespective of any question of quality – their extreme intensity seems to me to result from the paradoxical conjunction of two procedures: a more or less marked distortion of the figures, combined with a fairly naturalistic

treatment of their surroundings” (FFP 11). Indeed, I suspect that the presence of figural distortion beyond the “skin” of the human figure and face would permit the viewer to read the surface of the entire canvas as “painterly” rather than be forced perceptually and cognitively to confront a violent distortion specifically directed at the flesh of a *recognizably* human body. We can now see how his varied and contradictory statements to Sylvester about “injury” and distortion are all true at the same time: he *does* injure the people he paints (“the injury I do to them in my work”), in so far as their images can be seen *as* the persons they represent; at the same time, he does *not* injure his friends, since injury is done to *mere* images; and finally, he does and in fact needs to injure the *image* (“who today has been able to record anything that comes across to us as a fact without causing deep injury to the image?”), for this is the source of much of the psychological power of his paintings, but his talk of injuring images is meaningful only because he is familiar with the way they can be seen *as* persons.

It will be obvious, I hope, why the argument about Bacon that I have been developing must be opposed to Gilles Deleuze’s influential interpretation, which perversely refuses to acknowledge the primacy of the face for Bacon’s art. Importing the ideas about “faciality” that he and Félix Guattari developed in *A Thousand Plateaus* (discussed above, in chapter one; Deleuze’s text on Bacon is the first he wrote after his collaboration with Guattari), he reads Bacon’s portraits as a painterly manifestation of a process they called in that text the “dismantling of the face”:

As a portraitist, Bacon is a painter of heads, not faces, and there is a great difference between the two. For the face is a structured, spatial organization that conceals the head, whereas the head is

dependent on the body, even if it is the point of the body, its culmination. It is not that the head lacks spirit; but it is a spirit in bodily form, a corporeal and vital breath, an animal spirit. It is the animal spirit of man: a pig-spirit, a buffalo spirit, a dog-spirit, a bat-spirit... Bacon thus pursues a very peculiar project as a portrait painter: *to dismantle the face*, to rediscover the head or make it emerge from beneath the face. (FBLs 19; ellipsis and emphasis in original)

As is the case here, the original discussion of “faciality” in *A Thousand Plateaus* made little sense of the idea that a face might (indeed should) be dismantled, let alone what the quasi-technical term “head” was supposed to refer to (this much is clear: the “head” is what remains once the social construct of the “face” is dismantled, but as I noted in chapter one, their theory of “faciality” is premised on the mistaken notion that the central role of the face in human forms of life is socially determined). So it is difficult to evaluate the claims that Deleuze puts forward here. But it is obvious that any reading of Bacon that does not preserve a fundamental role for the human *face* cannot begin to account for the peculiar presence and force his paintings have been recognized to have: Leiris and Kundera, as we have already noted, do not make this mistake and are quite clear that the “resemblance” (Leiris) and “faithfulness” (Kundera) of his faces are essential to the power of Bacon’s portraits.

Moreover, Deleuze’s failure to acknowledge the role of the face leaves him unable to provide a compelling explanation of Bacon’s use of the term “sensation,” which, as the subtitle of Deleuze’s text makes clear (“The Logic of Sensation”), is the conceptual key to his entire reading of Bacon’s works. As I have argued, one of the primary sources of the violent sensation of life Bacon hopes to provoke in the “nervous

system” of his viewers is the tension between figuration and disfiguration precariously balanced in the way he renders his physiognomies. But because Deleuze does not grasp the critical significance of the perceptual recognizability of Bacon’s faces (against which any “irrationality” could be perceived), he is forced to look elsewhere for the source of “sensation.” That is, in his eagerness to regard Bacon as an artist who is concerned primarily to “rediscover the head or make it emerge from beneath the face,” he fails to respect how important the face (*as a face*) is to whatever power Bacon’s art possesses. He argues instead, in a cosmological vein, that “sensation” refers to a pre-reflective life of the senses that is linked to a universal, cosmic “Rhythm” that runs through all existence. (The source of the Rhythm itself he traces to a primordial chaos: “We can seek the unity of rhythm only at the point where rhythm itself plunges into chaos, into the night, at the point where the differences of level are perpetually and violently mixed”; FBL 39). According to Deleuze, the sensory experience of any particular sense modality (such as “visual sensation” in particular)

is in direct contact with a vital power that exceeds every domain and traverses them all. This power is Rhythm, which is more profound than vision, hearing, etc. Rhythm appears as music when it invests the auditory level, and as painting when it invests the visual level. This is a “logic of the senses,” as Cézanne said, which is neither rational nor cerebral. What is ultimate is thus the relation between sensation and rhythm, which places in each sensation the levels and domains through which it passes. This rhythm runs through a painting just as it runs through a piece of music. (FBL 37)

I admit that I find these ideas quite beautiful, but I am not sure what they have to do with Bacon’s art. It follows from Deleuze’s account here that “sensation” is not to be

understood (as I have been claiming) as the result of how we *perceive* Bacon's distorted human figures, but rather the distortions themselves are to be regarded as visual traces of the rhythmic force of sensations that runs through the bodies on the canvas: "In short, it is not movement that explains the levels of sensation, it is the levels of sensation that explain what remains of movement.... [I]n the end, it is a movement 'in-place,' a spasm, which reveals a completely different characteristic of Bacon: *the action of invisible forces on the body* (hence the bodily deformations which are due to this more profound cause)" (FBL 36). But this leaves unexplained why *we* – the beholders of Bacon's paintings – would so intensely experience the sensations that, according to Deleuze's basically formalist account, simply inform or deform the visual dispositions of the bodies on his canvases. If one accepted Deleuze's cosmology, one might argue that because the rhythmic patterns and forces underlying sensations run through the whole of the universe, the viewer of the sensations represented in a Bacon canvas (visible in his deformed bodies) would quite naturally be sympathetically affected (I am not certain, but I believe Deleuze implies as much though he nowhere makes it explicit). One would have to accept his cosmology, however, for this to seem a compelling answer.¹⁰¹ But however it measures up as cosmology, I would argue that it falls short as

¹⁰¹ It appears that Deleuze's cosmology ultimately derives from his reading of Nietzsche's cosmological doctrine of the "will to power." For an incisive evaluation of the role of this doctrine within Nietzsche's philosophy as a whole, see Maudemarie Clark's *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Clark argues quite compellingly that Nietzsche did not regard the cosmological theory of the will-to-power as true (she also argues, forcefully, that Nietzsche never abandoned the concept of truth itself, against the prevailing tendency, by both his critics and supporters, to read him this way).

an account of Bacon's art, for the simple reason that it is blind to Bacon's quite obvious obsession with the face, *as* a face.

Finally, Deleuze's account disregards the fact, noted earlier, that Bacon constantly gauges his own perceptual and psychological responses to the images he paints as they emerge on his canvases: perceptual interaction between image and beholder is not something that can be left extrinsic to any account of the genesis or meaning of his works. This means, as Bacon candidly admitted, that "illustrational" elements may be introduced so as to maintain the recognizability of the face: "Of course one does put in such things as ears and eyes." It is, however, his ongoing perceptual *response* that will determine when and what kinds of alterations will be introduced (and, of course, this does not entail conscious control, though it does not preclude volition either: appearance is not inconsistent with chance, an important point which we will discuss later at greater length). Such perceptual interaction, and the resulting beholder's "sensation" that is the measure of the perception's intensity, are internal to Bacon's creative process. In the following remarks, Bacon characterizes this process as a continuous and relentless form of self-criticism:

You see, one has an intention, but what really happens comes about in working – that's the reason it's so hard to talk about it – it actually does come about in the working. And the way it works is really by the things that happen. In working you are really following this kind of cloud of sensation in yourself, but you don't know what it really is. And it's called instinct. And one's instinct, whether right or wrong, fixes on certain things that have happened in that activity of applying the paint to the canvas. I think an awful lot of creation is made out of, also, the self-criticism of an artist, and very often I think probably what makes

one artist seem better than another is that his critical sense is more acute. (IFB 149)

Notice that he locates the “cloud of sensation” referred to in these remarks in *himself* (it is a kind of critical “instinct”), reacting to and guiding the development of the image. Whenever Bacon successfully traps sensations in his images, whatever is captured is the result of a complex and continuous perceptual interaction between the viewer (first of all, Bacon himself) and the organically emerging image seen, at each moment, as a distorted though recognizable part of a particular person’s body, often his or her face. We might say, then, that sensation is not what deforms Bacon’s bodies (like an “invisible force” pressing down upon them, as Deleuze imagines) but something we naturally experience (in our own “cloud of sensation”) when we perceive bodies so deformed. The truth is that Bacon’s “sensations” are probably neither really in the canvas nor in the viewer, but always a measure (in the “nervous system”) of how the canvas is perceived by the viewer (whether that is Bacon or us). So understood, it would not be wrong to then see sensations as either in the image or in the viewer (as Bacon sometimes does), but neither of these two localizations would make sense without their emergence in the perceptual contact between the two (“sensation” has no metaphysical existence, one might say, which is why I think Bacon uses the fuzzy image of a “cloud”: it only comes to life when something is *seen* or *experienced* a certain way).

One consequence of Deleuze’s disparagement of the concept of the face is that he necessarily neglects the importance of identity and personality for Bacon’s art:

indeed, if Deleuze were right, Bacon should probably be regarded as a kind of anti-portraitist. Yet Bacon's paintings themselves, along with many of his published remarks, make clear that he was deeply concerned with what we might variously call the individuality, personality or identity of the people he chose to paint. Like Picasso, Bacon only felt like painting people he knew quite well. "I couldn't do people I didn't know very well," he said: "I wouldn't want to. It wouldn't interest me to try and do them unless I had seen a lot of them, watched their contours, watched the way they behaved" (IFB 73-4). During the same conversation in which Bacon made these remarks, Sylvester also called the "most crucial step in the development of" Bacon's "subject-matter" that time in the early 1950's when Bacon "started to do paintings of particular people [he] knew" (IFB 72). And when asked why he did not turn to this subject matter sooner, Bacon explained that he simply felt technically inadequate to the task, implying that the change in subject did not mark a change in interest: he was always fascinated by his friends and their personalities and would have painted them sooner if he had felt himself capable enough. And in a different interview, Bacon again links portraiture to personality. When asked by Sylvester about the "distinct presence or threat of violence" that "most people" feel when looking at his works, Bacon's response confirms not only that he agrees that his works exhibit a kind of interpersonal "violence," but also that this violence is intimately tied to the way he sees personality as such:

When talking about the violence of paint, it's nothing to do with the violence of war. It's to do with an attempt to remake the violence of reality itself. And the violence of reality is not only

the simple violence meant when you say that a rose or something is violent, but it's the violence also of the suggestions within the image itself which can only be conveyed through paint. When I look at you across the table, I don't only see you but I see a whole emanation which has to do with personality and everything else. And to put that over in a painting, as I would like to be able to do in a portrait, means that it would appear violent in paint. We nearly always live through screens – a screened existence. And I sometimes think, when people say my work looks violent, that perhaps I have from time to time been able to clear away one or two of the veils or screens. (IFB 81-2)

One thing these remarks show is how profoundly traditional Bacon's conception of portraiture actually was. Far from turning his back on verisimilitude and likeness as criteria of aesthetic success, he seems to have seen himself as pushing the medium of paint towards a greater faithfulness to the personality being represented. Bacon did not move portraiture beyond personhood, but rather re-imagined the "appearance" of personality as such.

There is, however, a significant and consequential ambivalence about the idea of personality that runs through these remarks by Bacon. On the one hand, personality is an "emanation" that, to speak etymologically, flows out from and floats around the person's face (here, that of his interlocutor, Sylvester): "When I look at you across the table, I don't only see you but I see a whole emanation." On this view, personality is *out there*, as it were, part of the realm of appearances, rather than something hidden away and private, like one's innermost soul ("in interiore homine," to recall Augustine's formulation). On the other hand, however, Bacon also implies that personality is, in fact, hidden or concealed (we live a "screened existence") and that the violence people sense in his paintings may have to do with the fact that he somehow sees through or

clears away those “veils or screens.” The “distinct presence or threat of violence” that Sylvester referred to, according to this view, would be an index of the kind of psychological violation Bacon practices. As is obvious, these two very different, one could say opposed, ways of picturing personality, have quite different consequences for our understanding of Bacon’s art, as they may have had for his own understanding of his practice as well: one view sees his art as a faithful record of the visible, the other as an invasive disclosure of the hidden. I will return to the latter possibility after first taking a moment to consider the surprising complexities of the former.

For the visibility of personality does not entail simplicity of transcription. Art, for Bacon, is not illustration. We can begin by noting that it is of the very essence of the visibility of such emanations – ever shifting and transforming – that they be absolutely mysterious and profoundly difficult to capture. As he says about “appearance” elsewhere:

The longer you work, the more the mystery deepens of what appearance is, or how can what is called appearance be made in another medium. And it needs a sort of moment of magic to coagulate colour and form so that it gets the equivalent of appearance, the appearance that you see at any moment, because so-called appearance is only riveted for one moment as that appearance. In a second you may blink your eyes or turn your head slightly, and you look again and the appearance has changed. I mean, appearance is like a continuously floating thing. (IFB 118)

The essential transience of the appearance of the human body that Bacon refers to here is what convinced some masters of physiognomic expressions, such as Daumier, to dismiss the value of drawing from life. However, appearance is not so difficult to

capture because it is somehow hidden, but only because it is so fleeting. On the other hand, the fleetingness of appearance is not simply due to the speed with which the muscles of the human body or face physically alter. This would make the difficulty purely contingent, something a faster hand or perhaps a camera might remedy. Indeed, Bacon regularly used photographs as visual references when he painted, and since his paintings look little like anything a camera could capture, we can be certain that physical transience has nothing to do with the “mystery” he invokes. On the contrary, the difficulty appears to be essential to the nature of appearance as such, for appearance does not seem to be reducible to “physical” or “literal” appearance at all. “I don’t only see you but I see a whole emanation which has to do with personality,” he said to Sylvester, as if there were some kind of disjunction internal to the way Sylvester appeared to Bacon. Note how, in order to explain why physiognomic expression is so difficult to capture, we were forced into embarrassing linguistic difficulties: did we not, in effect, just say that appearance is not reducible to appearance? We are at the borderlands of sense here. Perhaps this explains why Bacon resorts, somewhat tentatively, to characterizing appearance as “like a continuously floating thing.” This formulation, along with his reference to an “emanation,” suggests some kind of gaseous formation or cloud (recall the “cloud of sensation”), perhaps shot through with variously colored light, ever shifting, yet fully visible and, unsurprisingly, almost impossible to “trap” (it takes a “moment of magic”). Imagined this way, it is interesting to recall that Bacon spoke approvingly of Monet’s sunsets, even expressing a desire to paint a human mouth in the same way: “I like, you may say, the glitter and colour that

comes from the mouth, and I've always hoped in a sense to be able to paint the mouth like Monet painted a sunset" (IFB 50).

It would be easy to take Bacon's way of characterizing appearances (as "emanations" and "continuously floating things") as indicative of some sort of occult or spiritualistic views on his part, like those held by so many great modern painters before him (Kandinsky and Mondrian, for example). At least this would free us from the contradiction we found ourselves cornered into: understood spiritualistically, Bacon's appearances would not be reducible to *physical* appearances because the "appearances" Bacon sees are of immaterial realities (psychic "auras," perhaps). That is, Bacon *sees* personality, but with a "sight" that is spiritual rather than mundane. But this reading creates more difficulties than it resolves. Bacon, for one thing, despised all modern "mystical" ideas. In response to a suggestion by Sylvester that one can be said to enter a "trance-like state" while engaged in painting, Bacon's response is telling: "I don't like using the word trance-like nowadays, because it comes too near to modern mysticism, which I hate" (IFB 96). He also called himself a "non-believer" who professed a radically disenchanted view of existence: "I think of life as meaningless; but we give it meaning during our own existence. We create certain attitudes which give it a meaning while we exist, though they in themselves are meaningless, really" (IFB 23, 133). He also held a thoroughly naturalistic conception of the place of humans in the animal world: nothing but random contingency differentiates us from the meat we see at the butchers, he believed. Humans, after all, are but animals of another kind: "Well, of course, we are meat, we are potential carcasses. If I go into a butcher's shop I always

think it's surprising that I wasn't there instead of the animal" (IFB 46). Given the tenor of these remarks, it is hard to imagine that Bacon would intend anything remotely supernatural or spiritual in his remarks about "emanations" (or "continuously floating things"). So if it is clear that the "emanation" that Bacon saw around Sylvester is not reducible to the physical appearance of Sylvester's face and body, it is just as clear that it cannot be anything spiritual or mystical either. Perhaps it would help if we likened Bacon's notion of "appearance" to Wittgenstein's theory of aspects, for aspects too are neither purely physical nor ethereally spiritual. And like Bacon's appearances, aspects are what Wittgenstein said we *see* when we see a face *as* expressive of a person's thoughts and feelings: the affinities between the ideas of Wittgenstein and Bacon are striking. Perhaps this is unsurprising when we consider that few people have spent as much time and energy reflecting attentively upon the appearance of the human face as did they (there is no reason, I should note, to suspect that Bacon read or was aware of Wittgenstein's discussion of aspects: I think each came to their own views independently, simply by means of intense observation and thought). That does not mean, however, that their views are identical: that there are real differences in their physiognomic views is as undeniable as the unmistakable points of resemblance. Nothing is to be gained by forcing Bacon's idiosyncratic ideas into a philosophical mold, or by using his art as a mere illustration of a Wittgensteinian theory. This would add nothing to the cogency of Wittgenstein's views nor augment the force of Bacon's art, the powerful immediacy of which is clear to anyone who cares to look. Nonetheless, Wittgenstein's notion of aspects allows us to see that much of what Bacon

says about appearance is, in fact, rationally cogent (however odd and paradoxical much of it may sound), and so can show us in what ways they are not “merely” idiosyncratic. Bacon’s art and theory, should we say, touch upon something *true* about faces and their appearances, and it is in their respective contact with the truth about faces that the work of Bacon and Wittgenstein meet.

But does that mean that the *truth* of facial perception and recognition is somehow fundamentally violent, as so much of Bacon’s art appears to say? Is there a kind of epistemological brutality structuring intersubjectivity itself? Consider, for example, the portrait triptych that he painted of Henrietta Moraes in 1969 (fig. 9).



Fig. 9 Francis Bacon, *Three Studies of Henrietta Moraes*, 1969

Though criticism often finds the obvious a bit embarrassing to state, is it truly possible to look at these portrait studies and *not* imagine physical violence? Do the various bloodied faces of Moraes in this triptych series not clearly betray evidence of a terrible and terrifying brutality that has flayed, mauled and twisted her physiognomy? We have seen that Bacon does not shrink from the association of violence with his work. There is no point, I think, saying that his work is not *really* violent, that this is somehow a

naive response, that only “simple” people would see it that way. Not only does Bacon himself speak of causing “injury” to his portrait subjects (“the injury that I do to them in my work”), he also acknowledges that people who sense a “distinct presence or threat of violence” when looking at his portraits may be on to something. He connects this to his belief that we live “through screens – a screened existence”: “I sometimes think, when people say my work looks violent, that perhaps I have from time to time been able to clear away one or two of the veils or screens.” As we noted earlier, Bacon’s formulation here suggests that personality, far from being visible and part of the realm of appearances (i.e. emanations), is actually hidden and private, therefore requiring invasive exploration in order to be successfully uncovered and captured in paint. This would explain the violence people sense in his work: what they are responding to is the psychological *violation* that is intrinsic to his method. And yet, interestingly, this is a violation which, attempting to get at the personality underneath, only manages to mark the surface of the body: what psychological content (fear, longing, hope, etc.) is ever revealed by one of Bacon’s portraits?

One of the people who most forcefully and eloquently responded to Bacon’s portraits as invasive works of violence was Milan Kundera, who has written one of the most powerful yet disturbing essays on Bacon’s portraiture. In 1977, just after he had emigrated to France, Kundera was given the task of writing an essay on Bacon for the periodical *L’Arc*. He decided to write a brief reading of Bacon’s 1969 portrait triptych of Moraes, in which he interpreted Bacon’s “brutal” distortions of Moraes’ face as evidence of the painter’s struggle to “seize hold of her essence, of that diamond hidden

in the depths” (BPSP 10). Faced with the task of writing on Bacon’s triptych, Kundera significantly resorts to the mode of autobiography and confession, as if, in order to understand the paintings, one had to subjectively identify with the point of view of the painter; as if that point of view, and the way it struggled to see or grasp the essence of another person, was the true “subject” of the paintings. In order to convey the quality of his response to Bacon’s work, Kundera tellingly says little about the appearance of the paintings. There is no interpretation of form as such, for the meaning of Bacon’s images lie not in their forms, but rather in the *act* of perception and response the appearance records (the sensation). In order to be as faithful as possible to the *experience* of response, Kundera spends much of the essay relating the “scandalous” and “unconscionable” desire he felt during an encounter with a young woman in Prague before he had emigrated to France:

It was 1972. I met with a girl in a Prague suburb, in a borrowed apartment. Two days earlier, she had been interrogated by the police about me for an entire day. Now she wanted to meet with me secretly (she feared that she was constantly being followed) to tell me what questions they had asked her and how she had answered them. If they were to interrogate me, my answers should be the same as hers.

She was a very young girl who had as yet little experience of the world. The interrogation had disturbed her, and, after three days, the fear was still upsetting her bowels. She was very pale and during our conversation she kept leaving the room to go to the toilet – so that our whole encounter was accompanied by the noise of the water refilling the tank.

I had known her for a long time. She was intelligent, spirited, she had fine emotional control, and was always so impeccably dressed that her outfit, just like her behaviour, allowed not a hint of nakedness. And now, suddenly, fear like a great knife had laid her open. She was gaping wide before me like the split carcass of a heifer hanging from a meat hook.

The noise of the water refilling the toilet tank practically never let up, and I suddenly had the urge to rape her. I know what I'm saying: rape her, not make love to her. I didn't want tenderness from her. I wanted to bring my hand down brutally on her face and in one swift instant take her completely, with all her unbearably arousing contradictions: with her impeccable outfit along with her rebellious guts, her good sense along with her fear, her pride along with her misery. I sensed that all those contradictions harboured her essence: that treasure, that nugget of gold, that diamond hidden in the depths. I wanted to possess her, in one swift moment, with her shit along with her ineffable soul.

But I saw those two eyes staring at me, filled with torment (two tormented eyes in a sensible face) and the more tormented those eyes, the more my desire turned absurd, stupid, scandalous, incomprehensible and impossible to carry out.

Uncalled-for and unconscionable, that desire was nonetheless real. I cannot disavow it – and when I look at Francis Bacon's portrait-triptych, it's as if I recall it. The painter's gaze comes down on the face like a brutal hand trying to seize hold of her essence, of that diamond hidden in the depths. Of course we are not certain that the depths really do harbour something – but whatever it may be, we each of us have in us that brutal gesture, that hand movement that roughs up another person's face in the hope of finding, in it and behind it, a thing that is hidden there. (rptd. in *BPSP*, 9-10)

Kundera's understanding of Bacon's artistic method ("the painter's gaze comes down on the face like a brutal hand") implies, indeed presupposes, that violent and invasive force is the only way to touch and grasp the mind of another: the only way we can truly *know* another person, since the other's self is understood to be a substantive essence (like a "nugget of gold" or a "diamond") that lies "hidden in the depths." Understood in such a way, how else except by means of force could one imagine *seeing* let alone *portraying* the person beneath his or her "veils or screens," as Bacon would later put it? Perhaps this is one reason Bacon was so fond of the word "trap": regarded this way, painting might very well feel like a form of hunting. Either way, it is the meat we

crave. But, of course, the kind of knowledge that is the epistemological goal of this fundamentally Cartesian picture of mind is impossible to attain (for Cartesians, other minds will always be a *problem*), and Bacon's aesthetic "success" can therefore be seen as a reflection of an epistemological failure: only the *body* is ever touched. The mind, as Wittgenstein made clear, is not like a diamond or nugget of gold: it is not a *thing* at all to be treasured in absolute privacy ("There are no such things as minds, but people have mental properties," as Davidson expressed this point). Bacon's paintings, as Kundera's essay reveals, graphically *shows* the ethical stakes involved when we think about the nature of mind. Is it private; is it public? Is it visible; is it hidden? Seeing it as private and hidden, one gropes for the inner self only to find folds of flesh bloodied and bruised by one's fists, for there is nothing *there*: "Of course we are not certain that the depths really do harbour something." Bacon's paintings can be read, in this light, as ambivalent cautionary tales, the drama of other minds played out on the surfaces of their faces: beware of going beneath the surface, his physiognomies seem to say, for appearances are the only place mind can be seen (whether as aspects or emanations). This reminds us of Nietzsche's remarks about surfaces in the *Gay Science* (unsurprisingly, Bacon read Nietzsche):

Oh, those Greeks! They knew how to *live*. What is required for that is to stop courageously at the surface, the fold, the skin, to adore appearance, to believe in forms, tones, words, in the whole Olympus of appearance! Those Greeks were superficial—*out of profundity*! And is not this precisely what we are coming back to, we daredevils of the spirit who have climbed the highest and most dangerous peak of present thought and looked around from up there—we who have *looked down* from there? Are we not,

precisely in this respect—Greeks? Adorers of forms, of tones, of words? And therefore—artists?

It turns out that Bacon was quite fond of Kundera's essay. After Bacon died, his friend Michel Archimbaud even approached Kundera and asked him to write the introduction to a planned collection of Bacon's portraits and self-portraits. As Kundera notes at the beginning of the introduction that he eventually wrote for that volume (which reprints and expands upon his 1977 essay), Archimbaud assured him that "the invitation was Bacon's own wish": "He reminded me of a short piece of mine published long ago in the periodical *L'Arc*, a piece he said the painter had considered one of the few in which he could recognize himself" (BPSP 8). One wonders, even, whether Bacon might not have had Kundera's earlier essay in mind when he later spoke of "veils or screens" in connection to those people who "say my work looks violent." The interpretation of his own art implied by those remarks is certainly consistent with the essential points of Kundera's piece. That Archimbaud would entrust the introduction of Bacon's collection of portraits and self-portraits to Kundera's hand shows how genuine and deeply felt Bacon's admiration for the *L'Arc* essay must have been. However, as we noted when we first discussed these remarks about "veils or screens," this is but one possible view of his art, essentially opposed to that which sees it as a faithful record of the visible. Of course, Kundera's reading itself implies this opposite interpretation when he quite pointedly wonders out loud whether any kind of hidden self exists, for he does not in fact endorse the idea that portraiture can "pierce" the surface of the *persona* in order to uncover the person within. It is, in fact, the very impossibility internal to this

way of thinking about other minds (“my desire turned absurd, stupid, scandalous, incomprehensible and impossible to carry out”) that fuels much of the pathos of the piece, the implication, of course, being that the same pathos (that is, impossibility) underlies Bacon’s art as well. Like Bacon’s paintings themselves, Kundera wrote the essay as a mirror of the sensations produced by the perceptual transaction he experienced while beholding the triptych, and in this lies the significance of the way he relates the remarks of Archimbaud about Bacon’s feeling for his 1977 essay: “a piece he said the painter had considered one of the few in which he could recognize himself.” Recognition (that is, the matching of “clouds of sensation”) is a key to Bacon’s art, and the mirroring style Kundera chose for his response to Bacon is the most faithful recognitional response Bacon could have hoped for. No wonder he admired it. Significantly, this mirroring or matching dynamic already shows a way of perceiving and representing others that is not invasive.

I do not think, however, that it is a matter of choosing decisively between competing interpretations. Bacon’s art is powerful not because it is consistent – after all, it is not philosophy, though it *is* theoretical – but rather because it dramatizes with great intensity different ways of approaching and perceiving the human face. In one respect, it *is* injurious: flaying, cutting, digging through the flesh. In another respect, it is not: faithfully recording the transient appearances of emanations of the self as they continuously float across and about the surface of the face. *Both* of these possibilities are simultaneously recorded by Bacon’s portraits, and it is to a great extent the tension between the two that lends them not only such affective, but also, *conceptual* power.

They make us think, not *just* feel – though we should add that they make us think *by* making us feel. However, I think these two opposed ways of thinking about the face, even taken together, do not yet adequately account for the meaning of Bacon’s physiognomies. There is at least one other important aspect of his art, which has to do with the meaning of chance in his practice and theory. For though we have referred to chance repeatedly throughout the course of this discussion, we have not yet fully accounted for its frequency in Bacon’s remarks about his own practice. What does chance mean for him? At times, it seems as if it means absolutely everything: “in trying to do a portrait, my ideal would really be just to pick up a handful of paint and throw it at the canvas and hope that the portrait was there” (IFB 107). We have already read enough of his other remarks to know that this is an artistic ideal that Bacon quite clearly knew was unachievable and unrealistic. As he put it elsewhere, “I’m quite prepared to believe that mine is a really far-out and impossible theory.” However, his theoretical fantasies about paintings of absolute accident are nonetheless telling indices of how strongly he felt about the matter. In response to his acknowledgement that such ideas are probably “far-out and impossible,” Sylvester says: “Nevertheless, it’s obviously of great importance for you to think in those terms.” Bacon’s response shows clearly how much the possibility of a wholly irrational and accidental painting meant to him: “Certainly. It’s one of the reasons that I go on painting, because it haunts me so much” (IFB 126).

But just why did it haunt him so? In order to answer this question, I think we need to return to the radically disenchanting views he held about human life, though

instead of “disenchanted,” we should probably use more precise terms like “accidental” or “contingent.” That is to say, for Bacon there is no underlying reason things are as they are, and not otherwise, which explains his constant existential surprise in the presence of slaughtered meat: “If I go into a butcher’s shop I always think it’s surprising that I wasn’t there instead of the animal.” His is a post-Darwinian and entirely atheistic worldview, absolutely devoid of design, though one that seems (like the later Nietzsche’s)¹⁰² to be based on the acceptance of the truth of the natural sciences (to the exclusion of all religious belief systems) rather than deriving from a skeptical commitment to a total absence of truth altogether: hence, his frequent and positive references to nervous systems, sensations, instincts and drives. Indeed, perhaps such biological truths are the only ones he fully believed in: “we are born and we die, but in between we give this purposeless existence a meaning by our drives” (IFB 134). But if the drives are real, the meanings they make are not: “I think of life as meaningless,” he said quite succinctly.¹⁰³ There is no non-naturalistic teleology underlying biological life or existence in general. He clearly felt the force of these ideas quite intensely, and they appear to have permanently colored his adult existence. He

¹⁰² On Nietzsche’s naturalistic commitment to the findings of the empirical sciences, see Maudemarie Clark’s *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* and Christopher Cox, *Nietzsche and Interpretation*.

¹⁰³ That Bacon’s use of the word “drives” is not intended in a psychoanalytic sense is made clear by an exchange with Sylvester, in which Bacon strongly resists Sylvester’s attempts to read his portraits psychoanalytically: as signs of ambivalence and contradictory feelings towards his subjects. Here is Sylvester’s suggested interpretation: “do you not think, since you talk about recording different levels of feeling in one image, that, among other things, you may be expressing at one and the same time a love of the person and a hostility towards them – that what you are making may be both a caress and an assault?” Bacon’s response is quite clear and direct: “I think that is too logical. I don’t think that’s how things work. I think it goes to a deeper thing: how do I feel I can make this image more immediately real to myself? That’s all.” Of course, this does not mean that Bacon’s art cannot or should not be interpreted psychoanalytically, it just means that Bacon’s conscious use of the word “drive” should not be taken in that light, since he clearly put no stock in psychoanalytic theories.

told Sylvester that this kind of knowledge first came to him one day when he was seventeen:

I remember it very, very clearly. I remember looking at a dog-shit on the pavement and I suddenly realized, there it is – this is what life is like. Strangely enough, it tormented me for months, till I came to, as it were, accept that here you are, existing for a second, brushed off like flies on the wall. (IFB 133)

If in the face of its obvious meaninglessness life nonetheless seems to have some sort of meaning, Bacon saw that as simply due to our own projections: and such fictional meanings “in themselves are meaningless, really.” That does not mean, however, that Bacon is unequivocally contemptuous of such fictions. He admits that he has greater respect (despite his great distaste for all forms of religion) for those who hold tenaciously to religious beliefs (forms of “total falseness,” as he called them) than those who, thinking themselves free of morality, “just live a kind of hedonistic and drifting life” (IFB 134). After all, it takes dedication to hold even to illusions, and “the only thing that makes anybody interesting is their dedication” (IFB 134). But he admits that his ideal (or at least “more exciting”) person would be one who could do “totally without belief,” but nonetheless be “totally dedicated to futility” (IFB 134).

Bacon’s “haunting” theory of the role of accident in art (“one of the reasons that I go on painting”) derives from this ultimate understanding of the radical contingency of reality. Crudely put, we might say that on the side of total falseness is illustration, on the side of truth is chance. Radical contingency, after all, is the only thing undeniably true about existence. As Gloucester, from Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, said in lines that Bacon was fond of quoting: “As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; / They kill us

for their sport.” Imposed or willed meaning (that is, illustration) is therefore to be firmly resisted in favor of an absolute artistic dedication to accident – the practical aspect, one might say, of a clear-eyed theoretical acceptance of the “futility” of life. Here we hear Bacon describe how his commitment to accident translated into actual studio practice: he would, as he explained, “do almost anything to get out of the formula of making a kind of illustrative image – I mean, I just wipe it all over with a rag or use a brush or rub it with something or anything or throw turpentine and paint and everything else onto the thing to try to break the willed articulation of the image” (IFB 160). But what is fascinating is that Bacon did not follow these ideas and practices into total abstraction, as might initially seem their obvious theoretical and visual endpoint; after all, what else could be left in the image once illustration is thus banished? On the contrary, however, he held tenaciously to the appearance of the human figure. Indeed, not only did he remain committed to the figure as such, but even to the traditional genre of the portrait, which not only foregrounds figuration but is generically defined by the *resemblance* or *likeness* of the figures portrayed. And as we have seen, Bacon was surprisingly traditional in his conception of what a portrait properly was. Speaking of portraiture, we recall that he said “there’s no point in doing a portrait of somebody if you’re not going to make it look like him” (IFB 146). One might see this as an inconsistency in his personal philosophy, seeing his devotion to figural resemblance as at odds with his devotion to accident and chance. For isn’t resemblance necessarily on the side of illustration? This would be a terribly mistaken inference, however. For what is so powerful about Bacon’s theory of art is that he sees absolutely no

inconsistency at all in the imagining of a purely accidental form of *portrait* painting. Indeed, by devoting himself so often to the painting of portraits, he demanded of himself that he practice within the zone of this apparent, but *only* apparent, paradox: that individual resemblance could come about wholly by accidental means.

That Bacon's devotion to figuration and portraiture is not a theoretical inconsistency, however, requires that we grasp the extent to which Bacon saw reality *as such* as wholly accidental. In other words, that particular humans live lives as the particular humans they are in the first place is the most remarkable piece of (meaningless) luck one could imagine. "If I go into a butcher's shop I always think it's surprising that I wasn't there instead of the animal," is Bacon's more striking way of putting the same point. It follows then that a form of portrait painting that devotes itself to accident should be able to faithfully record the "fact" of this absolute chance, since the fact of personhood itself is absolutely accidental. What, after all, is an individual person but a wholly contingent kind of biological entity, which typically exhibit particular, characteristic, mental properties, sometimes called a personality if they display a sufficient degree of consistency and coherence over time? If the universe can give rise, in the total absence of design, to such patterns of organic matter as we are, then why cannot a totally random painting accurately record their appearance as well? Hence, his dream of painting a portrait by simply picking up a handful of paint and throwing it at the canvas. Patterns themselves, Bacon appeared to sense, are absolutely accidental. Bacon so clearly saw chance at work everywhere that at times he literally believed this kind of portraiture should be possible. Indeed, can we say, with certainty,

a person) as just as likely (or unlikely) as anything else that could possibly come into existence.

Of course, despite the fact that we cannot *a priori* rule out the possibility that someone might successfully create the kind of accidental portraiture Bacons often fantasized about, such chance likenesses were and are, it goes without saying, *highly* unlikely to come about simply by throwing paint at a flat surface. That the fantasy nonetheless had a strong grip upon Bacon's imagination ("it haunts me so much," he said) meant inevitably that despair would be a constant companion in the studio. And indeed, few mental states are invoked more often in his interview transcripts than despair. What is intriguing is the positive, productive uses to which Bacon channeled this dark feeling. Discussing his desire to feel "freer" while engaged in the act of painting, at one point he mentions to Sylvester that he uses his "will" to achieve this goal. Sylvester asks: "The will to lose one's will?" Bacon's considered reply – he decides in the midst of his response that "will" is the wrong word – tells us a great deal about the role of despair in his art: "Absolutely. The will to make oneself completely free. Will is the wrong word, because in the end you could call it despair. Because it really comes out of an absolute feeling of it's impossible to do these things, so I might as well just do anything. And out of this anything, one sees what happens" (IFB 13). The psychological and practical arc described by these remarks is crucial to understanding Bacon's art: impossibility leads to despair, which leads to freedom ("might as well just do anything"), which leads to the unwilled creation of new painterly possibilities. His ideas about chance, because they are theoretically

intelligible but practically impossible, put him in a terrible bind: as he himself acknowledged, “I think what I very often have talked about has been perhaps a particular theory of mine which is impossible to achieve.” Impossible to *achieve*, but not impossible to believe. These remarks suggest how the practical impossibility of Bacon’s theory is, in a way, the enabling condition for his art as a whole: for his “far out and impossible theory” forces him inevitably into practical situations of desperation, which then lead to moments of absolute painterly freedom. Would Bacon even have been able to experience such moments of freedom at all without this feeling of impossibility reducing him to despair in the first place?

Bacon’s theory of art, I suggest, was a crucial practical element of his everyday studio practice (and not, for example, something extrinsic or after the fact: *merely* theory, that is). For this reason, it is important to integrate his remarks into any reading of his art, not because his statements are privileged *interpretations* of his images, but because his ideas played an essential practical role in their creation (without them, I wonder whether he would have painted the paintings he did). By being so frank about his ideas, it is as though Bacon had invited us into his studio and allowed us to see him mix his pigments and stretch his canvases. That is, theory was a kind of “tool” right alongside his paints, brushes and rags. Drink, of course, also played an important liberatory role in his studio practice during the creation of some early works, such as the *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (1944). Speaking of this work, he told Sylvester: “It was a thing that I did in about a fortnight, when I was in a bad mood of drinking, and I did it under tremendous hangovers and drink; I sometimes

hardly knew what I was doing.... I think perhaps the drink helped me to be a bit freer” (IFB 13). However, he came to feel that drink’s artistic utility was ultimately quite limited: “Sometimes it loosens you, but again I think it also dulls other areas. It leaves you freer, but on the other hand it dulls your final judgment of what you hold. I don’t actually believe that drink and drugs help me. They may help other people, but they don’t really help me” (IFB 54). Alcohol produced (at great cognitive cost) the kind of freedom which his theory would later, by way of despair, come to supply in a more practically useable fashion (that is, without loss of critical acuity). In this light, it makes sense to think of Bacon’s theory as a more *reliable* substitute for drink: though alcohol helped him achieve the freedom to paint the *Crucifixion* triptych (“drink helped me to be a bit freer”), he told Sylvester that “it’s one of the *only* pictures I’ve been able to do under drink” (IFB 13, emphasis added). The most telling part of his explanation of why he came to view alcohol as unhelpful is his observation that it “dulls your final judgment of what you hold”: drink may have helped Bacon paint unwilled images, but it also dulled his ability to *respond* to them. And, as I have been arguing, perceptual *response* is the key to Bacon’s art – it is in his response to what he has put on a canvas (whether willed or not) that his “cloud of sensations” (which he also calls “instinct”) comes to life. Sober despair, unlike sheer intoxication, leads to the creation of images to which he is then capable of perceptually responding: “At that moment I’m thinking of nothing but how hopeless and impossible this thing is to achieve. And by making these marks without knowing how they will behave, suddenly there comes something which your instinct seizes on as being for a moment the thing which you could begin to

develop” (IFB 54). And what he sees on the canvas, when “luck” is on his side, is an unexpected image which hits his “nervous system” with a sensation of presence, or *life*: part of the original goal of the impossible theory, it turns out. In the following remarks, of which we have already quoted a small part, Bacon puts all of this even more clearly:

... you don't know how the hopelessness in one's working will make one just take paint and just do almost anything to get out of the formula of making a kind of illustrative image – I mean, I just wipe it all over with a rag or use a brush or rub it with something or anything or throw turpentine and paint and everything else onto the thing to try to break the willed articulation of the image, so that the image will grow, as it were, spontaneously and within its own structure, and not my structure. Afterwards, your sense of what you want comes into play, so that you begin to work on the hazard that has been left to you on the canvas. And out of all that, possibly, a more organic image arises than if it was a willed image. (IFB 160)

Illustration is inevitable, for our will is impossible to wholly disengage: it is not as though Bacon unrealistically imagines that it is possible to consistently paint without will. He *longs* for this, but knows it is impossible. But this very knowledge is a source of great despair, which opens up – in the midst of periods of illustration – moments *beyond* willing. And here, in the volatile *interaction* between illustration and chance, new accidental images, with a life of their own, find room to grow: they constitute “the hazard that has been left to you on the canvas.” And when all goes well, these organic images produce sensations that approximate those produced by the appearance of the original subjects, though without being wholly illustrational: “suddenly I have found that the thing comes nearer to the way that my visual instinct feel about the image I am trying to trap” (IFB 54). (Here we see again how surprisingly conventional is his notion

of resemblance and portraiture: his portraits would not appear so novel if they were not, at the same time, so essentially traditional.) Clearly, this process can be repeated over and over, either until an image successfully traps “the fact at its most living point” or until it is abandoned and destroyed. Leiris, we will recall, described the uncanny “life” of Bacon’s images perfectly, when he wrote, “As if the picture had its own life, and constituted a new reality instead of being a mere simulacrum” (Leiris 6).

Illustration, as Bacon acknowledged, plays an important and inescapable role in this creative process: in order to maintain the recognizability of the image he will even introduce ears, eyes, and other “illustrational” elements into his images. Unfortunately, it appears that he may at times have felt that this was a compromise of his personal philosophy: his acknowledgement to Sylvester that his theory is “far-out and impossible” has the ring of a confession (of course, if he was not so emotionally invested in his theory, it probably would not have worked so well for him: a certain blindness to its limits may have been the psychological condition of its practical utility). But far from being an unnecessary and extrinsic element in his artistic practice – despite whatever Bacon may have believed at times – the role of “illustration” is absolutely crucial, for the perceptual recognizability of his human figures (especially their faces) is a fundamental source of the “sensations” he traps in his portraits in the first place. Bacon’s complicated and unpredictable use of chance distortions was a powerful way of tuning and altering the sensations we naturally perceive in physiognomic patterns in order to more powerfully and accurately convey the sensations he perceived when looking at the subjects portrayed: their personalities, however conceived (as emanations

or hidden substances). That he married chance and portraiture is essential to the power and meaning of his art. As I have suggested all along, it is because he represents human figures and faces that he can so readily speak of his images as being “organic” in the first place: we naturally respond to such images *as* presences, as Gombrich put it, with a life and mind of their own. That is to say, Bacon’s intent was simply to create portraits that could be seen *as* the persons portrayed.

Following up on this last point, I would like to close this discussion of Bacon by suggesting that we see him as a fundamentally Romantic artist working under conditions of modern disbelief, a late and quite altered exemplar, that is, of the creative powers of the primary Imagination described in Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria*. Here is Coleridge’s well-known definition from chapter 13:

The IMAGINATION, then, I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still, at all events, it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (*as* objects) are essentially fixed and dead.

If we replace Coleridge’s references to divinity with accident, I think we are left with a good picture of one aspect of Bacon’s artistic project: by using chance to create images that trapped the sensation of life – that is, by creating images that could be seen *as* having a life of their own – Bacon participated in the same contingent processes that

first gave rise to individual human lives in the first place. At those moments of despair when he let himself “do anything,” Bacon was at one with the only creative force that exists in the universe: chance (“a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation”). Patterns exist: that is a fact, truly, beyond belief. It is as though each act of painting is, at some level, an act of wonder: wonder at the fact that life exists at all. And not only life in general, but these *particular* lives: George Dyer, Isabel Rawsthorne, Henrietta Moraes, Michel Leiris, Lucien Freud, *himself*. Bacon’s portraits and self-portraits are re-creations in the most literal sense. And by preserving the aspects that emanate from each face that he saw, he was preserving the presence (for him) that *was* each individual person. And when we feel our own “cloud of sensation” stir when beholding these portraits, that is a bit of their lives come alive in each of us. Despite Bacon’s disdain for conventional morality, I believe that his pictorial preservations of the “fact” of each person “at its most living point” is art at its most ethical (beyond good and evil).

The various ways of reading Bacon’s art that I have presented do not, I know, easily coexist with one another. But as I suggested earlier, it is not the consistency of Bacon’s art that matters to anyone who feels the force of his paintings: the force itself is what is at stake. That various, and perhaps conflicting, theoretical ideas are interwoven with the affective force of his images does not detract from their artistic value, and I hope that a reading that is faithful to the multiple theories and perspective that inform their creation will not be dismissed for that very reason. Indeed, I think it is part of the strength of his images that they sustain such widely varying (though narrowly

circumscribed) interpretations. It is not that anything goes when interpreting Bacon's art, but rather that a limited number of ideas and feelings appear to be suggested simultaneously. What unifies much of his work is not a uniform theory, but the consistent presence of the human face, and his portraits are one of the greatest twentieth-century artistic testaments to the importance of the face itself.

5. Face Value

As with the work of the many other figures already surveyed in this dissertation, Emmanuel Levinas' reflections on the ethical dimensions of the face-to-face relation likewise signals the special importance of the human countenance to modern thought.¹⁰⁵ The "epiphany of the face qua face," as Levinas puts it, "opens humanity," proclaiming the ethical responsibility of the self for all others (TI 194). However, those familiar with Levinas' now quite popular and influential work will already know that in his philosophy the face (*visage*) is a deeply equivocal term: on the one hand, empirical and available to sensibility (but only as frozen "caricature" [TI 198]), while on the other hand, transcendent and "neither seen nor touched—for in visual or tactile sensation the identity of the I envelops the alterity of the object" (TI 194). Exceeding the "enveloping," and thus violent, grasp of an objectifying sensibility, the face (in the latter sense) appears as an "epiphany" within the face (in the former): "The face resists possession, resists my powers. In its epiphany, in expression, the sensible, still graspable, turns into total resistance to the grasp" (TI 197). The transcendent face of the other appeals to the self and calls it to an absolute responsibility: "Before the hunger of men responsibility is measured only 'objectively'; it is irrecusable. The face opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation" (TI 201). More fundamental than even existence is responsibility, or as Levinas puts it: "preexisting the plane of

¹⁰⁵ See especially section 3 ("Exteriority and the Face") of Levinas' *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne Univ. Press, 1969). References to this text will be given parenthetically with the abbreviation TI.

ontology is the ethical plane” (TI 201). And so, unavoidable, yet “neither seen nor touched,” and somehow both before and beyond Being itself, is the transcendent face of the Levinasian other.

If the deconstructive literary criticism of Paul de Man can be seen as an exemplary, if rather extreme, instance of modern skepticism about the face and the personhood it has traditionally stood for, Levinas’ description of the epiphanic appearance of the face as the very condition of possibility of ethics would seem to position him diametrically opposite to de Man. And while in a sense this is so (certainly in spirit),¹⁰⁶ Levinas’ positioning of the face outside the field of human perception is arguably symptomatic of a fundamentally anti-physiognomic orientation not unlike de Man’s. It is worth asking why Levinas feels it necessary to relinquish the visibility of the face, indeed to insist on its essential *in*-visibility. It is clear that his bifurcated approach to the face is determined by his ambivalent allegiance to, and way of overcoming, Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology. For Levinas, Husserl’s model of intersubjectivity is essentially solipsistic, unable to regard the other person as anything but an *alter ego* constituted by, and in the image of, the self. True alterity is beyond the reach of the Husserlian “I”. And yet, because Levinas is faithful enough to Husserlian phenomenology to continue producing descriptions from the perspective of

¹⁰⁶ In his remarks about prosopopoeia in his essay on Shelley’s *The Triumph of Life*, de Man explicitly rejects the (“naive,” as he declares) notion that the endless tropological process of face-giving and defacement has any “value” for us whatsoever (ethical or otherwise), since “we are its product rather than its agent”: “... to read is to understand, to question, to know, to forget, to erase, to deface, to repeat—that is to say, the endless prosopopoeia by which the dead are made to have a face and a voice which tells the allegory of their demise and allows us to apostrophize them in our turn. No degree of knowledge can ever stop this madness, for it is the madness of words. What *would* be naive is to believe that this strategy, which is not *our* strategy as subjects, since we are its product rather than its agent, can be a source of value and has to be celebrated or denounced accordingly” (RoR 122; italics in original).

that “I”, he must regard the alterity of the other person (in the epiphany of her face) as a radical, or as he sometimes said traumatic, interruption of what Husserl terms the “primordial sphere” of the transcendental ego, and thus as beyond the reach of description of any kind. The “view” he thereby achieves of the face is therefore *necessarily* vacuous. But is Levinas’ way of approaching the face necessary? Moreover, by taking a path first determined by Husserl’s transcendental solipsism (if far beyond its original horizons), does Levinas not risk misdescribing our experience of other persons and thus the nature of ethical action in the world? Before considering these questions further, and so as to better appreciate the climate of thought that motivated Levinas to formulate his radical alternative to Husserl’s phenomenological epistemology, I think it may be helpful to take a step back in order to reflect upon the philosophical, and particularly ethical, stakes involved.

Wittgenstein, to use John Ashbery’s memorable phrase, thought of persons (and their faces) as “visible cores”: mental privacy, according to Wittgenstein’s view, is a philosophical illusion deriving from a faulty conceptual picture of the nature of thought and meaning. For Wittgenstein, consciousness in the face of another is directly visible: as he put it in *Zettel*, “Look into someone else’s face, and see the consciousness in it, and a particular *shade* of consciousness.... Do you look into *yourself* in order to recognize the fury in *his* face? It is there as clearly as in your own breast” (Z 220). In his later writings, Wittgenstein was self-consciously breaking from a still dominant Augustinian-Cartesian tradition that pictured the self, to simply reverse Ashbery’s terminology, as a *hidden* core; that is, as radically private, precisely in the way that

Augustine describes his own infant mind in the following passage, which we considered in chapter one, from the *Confessions*:

Little by little I began to realize where I was and to want to make my wishes known to others, who might satisfy them. But this I could not do, because my wishes were inside me, while other people were outside, and they had no faculty which could penetrate my mind. So I would toss my arms and legs about and make noises, hoping that such few signs as I could make would show my meaning, though they were quite unlike what they were meant to mime.¹⁰⁷

It is historically momentous—but perhaps unsurprising given his novel commitment to the priority of first-person cognition—that Augustine was the first thinker in the western tradition to formulate the argument from analogy to the existence of other minds. Here is the way he formulates the argument in his *De trinitate* :

For what is known so intimately, and so perceives itself to be itself, as that by which also all other things are perceived, that is, the mind itself? For we recognize the movements of bodies also, by which we perceive that others live besides ourselves, from the resemblance of ourselves; since we also so move our body in living as we observe those bodies to be moved. For even when a living body is moved, there is no way opened to our eyes to see the mind, a thing which cannot be seen by the eyes; but we perceive something to be contained in that bulk, such as is contained in ourselves, so as to move in like manner our own bulk, which is the life and the soul. Neither is this, as it were, the property of human foresight and reason, since brute animals also perceive that not only they themselves live, but also other brute animals interchangeably, and the one the other, and that we ourselves do so. Neither do they see our souls, save from the movements of the body, and that immediately and most easily by some natural agreement. Therefore we both know the mind of any one from our own, and believe also from our own of him whom we do not know. For not only do we perceive that there is

¹⁰⁷ St. Augustine, *Confessions* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), p. 25.

a mind, but we can also know what a mind is, by reflecting upon our own: for we have a mind. (*De trinitate*, viii.6.9)

The existence of other minds, according to this argument, can only be established by means of a process of analogical inference: I must *infer* by virtue of the movements of another's body, that he or she—just like me—must have a mind as well. But as Wittgenstein observed in the *Philosophical Investigations*, in reference to the common idea that it is only by analogy from our own private experiences that we can know what the word “pain” means, then “must I not say the same of other people too? And how can I generalize the *one* case so irresponsibly?” (PI §293). A generalization made on the basis of *one* instance to all entities of a certain class is, as Wittgenstein puts it, logically irresponsible. If we know that others have mental experiences, and we certainly do (just as we can recognize quite readily that others feel pain), this cannot be the result of an analogical inference, which would be rationally unjustifiable in any case.

It is not that the problem of other minds is intractable, but rather that there is no real problem to begin with. For Wittgenstein, the “problem” of other minds was anything but: far from being a pressing philosophical question, it was a delusional “picture” to be therapeutically dispelled. On the other hand, for the Augustinian-Cartesian tradition (of which Husserl is arguably the most important modern representatives), there were few more urgent questions than how one could know the mind of another person (after all, a self-consciously systematic philosophy such as Husserl's that had no convincing account of the experience of intersubjectivity could

hardly be considered “complete”). One purely quantitative indication of the importance of the problem of other minds for Cartesian thinkers such as Husserl is the fact that the fifth lecture of his *Cartesian Meditations*, specifically devoted to the explanation of intersubjectivity, is nearly as long as the other four lectures put together. For those who accepted the Augustinian concept of mind consolidated in the writings of Descartes, in other words, the problem of other minds was quite real, perhaps even insoluble.

After all, according to Descartes’ ontology the universe was composed of only two different substances—*res cogitans* (thinking matter) and *res extensa* (extended matter)—with all traffic between the two necessarily ruled out (except, of course, through the pineal gland, an implausible “solution” not even Descartes himself seems to have wholeheartedly believed). If thought itself, according to the Cartesian system, can have no connection to the extended matter of the body, then there would be no reason to trust that the behavior (verbal or otherwise) of those around us revealed anything reliable about the contents of their minds: indeed, there was no reason to believe there even *were* other minds. Who was to reassure us that those around us were not, in fact, automatons? Indeed, Descartes’ third *Meditation* made clear that only reasoned faith in the existence of a benevolent God was sufficient to settle the extreme form such epistemological skepticism was bound to take if left theologically unchecked. But even with the intersubjective world won back by means of faith, radical contingency between inner and outer would still determine the nature of our access to other minds. As we noted near the beginning of this study, this is a conceptual situation about which the

melancholy Hamlet would have shown little surprise: "I have that within which *passes* show," is the way he succinctly expressed this essentially Augustinian idea.

Consider, then, what it would mean for our understanding of intersubjectivity if minds were private in the very way described by the subjectivist tradition founded by Augustine and later consolidated by Descartes. This is the situation Levinas felt he had inherited from his teacher, Husserl, who, at least as far as Levinas knew, had expounded his fullest treatment of the problem of other minds in the *Cartesian Meditations*. Levinas would often repeat the fact that it was his disappointment with the results of the fifth of these lectures, about intersubjectivity, that provoked him to leave the phenomenological fold (though perhaps more in the manner of a nostos-bound Odysseus than the wandering Abraham he regarded himself to be). But so as to understand Levinas' grasp of the philosophical stakes, it is worth pausing to consider seriously the conceptual "picture" he had been taught. How, under conditions of modern skepticism about both God and pineal glands, might the problem of other minds look? What, in other words, if the self was in fact a *hidden* core which therefore must be rendered visible (perhaps even by means of rending) in order to be understood?

- Picturing Privacy: Rilke, Bacon and Coetzee

Unsurprisingly, in the twentieth-century it was various works of literature and art that expressed most powerfully the tragic pathos of the "theoretical" situation with which Levinas had to grapple. For example, in a passage from Rainer Maria Rilke's

novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, the speaker, a Danish writer living in Paris named Brigge, describes a disturbing encounter that provocatively stages the possibility that a person, or psychological subject, is indeed an absolutely private substance and therefore detached from all material reality, including even the corporeality of the face (staging, in an aesthetic register, the Cartesian problem of other minds):

Have I said it before? I am learning to see. Yes, I am beginning. It's still going badly. But I intend to make the most of my time.

For example, it never occurred to me before how many faces there are. There are multitudes of people, but there are many more faces, because each person has several of them. There are people who wear the same face for years; naturally it wears out, gets dirty, splits at the seams, stretches like gloves worn during a long journey. They are thrifty, uncomplicated people; they never change it, never even have it cleaned. It's good enough, they say, and who can convince them of the contrary? Of course, since they have several faces, you might wonder what they do with the other ones. They keep them in storage. Their children will wear them. But sometimes it also happens that their dogs go out wearing them. Any why not? A face is a face.

Other people change faces incredibly fast, put on one after another, and wear them out. At first, they think they have an unlimited supply; but when they are barely forty years old they come to their last one. There is, to be sure [natürlich], something tragic about this. They are not accustomed to taking care of faces; their last one is worn through in a week, has holes in it, is in many places as thin as paper, and then, little by little, the lining shows through, the non-face [Nichtgesicht], and they walk around with that on.

But the woman, the woman: she had completely fallen into herself, forward into her hands. It was on the corner of rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs. I began to talk quietly as soon as I saw her. When poor people are thinking, they shouldn't be disturbed. Perhaps their idea will still occur to them.

The street was too empty; its emptiness [Leere] had gotten bored and pulled my steps out from under my feet and clattered around in them, all over the street, as if they were wooden clogs.

The woman sat up, frightened, she pulled out of herself, too quickly, too violently, so that her face was left in her two hands. I could see it lying there: its hollow form. It cost me an indescribable effort to stay with those two hands, not to look at what had been torn out of them. I shuddered to see a face from the inside, but I was much more afraid of that bare flayed head [bloßen wunden Kopf] waiting there, faceless [ohne Gesicht]. (93, trans. Mitchell)

One of the most striking things about this passage is the sudden and sharp tonal shift that comes at the moment that Brigge recalls the pensive woman at the corner of rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs. Before the woman is introduced, a disarming levity characterizes his remarks on faces. He toys playfully with the idea that a face is but a fashioned thing: it can fit one's head like a glove, split at the seams, wear thin with use, and can even be worn by one's dog – "And why not? A face is a face." There is no need to take faces too seriously, he implies; after all, each one of us has many of them, as an actor might carry around a store of masks in a trunk. Even the suggestion that there is something "tragic" about those who run too quickly through their finite supply is qualified by a rather facetious "natürlich" that deflates the sentiment and works to maintain the note of supercilious detachment that colors the first half of this passage. And the sight of those who have used up their supply of faces, thus forced to walk around with the non-face (Nichtgesicht) showing through, seems to leave Brigge unperturbed (moreover, the pat internal rhyme between "nicht" and "gesicht" also works subtly against any inflation of tragic pathos). The tone remains unremittingly cool, as though Brigge were engaged in a bit of light-hearted cultural critique that did not threaten to rebound upon himself in any way (the detail of the pet dog walking

around wearing one of its thrifty owner's faces is perhaps intended to indicate that the speaker's target is something like the Parisian *petit bourgeoisie* in general). Indeed, the light tone of the remarks in the first half of this passage makes it easy to read its references to faces in a purely allegorical fashion: of course they are not about *real* faces, but rather "identities" or *personae* in an entirely figurative sense.

With the introduction of the woman, however, all this changes. Attention is suddenly narrowed down from broad generalities onto a single, and singular, person, who occupies a concrete and specifically named, but at the same time surreal, urban location. The most salient fact about the woman herself seems to be her immersion in *thought*: "she had completely fallen into herself," as Brigge puts it. Thinking (*denken*) is figured as a *fall* out of the shared world of the social into a deep and absolutely private interiority. A surreal emptiness (*Leere*) haunts the street: its cause is left undetermined, but it is difficult not to feel that it is somehow linked to the figure of the pensive woman, as though absorption in thought resulted in the evacuation of the fullness of the world, leaving the street itself "bored," indicative perhaps of an insufficiency of human life and interaction. It appears that the woman is meant to stand parodically for a kind of philosopher, and Brigge seems to have walked into an agonistic and characteristically modern struggle between *mind* and *world*, a struggle tellingly mapped onto the fleshly contours of a human face.

The contrast between the treatment of the woman and the earlier remarks on mask-like faces is highlighted by the difference in the way defacement is figured in each instance. As noted already, the non-face in the earlier part of the passage is

described with neutral straight-forwardness, the tone suggestive even of a kind of deadpan and clear-eyed humor (after all, the joke's on *them*). But the description of the woman's loss of face at the end is clearly altogether different, and the way Brigge characterizes it makes it difficult to read the closing lines in anything but the most literal way. The interpretive strategy of allegoresis comes to feel profoundly inadequate to, and almost like a defense against, the corporeal particulars of the moment (we might think of this as an analogue to the hermeneutic difficulty posed by Bacon's canvases of flayed and wounded physiognomies). Perhaps most significant is the fact that Brigge does not actually *see* what the woman's head looks like without her face: with an "indescribable effort" he manages *not* to look at her head, though he nonetheless goes on to describe it as "bare" and "flayed [wunden]," conjuring forth, as if despite himself, images of exposed viscera and streaming blood. Defacement here is rendered shockingly literal, and the cool detachment of the earlier part of the passage is completely lost.

But of what does the conclusion of this passage give us an oblique glimpse? (A sight that we must keep in mind is acknowledged to be wholly imaginary, not grounded in an actual visual perception, even within the terms of the fictional world described.) It is difficult to say: the ending is profoundly suggestive, affectively charged, and yet conceptually vague. We are left certain that this flayed head must *mean* something, and yet we are left with images of gore obstructing our interpretive speculations. Despite the fact that the closing lines are explicitly not based on any perceptual facts, it seems as though the description is intentionally engineered to

overload the sensory aspects of our imagination with pictures of flesh, blood and, perhaps most importantly, intimations of bodily pain. For how can we imagine what we are asked to imagine (*violent tearing* and *flaying*, to use variations on three words Brigge himself resorts to) without, at the same time, imagining excruciating pain: the kind of overwhelming pain that can temporarily annihilate our very sense of self and world? (And isn't some of the disorientation that we feel in response to this scene due to our bewilderment as to where the woman's self or mind in fact resides: in her head or on her face? And, between these two possibilities, are we not being asked to make an absolutely impossible judgment, which only feeds back into the feeling of disorientation that colors the whole conclusion of the passage in the first place?). If the affective tone of this closing description is so charged, it is surely not simply because Brigge claims to be "afraid" (though we can certainly sympathize with that response!), but rather primarily because we are being coerced into picturing a sight that cannot fail to elicit sensations of pain and aversion that blur the boundaries between ourselves and the imagined woman. It goes without saying that our only access to the scene is through the viewpoint of the narrator, Brigge, and so we inevitably experience affective identification with the fear and disorientation he feels before the strange event that he is witnessing. And yet, the corporeal intensity of the image that he relates splits, or rather stretches, our imaginative consciousness to contain (in an indeterminate form: we don't know what she looks like or is thinking about) the bodily experience of the faceless woman as well (and that there is a distinction between body and mind, in the case of the woman, is something, I think, that we *cannot* take for granted: in fact, perhaps one point

of the passage is to put that distinction into question, if not necessarily to resolve the issue either way). The surrealism of this passage (e.g., the personified “emptiness” clattering around in Brigge’s “steps”) does not soften the impact of the reader’s empathetic response to an imagined body in pain: indeed, the disorientation that the surrealistic elements of the passage introduce has the opposite effect, rendering the reader’s imagination susceptible and vulnerable to images that would ordinarily be patently unbelievable.

But what are we seeing (or *not* seeing) in the woman’s “bare flayed head”? One thing the whole passage seems to suggest (though in an equivocal way) is that faces are only contingently related to persons: faces are like masks that can be removed, worn through, or even violently torn off – the difference between the last possibility and the first two, however, is obviously significant and seems to be linked to the absorption in thought the woman was experiencing at the moment she was startled. She had completely disengaged from the world, “had completely fallen *into* herself [in sich],” and at the jarring sound of clattering steps “pulled *out* of herself [aus sich], too quickly, too violently.” The sense of movement *in* and *out* of the mind is carefully signaled by prepositional markers in the description that paint a picture of deep psychic interiority (a sense of spatial depth that, by contrast, seems utterly lacking in the descriptions of those who walk around with a non-face earlier in the passage: perhaps their loss of face is so undisturbing because there is no “inner” self—only absence or nothingness [Nicht]—lying behind or beneath their social *personae*). When the thoughtful woman is startled, she is deep within herself and pulls out violently without making adequate

adjustments for being in the world: without, that is, donning her face or *persona*.

Person and *persona* are imagined as radically distinct and incommensurable. Her “bare flayed head,” therefore, seems to show us a gory literalization of what personhood might look like (though of course we cannot actually *see* it) if we conceive of the self as a private inner substance: that is, a hidden core that we might imagine can be rendered visible only by means of a kind of rending.

But we must be careful to keep in mind that the entire passage is mediated by the consciousness of the narrator, Brigge. In other words, if we are being presented with a description in which the woman’s “bare flayed head” literalizes—that is, incarnates—a Cartesian conception of the self as a private inner substance (a hidden core), then this is so only from a particular point of view: a point of view that lies *outside* the unseen self of the woman, which therefore explains why that self must necessarily remain *unseen*. For no matter how thoroughly one may rend the contingent shells (whether body or face) that exist around a Cartesian self, that self cannot—by definition—ever be seen or touched by another person. The epistemological distance between two such selves is infinite and unspannable (for, of course, such selves are not extended things, and thus lie outside space altogether). In a Cartesian universe, there is no non-theological resolution to the epistemological problem of other minds.

Of course, that doesn’t mean that we cannot try (or imagine trying) to *see*, truly see, another Cartesian self. But Rilke seems to suggest that such imaginings, such attempts at “seeing,” will inevitably be tainted or contaminated by a kind of epistemological violence; and, we might add, the fact that the violence in Brigge’s

description of the woman has no physical agent does not in any way lessen the atmosphere of violence that suffuses the closing description, for the violent force resides in the imagination of the scenario itself. Force cannot span the epistemological chasm between two Cartesian selves, but an attempt by one such self to reach out and grasp another will very likely, and symptomatically, take the form of force. The attempt being futile, force will be a measure of, and kind of rage against, that futility itself.

Rilke's passage, therefore, can be read as a cautionary tale against such Cartesian imaginings in the first place. For the descriptive violence that erupts in the closing of that passage is indicative not of some kind of truth about the self, but rather is symptomatic of a particular *way* of thinking about the self. Brigge's encounter with the woman suggests that *if* we think of the self as a hidden core, *this* (the unseen head of the woman) is what it might look like to actually see one. But we cannot! And indeed, the passage seems to say, if given the opportunity, one would avert one's eyes however "indescribable" the effort necessary. The point, however, is not that we should or should not look away, but rather that we ought to reconsider the concept of self that underwrites such unbearable imaginative alternatives in the first place. That is why it is so important that the whole of the passage is mediated by Brigge's consciousness: for it is the way personhood is envisaged by a particular consciousness (by any consciousness) that constitutes the true point of the passage. The woman's "bare flayed head" can therefore be read as a symptom of, and warning against, a Cartesian understanding of mind that reifies mentality as such. Do we imagine the self to be a

hidden core? If so, what are the implications? What are the stakes? Surely, what Brigge sees (as well as what he does not) gives him good reason to feel “afraid.”

* * *

As I already suggested in an earlier chapter on Francis Bacon’s portraiture, various aspects of Bacon’s artistic practice can also be seen as a testimony to the fact that violent force haunts the epistemology of other minds when the person is imagined as a kind of hidden substance. It is worth briefly recalling in the context of the present discussion that Milan Kundera’s unsettling essay on Bacon’s 1969 portrait-triptych of Henrietta Moraes posited a compelling link between mental privacy and aesthetic violence, when he interpreted Bacon’s distortions of Moraes’ face as evidence of the painter’s struggle to “seize hold of her essence” (BPSP 10). “The painter’s gaze comes down on the face,” wrote Kundera in that piece,

like a brutal hand trying to seize hold of her essence, of that diamond hidden in the depths. Of course we are not certain that the depths really do harbour something – but whatever it may be, we each of us have in us that brutal gesture, that hand movement that roughs up another person’s face in the hope of finding, in it and behind it, a thing that is hidden there. (rptd. in *BPSP*, 9-10)

Kundera’s interpretation of Bacon’s artistic method presupposes that violent and invasive force is the only way to touch and grasp the mind of another: the only way we can truly *know* another person, since the other’s self is understood to be a substantive essence that lies “hidden in the depths.” Understood in such a way, as we noted earlier, how else except by means of force could one imagine seeing, let alone portraying, the person beneath his or her “veils or screens,” as Bacon himself put it? But, of course, the

kind of knowledge that is the epistemological goal of this fundamentally Cartesian view of intersubjectivity is impossible to attain (for Cartesians, that is, other minds will always be *problematic*), and Bacon's aesthetic "success" can therefore be seen as a reflection of an epistemological failure: only the *body* is ever touched. The mind, as Wittgenstein's later writings make clear, is not like a diamond or a nugget of gold that might be treasured in absolute privacy: indeed, it is not a "thing" at all (whether substance, essence or fact). Bacon's paintings, as Kundera's reading suggests, graphically show the ethical stakes involved when we think about the nature of mind. Is it a hidden thing; is it a thing at all? Is it public; is it private? Seeing it as radically private, one gropes (like Othello) for the true inner self only to find folds of flesh bruised by one's conceptual graspings, for there is nothing *there*: "Of course we are not certain that the depths really do harbour something," as Kundera himself acknowledged. Like Rilke's vignette about the faceless woman, Bacon's paintings can be read, in this light, as ambivalent cautionary tales, the drama of other minds played out on the surfaces of their faces. Beware of going beneath the surface, the distorted likenesses of Moraes seem to say, for it is only in the realm of appearances that one can see another's mind: "the light in other people's faces," as Wittgenstein suggestively put it.

* * *

Following on this point, and before finally returning to Levinas, I would like to look at the role of the face in J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, another work of the modern imagination that, like those of Rilke and Bacon, engages critically with the Cartesian view of mind that I have been discussing. At one point in the novel, the

Magistrate even experiences a feeling of “dry pity” for torturers such as Colonel Joll that could just as well have been provoked by Kundera’s reading of Bacon: “how natural a mistake,” the Magistrate thinks to himself, “to believe that you can burn or tear or hack your way into the secret body of the other!” (43). In the character of Joll, a representative of the fictional Empire’s “Third Bureau” (the division of the “Civil Guard” charged with intelligence and security), Coetzee presents us with a savage caricature of the Cartesian theory of mind, transposed into a political register. Convinced of the privacy of other minds, Joll resorts to quite literally invasive means in order to extract the “truth” that he assumes is hidden deep within his victims. As he explains his interrogation methods to the Magistrate: “First I get lies, you see – this is what happens – first lies, then pressure, then more lies, then more pressure, then the break, then more pressure, then the truth. That is how you get the truth” (5). In other words, appearances are necessarily associated with deception: as a matter of principle, *prima facie* evidence is to be rejected. First lies, then pain, and then only after much more pain, does one ever arrive at the “truth”: at the “diamond hidden in the depths,” as Kundera might have put it. For Joll, it is axiomatic that truth can only be found *beneath* a surface that must first be forcefully penetrated; his theory of mind, therefore, has no room for the possibility that a prisoner might simply tell the truth. Indeed, the Magistrate contemplates this very possibility with horror, and asks Joll about it: “‘What if your prisoner is telling the truth,’ I ask, ‘yet finds he is not believed? Is that not a terrible position? Imagine: to be prepared to yield, to yield, to have nothing more to yield, to be broken, yet to be pressed to yield more!’” (5). Joll is unmoved, and his only

response to this hypothetical query is the methodological declaration that deceit inevitably precedes the disclosure of truth. After hearing Joll explain the logic of his method, however, the Magistrate naturally remains uneasy, and concludes that Joll (like anyone who uses torture) has mistakenly equated truth with pain: "Pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt. That is what I bear away from my conversation with Colonel Joll" (5). And indeed, the reader soon learns that the Magistrate is quite right to worry about the soundness of the Empire's methods.

Just after this conversation, Joll tortures a young barbarian boy and his uncle, both of whom had originally ventured near the town simply in order to find a cure for a skin infection that would not heal on its own: "We were on the road," the uncle explained to the Magistrate and Joll, "coming here to see the doctor... He has a sore that does not get better" (3-4). Disregarding the obvious truthfulness of this explanation (the boy even peels aside a bandage to show them the angry sore), and fully consistent with his theoretical distrust of *prima facie* evidence, Joll later subjects the two barbarians to further "questioning," during which he brutally kills the older man and repeatedly cuts into the flesh of the young boy with a very small knife, in order, by means of the traumatic infliction of pain, to extract from him the very "truth" Joll was hoping to hear (indeed, was sent to the frontier to *find*) in the first place: that the barbarians were secretly "arming themselves" and preparing "to join in a great war on the Empire" (10-11). In the character of Joll, Coetzee makes even more graphic and explicit the conceptual correlation between epistemological violence and Cartesian pictures of mental privacy that Rilke, Bacon and Kundera had already suggested.

It would be easy, but only partially correct, to see the liberal-minded Magistrate as structurally opposed to the torturer Joll in the moral economy of Coetzee's novel. In fact, however, the Magistrate's momentary sympathy for Joll ("how natural a mistake to believe that you can burn or tear or hack your way into the secret body of the other!") hints at the extent to which these two antagonists share the very same concept of mind. And it is from this common Cartesian ground that spring the Magistrate's own "inexplicable attentions" directed towards the barbarian woman, which treat her as an enigma to be deciphered, a mystery to be comprehended, or better yet, an obdurate shell to be penetrated in order to access the psychological kernel within. And consistent with our discussion so far, it is the way he pictures her face that betrays the Magistrate's essentially Cartesian understanding of the nature of mind. Having explored how the treatment of the human countenance in Rilke and Bacon dramatizes the terrible ethical consequences of a theoretical commitment to mental privacy, we already have a good grasp of the meaning of the face in Coetzee. Indeed, everything that I have said about Rilke and Bacon applies quite directly to the role of the face in Coetzee's novel, so much so that I would be surprised if Coetzee did not have Rilke and Bacon in mind when he wrote those passages that describe the Magistrate's obsession with the face of the tortured woman (in fact, I suspect that Coetzee may even have known Kundera's *L'Arc* essay on the Moraes triptych: the crucial role of state interrogation in Kundera's essay, considering Coetzee's characterization of Joll, is striking).

At one point, deeply frustrated by his feeling that the barbarian woman is "beyond comprehension," the Magistrate pictures the features of her face altering in

terms that bring to mind Bacon's canvases: "I have a vision of her closed eyes and closed face filming over with skin," he thinks. "Blank, like a fist beneath a black wig, the face grows out of the throat and out of the blank body beneath it, without aperture, without entry" (42). And reminiscent of Bacon's predatory approach to painting ("as an artist, you have to, in a sense, set a *trap* by which you hope to trap this living fact alive" [IFB 57]), the Magistrate later complains that "with this woman it is as if there is no interior, only a surface across which I hunt back and forth seeking entry. Is this how her torturers felt hunting their secret, whatever they thought it was?" (43). And as if all this were not disturbing enough, he goes on to identify his erotic "attentions" to the woman's body with the interrogation methods used by Joll: "The girl lies in my bed," he thinks, "but there is no good reason why it should be a bed. I behave in some ways like a lover – I undress her, I bathe her, I stroke her, I sleep beside her – but I might equally well tie her to a chair and beat her, it would be no less intimate" (43).

This, I suggest, is Coetzee's point. There could be nothing *less* intimate than thinking of another person's mind as a hidden, private thing, encased in a shell, "opaque" and "impermeable," or like "an urn or a ball," as the Magistrate variously describes the woman's face and mind. On the very next page, he recoils from the association he had just posited between himself and Joll, but we readers know it is too late to take the comparison back: "There is nothing to link me with torturers," he exclaims to himself. "How can I believe that a bed is anything but a bed, a woman's body anything but a site of joy? I must assert my distance from Colonel Joll! I will not suffer for his crimes!" (44). Of course, it would be absurd (and cynical in the extreme)

to claim that the Magistrate and Joll are really not at all different. Nonetheless, Coetzee has made clear that the concept of mind that informs the Magistrate's treatment of the woman is isomorphic with that which the Empire uses to rationalize the brutal interrogation practices exercised in the name of state power: the very practices, of course, that left the woman maimed in the first place and her father dead. It is this that the Magistrate had suddenly realized, and his later protestations to the contrary, however forceful, come too late.

And, in any case, when the Magistrate insists that a "bed is... but a bed" and a "woman's body... but a site of joy," the "joy" that he speaks of, which is linked to his nightly ritual of cleansing and oiling the woman's body, merely confirms our general point about the Magistrate's Cartesian understanding of mind. Here is one typical description of the ritual: "[I] begin to wash her feet.... I lose myself in the rhythm of what I am doing. I lose awareness of the girl herself. There is a space of time which is blank to me: perhaps I am not even present... I push the basin aside and dry the foot... My eyes close. It becomes an intense pleasure to keep them closed, to savour the blissful giddiness" (28). The "bliss" the Magistrate experiences here is brought about by the rhythmic regularity of his hand movements upon the woman's body, but oddly enough the pleasure is not at all sensual but rather characterized by a withdrawal from sense-perception and the experience of time-consciousness. "[O]ften in the very act of caressing her," as he says in another description of the ritual, "I am overcome with sleep as if poleaxed... These dreamless spells are like death to me, or enchantment, blank, outside time" (31).

Those familiar with that *locus classicus* of Romantic inwardness, the fifth promenade of Rousseau's *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, will recognize in these characterizations of the Magistrate's state of mind a parodic allusion to the "sentiment of existence" that Rousseau felt while listening to the rhythmic "ebb and flow" of the waters of Lake Bienne: "I liked then to go and sit... in some secluded spot by the edge of the lake," we read in the fifth promenade:

there the noise of the waves and the movement of the water, taking hold of my senses and driving all other agitation from my soul, would plunge it into a delicious reverie in which night often stole upon me unawares. The ebb and flow of the water, its continuous yet undulating noise, kept lapping against my ears and my eyes, taking the place of all the inward movements which my reverie had calmed within me. (86-7)

And as with the Magistrate's nightly ministrations, these experiences of Rousseau by the lake provide his soul access to spots, as it were, *outside* of time: "where time is nothing to it," as Rousseau explains, "where the present runs on indefinitely but this duration goes unnoticed, with no sign of the passing of time... Such is the state which I often experienced on the Island of Saint-Pierre in my solitary reveries" (88-9)

Like these solitary reveries enjoyed by Rousseau, the rhythmic "pleasure" the Magistrate enjoys while caressing the woman's body is a *solitary* pleasure. Indeed, the perverse solipsistic experience of the nightly ritual is but the first-person correlate to his third-person perception of the woman's face as an "urn or a ball": both picture mind itself (whether his or hers) as a monad that is private and closed off from the world. That is to say, these two textual moments, both the rhythmic bliss and the woman's filmed-over face, are vivid expressions of two sides of a single conceptual logic. The

problem that Coetzee draws our attention to in this novel is the Cartesian picture of mind, shared by both Joll and the Magistrate, that underlies the entire spectrum of unethical actions that constitute its narrative arc. *Waiting for the Barbarians* has often been referred to as an allegory about the politics of imperialism, and certainly it is that; but I would urge that we consider it also, and perhaps even primarily, as an allegory about the philosophy of mind. Coetzee's novel, I suggest, sees imperialism as an extension into the field of politics of a mistaken view of intersubjectivity and other minds that operates first at the level of interpersonal relations between two individuals. As with Rilke and Bacon before him, though perhaps even more directly and self-consciously, Coetzee's imaginative representations of the barbarian woman's face dramatize, and thereby warn us against, the moral and epistemological pitfalls of our Cartesian modernity. Beware the seductive picture of mental privacy that is our common philosophical inheritance, Coetzee's novel suggests, lest we lose ourselves in solipsistic fantasies, whether the domestic ones of someone like the Magistrate, or imperialistic ones such as those of Colonel Joll. Either way, we risk overlooking the truth about those around us, perhaps simply (and somewhat surprisingly) because we insist on looking too hard. The Magistrate describes well the sort of self-blinding gaze (this "looking too hard") that he suffers from when, in the following passage, he thinks about how he hopes the barbarian woman regards his obsessive attention: "I have hitherto liked to think that she cannot fail to see me as a man in the grip of a passion, however perverted and obscure that passion may be, that in the bated silences which make up so much of our intercourse she cannot but feel my gaze pressing in upon her

with the weight of a body” (56). It is the very intensity of his gaze—intent on fathoming her psychological depths—that obscures from sight whatever might simply be there to be seen on the surface in the first place.

Near the end of the novel, the Magistrate thinks sadly to himself: “There has been something staring me in the face, and still I do not see it” (155). But is it not the woman’s face itself that has been staring him in the face, as in the dream sequences that he obsessively revisits night after night? Is it not the face itself that he does not *see*? Which he cannot see because he refuses to take her at face value, since (like Joll) he believes that the truth about persons must be hidden, buried, and mysterious? At various moments throughout the course of the novel, the Magistrate—relentlessly self-reflective as he is—insightfully glimpses (however dimly and briefly) his own complicity in this fundamentally projective and fantasmatic interpersonal dynamic, in which he “constructs” the barbarian woman *as* an enigma to be deciphered. It is not she who is “without aperture, without entry,” but he who insists on seeing and treating her that way (42). It is not she who has “no interior, only a surface across which I hunt back and forth seeking entry,” but he who approaches her in that way, and then, in exasperation, expresses sympathy for those, like Joll, who make the “natural” mistake of believing that one can “hack” one’s way into the “secret body of the other” (43). In one of his passing moments of lucidity, the Magistrate revealingly characterizes his treatment of the woman this way: “So I continue to swoop and circle around the irreducible figure of the girl, casting one net of meaning after another over her” (81). The Magistrate, in other words, senses what he is doing to the “girl”: that he is treating

her as a theoretical object suited to bear *his* meanings rather than express her own (though it is essential to this psychological dynamic that he believe he *is* trying to understand her on her own terms: that is, he imagines her to have a deeply hidden self which he then must forcefully struggle to disclose). Perhaps all this can make sense of the following recurring dream, in which what one might call the semantic fluidity or plasticity of the girl-figure in the Magistrate's psychic economy becomes terrifyingly evident: "There are other dreams in which the figure that I call *the girl* changes shape, sex, size. In one dream there are two shapes that arouse horror in me: massive and blank, they grow and grow till they fill all the space in which I sleep. I wake up choked, shouting, my throat full" (87; italics in original). This nightmarish dream makes all too clear that "*the girl*" that inhabits the Magistrate's thoughts is not the barbarian woman at all, but something like pure unformed matter, indeterminate, suited to take whatever conceptual determination best meets the Magistrate's theoretical compulsion to imagine mind as such as radically private. It is this "massive and blank" formlessness—which brings to mind the "bare flayed head" of the faceless woman in Rilke's *Notebooks*—and not some true hidden essence, that lies "behind" or "beneath" the filmed-over face the Magistrate pictures to himself when he thinks of the woman.

Derek Attridge, in his recent monograph on Coetzee, sees the significance of the girl and the dreams quite differently.¹⁰⁸ Opposing a critical tendency to read *Waiting for the Barbarians* in an allegorical fashion, he argues that the difficulties that the dreams pose for the Magistrate's (and the reader's) drive to interpret should be seen as

¹⁰⁸ Derek Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2004).

an ethical lesson about the virtues of semantic uncertainty and open-endedness.

According to Attridge, it is in “the girl’s” very resistance to signification that her true significance lies. That is, the Magistrate’s “failure to interpret” gives us access to a literary and intersubjective experience that is “important” and “emotionally powerful” precisely because it is, and must be, a failure:

Take the dreams: there are several in the novel, including a series of related dreams set in the town square, usually seen as snow-covered and always involving a figure that the Magistrate refers to as “the girl.” The reader is, of course, invited to interpret them, and to relate them to aspects of the Magistrate’s waking life (such as his frequent vision of the barbarian girl’s face as blank), but part of their haunting power derives from their refusal to succumb completely to the interpretive drive.... The point I wish to make is that allegorical reading of the traditional kind has no place for this uncertainty and open-endedness, this sense that the failure to interpret can be as important, and quite as emotionally powerful, as success would be. (47-48)

I have no complaint with Attridge’s dissatisfaction with allegorical readings of the “traditional kind,” which, as he describes them further, attempt to definitively link elements within the novel to “parallels outside the world of the book” (48). But as I hope is clearly evident from my reading of the novel so far, I believe that his explanation of the significance of “the girl” misses Coetzee’s point. Indeed, Attridge’s reading badly distorts a matter of fundamental importance to the novel, for by championing the girl’s resistance to interpretation as an ethical virtue, he is actually identifying with the Magistrate’s Cartesian prejudices, the very ones that originally transformed her into an incomprehensible entity that so obdurately resists interpretation in the first place. If she were actually as enigmatic or opaque as the Magistrate finds

her to be, then Attridge would have a point: but the real point of Coetzee's characterization of the barbarian woman is that the Magistrate, by casting his "nets of meaning" upon her, has *made* her otherness into a metaphysical problem. That "the girl" seems so resistant to the Magistrate's interpretive gaze is not evidence of the irreducibility and value of alterity, but the result of a solipsistic construal of the problem of other minds.

What the Magistrate blinds himself to in his rush to penetrate to the barbarian girl's hidden psychic essence is necessarily unclear, since this novel about solipsism is appropriately and strategically narrated in the first-person. Like him, we have no privileged access to the minds and thoughts of others. Even still, Coetzee provides us with enough clues to suggest rather clearly how badly mismatched are the Magistrate's thoughts and the intersubjective reality they intend to interpret. For example, consider the interaction in the following passage, in which it becomes clear that the Magistrate would prefer the barbarian woman to remain an interpretive enigma rather than assert herself as a real flesh-and-blood presence with thoughts, emotions and desires of her own:

"Wouldn't you like to do something else?" she asks.

Her foot rests in my lap. I am abstracted, lost in the rhythm of rubbing and kneading the swollen ankle. Her questions takes me by surprise. It is the first time she has spoken so pointedly. I shrug it off, smile, try to slip back into my trance, not far from sleep and reluctant to be diverted.

The foot stirs in my grip, comes alive, pokes gently into my groin. I open my eyes to the naked golden body on the bed. She lies with her head cradled in her arms, watching me in the indirect way I am by now used to, showing off her firm breasts and her sleek belly, brimming with young animal health. Her

toes continue to probe; but in this slack old gentleman kneeling before her in this plum dressing-gown they find no response.

“Another time,” I say, my tongue curling stupidly around the words. As far as I know this is a lie, but I utter it: “Another time, perhaps.” Then I lift her leg aside and stretch out beside her.

“Old men have no virtue to protect, so what can I say?” It is a lame joke, poorly expressed, and she does not understand it. She slips open my gown and begins to fondle me. After a while I push her hand away. (55)

The Magistrate’s refusal, which even he regards as rather lame, understandably pains the woman, who heatedly reproaches him for deflecting her advances when she knows that he regularly visits “other girls”: ““Do you also treat them like this?” she whispers, and starts to sob” (55).

Sensing the turn that this quarrel marks in their relationship, though not understanding it, the Magistrate sees to it that this “is the last night [they] sleep in the same bed” (55). It is important to appreciate that the Magistrate does not clearly grasp his own obscure erotic motivations: he, who has been an easy and promiscuous lover his entire adult life, has no explanation for why he does not desire to have sex with this particular woman, though she herself expresses a desire to do so. After having returned one night to the bed he shares with the barbarian woman after a visit to a favorite prostitute (the one he calls the “Bird”), the Magistrate ponders this very question, asking after the perplexing nature of his desire for the barbarian woman:

The girl I have just left, the girl she may perhaps (I suddenly realize) smell on me, is very pretty, there is no question about that: the acuteness of my pleasure in her is sharpened by the elegance of her tiny body, its manners, its movements. But of this one there is nothing I can say with certainty. There is no link I can define between her womanhood and my desire. I cannot even say for sure that I desire her. All this erotic behavior of

mine is indirect: I prowl about her, touching her face, caressing her body, without entering her or finding the urge to do so. I have just come from the bed of a woman for whom, in the year I have known her, I have not for a moment had to interrogate my desire: to desire her has meant to enfold her and enter her, to pierce her surface and stir the quiet of her interior into an ecstatic storm; then to retreat, to subside, to wait for desire to reconstitute itself. But with this woman it is as if there is no interior, only a surface across which I hunt back and forth seeking entry. Is this how her torturers felt hunting their secret, whatever they thought it was? (43)

The Magistrate's "interrogation" of his own desire is revealing but inconclusive: about the barbarian woman "there is nothing [he] can say with certainty." It is not that he finds her *undesirable*. Rather, it appears that his desire takes a different direction: not aiming to enter her literal body but rather to penetrate to something mysterious (like the "secret" her torturers sought) that he assumes is hidden deep within her mind. Strikingly, however, though his desire is not literally carnal, he imagines his goal (her "secret") in corporeal terms: the psychological distinction between inner and outer is rendered literally palpable (later he will also imagine even his own "gaze" as "pressing in upon her with the weight of a body"). But so mysterious is this secret of hers—this secret that she has become for him—that he can perceive her only as a surface ("as if there is no interior"): obdurate, enigmatic, unyielding. It is unsurprising then, that it is immediately following this very passage that he experiences his feeling of "dry pity" for torturers like Joll who attempt to "tear" their way into the "secret body of the other" (43). For it is at moments like this, when he imagines her as holding a secret that must be disclosed, that he reveals how deeply he shares Joll's Cartesian theory of mind.

So intent is he on gaining “entry” into her “secret body” that he rashly overlooks the way she expresses her mind quite clearly with her actual body, whether with her actions, words, or tears. It is as though he were following Joll’s method for torture, by methodically rejecting all *prima facie* evidence, in order to get at a latent and private *inner* truth (and is it not clear that the Magistrate’s method of “interrogation” thereby inflict its own kind of pain as well?). Near the very end of the novel, after he has been sleeping with Mai, the cook at the town’s inn, she remarks to him that he always seems distant in bed, just as the barbarian woman used to say he often was with her:

“I don’t make you happy,” she says. “I know you don’t enjoy it with me. You are always somewhere else.”

I wait for her next words.

“She told me the same thing. She said you were somewhere else. She could not understand you. She did not know what you wanted from her.”

“I didn’t know you and she were intimate.”

“I was often here, downstairs. We talked to each other about what was on our minds. Sometimes she would cry and cry and cry. You made her very unhappy. Did you know that?”

She is opening a door through which a wind of utter desolation blows on me.

“You don’t understand,” I say huskily. She shrugs. I go on: “There is a whole side to the story you don’t know, that she could not have told you because she did not know it herself. Which I don’t want to talk about now.” (152)

The testiness of his final response indicates how deeply Mai’s remarks have cut him, that indeed (as melodramatic as it may sound) it is as though a door had been opened in his monadic ego through which the painful truth about the outer world were rushing in. But has Coetzee not made it clear that if the Magistrate did not appreciate the pain he was causing the barbarian woman, it was simply because he refused to acknowledge it?

Far from being secreted away, her state of mind was readily accessible by the most mundane and straightforward of means (as Mai observed, “We *talked* to each other about what was on our minds”!). Between the Magistrate and the woman, however, it was not speech but “bated silences” that constituted their form of “intercourse,” lest talk interfere with his attempts to enter her “secret body” with his “gaze.” But could anything in Mai’s remarks truly have surprised him? The desolation the Magistrate feels as he listens to her might just as well derive from the shame of self-recognition as it could from the shock of some radically new knowledge. It is probably a bit of both. So though I do not dispute the truism that interpretation must necessarily remain uncertain and open-ended, I cannot agree with Attridge’s argument that the Magistrate’s “failure to interpret” the dreams or “the girl” constitutes some sort of positive ethical lesson of the novel: that “the failure to interpret can be as important, and quite as emotionally powerful, as success would be” (48). There are clearly limits to what we can know about one another, which at times can be painful to accept, but these limits are not those that Coetzee makes the Magistrate confront. I hope I have demonstrated that Coetzee’s point is not that we, like the Magistrate, must come to terms with the irreducible opacity of the barbarian woman. On the contrary, if the Magistrate had not insisted on imagining the girl *as* an enigma, he might have been able to see, and acknowledge, their common humanity (by which I mean nothing metaphysically elevated, but only such everyday things as thoughts, emotions, and desires). In recent decades, the related concepts of “otherness” and “difference” have been elevated to theoretical and political fetishes of sorts, but we do an injustice to Coetzee’s text by

imagining that it reflects or participates in this intellectual trend. Far from insisting on the woman's radical alterity, *Waiting for the Barbarians* strongly suggests that we are not nearly as different from one another as we often like to imagine. By identifying with the Magistrate's frustrated hermeneutic point of view, Attridge shows how difficult a lesson this can be to learn.

- Levinas: Phenomenology and the Other

Levinas, whose philosophical writings have played a major role in focusing critical attention onto the concept of alterity in recent decades, might very well have sympathized with Attridge's interpretation of Coetzee's novel: in fact, it is probably the mediated influence of Levinas's own ideas about otherness (transmitted by way of his influence upon Derrida) that informed Attridge's interpretation of Coetzee in the first place. Having considered how Coetzee's Magistrate solipsistically transforms the barbarian woman into a psychic enigma that mirrors his own Cartesian picture of mental privacy, it is time finally to return to Levinas' ethics of the face. Levinas would regard the Magistrate's mistreatment of the tortured woman as a typical instance of western thought's stubborn inability to think of another person without ensnaring him or her in "nets of meaning" woven by the intentional consciousness of the sense-bestowing self.

The phenomenological investigations of Levinas' teacher, Husserl, had made clear that mental life as a whole is characterized by object-directedness or intentionality, a fundamental and far-reaching claim that Levinas explains as follows:

The famous proposition that "all consciousness is consciousness of something," or that intentionality essentially characterizes consciousness, sums up the Husserlian theory of mental life: every perception is perception of a perceived, every judgment is judgment of a state of affairs judged, every desire is desire for a desired. This is not a correlation of words, but a *description* of phenomena. At all levels of mental life, whether at the stage of sensation or of mathematical thought, thought is *aim* and intention. (DEH 58; italics in original)

Phenomenology is intended to be radically presuppositionless, producing "descriptions" (as Levinas emphasizes) of how things appear to us in consciousness rather than formulating theoretical explanations based upon metaphysical or scientific claims about the nature of perception or the physical structure of the material world. As Dan Zahavi explains this aspect of phenomenological method:

Husserl wants to describe our experiences as they are given from a *first-person perspective*, and it is no part of my experience of, say, a withering oak tree, that something is occurring in my brain. Thus, already early on Husserl stresses the (metaphysical) *presuppositionlessness* of phenomenology. Phenomenology is supposed to be neither more nor less than a faithful description of that which appears (be it subjective acts or worldly objects), and should, as a consequence, avoid metaphysical and scientific postulates or speculations. (HP 13-14; italics in original)

Phenomenological description thus begins with our conscious experiences *as they are experienced*: *nothing* that cannot be validated in one's own experience is to be accepted. This includes even the ordinary (but, in fact, "metaphysical") assumption that a real world, external to the mind, exists in itself. All theories, however seemingly innocent,

are to be validated by experience; experiences are *not* to be interpreted with the aid of theories. As Dermot Moran puts it, “Phenomenology is a return to ‘phenomena’.” Husserl understands *phenomenon* as ‘what appears as such’; in other words, everything that appears, including everything meant or thought, in the *manner* of its appearing, in the ‘how’ (*Wie*) of its manifestation” (IP 127). Or as Heidegger would sum up this aspect of Husserl’s teachings in a well-known passage of *Being and Time*: “Thus ‘phenomenology’ means *apophainesthai ta phainomena* – to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself” (BT §7). Husserl encapsulated his methodological stress on the presuppositionlessness of phenomenological description in his famous “principle of principles” in *Ideas I* §24:

Enough now of absurd theories. No conceivable theory can make us err with respect to the *principle of all principles: that every originary presentive intuition is a legitimizing source of cognition, that everything originally (so to speak in its “personal” actuality) offered to us in “intuition” is to be accepted simply as what it is presented as being, but also only within the limits in which it is presented there.* (IP 127; italics in original)

In order to purify oneself of all “absurd theories” that might prejudice or contaminate one’s descriptions of mental life, Husserl recommended a set of procedures he called “reductions” (from the Latin *reducere*, “to lead back”) that were designed to lead us back, as it were, from received theory to naked experience. Moran explains the motivation for the reductions this way:

Husserl had a number of different theoretical reasons for introducing the notion of reduction. First it allowed him to detach from all forms of conventional opinion, including our commonsense psychology, our accrued scientific consensus on issues, and all philosophical and metaphysical theorising

regarding the nature of the intentional. We must put aside our beliefs about our beliefs, as it were. Secondly, it allowed him to return to and isolate the central structures of subjectivity. By putting aside psychological, cultural, religious, and scientific assumptions, and by getting behind or to one side of the meaning-positing orthetic acts normally dominant in conscious acts, new features of those acts come to the fore. (IP 146)

What Husserl found left in his consciousness, when by means of his various reductions he had purified himself of all metaphysical, scientific and religious presuppositions, was that consciousness was always consciousness *of*: that is, that consciousness was characterized by object-directedness or what (harkening back to a Scholastic term of art revived by Brentano) he also called “intentionality.” As Zahavi explains the object-directedness of the intentional relation: “Regardless of whether we are talking of a perception, thought, judgment, fantasy, doubt, expectation, or recollection, all of these diverse forms of consciousness are characterized by intending objects and cannot be analyzed properly without a look at their objective correlate, that is, the perceived, doubted, expected object” (HP 14). Husserl discovered that once one grasps consciousness as thoroughly intentional, the characteristic modern rift between subject and object is healed, for every intentional correlation contains as an essential part of it both intending act and intended object. Though these two components (which he would later term “noesis” and “noema”) are distinguishable in theory, in actuality they constitute two inseparable poles of *one* noetic-noematic correlation. Thus, my (noetic) perceiving of a tree is bound inextricably to the (noematic) tree that I perceive. Though act and object can be artificially teased apart for theoretical consideration, there is no actual rift between the subjective act and the object perceived. As Levinas put it,

phenomenology “leads us outside the subject-object categories and topples the sovereignty of representation. Subject and object are only the poles of this intentional life” (DEH 119).

What is important to keep in view, however, is that this “intentional life” in which the metaphysical distinction between subject and object is transcended is one that is strictly immanent to the consciousness of the intending self. As I noted earlier, one of the various “presuppositions” that Husserl’s reductions were designed to bracket out was the “metaphysical” belief that an objective world exists in itself, regardless of our consciousness of it. After the phenomenological reduction, the “reality” of the objective world remains, of course, but only *as* an intentional object *immanent* to the phenomenologically purified consciousness. The “objectivity” of the world survives the reduction, that is, but the reduction helps us to see its objectivity as nothing other than a meaning the world has *for me*. The same is obviously true for any phenomena that has the “appearance” of objectivity: after all, the very idea of appearance is inherently indexed to a subjective consciousness. A phenomenologically clarified understanding of “objectivity,” therefore, shows it to be nothing but the manner in which certain phenomena *immanently* appear to a subjective consciousness as *transcendent* to it, and it is in this way that the modern rupture between subject and object is “healed” by the phenomenological discovery of intentionality.

Because *all* phenomena are understood as immanent, and essentially indexed, to an intending consciousness, Husserl also often said that whatever meanings they have are therefore “constituted” by the intending self. Since they do not have their meanings

in themselves, where else could their meaning come from? Meaning, according to Husserl, can only be meaning *for us*, and so it is simply a different way of expressing this same point when he claims that meaning is given or constituted *by us*. As Moran explains the important phenomenological notion of “constitution”:

For Husserl, “constitution” expresses the manner in which objects of consciousness come to have the kinds of “sense and being” that they do, the manner in which subjectivity carries out its function of giving sense. Husserl’s notion of constitution should perhaps be thought as a kind of setting out or “positing” (*Setzung*), as a giving of sense, “sense-bestowing” (*Sinngebung*). (IP 164-5)

Or as Levinas put it, the “relation of intentionality is nothing like the relations between real objects. *It is essentially the act of bestowing a meaning (the Sinngebung)*” (DEH 59; italics in original).

I should pause to note that the reading of Husserl’s theories of intentionality and constitution that I have been developing is a contentious one, tending to portray his understanding of constitution as more idealist in nature than many of his supporters would accept. For instance, Zahavi (citing Heidegger in support), argues against idealist interpretations of constitution and instead suggests that we should rather regard constitution as a way of letting objects show themselves as what they are:

Constitution must be understood as a process that allows for manifestation and signification, that is, it must be understood as a process that permits that which is constituted to appear, unfold, articulate, and show itself as what it is. As Heidegger was to observe: “‘Constituting’ does not mean producing in the sense of making and fabricating; it means *letting the entity be seen in its objectivity*” (HP 73; italics in original)

However, there is room for interpretive disagreement here. Even though Moran himself does not support an idealist reading of the notion of constitution, he nonetheless points out that Husserl “does actually speak of transcendental consciousness giving both meaning and *being* to the world, but ‘being’ here means the manner in which beings appear to consciousness, being-for-us as opposed to being-in-itself (terms Husserl himself employs)” (IP 165). Summarizing his own positive and supposedly non-idealist interpretation, Moran writes:

Husserl’s stress on constitution does not rule out the recognition of the facticity of the world, and the manner in which contents appear in consciousness over which it has no control. Constitution includes a kind of passive construction of all the meanings found in consciousness. Rather the whole object as such is experience as *given from the world*. (IP 166)

It is unclear to me how far this actually differs from an idealist reading of Husserl: after all, even an idealist understanding of constitution would acknowledge that external objects are experienced “as given from the world,” as Moran puts it. “Facticity” might simply be a meaning objective reality has for us, rather than in itself. But any attempt at reaching a definitive interpretation of the Husserlian concept of constitution is far beyond the scope of this study. As Zahavi says, Husserl himself “never gave a clear-cut answer to the question of whether constitution is to be understood as a creation or a restoration of reality,” and thus “one of the recurrent problems in Husserl research has been the question of how exactly to understand Husserl’s notion of constitution, particularly in its implications for the discussion between realism and idealism” (HP 72). If I have chosen to emphasize the idealist way of reading Husserl’s theory of

mental life, I have done so not only because I tend to find it persuasive, but more importantly, because it is clearly the view taken by Levinas, and it is this interpretation of Husserl that fundamentally determined the development and eventual shape of his own later phenomenology of the face.

According to Levinas' reading of Husserl, that is, intentional consciousness cannot help but understand the Other according to terms originating in what Levinas calls the Same (that is, the constituting "primordial sphere" of the monadic transcendental ego).¹⁰⁹ Thus, when I perceive another person, I constitute him or her in my mind as a kind of *alter ego*: in other words, a different *me* (somewhat like Augustine's analogical inference to the existence of other minds). Intentionality, as Levinas put it, is "essentially the act of bestowing a meaning (the *Sinngebung*)."¹⁰⁹ That which is truly Other than the Same, by definition absolutely—or as Levinas liked to say, "infinitely"—exterior to it, by being made the intentional object of the consciousness of the self, is reduced to a mere structural moment in the closed conceptual totality that characterizes the essentially monadic consciousness of the transcendental ego: hence the antinomic terms that make up the title of one of Levinas' major texts, *Totality and Infinity*. In this difficult work, Levinas would defend the ethical claims of the infinitely Other against the encroachments of all forms of theoretical (that is, *intentional*) totalization.

¹⁰⁹ On Husserl's use of the Leibnizian term "monad," Dermot Moran writes: "The 'monad' is Husserl's name for the whole concrete conscious life of an ego taken as the full set of all its intentional experiences, both actual and possible (CM § 33, 68; Hua I 102). It is the complete draft of a life as it were. Husserl speaks of 'monadisation' of the transcendental ego and of the self as a 'monad with windows'" (Moran 174).

Obviously, Levinas believes that it is somehow possible to come into actual contact with radical alterity, otherwise the complaints he levels against the phenomenological tradition would remain purely formal and empty. A form of “alterity,” however conceivable, that had no role in our lived experience—that was simply an abstract idea—could exercise no obligatory force upon us and should therefore have no bearing on our ethical thought or conduct. But Levinas insists that we can indeed experience (and not simply think about or imagine) absolute alterity, and he argues that the “infinitude” defining the otherness of the other can be directly sensed in the appearance of his or her face: “the gleam of exteriority or of transcendence in the face of the Other” (TI 24). Indeed, it would be more accurate to say that the radical alterity Levinas speaks of could *only* be “experienced” and not ever faithfully “thought” in the first place, since any “idea” of the other would already be an objectified ideality, a *concept* (and therefore absorbed into the totality of the Same). But if alterity can somehow be directly experienced, how do we “see” this “gleam” of the face, since Levinas appears to accept the idealist findings of phenomenology, from which it follows that “in visual or tactile sensation the identity of the I envelops the alterity of the object” (TI 194)? In other words, like all forms of consciousness and thought, perception is intentional in nature, and works by synthesizing together various perspectively given adumbrations of perceptual objects into cognitive unities (“The identity of a unity across multiplicity represents the fundamental event of all thought. For Husserl, to think is to identify,” notes Levinas [DEH 59]). Because the face of the other, when approached in an ethical manner, cannot (according to Levinas’ definition)

be intended like any ordinary object of cognition, whatever epiphanic “vision” we might have of the other’s face must therefore be highly peculiar.

In his preface to *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas summarizes as follows the paradoxical phenomenology of “vision” (which he tellingly associates with eschatology) that informs his understanding of the face-to-face relation:

The first “vision” of eschatology (hereby distinguished from the revealed opinions of positive religions) reveals the very possibility of eschatology, that is, the breach of the totality, the possibility of a *signification without a context*. The experience of morality does not proceed from this vision—it *consummates* this vision; ethics is an optics. But it is a “vision” without image, bereft of the synoptic and totalizing objectifying virtues of vision... (TI 23, italics in original)

“Ethics is an optics,” we are told, but the “vision” of the other’s face that opens, indeed “consummates,” the ethical relation between two persons is perceptually empty: “without image.” That is to say, the face of the other, when seen aright, is not seen at all. The face-to-face encounter has nothing to do with perception (facial or otherwise), and indeed Levinas repeatedly associates sensory perception with epistemological violation: vision is “totalizing” and “objectifying,” as he puts it here. In other words, Levinas’ ethics of the face is essentially iconoclastic: as with the face of God in the Hebrew Bible, one respects the otherness of the Other by refusing to draw it into the field of representation. But Levinas’ phenomenological understanding of the reach of representation is wide indeed: “*all* mental life participates in representation,” as he wrote in one of his essays on Husserl (DEH 59; emphasis added). Therefore, according to his own iconoclastic logic, the unrepresented and ethically *unrepresentable* otherness

of the Other must lie outside the bounds of cognition (“mental life”) as a whole. If Levinas nonetheless insists that ethical contact with the Other is possible, it can only be so beyond perception, intentionality, and thus thought itself. No wonder he thought of the epiphany of the face as a kind of eschatological vision: to take Levinas’ notion of the face seriously is to entertain the possibility of a revelation beyond the scope of philosophy, reason and even thought as such.

And yet he did not want to see himself as having abandoned philosophy for religion: as is well known, he repeatedly insisted on a strict difference in his writings between his philosophical reflections and his Talmudic interpretations. Levinas argued that he had discovered a *philosophical* explanation for how we can sense the alterity of the other person in Husserl’s various writings on time-consciousness, particularly in the concept of the primal impression (*Urimpression*) that plays such an important role in Husserl’s analyses of the experience of time. That is, Levinas believed he had discovered within Husserl’s own philosophical system a description of an experience that exploded the egological bias of phenomenology. In finding such rich conceptual possibilities in Husserl’s writings on time-consciousness, Levinas was far from alone: Heidegger before him, and Derrida after, are just two of the many phenomenologically oriented thinkers who based their own original philosophies upon what they believed were untapped conceptual possibilities latent in Husserl’s probing reflections on time. The distinguished Husserl scholar Rudolf Bernet notes the irony of this philosophical legacy:

It is almost as if the Husserlian descriptions of the experience of time contained within themselves the seeds of a surpassing of the philosophical framework in which Husserl had inserted them. We are then confronted with the paradox whereby an analysis of time that was to have provided a foundation for a phenomenology of an egological transcendental consciousness constitutive of objects by justifying their *epistemological* validity also retains a large part of its value in an *ontological* phenomenology of *Dasein* or in an *ethical* phenomenology of the other person who appears in the form of the 'face' or the 'appeal'. (CCL 82)¹¹⁰

But what philosophical and ethical possibilities did Levinas in particular discern in Husserl's writings on time-consciousness, especially in his conception of the primal impression? In order to understand and evaluate Levinas' challenging reading of Husserl's already dense reflections on time-consciousness, however, I think it would be helpful to first sketch out the basic outlines of Husserl's own views.

Like many of his fellow moderns (such as William James and Henri Bergson), Husserl considered constitutive consciousness to be temporal in nature: consciousness, as he liked to say, is a constantly streaming flux (*Fluss*). According to Husserl, every phase of consciousness has a tripartite temporal structure: (1) the primal impression (our consciousness of the now-moment), (2) a retentional moment (the continuing presence in consciousness of a prior now-moment), and (3) a protentional moment (the present expectation or anticipation of a now-moment yet to come). Though these three "moments" can be theoretically distinguished, they are actually inextricably woven together in each lived phase of consciousness. The constantly streaming present, past and future are all aspects of a single present, or as Dan Zahavi aptly puts it, Husserl

¹¹⁰ *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, Eds. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002). References to this text will be parenthetically cited as CCL.

insists on “the *width* of presence” (HP 82; my emphasis). That is to say, the temporal present is not punctual in nature. We can therefore perceive temporal objects, such as musical melodies, because “consciousness is not caught in the now,” contrary to the view of thinkers like Brentano, who argued that we can indeed immediately “perceive” each punctual now-moment but can only *imagine* the immediate past and future. Husserl, arguing against Brentano’s position, held that consciousness is clearly able to directly perceive—as an essential part of a “thick” present—notes that have faded into the past as well as anticipate notes that will come in the near future. As Bernet explains:

It is not for no reason that Husserl speaks of the ‘flux’ (*Fluss*) of consciousness. The rhythm of this flux is articulated by the emergence of a new intentional act succeeding the previous one, which is thus pushed into the past. In most cases, this new act is not without links to the previous act; it was already present in the form of an anticipated future before being effectively realized in the present. And what is true of the act in its temporal duration is equally true of each instant within this duration: consciousness of the present is always intertwined with consciousness of the past and of the future, and this is the very reason why consciousness is a flux and not a succession of separate punctual instants. (CCL 84)

It is within the context of such a tripartite temporal horizon that objects which endure in time are intended and constituted as cognitive unities. Indeed, absent this temporal horizon, we would only be able to experience a series of disconnected and punctual “nows.” Even the simple visual perception of physical objects, such as tables, can only be accomplished because the synthesizing powers of consciousness, which work by uniting various perspectival views of an object, are not limited to the disjointed

perception of punctual “snapshots.” Object-constitution, that is, presupposes that consciousness can reach through, and synthesize together, individual appearances and perceptual acts extended in a temporal manifold. Thus, as Zahavi notes, “temporality must be regarded as the formal condition of possibility for the constitution of any objects,” indicating one reason for the immense importance Husserl attributed to his analyses of time-consciousness (HP 80).

What Husserl came to realize, however, is that not only are transcendent objects (such as melodies) constituted in a temporal fashion, but that our *consciousness* of our own subjective awareness of these objects (the experience of the *hearing* of the melody, for instance) is temporally constituted as well. As Zahavi explains: “Our acts and experiences are themselves temporal unities which arise, persist, and perish. They are also constituted in a network of primal impressional, retentional, and protentional intentions, and are only given, only self-aware within this framework” (HP 85). Therefore, we are aware not only that a melody we have just heard “ages” or “fades” with the passing of time, but that the various subjective acts that constituted our awareness of the melody also age with the temporal streaming that characterizes our mental life (once the melody has passed, we don’t simply “remember” the melody itself, but our awareness of the actual experience of aural perception palpably fades too with the passage of time). As Husserl puts it: “Hence the flow of consciousness obviously becomes constituted in consciousness as a unity too. The unity of a tone-duration, for example, becomes constituted in the flow, but the flow itself becomes constituted in turn as the unity of the consciousness of the tone-duration” (EH 216).

Husserl thus found it necessary not only to analyze the experience of time that underlies our constitution of objects, but also the experience of time that underlies the self-givenness (or self-constitution) of subjectivity itself.

Yet, Husserl discovered that he could not simply explain the temporal constitution of subjective acts of awareness in the same way that he had explained the constitution of transcendent temporal objects, for this would lead to an infinite explanatory regress. Consciousness, that is, cannot be temporally constituted in the very same way as transcendent temporal objects (such as melodies) unless something stands to our constituting-consciousness as our constituting-consciousness stands to the temporal objects, in which case we would then have to ask what constitutes that which constitutes our consciousness (and so on and so forth). In order to block the possibility of this kind of dizzying conceptual regress, Husserl felt compelled to posit an absolute consciousness that stands outside the constituted stream of time itself; in fact, Husserl concluded that this absolute consciousness is itself the origin of the temporal stream of constituting-consciousness in the first place. It is worth reading the following gloss by Zahavi, who explains this difficult idea with characteristic clarity:

The first and decisive point to make is that our consciousness of that which is given in constituted time... is not itself given in the same kind of time, since this would lead to an infinite regress. If time-constituting consciousness were itself given in constituted time, it would be necessary to posit yet another higher-order time-constituting consciousness, and so forth. It is for this reason that Husserl denies that the time-constituting consciousness, the *absolute stream* as he also calls it, is *simultaneous* with that which is temporally constituted. To speak of simultaneity is to posit a common temporal denominator, which is exactly what has to be avoided. The stream is not influenced by temporal change;

it does not arise or perish in objective time, nor does it endure like a temporal object. Occasionally, Husserl will speak of the stream as if it were atemporal or supratemporal, but this should not be misunderstood. The stream is atemporal in the sense of not being *in* time, but it is not atemporal in the sense of lacking any reference to time. On the contrary, the stream is always present, and this standing now (*nunc stans*) of the stream is itself a kind of temporality. (HP 86-7)

What Levinas found profoundly suggestive in Husserl's writings on time-consciousness is that Husserl placed at the origin of this streaming absolute consciousness a primal impression (*Urimpression*) which, because it is somehow "prior" to the constitution of inner time as such, is not itself an object of an intentional relation (as we noted earlier, intentionality presupposes a temporal horizon). Emerging at what Husserl terms the "originary source point" (*Urquellpunkt*) of absolute consciousness, the primal impression thus occupies a somewhat odd and anomalous position in the phenomenological system: without it, there can be no intentional consciousness, and yet the *Urimpression* itself cannot be intended and thus is not a phenomenal part of the consciousness to which it gives rise. Remarkably, Husserl felt compelled to found phenomenology itself (conceived of as purely descriptive) upon a conceptual item that was explicitly non-phenomenal and thus beyond description (it is surely worth asking whether the very positing of an *Urimpression* does not violate Husserl's "principle of principles," thus undermining the foundation of his entire theoretical edifice, but that is a question that will have to be left for another day). Husserl explained that this *Urimpression* could be intended only once it had been "pushed" into the retentive past by the emergence of a new *Urimpression*, thereby giving rise to the possibility of both

inner time and self-consciousness; prior to that elapsing, however, the primal impression is strictly beyond the reach of objectifying intentionality (i.e. consciousness as a whole).

The role of the *Urimpression* at the atemporal origin of absolute consciousness, Levinas argued, showed that “consciousness is delayed in relation to itself” (DEH 144): Husserl himself had expressed a similar thought when he wrote that, “We therefore owe it to retention that consciousness can be made into an object” (EH 220). In Husserl’s *Urimpression* (Levinas calls it the “proto-impression”), Levinas claimed to have found, at the very origin of phenomenological subjectivity, a phenomenon that was irreducible to the subject-object dichotomy that characterized the objectifying intentionality of subjective mental life. In the *Urimpression*, Levinas argued, “perceived and perceiver are simultaneous,” and thus the “proto-impression alone is pure of all ideality” (DEH 144). If, as Levinas argued, the meaning or sense of all intentional objects are idealistically bestowed by the consciousness that intends them, then at least in this proto-impression he had found a “phenomenon” (which he would term the face [*visage*]) that transcended (even if only “momentarily”) the violent reach of the meaning bestowal (*Sinngebung*) of intentionality. It is worth noting that so much, and no more, is justified by Husserl’s analysis of time-consciousness: that is, Husserl shows us that at the origin of absolute consciousness is a phenomenon that lies outside the bounds of consciousness and intentionality, period. But precisely because this “phenomenon” lies beyond the reach of intentionality (and therefore mental life as a whole), we cannot justifiably make any substantive claims about it, let alone on its

behalf. As we already know, however, Levinas insists on pushing the matter much farther than this logical limit, reading the proto-impression in a heterological light as the ethical contact of the self with an absolute exteriority: indeed, it is his heterological reading of Husserl's *Urimpression* that leads Levinas to feel *phenomenologically* justified in claiming that one can be touched by the alterity of the Other person in a way that escapes the objectifying nature of perception and intentionality. When he suggests that we can sense the "gleam" of exteriority and infinitude in the face of the Other, it is the non-intentional experience of the proto-impression that Levinas has in mind. Prior to cognition, prior even to the emergence of subjectivity as such, Levinas declares that we are always already in relation to the infinitely Other, who can therefore hold us infinitely responsible because the very constitution of our own transcendental subjectivity is based on an originary contact with the Other's face: thus, "the face opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation" (TI 201). Beyond the reach of reason, the face therefore also cannot be touched by the judgements of logic: "The presentation of the face is not true, for the true refers to the non-true, its eternal contemporary, and ineluctably meets with the smile and the silence of the skeptic. The presentation of being in the face does not leave any logical space for its contradictory" (TI 201). By placing the "vision" of the face far beyond the grasp of reason, Levinas appears to believe he has guaranteed the ethics it is said to "consummate" an absolute certainty completely immune to skeptical challenge. The first sentence of the preface to *Totality and Infinity* seems to invoke the genealogical spirit of Nietzsche: "Everyone will readily agree that it is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped

by morality" (TI 21). Because it is neither true nor non-true, the *Urimpression* would, Levinas appears to hope, preserve his ethics of the face from the ravages of a Nietzschean critique.

Bernet, however, has tactfully noted the obvious fact that there is no reason to assume that Husserl's *Urimpression* has anything to do with another person. It does not even follow from Husserl's analyses, he goes on to say, that this primary impression must even originate from outside the self at all: it could very well be the result of a kind of auto-affection. In Bernet's own words:

One hardly need point out, however, that this form of alterity which is constitutive of the originary impression is not yet the alterity of another man or woman for whom I might feel responsible. There is nothing in Husserl that would permit us to conclude that it is another subject that affects me in this originary impression [*Urimpression*]. Even if we were to extrapolate from the letter of Husserl's texts and admit that originary impression is indeed the experience of a hetero-affection, and not an auto-affection, it would still need to be established that this initial form of temporal hetero-affection maintained an essential link with the traumatic hetero-affection by the suffering of the other person.
(CCL 91)

Bernet's understated and respectful, but I think devastating, criticism of Levinas' elaboration of Husserl's analysis of time-consciousness makes clear that by making recourse to a conceptual item (the *Urimpression*) that, by definition, lies outside the sphere of the conceptual, Levinas is basing his ethics upon a kind of bare X about which we can say *nothing* with good reason. Even if we accept Levinas' argument about the sheer possibility of an experience of radical alterity, there is no reason at all for us to accept his ethical claims on behalf of that "brute" non-conceptual Other. By feeling

compelled to place the face of the Other outside of the field of meaning in order to save it from the supposedly violent intentionality of thought, Levinas has reduced the Other to an empty and strictly meaningless philosophical construct (ironically, Levinas appears to have saved the Other from the reach of theory by identifying the Other with a theoretical posit). When understood this way, Levinas' rhetorical recourse to the religious concepts of epiphany and eschatology appears both telling and unsurprising: having placed the face-to-face relation outside the bounds of reason, anything substantive he nonetheless goes on to assert about this rigorously non-rational relation is bound to have the ring of a religious experience. What, after all, can we meaningfully say about an intersubjective experience that cannot, by definition, be an object of thought? Therefore, despite his repeated protestations to the contrary, Levinas' iconoclastic approach to the face forces us to leave the field of philosophy and find moral refuge in the dictates of religion.

The problem, however, lies not so much with Levinas' paradoxical findings (as logically unacceptable as they now appear to be), but in the philosophical compulsion that originally drove him to search them out. That is, I would argue that it was by assuming that consciousness is inherently imperialistic (enveloping others in nets of meaning woven by the self), that he created a situation for which there was no other solution than the iconoclastic one he eventually resorted to. For there is, according to Levinas' strict phenomenological understanding of intentionality, no way to relate to the Other (even perceptually) without betraying his or her alterity. The only way to respect the other's face is therefore, we might say, to turn one's own away. But was he not

driven to associate consciousness with an inability to relate ethically to the Other only because he accepted the solipsistic Cartesian starting point bequeathed to him by the idealist methodology of his teacher, Husserl? If the very fact of consciousness in fact cuts us off as radically from one another as Levinas' phenomenological understanding of intentionality would suggest, his iconoclastic solution, however extreme it might seem, could very well still compel theoretical consent; after all, what other way could we then imagine the possibility of relating to other people if each of us is truly trapped in his or her own monadic consciousness? But, as we have argued all along, this picture of mental life is false. The problem, therefore, is not his paradoxical solution, but the Cartesian picture of mind that underlies it.

* * *

In this closing section, I would like to propose an alternative to Levinas' iconoclastic ethics, one which also sees a deep analogy between morality and the way we respond to the human countenance, but which follows Wittgenstein in acknowledging—by taking at face value—the meaningfulness of the face's appearance. However, I will arrive at my positive argument somewhat indirectly, for in order to explain the motivation for, as well as to develop, this alternative conception of moral values, I will need to consider the historical roots of some characteristic features of our philosophical modernity: especially the interrelated conceptual distinctions between facts and values, subjects and objects, and reason and mechanism. I will begin by considering some of the historical developments that originally led to the modern

rupture between subject and object, a major problem for modern thought, which Husserl's theory of intentionality was designed to resolve.

Few ideas have had as immense an impact on the development of twentieth-century philosophy as did Husserl's notion of intentionality, though the directions this idea was taken in have been quite various: just think, for example, of the very different roles of the concept of intentionality in the writings of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Levinas, Searle, Derrida, Marion, Taylor, Dennett and Dreyfus. Perhaps the most important reason for the philosophical importance of the idea of intentionality is that it appeared to offer an elegant way of healing the characteristically modern—that is, post-Cartesian—rift between subject and object. After Descartes' postulation of a radical separation between “thinking” and “extended” matter, it became a difficult conceptual problem to explain how the subject or “cogito” could ever accurately *know* anything about the objective world from which it was absolutely distinguished (thus the branch of philosophy known as epistemology came to assume unprecedented importance in this new post-Cartesian philosophical world). Prior to Descartes, meanings were understood to inhere in a teleologically structured nature: the logos, that is, was still woven into the substance of the cosmos. The “material universe,” as Charles Taylor puts it, was regarded “as a kind of medium, in which psychic contents like heat and pain, or the supposed Forms or Species of scholastic tradition, could be lodged or embodied or manifest themselves” (SoS 146). The perception of meaning, according to this expressive—or, following Weber, “enchanted”—conception of nature, was therefore unproblematic: meaning, that is, was something that might simply be

perceived. The meaning of the natural world was, we might say, self-disclosive: one simply needed to look in order to understand. But against this pre-modern view, Galileo and his contemporaries (Descartes included), argued that the material universe should be understood mechanistically: as Galileo famously put it, the natural world is “written in the language of mathematics,” thereby memorably expressing the new anti-Aristotelian view of nature that would drive the scientific revolution. The law-governed regularities of cause and effect, rather than teleology, would from then on constitute the kind of intelligibility proper to the natural world. However, our first-person experience of thinking feels free, and our thoughts seem accountable only to the justificatory structures of rationality, and therefore do not seem reducible to the causal processes of the space of nature (our brains included), which is why Descartes quite reasonably argued that mind cannot be identified with the body. But his substance dualism left it mysteriously unclear how body and mind can then ever interact, such that sensations might affect the mind and the mind move the body: as we noted earlier, his eventual postulation of the pineal gland as the point of mind-body interaction was hardly a satisfactory resolution of this conceptual difficulty.

Descartes, therefore, had rescued thought from the reductive net of efficient causation, yet at the price of making the mind a radically private thing, setting the stage for much of the drama of modern philosophy to come. A key recurring element of that drama was the repeated investigation of how the subject could ever come to have knowledge about anything outside itself (not simply other “subjects,” but even the most basic elements of objective nature, such as quantity and extension). The Platonic Ideas,

once inhabiting a transcendent realm of Forms, were now stripped from that supernatural pedestal and turned into intra-mental entities: ideas (we still use the same word) are *in* our heads, as we would now say. Knowledge, then, became conceived of as the creation of “representations” in the mind that, when true, map accurately onto features of the external world. As Taylor describes this momentous transformation:

A representation of reality now has to be constructed. As the notion of ‘idea’ migrates from its ontic sense to apply henceforth to intra-psychoic contents, to things ‘in the mind,’ so the order of ideas ceases to be something we *find* and becomes something we *build*. (SoS 144; italics in original)

Philosophers would from then on frequently take it for granted that a mind (understood as rational) can have no other source of knowledge about objective reality than by means of constructed representations of an external world (understood as mechanistic). As Wilfrid Sellars explained this conceptual dichotomy in his classic essay, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” on the one hand we have a logical space of nature (structured by the laws of causality) and on the other, a logical space of reasons (structured the laws of rationality).

Because of the binary nature of this basic conceptual picture, modern philosophy (as John McDowell has forcefully argued) has compulsively oscillated between two equally untenable pictures of the way mind relates to world: empiricism and coherentism. According to the empiricist, knowledge can only *count* as knowledge if it is answerable to the world which it purports to represent. McDowell explains the importance of the idea of answerability to the empiricist as follows:

Now how should we elaborate the idea that our thinking is thus answerable to the world? In addressing this question, we might restrict our attention, at least tacitly, to thinking that is answerable to the *empirical* world; that is, answerable to how things are in so far as how things are is empirically accessible. Even if we take it that answerability to how things are includes more than answerability to the empirical world, it nevertheless seems right to say this: since our cognitive predicament is that we confront the world by way of sensible intuition (to put it in Kantian terms), our reflection on the very idea of thought's directedness at how things are must begin with answerability to the empirical world. And now, how can we understand the idea that our thinking is answerable to the empirical world, if not by way of the idea that our thinking is answerable to experience? How could a verdict from the empirical world—to which empirical thinking must be answerable if it is to be thinking at all—be delivered, if not by way of a verdict from (as W.V. Quine puts it) “the tribunal of experience”?¹¹¹ (MW xii)

And therefore, at the far reaches of our cognitive access to the world (the place where mind “experiences” the world, if you like), thought must ultimately touch upon, and thereby be answerable to, some kind of pre-conceptual “Given.” It is because this brute Given lies outside the sphere of the conceptual that our concepts can be answerable to it, according to the empiricist. Otherwise, there would be no way of determining whether our thoughts about the world are *true* or *false*: we could conceivably think anything we like! Empirical experience, as Quine put it, serves as a “tribunal” that has the power to declare a “verdict” upon our thoughts. One way of picturing this epistemological transaction is by considering the idea of sensory impressions: according to the empiricist view, impressions or impacts from the space of nature (outside the

¹¹¹ The famous quotation from Quine is from “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” in W.V. Quine, *From a Logical Point of View* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1961), pp. 20-46, p. 41.

realm of the conceptual) are what ultimately ground and justify our beliefs (in the space of reasons) about the external world.

But Sellars saw this is a radically incoherent picture of the nature of human knowledge, for it confuses “happenings” in the space of nature with “justifications” in the space of reasons. Happenings in the space of nature, that is, are governed by efficient causation: they are written, as Galileo would have put it, in the “language of mathematics.” The logical space of reasons, however, is structured by *normative* relations such as “one thing’s being warranted, or—for the general case—correct, in the light of another” (MW xv). As McDowell summarizes Sellars’ negative point: “whatever the relations are that constitute the logical space of nature, they are *different in kind* from the normative relations that constitute the space of reasons” (MW xv). Put differently, Sellars writes: “In characterizing an episode or a state as that of *knowing*, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says” (cited in MW xiv). Experience as conceived of by the empiricist, that is, *cannot* serve as a tribunal upon our conceptualizations (at best the notion of a pre-conceptual Given might provide an exculpation for those beliefs we continue to hold anyway: “The trouble with the Myth of the Given,” writes McDowell, “is that it offers us at best exculpations where we wanted justification” [MW 13]). Which is just to say that nothing outside the realm of the conceptual can justify or invalidate that which lies within the realm of the conceptual. This argument about the incoherence of the idea of a brute Given, it should be noted, applies just as much to the inner psychological realm as it does to the realm of

external perception. Indeed, McDowell reads Wittgenstein's "private language argument" precisely as an attack on the idea that non-conceptual entities of any kind can ground our understanding of mental state terms (such as the concept of pain). As he explains:

... the main point of the conception Wittgenstein attacks is to claim that "judgements of inner sense" are ultimately grounded on bare presences, rather than to devise a way to put the bare presences into words. If someone in the grip of the [private language] conception was convinced by an argument that language could not embrace the supposed items she insists on, she might reply that that is really just her point. If language could embrace them, that would mean they were within the conceptual sphere, and the point of acknowledging them is to acknowledge something that constrains spontaneity, which moves within that sphere, from outside. So certainly language cannot capture them; but still, it can seem necessary to insist, they are there to be pointed to as the ultimate justifications for judgements of "inner sense." The fundamental thrust of Wittgenstein's attack is not to eliminate the idea of a private language, which by itself would merely push the line of thought that he opposes to this point. Wittgenstein's attack undermines even this position, which has already given up the idea of a private language, by applying the more general moral: a bare presence cannot be a ground for anything. (MW 19)

The idea of a brute given, which Sellars liked to call a mythological construct, "cannot be a ground for anything," whether we are thinking of introspection or external-world perception.

On the other hand, those philosophers that McDowell labels coherentists share with empiricists the modern belief that there is a radical distinction between the rational mind and mechanistic world, yet they have come to appreciate the unworkability of the idea of the "given" that underlies empiricist epistemology and so have felt compelled to

renounce the concept of empirical “experience” entirely. McDowell portrays Davidson as an exemplary coherentist (unfairly so, I think, but that is unimportant for our immediate concerns, since it is the basic outlines of coherentism in general that are at stake), and he characterizes Davidson’s position this way:

... Davidson thinks experience can be nothing but an extra-conceptual impact on sensibility. So he concludes that experience must be outside the space of reasons. According to Davidson, experience is causally relevant to a subject’s beliefs and judgements, but it has no bearing on their status as justified or warranted. Davidson says that “nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief,” and he means in particular that experience cannot count as a reason for holding a belief. (MW 14)

McDowell agrees with Davidson’s assessment of the unintelligibility of empiricism’s recourse to a notion of a brute given (i.e. sensory impacts) for the purposes of epistemological justification, yet McDowell worries that Davidson’s solution produces a picture of rationality that is equally unworkable since it is unconstrained from outside itself: Davidson, that is, offers a picture of concepts as spinning in a frictionless void. This latter picture, as McDowell notes, is just what gives empiricism its allure in the first place, for it is an essential element of our understanding of thought as such that it be answerable to how the world is, not simply accountable to other beliefs we may have about the “world” as it is represented in our thoughts alone. Coherentism, in other words, invites a philosophical recoil back to empiricism:

Davidson’s picture depicts our empirical thinking as engaged in with no rational constraint, but only causal influence, from outside. This just raises a worry as to whether the picture can accommodate the sort of bearing on reality that empirical content

amounts to, and that is just the kind of worry that can make an appeal to the Given seem necessary. (MW 14)

The problem with the coherentist alternative to empiricism, McDowell argues, is that it does not adequately appreciate, and therefore does not address, the fundamental motivation for empiricism, which is a perfectly reasonable desire that our knowledge be answerable to a real world, and not merely reflect the structure of our own thoughts. Coherentism, that is, finds that the idea of an epistemologically grounding Given is unintelligible, jettisons that concept, and acts as if a nettlesome philosophical problem had been definitively resolved. The coherentist solution, however, will inevitably leave us dissatisfied (since it is at odds with our very understanding of what thought and knowledge are in the first place) and philosophy will therefore continue to suffer from a conceptual pendulum swing from one untenable position to the other.

In *Mind and World*, McDowell observes that as long as we hold on to the modern belief that mind is rational and nature entirely mechanistic, we will continue to oscillate between these two positions. It is this characteristically modern dichotomy between reason and mechanism, he believes, that underlies the philosophical oscillation he hopes to put to rest: that is, the idea of the "given" makes sense, and acquires its theoretical allure, only because we are under the sway of a post-Galilean scientific worldview. He therefore argues that we can hold on to the two equally compelling ideas (1) that the normative structure of rationality is *sui generis* when judged against the law-governed interactions of the space of nature and (2) that our thoughts are answerable to our experience of how the world truly is, only if we let go of the radically

disenchanted view of nature as wholly mechanistic which was bequeathed to us by Galileo and the modern scientific revolution (a theoretical position that he labels “bald naturalism”). What the scientific image of nature—nature as governed wholly by the laws of efficient causation—leaves out is the fact that for humans, nature includes a conceptually saturated *second* nature: “Human beings acquire a second nature in part by being initiated into conceptual capacities, whose interrelations belong in the logical space of reasons” (MW xx). In other words, our phenomenological experience of the world is *not* of a causal law-governed “environment” but of a *world* that is infused with the concepts of whatever culture we are raised in, a maturation process of cognitive development and socialization succinctly captured by the German notion of *bildung*. Therefore, experience need not be solely equated with the causal impacts of brute givens (as Sellars was right to argue, the idea of the Given is indeed a myth), but can be understood as our phenomenological openness to a world thoroughly imbued with conceptual meaning, at least as long as we have been provided with a “good enough” upbringing and enculturation. As McDowell explains:

Once we remember second nature, we see that operations of nature can include circumstances whose descriptions place them in the logical space of reasons, *sui generis* though that logical space is. This makes it possible to accommodate impressions in nature without posing a threat to empiricism. From the thesis that receiving an impression is a transaction in nature, there is now no good inference to the conclusion drawn by Sellars and Davidson, that the idea of receiving an impression must be foreign to the logical space in which concepts such as that of answerability function. Conceptual capacities, whose interrelations belong in the *sui generis* logical space of reasons, can be operative not only in judgements—results of a subject’s actively making up her mind about something—but already in the transactions in nature that are

constituted by the world's impacts on the receptive capacities of a suitable subject; that is, one who possesses the relevant concepts. Impressions can *be* cases of its perceptually appearing—being apparent—to a subject that things are thus and so. In receiving impressions, a subject can be open to the way things manifestly are. (MW xx; italics in original)

It follows from McDowell's conception of second nature that when we see that something is "thus and so", we have good *reason* to believe that things are "thus and so": "*That things are thus and so,*" writes McDowell, "is the conceptual content of an experience, but if the subject of the experience is not misled, that very same thing, *that things are thus and so,* is also a perceptible fact, an aspect of the perceptible world" (MW 26; italics in original). Or as Wittgenstein put it in the *Investigations*, in a passage that McDowell cites in support of his position: "When we say, and *mean*, that such-and-such is the case, we—and our meaning—do not stop anywhere short of the fact; but we mean: *this—is—so*" (PI §95, cited in MW 27; italics in original).

Suggestively, McDowell finds the closest analogue in the philosophical tradition to his notion of second nature in Aristotle's writings on ethics. Attempting to explain the kind of rational-and-perceptual capacities that allow us to directly *see* meaning in the world, McDowell argues that we should take as a model for this type of rational recognition the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis*, which is usually translated as "practical wisdom." The person of virtuous character in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is one who, through proper upbringing, has been sensitized to the demands of reason in the world:

For Aristotle, virtue of character in the strict sense is distinct from a merely habitual propensity to act in ways that match what

virtue would require. Virtue of character properly so called includes a specifically shaped state of the practical intellect: “practical wisdom,” in the standard English translation. This is a responsiveness to some of the demands of reason (though that is not Aristotle’s way of putting it). The picture is that ethics involves requirements of reason that are there whether we know it or not, and our eyes are opened to them by the acquisition of “practical wisdom.” So “practical wisdom” is the right sort of thing to serve as a model for the understanding, the faculty that enables us to recognize and create the kind of intelligibility that is a matter of placement in the space of reason. (MW 79)¹¹²

McDowell clearly means “practical wisdom” (*phronesis*) to serve as a general model for understanding of all kinds, not strictly *ethical* understanding: he is trying to elaborate the concept of “second nature” as a whole, not simply those aspects of it relevant to our grasp of ethical values. But by taking the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis* as a model for how we can directly recognize (by analogy to visual perception) the claims of reason in the world, McDowell’s argument suggests how we might make intelligible (and therefore accept) a perfectly ordinary aspect of the phenomenology of moral evaluation: the everyday fact that moral values that we perceive as features of the layout or disposition of persons and events in the world strike us as *really there* (and do not seem

¹¹² For reference, here is a relevant passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Terence Irwin, the translator of the following passage, prefers “intelligence” to “practical wisdom” as an equivalent for *phronesis*): “Intelligence [*phronesis*] is evidently not scientific knowledge [*episteme*]; for, as we said, it concerns the last thing [i.e. the particular], since this is what is done in action. Hence it is opposed to understanding [*nous*]. For understanding is about the [first] terms, [those] that have no account of them; but intelligence is about the last thing, an object of perception [*aisthesis*], not of scientific knowledge [*episteme*]. This is not the preception of special objects, but the sort by which we perceive that the last among mathematical objects is a triangle; for it will stop here too. This is another species [of perception than perception of special objects]; but it is still perception more than intelligence is” (NE 1142a24-31; bracketed English text is Irwin’s). From Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985).

like merely subjective projections).¹¹³ As Maximilian de Gaynesford explains: “McDowell is a realist about value, but of a sophisticated or qualified sort. And the subtlety of his position depends on its appeal to second nature, to those rational-conceptual capacities that subjects and agents naturally have, but because they naturally acquire them rather than because they are naturally born with them” (JM 163).

If we witness someone physically harming another person on the sidewalk, we do not think to ourselves: that’s terrible, but only because I subjectively project upon this state of affairs an arbitrarily negative moral coloring. The “wrongness” of the violence strikes us as immediately and quite directly real: as an actual, objective feature of the events we are witnessing, which anyone who had eyes to see could, and indeed *should*, perceive. If a friend who was standing next to us observed the same violence and expressed indifference to the situation, we would likely fault him or her for *not* perceiving a moral wrong: we would feel at that moment that we had discovered something wrong with our friend, not simply with the situation. If at the grocery store we witnessed a parent losing control and screaming at a young child (“You idiot!”), causing the child to wilt and sob before our very eyes, we might sympathize with whatever frustration caused the parent to lose control (perhaps we notice a broken jar of jelly on the floor), but still we likely would (and *should*) perceive the action as simply wrong. Again, it is not part of the phenomenology of our experience of such a situation to regard our moral evaluation as a subjective projection upon a state of affairs that

¹¹³ For an excellent development of this notion by a student of McDowell’s and Martha Nussbaum’s, see Bridget Clarke, *The Lens of Character: Aristotle, Murdoch and the Idea of Moral Perception* (Ph.D. Dissertation: University of Pittsburgh, 2003).

objectively features no moral qualities. Ethical phenomenology—if it is to be accepted—shows a world that has value as part of its very fabric.

In his *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, J.L. Mackie agrees that the phenomenology of value shows values (not only moral but aesthetic as well) to be “part of the fabric of the world” (Mackie 15), which is to say that they strike us as “objective.” But because, according to Mackie, there is no way to find a place for such values in a naturalistic ontology, thus rendering them ontologically “queer” as he liked to put it, our evaluative phenomenology must be in “error”: values may appear real to us, but that is only an illusion. Facts alone are real, of course. McDowell, however, notes that Mackie’s argument achieves whatever conceptual force it has by mistakenly presuming that for a value to be real it must be a “primary quality,” akin to solidity. Taken this way, it is of course implausible that values are simply there to be seen like the shape or size of the physical objects that make up the material furniture of our lives. If we nonetheless insist that values are real, then Mackie would have a point when he claims that our evaluative phenomenology is erroneous, however compelling that phenomenology might seem regarded from a first-person perspective.

McDowell, however, argues that we do not need to accept Mackie’s association of values with primary qualities (which makes them inevitably seem “queer”), and rather suggests that we regard values as *secondary* qualities, akin to colors. Here is how he defines secondary qualities, using the color “red” as an example:

A secondary quality is a property the ascription of which to an object is not adequately understood except as true, if it is true, in virtue of the object’s disposition to present a certain sort of

perceptual appearance: specifically, an appearance characterizable by using a word for the property itself to say how the object perceptually appears. Thus an object's being red is understood as something that obtains in virtue of the object's being such as (in certain circumstances) to look, precisely, red. (MVR 133)

Colors, like all secondary qualities, are not objective in the way that extension and quantity are, for the definition of a secondary quality (such as "redness") is inextricable from our sense of how an appropriately sensitized subject would *perceive* a sample of that color. Redness is not *there* like an object's shape or size, but it is there nonetheless. Secondary properties, that is to say, are "dispositional" in nature. For something to be red is for it to be such that a properly sensitized person would see it as red. But this is not to reduce "redness" to a merely subjective property or projection, for a red object is not red only at those times when it is being observed. It is red (and disposed to be red) even when no one is looking at it. As McDowell explains:

Secondary-quality experience presents itself as perceptual awareness of properties genuinely possessed by the objects that confront one. And there is no general obstacle to taking that appearance at face value. An object's being such as to look red is independent of its actually looking red to anyone on any particular occasion; so, notwithstanding the conceptual connection between being red and being experienced as red, an experience of something as red can count as a case of being presented with a property that is there anyway – there independently of the experience itself. (MVR 134)

And thus, redness is a real (though secondary) property of the object itself, and not merely a subjective projection of a given beholder, though we cannot fully understand the concept of redness without making reference to appropriately sensitized perceiving

subjects. As de Gaynesford sums all this up, explicitly extending the analogy from colors to values conceived of as secondary properties:

Moral and aesthetic properties are of the sort that are not fully describable or intelligible without reference to the effect they have on subjects of experience and agents. In that sense, they are more like the colour- or taste-properties that an object might have than like those shape- or size-properties it has. All these properties are objective; but whereas shape- and size-properties are fully describable and intelligible independently of our sensitivity to them, colours, tastes and values are not.

This is because colours, tastes and values are a particular kind of objective property: they are dispositions of objects to appear a certain way to suitably sensitive observers in suitable circumstances. An object's having the colour-property 'red', for example, just is its being such as to look red given these circumstances. Given the same circumstances, an object's having the aesthetic value 'beautiful' just is its being such as to appear beautiful, and a person's having the ethical value 'kind' just is his being such as to appear kind. So the existence of such properties depends partly on the existence of beings with the capacity to observe them and pick them out. (JM 163-4)

McDowell's development of a secondary-quality construal of values allows him to acknowledge the dependence of values on the contingent existence of certain forms of human life (including societies that raise those "beings with the capacity to observe [certain values] and pick them out") yet at the same time to accept their *reality*. That is to say, like colors values are secondary qualities that are there whether or not a given individual notices them at a given time; they are real aspects of the world that await recognition. According to his position, as de Gaynesford explains:

Ethical and aesthetic beliefs and judgements can be true or false. Ethical and aesthetic properties really exist in the world. These values are things to which moral agents and aesthetic judges can be sensitive or insensitive. These values are really there to be discovered; they are not projected onto the world, willed into

existence or constituted by emotional reactions. They are distinct from discrete affective experiences that individuals may or may not have when confronted with them. They make a real difference to the situation or individuals that possess or lack them. (JM 167)

Given McDowell's reliance on the analogy of value-perception to color-perception, it is significant that there has been much dispute (and not simply in reference to his writings) about whether or not colors themselves should be understood in a dispositional manner.¹¹⁴ Perhaps, as some, like Locke, have maintained, the phenomenology of color is itself simply illusory: Mackie, unsurprisingly, goes in for this very position. Others, taking a physicalist line, argue that color is simply "the property of selectively reflecting incident light at certain wavelengths," and thus color is relational but non-sensory (cf. JM 168). While still others take a "strong objectivist" position and "claim that objects are coloured, and that the nature of this property is intrinsic" (JM 168).

If we could hold onto a dispositional understanding of values only if we were able to establish the dispositional nature of colors, it would be essential that we address and refute each of these competing ways of understanding color perception. De Gaynesford, however, suggests that the analogy between colors and values, as illuminating as it is in McDowell's hands, does not need to be understood that strictly:

We can understand McDowell as saying the following: "Why shouldn't we understand value as we understand colour – in the world, though internally related to the exercise of sensibility?" If we respond: "because that is not how colour works", that does not undermine McDowell's overall claim about value. Even if colour does not work that way, other things might, and they would provide an effective model for value. (JM 169)

¹¹⁴ See, e.g., de Gaynesford, pp. 168-170.

I think the hypothetical response de Gaynesford suggests that we might make to the skeptic about the dispositional nature of colors is true, but weak, for if we cannot point to any “other things” that “might” work the way McDowell wants colors to work, then we would have some reason to worry about the relevance and force of McDowell’s argumentative strategy. However real values might appear to us, perhaps Mackie was right all along. If nothing else is dispositional in the way McDowell claims values are, then why should we believe values are that way in the first place, unless we made argumentative recourse to the compelling force of our first-person evaluative phenomenology? But that would hardly be a convincing move since it is that very phenomenology that was originally at issue: after all, even Mackie agrees that values *appear* real.

Whether or not colors work the way McDowell suggests (though I suspect they do), I propose that we consider Wittgenstein’s aspect-seeing explanation of face-perception (as I have developed it in earlier chapters, especially chapter two) as a better model than color perception for a realist construal of the recognition of values. Indeed, I would argue that to some extent, face perception does not simply provide a good *analogical* model for understanding how moral perception might function (as construed by McDowell and others who subscribe to a perception-based model of ethics), but that the aspect-seeing powers that enable face perception in general are the *very* cognitive mechanisms that enable moral perception as well. Even if colors are not dispositional in the way McDowell wants them to be, my reading of Wittgenstein has demonstrated

that faces and the aspects that play across their features certainly are. There is nothing “queer” about the fact that we can “see” the glance of the eye, for example, as

Wittgenstein caustically observed in a passage from *Zettel* that we looked at earlier:

“If you only shake free from your physiological prejudices, you will find nothing queer about the fact that the glance of the eye can be seen too.” For I also say that I see the look that you cast at someone else. And if someone wanted to correct me and say that I don’t really *see* it, I should take that for pure stupidity. (Z 223)

And yet, our ability to *see* sight itself—like our ability to perceive value—cannot be explained by merely broadening the reach of the senses. As Wittgenstein put it elsewhere, aspect-seeing implies a “*modified* concept of sensation” (PI p. 179; my emphasis). The “glance” is not an empirical fact like the color of an iris, or the dilation of a pupil: “I should contradict anyone who told me I saw the glance ‘just the way’ I see the shape and colour of the eye” (Z 223). Wittgenstein’s passing negative remark here about the perception of eye-colour suggests the extent to which even a compelling argument for the dispositional nature of color-perception will not yet account for how we can see mind in a face, without which it would be difficult to imagine a satisfyingly full account of the nature of intersubjective moral perception. That is to say, while certainly quite illuminating, the conceptual reach of McDowell’s suggestion that values are secondary qualities like colors may ultimately be too limited. For instance, consider how implausible it would be to claim that we see fear the way we see the color red; and yet could we claim to have an adequate ethics that did not account for how we recognize (and respond to) another person’s fearful state of mind?

If we take Wittgenstein's writing on face-perception as a model for the perception of values, then we need not worry about the ontological status of colors. The range of moral and aesthetic values that we recognize as part of the fabric of our world can be regarded as just as real as the states of mind that we see flashing across the faces of those around us (but no more real than they are either!). As we noted in chapter two, recognizing the aspect of timidity in a face is something that one who has mastered the concept of timidity can do without a thought, so to speak. We can have a "purely visual concept... of a timid face": wholly visual, yet conceptually rich. But for one who has not mastered the concept of timidity, a timid aspect would not be directly recognizable upon the face of another, and this "blindness" would be made evident by the fact that he would "react to the visual impression differently": perhaps, for example, showing indifference (or even irritation or hostility) where another might have shown concern. The way a person responds, or does not, to an aspect of mind in the face of another *shows* whether that person can experience (that is, *fully* knows the concept for) that aspect of mind at all. I would argue that the intersubjective responsiveness that is internal to Wittgenstein's way of understanding the possession of mental state concepts is already substantially ethical in nature. To fully recognize something like fear is also to be disposed to *respond* with concern and care to the presence of that state of mind in another person, though in a fashion that cannot be specified or predicted in advance by the application of rules. This line of thought suggests how compatible is Wittgenstein's understanding of physiognomy with a realist model of moral perception: for if we saw someone responding inappropriately (whether with indifference or annoyance) to

another person whose face clearly expressed fear, we would say that there was something at fault with the morally insensitive person's character. Speaking in Aristotelian terms, a person who did not recognize—and therefore did not appropriately respond to—the fear in another person's face could be said to suffer from an impairment in his or her practical intellect. That is, blindness to the demands of moral reasons can, and perhaps should, be understood as a form of *aspect*-blindness.

On the other hand, and somewhat paradoxically, the perception of the particulars of another person's facial expressions plays no positive role in Levinas' ethical phenomenology of the face. Levinas' way of overcoming Husserl's transcendental solipsism shows him still to be in the grip of a fundamentally Cartesian picture of mind, which as I have argued, explains why he would feel himself able to respect the alterity of the other person's face only by placing it beyond the reach of visual perception altogether. Wittgenstein's later writings, on the other hand, show how the expressive meaningfulness of the face can play a positive, even essential, role in ethical life. His theory of aspect-seeing explains not only how we can understand the expressions of a face but also how we can perceive ethical truths, preserving the reality of moral claims while steering clear of both ethical subjectivism and fundamentalism. Aspect-seeing, that is, underlies not only facial perception but also practical wisdom as well (i.e. *phronesis*): moral values, like the mental states in a face, are neither objective facts in the world, nor subjective projections of the beholder, but they are *real* nonetheless. I suggest that it is because of this deep cognitive link between face perception and the way we recognize mind and value that the human countenance has been so important to

modern aesthetic experimentation and philosophical reflection: for face perception uses the same powers of pattern recognition that enable us to perceive personhood and moral truths. Indeed, it is because of the connections between face, mind and value that the making and receiving of images of the human face can provide us ways to reflect creatively upon the meaning of personhood in the skeptical and ethically disoriented climate of our late modernity.

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