EXPERIENCES WE CANNOT DESCRIBE

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Introduction

This paper will address the idea of the ineffability of experience. Supposedly, there is something about my experience – a core of subjective feel of 'what it is like' – that I cannot describe to anyone else. Since, perhaps, the publication of Thomas Nagel's paper 'What is it like to be a bat?' in 1974, that idea has spawned an enormous discussion that, for obvious reasons of space, will not be rehearsed here.\(^1\) Nagel, for his part, did not claim that experiences are ineffable. However, he helped to introduce the notion of subjective feel or what-it-is-likeness.

What I find intriguing is that the ineffability of subjective experience looks very much like the end point of a *reductio*. If it is consistently held, it is hard to see how one can avoid complete skepticism about other minds. It also seems to imply that I can never tell anyone what I see, nor discuss something we both see. (This criticism has been put forward by others (REF). Here it is simply mentioned, as the rest of my argument is not dependent on it.) Yet the idea lives curiously on. I take this to indicate that the ineffability of subjective experience is not just a piece of confusion based on identifiable fallacies – even though I will proceed to point out some of those fallacies. Conversely, it will not be laid to rest simply by snuffing out the fallacies. To understand its appeal, we must identify the implicit background from which it arises.

It seems to me, then, that problems associated with ineffability are *not accidental* in the current philosophy of mind. The entire system is rigged so as to make them appear. One may even ask whether 'perception' and 'experience' have not, in their current philosophical use, been turned into pseudo-concepts. To put it more charitably: questions need to be asked about the relation between standard philosophical construals of 'perception' and 'experience' and, on the other hand, the concepts of hearing, seeing, having an experience, looking, listening, etc., as those occur outside the philosophical context.

The concept of experience, in its current shape in mainstream philosophy of mind, is a legacy of the Empiricist tradition. That tradition has interacted with experimental psychology and neurobiology, where the relevant concepts are bound up with specific (and perfectly legitimate) experimental methods. But it also seems to me that the idea of ineffability has another root: our occasional genuine feeling of not being able to convey our experience to others – or at least, to others who have not been through the same kind of thing. In the last part of this paper, I will discuss that feeling via the drastic example of Erich Maria Remarque’s *Nothing New on the Western Front*.

My suggestion is that this sense in which the communication of experience may be impossible should be analysed in ethical rather than epistemological terms: not as a question of what we know about the other person’s inner life but as an expression of the sense of vulnerability that often permeates human relations.

Hume’s Pineapple

Examples of the ineffability thesis abound in modern literature.\(^2\) They can be traced back to, at least, David Hume, who writes, in *Treatise on Human Nature*:

To give a child an idea of scarlet or orange, of sweet or bitter, I present the objects, in other words, convey to him these impressions; but proceed not so absurdly, as to endeavour to produce the impression by exciting the ideas. Our ideas upon their appearance produce not their corresponding impressions, nor do we perceive any colour, or feel any sensation merely upon thinking of them (p. 52). [...] We cannot form to ourselves a just idea of the taste of a pineapple, without having actually tasted it (p. 53).\(^3\).

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\(^1\) Nagel … Ref.

\(^2\) C.H. Vanderwolf (1998), 'Brain, Behavior, and Mind: What do we Know and What can we Know?' (Neuroscience & Behavioral Review Vol. 22 No. 2, pp. 125-142, 1998) (p. 130): "It is widely accepted that one cannot communicate one’s own subjective experience to another person. It is impossible to explain what a mango tastes like to someone who has never eaten one. Further, it is impossible to know what another person’s subjective experience is really like even when both have had an objectively similar experience."

To this it can be replied that we may easily describe the taste of pineapple by comparing it with other fruit. Hume might agree in one sense, but for him that response would seem irrelevant. He might point out two things. The description would still require that the listener be familiar with the taste of other fruit. Moreover, it would give the listener only a piece of superficial, propositional knowledge, but no real acquaintance with (or ‘a just idea of’) the taste of pineapple.

The first point is true, of this case and of all explaining. In describing anything, we should adjust the description to what the listener already knows. If I describe pineapple to someone with no experience of fruit at all I need to proceed in some other way. I can compare it with something else with which the listener is familiar.

Would that still count as a sufficient explanation of what pineapple tastes like? The obvious question here is: What is required for an explanation to be sufficient? Should it help you pick out pineapple from other fruit? Or help you decide if you should try some? So far, it has not been indicated what it is that cannot be described.

At this stage, those who agree with Hume might reply that a description that helps me with a limited task is not an exhaustive or complete description.

But here I disagree. Their response would be based on the tacit assumption that we obviously know what it means to ask for an exhaustive description here (and perhaps everywhere). The exhaustive description is supposedly a description that, unlike the specific and practically oriented descriptions that were suggested, answers all questions and is not bound up with any specific purpose. But the idea of answering ‘all’ questions presupposes a limited number of questions. The very idea of giving an exhaustive description is thus bound up with contexts where such limits may be given.

The minutes of a meeting may be called exhaustive when they take up all the legally relevant details about agenda, votes taken, and the like. A nod may constitute an exhaustive answer to a simple question. On the other hand, if you describe a person to me and I reply, ‘Well, that was an exhaustive description’, my response shows that my interest in that person is fairly limited. In an obvious way, our descriptions of simply anything could always be expanded, but whether we do so depends on our interests. Distinctions between exhaustive and incomplete descriptions are applicable only insofar as there is no ambiguity, no open-endedness, about what the description should achieve. Most descriptions are neither to be called exhaustive nor incomplete, because that distinction is not made.

Thus the idea that there is something extremely difficult here may, in the end, be based on the fact that I have not specified what I am going to accept as success. Somewhat similarly, it may feel very difficult in the abstract to decide exactly how large an area is designated by the word ‘here’. But in a practical context it does not need to be difficult at all.4

The Role of Samples

One might reply, however, that Hume does mention a specific task that the description should perform. The description should make the listener feel the taste of pineapple. And arguably, that cannot be achieved by means of a verbal description.5

The requirement might seem odd. The fact that tastebuds are not stimulated by sound is not usually regarded an obvious shortcoming in either. And, as Jonathan Westphal points out,6 the corresponding requirement is never made in other contexts. A satisfactory description of the meaning of, say, ‘uncle’ does not need to induce in us the feel of an uncle. Yet it is not usually argued that the meaning of ‘uncle’ cannot be described.

On the other hand, the fact (if it is a fact)7 that I cannot make you feel the taste of pineapple by means of a verbal description does not mean I cannot make you feel the taste at all. You can try pineapple if I give you some. And, as Wittgenstein highlights,
the use of a sample may also be treated as part of the description. The main question in this connection is not in what ways I can make you feel the taste. The question is what ‘feeling the taste’ is supposed to achieve. In what sense is it important that you should be made to feel the taste?

Hume would definitely not think of the sample as constituting part of the description. Giving a sample is in a sense, for him, the opposite of describing, for it succeeds precisely where mere descriptions must fail. I can understand verbal descriptions of a taste only because I have earlier tried the thing or something similar to it. Thus my familiarity with samples is also the key to my understanding of verbal descriptions. Unlike the verbal description, the sample gives me direct, immediate and complete access to the experience in question.

Bertrand Russell summarised his own version of this idea in his basic distinction between knowledge by description and knowledge by acquaintance. Thus he writes,

> The particular shade of colour that I am seeing may have many things said about it – I may say that it is brown, that it is rather dark, and so on. But such statements, though they make me know truths about the colour, do not make me know the colour itself any better than I did before: so far as concerns knowledge of the colour itself, as opposed to knowledge of truths about it, I know the colour properly and completely when I see it, and no further knowledge of it itself is even theoretically possible.

This explains the surprising requirement that a complete description of pineapple taste should make us feel the taste. Having the feeling itself is thought to be the only sort of knowledge that leaves no question unanswered.

But here I would point out that the use of samples is not immune to the difficulty that made purely verbal descriptions seem inadequate; namely, that any adequate description is only so in relation to a purpose, not once and for all in relation to an assumed (and unspecified) absolute standard of completeness. That may be seen in Wittgenstein’s discussion of the use of samples in ostensive definitions. Samples may be understood and misunderstood much in the same way as other parts of the language game. Their usefulness depends on the fact that their overall role in the language game is clear.

When Russell says he knows the colour brown completely from his immediate experience, he is not claiming he can never be mistaken about the colour of objects (in a shadow, at the sunset, etc.). He says he is acquainted with “the colour itself”. But what is the relation between that and the appearance of brown objects in a natural environment? We should remember that colour samples are helpful there only because the roles of illumination, shadows and highlights are also being taken into account. Thus the fact that Russell is acquainted with the colour brown from his earlier contact with a colour sample does not, in itself, guarantee that he can recognise brown objects in new viewing conditions. The same thing is true of taste samples. They may be inadequate in some way or other. Not all pineapple will taste the same every time. And here even the criteria of ‘sameness’ and ‘adequacy’ will be dependent on what the sample is supposed to achieve.

In sum, the surprising requirement that a complete description of a taste should make us feel the taste is, in the last analysis, based on the idea that feeling the taste of conscious experience can be informatively described. By informative description I mean a description that is capable of eliciting undergoing for the first time, that is, capable of conferring knowledge by acquaintance all by itself (i.e., not accompanied by corresponding sensory stimulation).
constitutes complete knowledge. Supposedly it escapes the context dependence that might seem to make ordinary verbal descriptions incomplete. Using a sample might then look like an obvious way out. However, the usefulness of the sample is also context dependent.

The ‘What It Is Like’ Feel

In the previous sections it was pointed out that, contrary to the ineffability thesis, we can and do convey tastes and other experiences to each other in many kinds of way. However, the argument might leave the reader with the sense that the main question has barely been addressed.

The reader might say that a description of an experience should not just help the listener with some practical issue. It should capture the subjective experience itself. The assumed difficulty here is not only that of describing one’s experience to others, but of getting hold of it at all – perhaps above all, of describing it to oneself.14 It seems to be a case of trying to look inwards, getting hold of something and putting it into words. And somehow we find that every effort to do so leaves something out.

This invites the question what kind of a role ‘the description’ should play here. If I describe something to you I address you. I wish you to know or pay attention to something, and I may want to make sure I have got my point across. When I describe my experience to myself I am not communicating information. It is as if I was trying to point inwards, to a feeling, reminding myself of it.15 Thus the idea is: the complete knowledge of an experience requires the sort of direct contact with it that I have when I attend to my own experience.

What is it then that I am attending to? In the literature, this core of my experience is often called its quale or its ‘what-it-is-like’ aspect. Here is a representative enumeration of examples:

By quale, philosophers mean those properties of conscious experiences which define what the experience feels like for the subject. The taste of chocolate, the itch of a mosquito bite, the heat of the sauna, the shrill, chirping noise of a grasshopper, and the pale yellowish glow of the full moon are qualitative properties of conscious experiences.16

However, we might reply that the list above has not pointed to anything that cannot be put to words. It is a list of various experiences. The items in it could easily be elaborated into full descriptions. So why say that qualia are ineffable?

The response to that might be that the items in the list are, in a sense, no direct descriptions of qualia, even if they have been put there in order to indicate what kinds of experience are meant. They are the stimuli that cause certain experiences. By thinking of the examples I can recall the qualia of my personal experiences. But no amount of detail about the stimuli can convey the feel of my experience of the moonlit night; how it feels to me.

But now we also see that the problem is created by a restrictive definition of ‘feeling’ or ‘experience’. ‘Experience’ has been defined in terms of inner processes while every ‘external’ aspect of it has been systematically left out. M.G.F. Martin characterises that view (to which he is opposed) in the following way:

On this view, awareness of the objects and how they appear to be is one thing – the mind is directed out to the world – and attention to one’s own experience is another thing. The experience is merely a causal intermediary between the world and our knowledge of it: our awareness of experience requires directing attention not at the objects of sense but rather within the mind.17

Suppose seeing, tasting, touching, etc., are feelings; and suppose my feelings are defined as states of my mind, soul, or brain. Then ‘the ineffability of qualia’ comes to

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14 A point made by Hugo Strandberg.
15 Cf. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* I: § 253: ‘I have seen a person in a discussion on this subject strike himself on the breast and say: “But surely another person can’t have THIS pain!”’ The answer to this is that one does not define a criterion of identity by emphatic stressing of the word ‘this’. Rather, what the emphasis does is to suggest the case in which we are conversant with such a criterion of identity, but have to be reminded of it.1

play; for while I might show you things that cause my state of mind I could never show you the state of mind itself (nor my brain 'from the inside', whatever that means).

The ineffability thesis says that my experience has an inner core of subjective feel, a what-it-is-likeness that cannot be conveyed to anyone else. What I am now arguing is not: 'Experience has no such core'. (I am not saying that experience has it, either – because the 'it' might mean different things.) But I am asking: Why is it that our actual ways of describing experience are not taken to show that their 'feel' can be described?

Empiricism and Experimental Research

The root cause of this problem lies, as I said, in the restrictive definition of 'experience'. This happens already with the early Empiricists. In Berkeley’s first Dialogue between Hylas and Philonous, Philonous (the interlocutor representing Berkeley’s own voice) maintains that smelling a flower does not consist in applying the flower to one’s nose and breathing in. These activities are not even aspects of smelling. Smelling is only the act of sensation that follows these activities.

Phil. In plucking this flower, I am active, because I do it by the motion of my hand, which was consequent upon my volition; so likewise in applying it to my nose. But is either of these smelling?
Hyl. No. […]
Phil. Smelling then is somewhat consequent to all this.18

Similarly, James Mill concludes, in his description of the sense of touch, that '[t]he feelings of resistance, extension, and figure, are not feelings of touch' as they would imply movement, which is external to the feeling itself.

When these […] are detached, a very simple sensation seems to remain, the feeling which we have when something, without being seen, comes […] in contact with our skin, in such a way that we cannot say whether it is hard or soft, rough or smooth, of what figure it is, or of what size.19

One should probably add that ‘pure’ feelings of touch would not even include awareness of one’s skin being touched, as the idea of a skin, or generally a surface enclosing a three-dimensional body, would also imply movement.20 Thus, in an attempt to isolate a pure concept of perceptual experience, one is left with a minimal core that is hardly describable at all. ‘Experience’ is systematically purged of any aspect that is normally described when we describe our experiences without a philosophical point in mind. There is a profound difference between the idea of experience as understood here – and in general, in the Empiricist tradition – and, on the other hand, ‘experience’ in an everyday sense (as when someone is called an experienced driver).21

On the other hand, the Empiricist idea of experience is connected to the emergence of experimental research, aiming to connect physiological knowledge with introspective reports by research subjects. In the case of Mill, the connection is obvious.

James J. Gibson, also writing about the sense of touch, emphasises the attention paid by early experimental researchers to the so-called stimulus error (CHECK). This supposed error consisted in the fact that, when research subjects were asked to report what they felt at the application of a certain tactile stimulus, they tended to describe the stimulus and not the sensation induced by it. Much effort was put into developing a setting that would distinguish between stimulus and sensation:

First of all it was required that the experimental subject was passive and that the stimulus was presented by the experimenter, not acquired by the research subject. Second, the stimuli were usually small, individual, brief indentations of the skin effected by a needle, a hair or the point of a heated or refrigerated metal tube. Third, the research person was asked to report his consciousness of

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20 A point made by Smith, loc. cit (?) See also Condillac, Traité de sensations (?)
the sensation, not of the object that had caused it. A report of the perception (what the object seemed to be) instead of the sensation (of how the skin felt) was considered an error. Some perceptual component must have been often present in these experiments, for the observer had difficulties in avoiding what Titchener called 'stimulus error'. Left on his own, the observer tended to report the object of his experience instead of the mental content.\textsuperscript{22}

However, whatever our reservations about those experiments, they did serve a genuine purpose: that of finding out about various features of the nervous system. The mistake, if there was one, consisted in the idea that the experimental results would serve as a blueprint for a reductive description of the sense of touch (of what is involved in finding out about one’s environment by means of touch) in terms of isolated tactile stimuli.

**Epistemological and Ethical Obstacles to Describing**

In the remaining part of this paper, I discuss a specific case of someone not being able to convey his experience to others. It is a case that may be made sense of quite independently of whatever one thinks of Empiricist epistemology, and I invite participants of this Seminar to comment on whether the two parts of the present paper should really be presented separately. There is a reason, however, for reading them together. I do not think the Ineffability thesis can be laid to rest simply by pointing out that it involves fallacies of various kinds. It involves a response to a feeling I think is familiar to everyone: that there are experiences we cannot discuss with those who have not been through the same thing themselves. Moreover, it is connected to the occasional feeling that exactly those experiences lie deep in us and define us as individuals.

But I believe that the Ineffability thesis involves the mistake of construing the difficulty epistemologically – in terms of what we know about each others’ experiences. It should rather be treated ethically – in terms of obstacles that separate us.

To exaggerate a bit: it might strike us as odd that we never run out of words when the experiences we describe are trivial. Walls start arising between us when what we want to say really matters. This is not a matter of the limited resources of language. It is about our relations to those whom we wish to reach.

**The Undescribable War Experience**

*Im Westen nichts Neues\textsuperscript{23} (All Quiet on the Western Front),* Erich Maria Remarque’s horrifying war novel, is set on the German side of the front in the First World War. This collective slaughter, one of the worst in human history\textsuperscript{24}, was fought as a war of attrition, holding one’s positions and waiting for the other side to wear down by disease, famine, and the sheer weight of troops thrown at them. The stated aim of Remarque’s book was to be 'a report of a generation destroyed by war – even when it escaped its grenades'.\textsuperscript{25} The novel earned immediate international fame as an indictment of the war and of the older generation that had welcomed it.\textsuperscript{26}

The war is seen through the eyes of Paul Bäumer, nineteen years. Along with his classmates, he volunteers to the German forces directly from school. Stolen of his youth, he grows to adulthood inside a meatgrinder using up his comrades one by one. Much of the work describes the sheer horror of war, where men are reduced to human animals surviving by mere instinct.

On another level, the novel is about communication, its difficulties and impossibilities when two worlds meet. Part of the tragedy of the war (and presumably, of all wars)

\textsuperscript{22} Gibson, 100-101. [The senses considered as perceptual systems] (THIS IS MY TRANSLATION OF THE SWEDISH TRANSLATION; THE ORIGINAL MUST BE CHECKED. För det första krävdes att försökspersonen i ett experiment var passiv och att stimulus presenterades av experimentatorn, inte förvärvades av försökspersonen. För det andra var stimuli vanligen små, enstaka, korta inträckningar i huden, utförda av en nål, ett hårstrå eller spetsen av ett uppvärmt eller nedkylt metallrör. För det tredje ombuds försökspersonen att rapportera sitt medvetande om förmögenhet, inte om det objekt som hade förrorsakat den. En rapport om perceptionen (vad objektet syntes vara) i stället för förmögenhet (hur huden kändes) betraktades som ett fel. Någon perceptionsskönhet måste ofta ha förkommitt i dessa experiment, ty iakttagaren hade svårt att undvika det som Titchener kallade för "stimulusfel". Lämnad för sig själv tenderade iakttagaren att rapportera objektet för sin erfarenhet i stället för det mentala innehållet.

\textsuperscript{23} Erich Maria Remarque, 1990. *Im Westen nichts Neues.* Ed. Brian Murdoch. London: Routledge. First edition Berlin: Propyläen Verlag, 1929. – References to the work will indicate both the chapter and page numbers. All translations will be by the present author. The novel was immediately translated to English; Murdoch (1990, 34) characterises the translation as ‘uneven’.

\textsuperscript{24} ‘The statistics, which are only guesses, speak of ten million dead in all the combatant countries’ – Brian Murdoch, 1990, Introduction (pp. 1-35), p. 8.

\textsuperscript{25} Remarque 1990, 40. Italics added.

\textsuperscript{26} Brian Murdoch, back cover of Remarque 1990.
was the fact that its realities were never adequately brought home to those behind the front. But the novel also shows that the difficulty of communication was not just incidental or due to censorship. It was necessary, for the sheer psychological (and perhaps physical) survival of those who were part of it, not to speak of it, nor to dwell on its memories. A veil, a step had to separate the two worlds of the front and home. And it was necessary for those at home not to feel the full reality of where their sons had been sent.

The early life that Paul has left behind now strikes him as completely alien. He sees there is no return to it for him, but at the same time it is impossible for him to tell others about the new reality at the front. He reflects on the meanings of words and on their lack thereof. Words that once meant something are now empty. Other words have acquired a new, sinister meaning.

Heavy barrage, barrage, blanket fire, mines, gas, tanks, machine guns, hand grenades – words, words, but they contain the terror of the world.

The other reality at the front constitutes a world completely different from civilian life:

It is always the same: we leave off and we are soldiers, grudging or in good spirits, then come the first gun emplacements, and every word of our conversation has a changed sound.

If Kat [Katzcinsky, Paul’s elder comrade] stands before the barracks and says, “there’s a show [bombardment] – “, then that is precisely what he says, full stop; if he says it here instead, the sentence will have the sharpness of a bayonet in a moonlit night, it cuts right through your thoughts, it is closer, addressing that unconscious that has awaken in us, with the dark meaning, “there’s a show” – . Perhaps it is our innermost and most secret life shivering and rising for defence.

Things come to a head when Paul comes home for a leave. He meets his family, who timidly question him about his life on the front.

[Paul’s mother:] "Was it bad out there, Paul?"

Mother, what shall I answer? You will never understand and never grasp it. And you must never grasp it.

"[...] What with the gas and all that."

It is my mother saying this. She says: what with the gas and all that. She has no idea of what she is talking about, she is just worried for my sake. Shall I tell you we once found two enemy trenches full of people stiff on their places, as if hit by stroke? On the parapets, in the dugouts, exactly as they had been, standing and lying blue in their faces, dead.

"O, Mother, they talk so much nonsense", I replied [...] Paul’s father wants details and interesting stories about battles. He has "wishes that I find moving and stupid":

I realise he doesn’t know that that sort of thing cannot be told to others, and I, too, would like to make him happy; but there is a danger for me if I put these things into words. I am afraid that they will then grow to giant proportions and

27 Cf. Erik Ahlman: ‘An instinct of psychological survival sometimes makes it incumbent on us to refrain from the full understanding of another person’ – Trans. OL. (REF, KOLLA ORGINALET).
28 Es ist ein Schleier und ein Schritt dazwischen [between Paul and his previous milieu]. (VII, 151)
29 Trommelfeuer, Sperrfeuer, Gardinenfeuer, Minen, Gas, Tanks, Machinengewehre, Handgranaten – Worte, Worte, aber sie umfassen das Grauen der Welt. (VI, 133)
30 Jedesmal ist es dasselbe: wir fahren ab und sind mürrische oder gutgelaunte Soldaten; dann kommen die ersten Geschützstände, und jedes Wort unserer Gespräche hat einen veränderten Klang.

Wenn Kat vor den Baracken steht und sagt: "Es gibt Kattun – “, so ist das eben seine Meinung, fertig; wenn er es aber hier sagt, so hat der Satz eine Schärfe wie ein Bajonett nachts im Mond, er schneidet glatt durch die Gedanken, er ist näher und spricht zu diesen Unbewußten, das in uns aufgewacht ist, mit einer dunklen bedeutung, "es gibt Kattun“ – . Vielleicht ist es unser innerstes und geheimstes Leben, das erzittert und zur Abwehr erhebt. (IV S. 78)
31 "War es sehr schlimm draußen, Paul?"

Mother, was soll ich darauf antworten? Du wirst es nicht verstehen und nie begreifen. Du sollst es auch nie begreifen.

"[...] mit dem Gas und all dem andern."

Es ist meine Mutter, die das sagt. Sie sagt: mit dem Gas und all dem andern. Sie weiß nicht, was sie spricht, sie hat nur Angst um mich. Soll ich dir erzählen, daß wir einmal drei gegnerische Gräben fanden, die erstarrt waren in ihrer Haltung, wie vom Schlag getroffen? Auf den Brustwehren [parapets], in den Unterständen, [dugouts] wo sie gerade waren, standen und lagen die Leute mit blauen Gesichtern, tot.

"Ach, Mutter, was so geredet wird", antwortete ich [...] (VII, 152)
can no longer be mastered. What is to become of us if everything that goes on out there was made quite clear.\textsuperscript{32}

It is not that the war, in itself, is so terrible that it outstrips every description. Apparently Remarque’s readers, some of whom had been to the front, frequently thought he had captured their war experience exactly as it was. It is only that Paul cannot describe it to his parents, nor, in full, to himself. The risk is that he will "suddenly have to lean against the wall, as the world turns soft as rubber, my veins turning bristle as rotting wood".\textsuperscript{33} But the sense of ‘cannot’ here is ethical. (MORE OF THIS?) Also, it is not a question of Paul wanting to tell his parents something but failing. He cannot tell them and he refuses to tell them – he will not for his life tell them. These come down to the same thing.\textsuperscript{34}

At home, Paul goes to his old schoolboy’s room. There are all his things and books waiting for him, exactly as he left them. He goes to the bookshelf.

Searching, skimming through, taking up new books. Soon there is a pile lying next to me. Others are added, quicker – loose sheets, notebooks, letters.

I stand in front of them, wordless. As if on trial.

Depressed.

Words, words, words – they don’t reach me.

Slowly I put the books back to their empty places.

Gone.

Quietly, I leave the room.\textsuperscript{35}

The books and notes no longer address him, they no longer touch him; not because the words happen to be the wrong ones and the job could be done by some other words; but because his earlier life, now on trial, has lost its relevance. He can think back to his earlier days, but there is no life left in it:

But it would be the same as when we fall into thoughts in front of the photo of a dead comrade; his traits are there, his face is there, and our days together acquire a semblance of life in our memory; but he is not there.\textsuperscript{36}

But Paul still connects with his family via simple gestures: food that has quietly been spared for him for months, simple clumsy words:

If my mother says to me, "my dear boy", it means as much to me as when someone else makes a terrible fuss or whatever.\textsuperscript{37}

An important scene shows Paul and Kat in a shed roasting a goose, stolen from a farmhouse near the frontlines. Very little is said, they connect through the shared meal.

So we sit there facing each other, Kat and I, two soldiers in threadbare coats, roasting a goose, in the middle of night. We don’t talk much, but we are full of delicate concern for each other, as I imagine lovers being. We are two human beings, two tiny sparks of life, outside there is night and the sphere of death. We sit at its edge, endangered and concealed, fat dripping over our hands, we are close to each other in our hearts, and the hour is like the room: the tranquil fire sends the lights and shadows of sensation dancing back and forth. What does he know of me – what do I know of him, earlier none of our thoughts was

\textsuperscript{32} [Pauls far vill höra om hur det är vid fronten, han har “Wünsche, die ich nährend und dumm finde:” Ich begreife daß er nicht weiß, daß so etwas nicht erzählt werden kann, und ich möchte ihm auch gern den Gefallen tun; aber es ist eine Gefahr für mich, wenn ich diese Dinge in Worte bringe, ich habe Scheu, daß sie dann riesenhaft werden und sich nicht bewältigen lassen. Wo blieben wir, wenn uns alles ganz klar würde, was da draußen vorgeht. (VII, 155)

\textsuperscript{33} […] Furcht, mich plötzlich an die Wand lehnen zu müssen, weil die Welt weich wird wie Gummi und die Adern mürbe wie Zunder. (VII, 152)

\textsuperscript{34} Cf. Wittgenstein, \textit{Culture and Value}. “Man’s greatest happiness is love. Suppose you say of the schizophrenic: he does not love, he cannot love, he does not want to love – where is the difference?” (CHECK TRANS.) (END OF 1948).

\textsuperscript{35} Ich suche, blättere, nehme neue Bücher. Schon liegt ein Pack neben mir. Andere kommen dazu, hastiger – Blätter, Hefte, Briefe.

Stumm stehe ich davor. Wie vor einem Gericht.

Mutlos.

Worte, Worte, Worte – sie erreichen mich nicht.

Langsam stelle ich die Bücher wieder in die Lücken.

\textsuperscript{36} Aber es wäre das gleiche, wie wenn wir nachdenklich werden vor der Photographie eines toten Kameraden; es sind seine Züge, es ist sein Gesicht, und die Tage, die wir mit ihm zusammen waren, gewinnen ein träumerisches Leben in unserer Erinnerung; aber er ist es nicht selbst. (VI, 125)

\textsuperscript{37} Wenn meine Mutter zu mir “lieber Junge” sagt, so ist das so viel, als wenn eine andere wer weiß was anstellt. (VII, 151)
similar – now we sit in front of a goose and feel that we exist and are so close that we don’t feel like talking about it.  

The significance of the event is conveyed in part by pointing out that Kat and Paul do not want to talk of it.

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Cf. Rainer Maria Rilke:

For stanzas are not, as people think, feelings (those you have early enough) – they are experiences. For the sake of one stanza you must see many cities, people and things, you must know the animals, you must feel how the birds fly, and know the gesture with which small flowers open themselves in the morning. You must be able to think back […] to childhood days, yet unaccounted for, to parents whom you surely insulted when they brought a joy to you and you didn’t understand it (it was joy for someone else – ).

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38 So sitzen wir gegenüber, Kat und ich, zwei Soldaten mit abgeschabten Röcken, die eine Gans braten, mitten in der Nacht. Wir reden nicht viel, aber wir sind voll zarterer Rücksicht miteinander, als ich mir denke, dass Liebende es sein können. Wir sind zwei Menchen, zwei winzige Funken Leben, draussen ist die Nacht und der Kreis des Todes. Wir sitzen an ihrem Rande, gefährdet und geborgen, über unsere Hände trieft Fett, wir sind uns nahe mit unseren Herzen, und die Stunde ist wie der Raum: überflackert von einem sanften Feuer gehen die Lichter und Schatten der Empfindungen hin und her. Was weiss er von mir – was weiss ich von ihm, früher wäre keiner unserer Gedanken ähnlich gewesen – jetzt sitzen wir vor einer Gans und fühlen unser Dasein und sind uns so nahe, dass wir nicht darüber sprechen mögen. (V, 106-107) [NB the reference to how small they are, also on p. V: 108. ‘ein kleiner Soldat’]

39 Denn Verse sind nicht, wie die Leute meinen, Gefühle (die hat man früh genug), – es sind Erfahrungen. Um eines Verses willen muß man viele Städte sehen, Menschen und Dinge, man muß die Tiere kennen, man muß fühlen, wie die Vögel fliegen, und die Gebärde wissen, mit welcher die kleinen Blumen sich aufhun am Morgen. Man muß zurückdenken können […] an Kindheitstage, die noch unaufgeklärt sind, an die Eltern, die man kränken mußte, wenn sie einem eine Freude brachten und man begriff sie nicht (es war eine Freude für einen anderen – […] – Rainer Maria Rilke, Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge, s 724. Sämtliche Werke, 6. Bd. Insel Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1966.