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Wittgenstein and Diamond on meaning and experience: from groundlessness to creativity

My paper combines Ludwig Wittgenstein's notion of 'running up against the limits of language' and Cora Diamond's notion of the 'difficulty of reality' in order to examine those extraordinary experiences in our human lives when, at a particular moment, something appears to us that seems to have an absolute, inexpressible value. More specifically, I focus on the peculiar feeling of dissatisfaction with meaning that is likely to result from such experiences and deal with two kinds of temptation that are likely to prevent us from transforming this feeling of dissatisfaction into an act of creativity; these are, first, the temptation to regard such experiences as a manifestation of the transcendent, and, second, the temptation to trivialize such experiences by treating them as some sort of grammatical illusion. In discussing these two temptations, I intend to show that there is a third way around the dissatisfaction with meaning that consists in accepting the fact that meaning cannot be ultimately grounded in advance of any particular linguistic act, but depends largely on our individual creative engagement with language.

The reader might be already familiar with what I am going to describe from Wittgenstein's own description of what he calls, in his *Lecture on Ethics*, (PO, pp.

37-44) the 'running-up-against paradox'.

The reason why I am not using here this term but I am instead introducing a new one is that I wish to examine what Wittgenstein describes in his *Lecture on*

Ethics together with what Cora Diamond describes as 'difficulty of reality', when she speaks of experiences which are painful and difficult, or awesome and astonishing in their inexplicability (Diamond, 2008, p.45-46).

What seems to characterize both Wittgenstein's and Diamond's kinds of experience is that they appear to have an absolute value, which looks as if it cannot be

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expressed in words, at least not without leading to our dissatisfaction with meaning¹. As John McDowell beautifully puts it when he comments on Diamond's 'difficulty of reality', in such experiences 'one is losing the capacity to instantiate one's allotted life form as a speaking animal', or one is 'losing one's capacity to capture reality in language' (McDowell, 2008, p.137). In Wittgenstein's terms nonsensicality seems to be the very essence of such expressions (see PO, p.44). As I will argue, it is precisely at this point of dealing with what appears as necessary generation of nonsense, where the possibility or rather the task for creativity in language emerges.²

In order to argue that such experiences are the chance for creativity, I will focus on what I called a dissatisfaction with meaning and will start by treating them as experiences where there seems to be either too much or too little meaning.

Stanley Cavell also draws such a connection when he comments on the 'difficulty of reality' and its relation with the difficulty of philosophy: 'I associate this [...] with what I have sometimes discussed as a chronic difficulty or disappointment with meaning, or say with language, or with human expression, as such'³ (Cavell, 2008, p.101).

¹ Before I proceed with offering a range of examples of such an experience I need to address a worry: Is it legitimate to bring together Wittgenstein's and Diamond's kinds of experiences? Wittgenstein speaks of a 'running up against the limit', however Diamond does not bring up the notion of limit at all. One could even say that she avoids it. I believe that Diamond does avoid it (on purpose) because she tries to protect what she says from certain connotations that the notion of limit usually bears, such as the idea of a beyond the limit or of language as a cage. However in her *The Tractatus and the Limits of Sense* Diamond deals with Wittgenstein's *Lecture on Ethics* and tries to imagine a way to speak of limits that does not involve something 'beyond the limits' being out of reach, namely a way that does not present limits as constraints. As she puts it, it is important to emphasize 'the difference between thinking of the inexpressibility of something as being a matter of the something lying beyond the expressible and thinking of it as not being anything within the expressible, within what can be said, i.e. thinking of oneself as in a position to reject anything sayable as an expression of the something' (Diamond, 2011, p.242). This paper also tries to think of an experience of limitation not as some sort of constraint arising from a supposed inexpressibility but rather as what opens us towards more creative forms of expression, and I think that bringing Wittgenstein's and Diamond's notions together can serve such an end. However an account of the differences and similarities of their approach is far beyond the scope of my paper.

² Seeing nonsense as a chance for creativity is also attuned to Wittgenstein's own suggestion to not avoid talking nonsense but to also be attentive to it. As he puts it in his *Conversations with the Vienna Circle*: 'Yet the tendency represented by running-up-against points to something. St. Augustine already knew this when he said: What, you wretch, so you want to avoid talking nonsense? Talk some nonsense, it makes no difference!' (WVC, p.69).

³ For an overview of Cavell's discussion on the difficulty of meaning see Cavell, 1976.

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In my effort to give a refined and fresh approach of such experiences, I will also try to show that they take place within the ordinary. This does not mean that it is an everyday experience, but it means that it takes place through experiences that one has in one's life in language.⁴

Wittgenstein does suggest that the 'running up against the limit' emerges within the ordinary when he says, for instance, that he will use examples which are entirely personal or when he situates his first example, the wonder at the existence of the world, in the context of 'the sensation when taking a walk on a fine summer's day'. However, despite such hints, I think that this connection with the ordinary is not yet so straightforward and needs to be given prominence. Bringing Diamond's notion and her examples into the discussion will be helpful towards this end.

By placing this experience in an everyday context I intend to approach the problem of what appears as a limitation not as something that emerges just in metaphysical reflections, but as an everyday conceptual experience, namely as an experience that concerns everyone in relation. At the same time, I am also interested in the possibility of responding to it in a way that does not transcend language but instead brings one back to it and moreover invites one to be attentive to it.

In what follows, I will first provide some examples of such experiences and then will try to explain how the generation of nonsense gives rise to two temptations (those of facticity and transcendence); if we do not succumb to them, then we face a problem with meaning, which I will call 'groundlessness of meaning'. In the last part of the paper I try to show how the acceptance of groundlessness amounts to being creative within language.

⁴ One should be careful not to equate a return to the ordinary with never leaving it in the first place. The value of ordinariness can be recognized only after we have left it. We could also speak of a back and forth movement, an oscillation between ordinariness and the experience of limitation.

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1. *Some examples of an experience of limitation*

Offering a range of examples can further help the reader understand this experience as forming a part of our everyday.

The following examples come mainly from Wittgenstein and Diamond but there is also one example taken from a description provided by the film director, Andrej Tarkovsky.

In his *Lecture on Ethics* Wittgenstein offers us three examples of such an experience: the example of wondering at the existence of the world—when he is inclined to use such phrases as 'how extraordinary that anything should exist' or 'how extraordinary that the world should exist'; the example of the experience of feeling absolutely safe and also that of feeling guilty in a way which makes us say that God disapproves of our conduct.

The absolute character of these experiences is stressed by the fact that Wittgenstein relates all three of them to God: 'For the first of them is, I believe, exactly what people were referring to when they said that God had created the world; and the experience of absolute safety has been described by saying that we feel safe in the hands of God. A third experience of the same kind is that of feeling guilty and again this was described by the phrase that God disapproves of our conduct' (PO, p. 42).

Let us see how absolute value takes the form of a dissatisfaction with meaning. Sense making seems to not fit with such experiences and, as also suggested in the *Lecture on Ethics*, any significant description seems to be rejected on the very ground of its significance.

In the first example of wonder at the existence of the world, what can be regarded as a trivial truth, to be taken for granted, suddenly seems to have some extra meaning. We can easily imagine someone countering from the perspective of facts: 'well, yes of course the world exists! What is there to wonder about?'

Similarly, absolute safety does not seem to be a matter of what we usually

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consider as being safe. My sense of safety is not a matter of certain facts taking place or not, it is not a matter of having locked one's door or carrying a gun or being with one's family. Absolute safety means that I am safe no matter what happens.

The same goes for Wittgenstein's third example. However hard one tries to convince us that we are not guilty, whatever arguments one might use to ease our guilt will not do. Trying to express why we feel guilty will not do any justice to our sense of guilt.

How are we to express this absolute wonder or safety or guilt? I will come back to the question but let me first turn to Diamond's description and offer some more examples. In her first one she focuses on the Ted Hughes poem, 'Six Young Men', where the speaker of the poem looks at a picture of six alive, young, smiling men, and then finds out that within six months of the picture's having been taken they were all dead. The difficulty that the poet or the speaker or the reader of the poem faces is that of simultaneously embracing the aliveness of the six men and their deadness, the paradox of the simultaneous awareness of death and life. This is another example where it seems as if meaning cannot be given to the experience. We remain in a state of horror at its inexplicability because it looks as if meaning has withdrawn. Our finitude, death or our bodily existence, are aspects of life which often seem untouched by meaning.

But the inexplicability can also take the form of astonishment or awe when it is related to a feeling that there is an abundance of meaning, when things look full of meaning.

Diamond refers to beauty, goodness and the miraculous, as examples where the inexplicability takes a positive form. She borrows Ruth Kluger's description of her memoir at Auschwitz, where a young woman helped her and stood up for her as a 12 year old child. In her memoir (Kluger, 2001) Kluger confesses that this young woman's kindness still remains inexplicable for her and fills her with astonishment.

Such an experience is also presented by Andrej Tarkovsky when he describes:

Sometimes I am filled with a sense of absolutely breathtaking happiness, which shakes my very soul, and in those moments of harmony the world around me

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begins to look as it really is -balanced and purposeful; and my inner, mental structure or system corresponds with the outer structure of the milieu, the universe- and vice versa. At those moments I believe myself to be all powerful: that my love is capable of any physical feat of heroism, that all obstacles can be overcome, that grief and yearning will be ended, and suffering be transformed into the fulfillment of dreams and hopes. This is one of these moments. (Tarkovsky, 1994, pp.316–317)

Tarkovsky's description can be considered to combine the two experiences that Wittgenstein discusses: wondering at the existence of the world and absolute safety. The wonder at the existence of the world appears in Tarkovsky's description as being in harmony with the world and seeing it as it really is, while the absolute safety that Wittgenstein describes is presented by Tarkovsky as the overcoming of all obstacles and the end of all suffering, grief and yearning.

But how can one make sense of such an absolute safety or the absolute value of the world existing? Diamond makes use of R. F. Holland's way of describing a miracle as what is at the same time empirically certain and conceptually impossible (Diamond, 2008, p.63). As soon as I try to put such an experience into words, I become dissatisfied because it seems to be deprived of its absolute character. The 'conceptually impossible' contradicts its 'empirically certain' aspect.

This dissatisfaction might create a tendency to avoid dealing with the problem that such experiences seem to create and I will approach this avoidance through what was previously called two temptations.

2. The generation of nonsense and the two temptations involved

The tight connection between expressing such experiences and the generation of nonsense is elaborated by Wittgenstein in the following passage:

If I say 'I wonder at the existence of the world' I am misusing language. [...] To say 'I wonder at such and such being the case' has only sense if I can imagine it not to be the case. In this sense one can wonder at the existence of, say, a house when one sees it and has not visited it for a long time and has imagined that it had been

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pulled down in the meantime. But it is nonsense to say that I wonder at the
existence of the world, because I cannot imagine it not existing. (PO, p.41–42)

Wondering at the existence of something, Wittgenstein says, suggests being able to
imagine its non-existence. But how can one really imagine the non-existence of the
world? And is that what would give meaning and sense to our sentence?

Recall that for Wittgenstein nonsense is generated when we have failed to give
meaning to one or more of a proposition's constituents (TLP, 5.4733). However, in
this case it seems that meaning cannot be given, at least not in the way meaning is
given to the constituents of facts. Furthermore, as I will argue, it seems that this is not
what we want in the first place.

For we could think of someone who would try to give a more humble meaning
to the word 'world' so as to imagine its non-existence. One could for example mean
that (s)he can imagine the non-existence of this particular world, as it exists now and
as opposed to what could have been the case under different circumstances. But the
question here is not to find a way for my words to have meaning because doing so
does not do justice to the absolute character. It might help us make sense but in doing
so it takes away the feeling that my experience has absolute value. Turning such an
experience into a question about our ability to really grasp or imagine or think of the
non-existence of the world is already an avoidance of what the experience has to offer
us if we are attentive to nonsense.

But let us take one step at a time. I should first clarify that not everyone is
attentive to the nonsense generated when trying to express such experiences, or
becomes troubled by it. My interest lies in a person who does become troubled by the
generation of nonsense, on a first level. One could describe such a person as someone
who has philosophical tendencies, and indeed such an experience may also be the way
for someone to enter into philosophy. Such an experience can work as a Socratic
gadfly, something that creates uneasiness and opens us up to a question, an aporia.
What troubles the incipient philosopher is the generation of nonsense and the question
on meaning that arises from it, namely the question how she could ensure that such an

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experience is endowed with meaning.

I want to argue that two temptations arise in front of this uneasiness: either to regard nonsense in terms of language-games or to seek to ground meaning in metaphysics; I will call these temptations 'temptation of facticity' and 'temptation of transcendence' respectively.⁵ The first one amounts to a trivialization of the experience, on the grounds that all there is are facts and their representation. Here, the experience is considered to be just a result of language-games, cultural influences, or grammatical illusion. The second temptation amounts to seeing the experience of limitation as a manifestation of the inexpressible or ineffable, namely of a realm which lies beyond language. I already gave a hint of this temptation: it is when we take the nonsense generated out of wondering at the existence of the world as implying that there is something our language cannot do; as if language were failing to express what we supposedly manage to grasp.

Both temptations prevent us from remaining exposed to nonsense and from seeing it as a chance for creativity, and I borrow a notion from Diamond to describe a stance of succumbing to these temptations. This is her notion of 'deflection' which describes the difficulty of remaining exposed to such an experience and the need to deny or avoid it. The difficulty involved, as I will argue, is a difficulty of accepting that grounding meaning is our own task and responsibility, because no metaphysics and no world-as-it-is can ground it for us.

I propose a different stance which will be called a stance of reflection⁶ and will be approached as what opens up the space (and the responsibility) for creativity in language.

⁵ I borrow these two notions (temptation of facticity and of transcendence) from Eli Friedlander who introduces them in his interpretation of the *Tractatus* (2001, p.17).

⁶ I owe this term to Sebastian Greve who came up with the idea while reading my text.

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Reflection is to be contrasted to deflection⁷ not only in the sense of a thoughtful position but even in the literary sense of the word, as what is receptive to light, with this receptivity being manifest in the very fact that it throws light back, or that it allows for an image to be shown. I will come back to this analogy with light. But let me first provide some examples of deflection.

3. *Some examples of deflection*

Let us recall the above-mentioned examples and see what would be a temptation of facticity, a temptation to regard the experience as requiring a recourse to facts and its absolute character as an illusion created by language. Let us start with the examples of astonishment: what first appears as having absolute value can be relativized or trivialized so that the 'extraordinariness of the existence of the world' or the 'astonishing kindness' become just contingent matters of taste or character. As Ruth Kluger says when she treats of the astonishing goodness of that woman at Aushwitz: 'people wonder at my wonder. They say, okay, some persons are altruistic. We understand that; it doesn't surprise us. The girl who helped you was one of those who liked to help' (Diamond, 2008, p.62).

In Diamond's example of the Ted Hughes's poem, a deflection through facticity would be to see this astonishment in terms of an inability to follow a language-game. Diamond also imagines one countering that there is no real depth to be astonished with because this is just a switch of language-game. When the photo was taken the six men were alive, but now what you see is a photo of the past. If you

⁷ Deflection and reflection are not however to be regarded as polar opposites. As it will be shown later, reflection presupposes our being tempted to deflect. Not being tempted means that one does not really experience running-up-against the limits of language. A helpful way to think about this is also through the Cavellian relation between acknowledgement and avoidance (besides Diamond's notion of deflection is influenced by what Cavell calls 'avoidance'). Even though these two things are opposite, Cavell also stresses that acknowledgment is essentially an acknowledgement of avoidance, thus upending their antithesis. From such a perspective, reflection can then be said to involve an acknowledgement of our tendency for deflection (avoidance). See Diamond, 2008, p. 84, Cavell, 1976, pp. 238-266. I owe these thoughts to Jean-Philippe Narboux who brought the Cavellian analogy to my attention.

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treat this from the perspective of the past you get feelings related to the aliveness of the picture and if you treat it from the perspective of the present you get feelings related to them being dead. Nothing difficult here!

In his *Lecture on Ethics* Wittgenstein also brings up this temptation of a recourse to facts when he asks us to do the thought experiment of imagining that we suddenly grew a lion's head and began to roar.

Certainly that would be as extraordinary a thing as I can imagine. Now whenever we should have recovered from our surprise, what I would suggest would be to fetch a doctor and have the case scientifically investigated and if it were not for hurting him I would have him vivisected. And where would the miracle have got to?

For it is clear that when we look at it in this way everything miraculous has disappeared; unless what we mean by this term is merely that a fact has not yet been explained by science which again means that we have hitherto failed to group this fact with others in a scientific system. This shows that it is absurd to say 'Science has proved that there are no miracles'. (PO, p.43)

The scientific way of looking at things is the way of looking at things qua facts but this, Wittgenstein says, is not the way to look at something as a miracle. 'For imagine whatever fact you may, it is not in itself miraculous in the absolute sense of that term' (PO, p.43).

There are two further facticity-related deflective interpretations of what Wittgenstein says. The first one is to think that we haven't yet found the correct logical analysis of expressions of the miraculous. According to this idea all there is are facts but we still haven't found the right language for these facts. Wittgenstein responds critically to such a way of thinking:

Now when this is urged against me I at once see clearly, as it were in a flash of light, not only that no description that I can think of would do to describe what I mean by absolute value, but that I would reject every significant description that anybody could possibly suggest, ab initio, on the ground of its significance. That is to say: I see now that these nonsensical expressions were not nonsensical because I had not yet found the correct expressions, but that their nonsensicality was their very essence. (PO, p. 44).

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This is a strong claim and Wittgenstein never clarifies how we are supposed to understand this essential nonsensicality. Following his TLP 5.4733 it would be wrong to understand this remark as implying that there is a special category of propositions which is intrinsically nonsensical. Nonsense is just the result of the fact that meaning has not yet been assigned. But then if it is not some logical or ontological features which prevent the assignment of meaning what is it that leads to nonsense being the essence of such propositions? Wittgenstein responds: it is that we do not want sense; or when he puts it in more personal terms, it is that himself he would reject any significant description. So then the question about the kind of features of some particular propositions becomes a question about ourselves. But this is still unclear: how are we to understand our rejection of every significant description on the ground of its very significance?

This unclarity gives rise to what I consider to be the second deflective interpretation.⁸ Focusing on Wittgenstein's aforementioned claim that we do not want significant descriptions, this interpretation draws from it the conclusion that in such cases we do not know what we want, which leads to the idea that these glimpses of the miraculous are illusions that we somehow have to be cured from. Under such a reading philosophy's therapeutic role is to cure us from such false schemes and metaphysical illusions.

My paper is opposed to such an approach and regards this essential nonsensicality and our not knowing what we want not as a trait of illusion or immaturity but rather as a dimension of our very existence in language. And, furthermore, as a dimension which allows for different types of relation with language, including creative uses of language. I will come back to this in a while.

Even though neither Wittgenstein nor Diamond mention it, I wish to suggest that there is also the other side of deflection, which corresponds to the second temptation mentioned above: the temptation to turn such an experience into

⁸ Such an interpretation seems to be put forward by some of the so-called resolute readings. See for instance Conant, 2004, p.185, where he speaks of running-up-against the limits of language as an illusion that the *Tractatus* seeks to explode.

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metaphysical reflection⁹. This can also be an avoidance through philosophy, through an epistemological discussion about the transcendental grounds for human knowledge, for instance about the very possibility of knowing about the existence of the world. Or it could be a discussion about a transcendent source of value (of life, beauty, goodness), in which case the miracle becomes something emanating from a transcendent source, something that is beyond language (or beyond the world-in-language).

In both cases the character of 'running-up-against' is lost or avoided and replaced either by facticity or by transcendence. I have suggested that there is also a non-deflective stance which does not succumb to these temptations and points towards creativity. I will now try to show how such a reflective stance becomes possible when we try to understand such experiences in relation to a question on meaning.

4. The groundlessness of meaning

I have suggested that what Wittgenstein approaches as 'essential nonsensicality' is expressed in our dissatisfaction with meaning, and that such dissatisfaction might manifest itself as a problem of meaning; this happens, for instance, in Wittgenstein's example where whatever meaning we try to give to the word 'world', wondering at its non-existence still does not seem to make sense but also in his example of absolute safety where the ordinary meaning of the word 'safety' leaves us with a sense of disappointment, as if it did not fit with what we want to express.

I call this problem 'groundlessness of meaning'. What I mean by groundlessness is that the question of meaning cannot be settled in advance nor in a determinate, once-

⁹ The term metaphysical reflection can help us understand the antithesis between deflection and reflection in a more refined way. As pointed out earlier, reflection presupposes an acknowledgement of our tendency to deflect, otherwise it can just become another kind of deflection itself, as in the case of metaphysical reflection.

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and-for-all way, but remains open and depends on the way we relate to language. If the experience of limitation brings one face to face with what was just called groundlessness of meaning, then this is what makes it hard to stay exposed to such experiences and creates a temptation to deny or avoid them.

But my reader might find the word 'groundlessness' too heavy, almost metaphysically so. Maybe some reader would counter to me: 'You speak of "groundlessness" because you see the experience of limitation from the point of view of the philosopher who seeks to ground meaning in a determinate way, and thus ends up being troubled by an experience of limitation because of the generation of nonsense.' From such a point of view, 'groundlessness' would be a word that causes anxiety to metaphysicians, to philosophers who have left everyday language and wish to ground meaning on some anchor point outside language, as if meaning were detached from our lives. This imaginary reader would perhaps continue by saying: 'The word groundlessness then concerns the metaphysician and not the ordinary person who sees no problem at all in meaning!'

I would then answer that it is indeed the philosopher who will be most concerned with what happens in an experience of limitation. It is (s)he who will be struck by the generation of nonsense and will ponder on what this necessary nonsense means. And also it is indeed the metaphysician who will see groundlessness as problematic, who will try to avoid it or remedy it. But is this really only a philosopher's or a metaphysician's problem?

One possible response here is that perhaps it is a philosopher's or a metaphysician's problem only insofar as neither trusts everyday language, as opposed to the ordinary person who can be naïve or ingenious with what (s)he means. But does the ordinary person in fact trust language? Is naivety a form of trust or does trust presuppose a loss of naivety? In other words, is grounding meaning only a philosopher's problem or does it show something about the ordinary person as well?

What I am suggesting is that if the experience of limitation poses a problem regarding meaning, this problem is neither restricted to such experiences and to some

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particular subject-matters only, nor to the philosopher or the metaphysician, but it concerns our very relation to meaning within our ordinary lives in language; and to the extent that such experiences concern our ordinary lives, they can teach us to be more attentive to our utterances in general. Being attentive to our words is distinct from both the stance of the metaphysician who does not pay attention to his or her ordinary utterances because they are supposedly too unstable or trivial, and the stance of naivety which amounts to abandoning the search for meaning by reducing it to the making of sense.

But why would we need some special search for meaning? Don't we know what we mean by the fact that we can provide an explanation on how we use our words, if someone asks us 'what do you mean?'. Someone can thus counter that we ground meaning in our significant uses and that we all do so even if we are not aware of it or even if we don't describe it that way.

However this response does not seem right to me and the first question that should be asked is what a significant use is. When do we use our propositions significantly? One could respond by saying: when the other person (our interlocutor) says that (s)he understands. But how do we know that (s)he has understood?

Wittgenstein in his *Notebooks* imagines a similar situation when he says 'The watch is lying on the table' and his interlocutor responds: 'Yes, but if the watch were in such-and-such a position would you still say it was lying on the table?'. Wittgenstein continues: 'And I should become uncertain. This shows that I did not know what I meant by "lying" in general. If someone were to drive me into a corner in this way in order to show that I did not know what I meant, I should say: "I know what I mean; I mean just this", pointing to the appropriate complex with my finger'¹⁰

¹⁰ Someone might misinterpret this passage and regard it as being in favor of an ostensive definition, thus attributing to early Wittgenstein the idea that names are the foundation of meaningful language use. But reading the whole passage, as it is also cited here in what follows, clearly shows that Wittgenstein is not putting forward an argument in favor of ostensive definition. On the contrary (and according to my overall approach to the so-called early Wittgenstein) this passage from the *Notebooks* seems to anticipate much of what later Wittgenstein renders clearer, esp. in his *Philosophical Investigations*. Under such a reading this passage from the *Notebooks* should be read together with PI, §§28–29 where he discusses ostensive definition, but also with PI§88 where Wittgenstein tries to clarify what we mean by exactness or inexactness.

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(NB, 1961, p.70).

Wittgenstein is pointing out that meaning is not a separate, hidden entity that one tries to grasp. Instead, meaning is connected with how I use my words. There is no need for an endless digging, he would suggest, and some things can be taken for granted. In the same passage we read: 'It is clear that I know what I mean by the vague proposition. But now someone else doesn't understand and says: "Yes, but if you mean that then you should have added such and such"; and now someone else again will not understand it and will demand that the proposition should be given in more detail still. I shall then reply: Now that can be taken for granted'.

I take it that Wittgenstein is here trying to help us avoid the temptation of transcendence and calm our agonizing need to ground meaning once and for all. When Wittgenstein says that we can take it for granted, he asks us to trust language and to stop trying to ground meaning on something outside language. But his demand from us to trust language should not be misunderstood as a demand for naivety. In other words, one should be wary of viewing the critique of the metaphysician's position as amounting to a complete indifference towards meaning. One should not throw out the baby with the bath water, so to speak.

Wittgenstein is not saying: 'take meaning for granted because you mean what you want to mean'. To trust language is not to take one's words for granted, but it is to take for granted that clarity can be achieved through language. It is to take for granted the possibility for meaning, or in other words to take for granted that possibilities of meaning are there for us to recover.

If Wittgenstein's 'taking for granted' meant that every time someone asked us what we mean we could end the discussion by saying 'I know what I mean; I mean just this', then there would be no possibility to understand or begin a dialogue. Disagreeing, persuading, making someone change his mind or getting someone to see a paradox in his or her own words would be impossible.

This is the point where the creative use of language enters the picture. By making us face this difficulty regarding meaning, an experience of limitation can

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invite us to care for meaning, to pay attention to our utterances and try to be clear and creative with our words. Disagreeing, persuading, seeing from a different perspective, getting someone to see a paradox, drawing an analogy, using a simile, all these are some of the ways of being creative with language. From this point of view, Wittgenstein's own treatment of the problem of such an experience in his Lecture on Ethics can be understood as a creative stance.

5. *From groundlessness to creativity*

I have argued that it is possible to give a different answer to an experience of limitation through an acceptance of the groundlessness of meaning. This different stance of non-deflection that allows us to stay exposed and learn from the experience of limitation has been differentiated from the two following positions:

a. a position that sees groundlessness of meaning as a problem to be solved through the search for some metaphysical or other stable ground (independent of our grammar).

b. a position that sees no problem at all in meaning. This stance says: 'I mean what I use my words to mean'. In this case, meaning becomes an issue of language games and grammar without further complications.

The first stance finds its expression in transcendence, as the effort to ground meaning transcendently (with metaphysics being the traditional solution); the second is expressed with facticity. Both stances fail to see meaning in terms of possibilities recoverable through our creative uses of language and thus fail to be sensitive to it.

As Cavell puts it, a life with no care for meaning is a life where we have not

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understood ourselves and we have not understood the world (Cavell, 1976, p.40).¹¹

The difficulty that manifests itself through an experience of limitation is then our difficulty of being at home with our words, with ourselves and with others.

It might already have crossed the reader's mind that the above-discussed are situated in the heart of the problem of skepticism. This is true; however I am interested in skepticism insofar as it is a problem of our ordinary lives as well. Groundlessness in that sense ceases to be a heavy, metaphysical term and becomes a term which designates the fact that our agreements rest on nothing and that meaning is a matter of how we use language, of how we relate to our utterances.

The question of having a real access to the world (one which would presumably allow us to give meaning to the above-described experiences) becomes a question of relating to our words. Thus it does continue to be a question of having access to the world, but this is not meant as discovering or grasping some world which is out of view or hidden beyond language but rather appropriating the world here and now, the world in plain view. This is an appropriation which takes place through the appropriation of our words by asking: 'how am I involved in meaning?'

The fact that this question is asked in the first singular person should not mislead us regarding the centrality of a shared understanding. Being involved in meaning does not suggest a psychologization of meaning which would render it a matter of the individual (of the sort 'I mean what I want to mean') for this is part of the

¹¹ Here is the whole passage: 'What these remarks come to is this: it is not clear what such an activity as my-finding-out-what-I-mean-by-a-word would be. But there obviously is finding-out-what-a-word-means. You do this by consulting a dictionary or a native speaker who happens to know. There is also something we may call finding-out-what-a-word-really-means. This is done when you already know what the dictionary can teach you; when, for some reason or other, you are forced into philosophizing. Then you begin by recollecting the various things we should say were such-and-such the case. Socrates gets his antagonists to withdraw their definitions not because they do not know what their words mean, but because they do know what they (their words) mean, and therefore know that Socrates has led them into paradox. (How could I be led into a paradox if I could mean what I wished by my words? Because I must be consistent? But how could I be inconsistent if words would mean what I wanted them to mean?) What they had not realized was what they were saying, or, what they were really saying, and so had not known what they meant. To this extent, they had not known themselves, and not known the world. I mean, of course, the ordinary world. That may not be all there is, but it is important enough: morality is in that world, and so are force and love; so is art and a part of knowledge (the part which is about that world); and so is religion (wherever God is).' (Cavell, 1976, pp.39-40)

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facticity position that has been criticized so far. On the contrary, it is a realization that I have lost my way about (language as) our common ground of being astonished or horrified, of being left speechless but also of understanding. Being actively involved in meaning entails a first person assumption of responsibility but this assumption takes place within the community.

I have dealt with the experience of limitation in a way which instead of avoiding the problem reflects (on) it and brings it to the surface as a problem of meaning. I called this problem 'groundlessness' and I presented it as a chance for creativity. Under this reading, what might at first appear to be a problem (or failure) of language is transformed into a problem of our relation to language, into a concrete problem of being more actively and creatively involved in our utterances.

In that sense, reflection or creativity is not only a chance offered by an experience of limitation but it also has the urgency of a task: the task to find our way back to the common world, to know ourselves and the others, or else to find our place within our form of life.

I will conclude my paper by offering some examples of this reflective stance.

6. *Concluding remarks: Some examples of reflection*

Let me try to give some examples of a creative use of language. According to what has been argued so far, horrifying or astonishing experiences like the ones previously described can lead to an effort to express what is going on despite the sense of dissatisfaction or failure that this may create to us. Insisting and trying to express such experiences can lead to the creation of a poem or of a piece of music or even of a philosophy paper! Dissatisfaction is eased through creation because what at first seemed impossible is then transformed into an object of shared understanding.

Reading Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* we find ourselves in front of the following scene. Prince Muishkin is having a conversation with General Epanchin's daughters.

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One of them, Adelaida, who loves to paint, has been insistently looking for a good subject for a picture. She asks for the prince's opinion and after a while the prince responds that she should 'draw the face of a criminal, one minute before the fall of the guillotine, while the wretched man is still standing on the scaffold, preparatory to placing his neck on the block' (Dostoyevsky, 2002, p.63).

Adelaida is surprised and asks him to describe what he means. This is where the reader who has already thought about the problem that this paper tries to treat might wonder: how can Dostoyevsky possibly describe what seems essentially hard to even imagine? A painting might do; but language? The concern is shared by prince Muishkin himself:

'It was just a minute before the execution', began the prince, readily, carried away by the recollection and evidently forgetting everything else in a moment; 'just at the instant when he stepped off the ladder on to the scaffold. He happened to look in my direction: I saw his eyes and understood all, at once—but *how am I to describe it? I do so wish you or somebody else could draw it, you, if possible.* I thought at the time what a picture it would make. You must imagine all that went before, of course, all—all' (Dostoyevsky, 2002, p.63).

What I find amazing and much helpful for our purposes here is that reading prince Muishkin's description (which is too long to be quoted here) leaves the reader with a surprising sense of satisfaction. What might have seemed impossible takes place as an act of creation. And although some readers might have worried that language will fail prince Muishkin, Dostoyevsky's brilliant description helps restore our faith in language. Instead of looking like a cage, language now looks like a liberating path.

Let me continue with an example we had already discussed. In Diamond's first example the horror from the contradiction between life and death (from being aware of death while being alive) is already expressed creatively by the fact that Ted Hughes made a poem out of it. Here is the relevant stanza (Hughes, 1957, pp.54–55):

That man's not more alive whom you confront
And shake by the hand, see hale, hear speak loud,

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Than any of these six celluloid smiles are,
Nor prehistoric or fabulous beast more dead;
No thought so vivid as their smoking blood:
To regard this photograph might well dement,
Such contradictory permanent horrors here
Smile from the single exposure and shoulder out
One's own body from its instant and heat.

I take this to also be a beautiful example of how such moments can lead to creativity. Tarkovsky's own description was another beautiful example. But this presupposes staying exposed to such experiences and not deflecting; because as it has been canvassed, one could as well have treated this difficulty of reality as some ineffable feature which would result to feeling constrained, in which case the question about our own involvement in meaning would turn into a metaphysical question. Or one could have trivialized such an experience by treating it in terms of language-games or an illusion, in which case the question about the significance of our own active involvement in meaning would not come up at all. Someone embracing such a position would not really get what the poem is about or would not understand Ted Hughes himself; one would not be touched by him.

To not deflect means to stay exposed to an experience of limitation. Being exposed means that one is no longer protected and might even become vulnerable. The term 'exposure' is used in photography to designate the amount of light allowed to fall on the photographic film or a sensor during the process of taking a photograph. When I used the word reflection to designate such a stance I suggested that it should not only be considered as thoughtfulness but also as a process where light is received and sent back.

My paper has then been about exposure and reflection and I hope to have shown how an experience of limitation may function just as light functions in photography, as what can lead to creation.

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