FOREWORD

Veena Das speaks of her “repeated (and even compulsive) reliance on Wittgenstein” as playing a role in the philosophical friendship that has developed between us. Beyond the clear evidence for this observation, the truth of it, from my side of things, is further confirmed, if perhaps less clearly, in an early and in a late thought of mine, each expressing my sense of an anthropological register in Wittgenstein’s sensibility, thoughts not reflected in Wittgenstein’s well-known recurrence, in his later (or as the French put it, his second) philosophy, to imaginary “tribes” different from “us.” I would like to mark my pleasure in contributing prefatory words for Das’s wonderful book Life and Words by putting those easily lost thoughts into words, into the world.

My early thought was directed to a passage in Philosophical Investigations that roughly sounds to me like a reflection on a primitive allegory of incipient anthropological work: “Suppose you came as an explorer into an unknown country with a language quite strange to you. In what circumstances would you say that the people there gave orders, understood them, obeyed them, rebelled against them, and so on? The common behaviour of mankind is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language” (§206).

This may, as other moments in Wittgenstein’s text may, seem either too doubtful or too tame to be of much intellectual service. “Common behavior”
seems quite unargumentative in referring to the behavior of salmon and mallards and anthropoid apes, not quite in referring to that of human beings. But let’s turn the card over. Take it that the allegorical air comes rather from the fact that to ask a question of the form “In what circumstances would you say . . . ?” is precisely Wittgenstein’s most obvious (ordinary language) procedure directed to and about us, about us as philosophers when we are, as we inevitably are, variously tempted to force our ordinary words to do what they, as they stand, will not do, disappointed by finitude. It is our language that is, or that we perpetually render, foreign to us. The point of the allegory would then be that the explorer coming into an unknown country with a strange language is a figure of the philosopher moved to philosophical wonder by the strangeness of the humans among whom he lives, their strangeness to themselves, therefore of himself to himself, at home perhaps nowhere, perhaps anywhere. (I have spoken of the Investigations as a portrait more specifically of the modern subject.)

Asking us either to find our behavior strange (seltsam), or not strange, is a familiar gesture in the Investigations, anticipated, for example, in Plato’s image of the everyday as a cave, and in Rousseau’s fantasm of the first word (the first naming of the human other) as a giant, and in Thoreau’s perception in the opening pages of Walden of his fellow townsmen as self-tormenting “Bramins” (Thoreau’s spelling). The intersection of the familiar and the strange is an experience of the uncanny, an intersection therefore shared by the anthropologist, the psychoanalyst, and the Wittgensteinian (Socratic, Rousseau-like, Thoreau-like, etc.) philosopher. (Here an anthropological perspective is the counter to what is sometimes called, and disapproved of as, a humanist perspective, satisfied in its knowledge of what humanity should be. What I call Wittgenstein’s anthropological perspective is one puzzled in principle by anything human beings say and do, hence perhaps, at a moment, by nothing.)

This brings me to the second, later thought prompting the sense of Wittgenstein’s seeking perspective on his unknown culture. I once shared a podium to discuss, perhaps debate, Wittgenstein’s later views with a friend who is fully recognized as one of the most accomplished philosophers of our generation. In his introductory remarks he asked, in effect: Why is Wittgenstein content to accord the status of a culture or an imaginary tribe to virtually any group of strange creatures with apparently the sole exception of philosophers? When my turn to speak came I replied that for Wittgenstein philosophy is not a culture, not one among others. It is
without (no matter how persistently it craves to have) a persistently accepted and evolving language of its own, retaining only some local terms that will be disputed and repudiated by other philosophers; “houses of cards” Wittgenstein will call its parade of discourses. The locale of its originating form of life is the singular human being dissatisfied with itself, a fate inherent, or say natural, within any civilized human society. We (moderns, philosophers) are likely often to accede to the idea that philosophy has become a profession like others, say, since its incorporation into the Western university curriculum over the past two and a half centuries. But that is something Wittgenstein fairly clearly finds as strange as it is familiar.

It seems clear to me that Das’s sense of compulsive turning to a companionship with Wittgenstein’s later work is her recognition that his address to the human other is, like her own, one that can be said to revolve characteristically around the study of pain. I have heard this tropism of Wittgenstein’s criticized as in effect making things too easy for himself, since the criteria of pain are epistemologically so well defined, the feeling so well known. This strikes me merely as one of numberless ways of defending oneself against Wittgenstein’s uncovering of philosophy’s defenses, say, against the everyday, against finitude. But the question of the sense of pain’s pressure in Wittgenstein’s text is a good one. Since I have for a long time been following out my sense of Wittgenstein’s work as directed to an understanding of skepticism, I am likely to regard pain as especially suited to be a philosophical example for him precisely because of its commonness and its recognizability, something knowable about the other if anything is. And I would emphasize two other facts of the phenomenon, first that over a large range of its occurrences its manifestation is more or less repressible or disguisable (paradoxically more easily than the manifestation of joy or mild surprise or a prompting of laughter), so that one may be said in such cases to have to care whether to understand what is happening; second, that unlike joy or surprise or laughter, with pain there is a moral demand to respond to its expression. (A killjoy is obnoxious but not immoral.) I find that one appropriate use of Das’s work is as a companion to Wittgenstein’s preoccupation with the other.

What kind of task is it to study social suffering? To follow Das into events in which social convulsion lays bare the question of a society’s will and its right to exist, to name and honor itself, is to arrive repeatedly at the feeling that to know a society is to know its capacity to inflict suffering upon itself. In her perception of the cases she principally studies, the
extended total event of the Partition and the comparatively confined event of the aftermath of the assassination of Indira Gandhi, states of chaos are as if called upon to hold the mirror up to what society has called its order. Here the philosophical image or myth of pervasive but hidden chains or iron bars keeping us in place—yet variously perceptible in Plato (where in the Cave we are each chained) and in Rousseau (where we are free and everywhere in chains) and in Thoreau (where we are caged in the woods) and in Marx (where most of us have nothing to lose but our chains)—can seem to come to a terrible enactment in the moment at which these bonds bewilderingly are broken. In the instances Das places before us, a reality of pain is released for which she finds that there are no standing words.

She nevertheless discovers a path of articulation into this chaos by confronting the tradition of philosophy and transforming or reinhabiting—and, what is more, showing the resultant relation of—two of its familiar sites of perspective on our common lives, that of the social contract establishing consent to the political order, and that of our common language appearing as inherently unreliable. She takes on the perception that the social contract has been sexualized, that the roles of men and women are systematically contrasted in the events of partitioning, where consent is declared and forced (hence horribly parodied) by symbolizing it in the abduction of women, and where this violation simultaneously produces silence in women and, in men, a volubility that fails to express what they see and do. Das characterizes the men’s speech as taking on the register of rumor, as if the events they describe were caused otherwise than by themselves, as if they have made themselves into creatures lacking both desire and responsibility. This psychic catastrophe is a kind of living parody of something philosophy has meant to capture in its portraits of skepticism, where one is invited to feel that it is language itself that causes the human being’s ignorance of itself and of its role in the world, and not a self-distancing and self-blinding relation to one’s words.

Something that has kept drawing me back to the topic of skepticism, from the time of completing my doctoral dissertation, so largely concerned with understanding Wittgenstein’s _Philosophical Investigations_ as an original response to the threat of skepticism, was my sense that skepticism with respect to other minds was, whenever I heard it discussed in classes and conferences, made derivative from, or made to imitate, skepticism’s modern inception in Descartes and its continuation in Hume and its opposition in Kant, each of whom had treated skepticism essentially with respect to material objects, or, say, to the system of objects philosophers
have called the external world. Hence the philosophical problem of others was shaped as one of assessing whether, or how, we know about others what we claim to know. A decisive turn in my own studies in skepticism came from the realization that a skeptical process toward other human beings (others like myself, Descartes says) results not in a realization of my ignorance of the existence of the other, but in my denial of that existence, my refusal to acknowledge it, my psychic annihilation of the other. That there is a violence that is not directed to the defense of the self’s integrity or to a rightful demand for equality or for freedom, but expresses this wish for the other’s nonexistence, strikes me as a further way to take up Das’s insight of “healing [the consequences of violence] as a kind of relationship with death.”

I was prompted to ask myself whether her cases of extreme manifestation of a society’s internal, one could say, intimate and absolute violence are comprehensible as extreme states, or suddenly invited enactments, of a pervasive fact of the social fabric that may hide itself, or one might also say, may express itself, in everyday encounters. The background of my question is double, one part coming from a further perception of Das’s, and one part coming from my having in recent years begun to register unacknowledged yet inevitable manifestations of what Wittgenstein pictures as the pervasive, irreducible recurrence of human nervousness or restlessness, as it were the human incapacity for and refusal of peace (which Wittgenstein specifically pictures as features of the modern subject, ones he portrays as torment, perverseness, disappointment, devastation, suffocation, and so on), a kind of perpetual preparation for violence that has led me to speak of our dealing among ourselves “the little deaths of everyday life,” the slights, the grudges, the clumsiness, the impatience, the bitterness, the narcissism, the boredom, and so on (variously fed and magnified and inflamed by standing sources of social enmity, say, racism, sexism, elitism, and so on). No wonder a philosopher (I am thinking at the moment of Thoreau) will from time to time allow himself to be overcome with the feeling that human life, as it stands, stands in need of, and is without, justification, as when, adding up the amount he has spent on food in a year, that is, on supplies to keep himself alive, he announces, “I thus unblushingly publish my guilt.”

The further insight of Das’s that I refer to is her recognition that in the gender-determined division of the work of mourning the results of violence, the role of women is to attend, in a torn world, to the details of everyday life that allow a household to function, collecting supplies, cooking, washing
and straightening up, seeing to children, and so on, that allow life to knit itself back into some viable rhythm, pair by pair. Part of her task is to make us ponder how it is that such evidently small things (whose bravery within tumultuous circumstances is, however, not small) are a match for the consequences of unspeakable horror, for which other necessaries are not substitutes. (Here the pity and terror that Aristotle finds in the catharsis provided for the witnesses of tragedy seem in everyday time to yield healing for the healers of catastrophe.)

In the background of my sense of these matters a remark from Wittgenstein’s *Journals*, collected in a volume entitled *Culture and Value*, plays a role that I know I still imperfectly, or only intermittently, understand but that I feel sure is illuminated by this nearly inconceivable mismatch of harm and healing: “The whole planet can suffer no greater torment than a single soul.” We are touching here on matters that will seem to take moral philosophy, with its assessment of goods and its exhortations to duty and to contracts, quite beyond its accustomed paths.

A parting word. I spoke just now of evidently small things in response to tumultuous things, and I spoke earlier of Das’s work as reciprocating Wittgenstein’s preoccupation with the everyday life of the other, where the modification “everyday” asks attention to the specificity (however perhaps normally missed) of a current locus of interest and desire and need. The bridge for me here between these representatives of philosophical and anthropological work is my perpetual harboring for philosophy an idea or image—I guess in unpropitious times—of the first virtue of philosophy as responsiveness. I have sometimes put this thought by saying that philosophy does not speak first. It is a recurrent cause of wonder to me that in philosophy’s modern rebeginning, where philosophy finds the power to wipe clean the intellectual slate and ask for proof that we know anything exists—most poignantly expressed as wanting to know whether I am alone in the world—Descartes passes by, I have to say denies, the answer provided in the existence of the finite neighbor. My heartfelt gratitude to Veena Das for her *Life and Words.*

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