Sharing and not sharing with others

(Speaking about meaning and use in language)

Introduction

The following paper attempts to discuss the connection between meaning and use in language by examining how we can speak of sharing and not sharing with others. As an introduction to this theme a passage is presented and discussed from Raimond Gaita’s book A common humanity: thinking about love truth and justice, in which he speaks of the importance of other human beings. This subject of others and their importance to us generates a more general discussion about meaning in language. This is because when we speak of “the importance” of others it can lead to the assumption that there must be something which we can refer to in order to speak of the other being important. This also applies to sharing or not sharing, as in the case of Raimond Gaita who seems to speak of a common humanity in order to show what we as human beings necessarily share with each other. The aim of this paper is, however, to illustrate in what way such an investigation leads to a misunderstanding of what it means to share and a misrepresentation of our reactions and attitudes towards one another.

The question of meaning lies at the heart of this debate and an attempt is made to show how the terms sharing and not sharing are both expressions of specific understandings of specific circumstances. This is not because either context or concepts are what define meaning, but rather it is to stress the fact that when we are describing something we are doing something. It is, therefore, important to look and see what we find intelligible to say about a situation.

Finally, it is important to note that this paper could be seen as a misrepresentation of Raimond Gaita’s book: A common humanity: thinking about love truth and justice because it only discusses one small element in the book. Yet the discussion in this paper is concerned with a certain kind of problem and temptation within philosophy, a problem which Lars Hertzberg discusses in his paper “Gaita on recognizing the human”, which is also the inspiration for the present paper. The dilemma lies in how we speak of language and meaning, and that difficulty is present not only in Gaita’s work, but also in philosophy in general. That is why the discussion that follows should not be taken as a critique of Gaita per se, more as a reminder of the ease we all have of walking astray in philosophical discussions.

1. A common humanity

In his book: A common humanity: thinking about love truth and justice, Raimond Gaita writes:

Our sense of the preciousness of other people is connected with their power to affect us in ways we cannot fathom and in ways against which we can protect ourselves only at the cost of becoming shallow.

(Gaita 2000, pp. 26-27)
It might be said that what Raimond Gaita is attempting to express in this passage, is something which could be illustrated by a comparison with a quotation from Ludwig Wittgenstein, which Gaita also discusses in his book (Ibid, p. 265). Wittgenstein states: "My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the opinion that he has a soul." (Wittgenstein 1953, part II, section iv). The connection might at first seem unclear because Gaita speaks of the "preciousness of other people", while Wittgenstein's remark can be understood as a rebuttal of a Cartesian or dualist view of the human being, a view which is based on the notion that there is a "gap" between outer behaviour and inner life.¹ What Wittgenstein is refuting is, however, not simply a Cartesian view, therefore in some respects this is a misleading description, although it is still part of the larger picture. More specifically it might be said that Wittgenstein, especially the later Wittgenstein, tries to show that the notion of knowing ourselves better than others or the idea that the inner is wholly distinct from the outer, are both the result of conceptual misrepresentations or misunderstandings within language. Doubt concerning other human beings is, according to this, not a psychological mystery brought about by the empirical impossibility of acquiring adequate proof concerning the inner lives of others. When Wittgenstein writes: "My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the opinion that he has a soul.", he is not saying "we already have proof", he is pointing out that the very notion of needing proof is a misunderstanding of our relationship and attitudes towards others.²

Should we then understand Wittgenstein as saying that we cannot doubt others because all human beings have a "soul", is that why we do not need to look for proof concerning others? The short answer to this is "no", for as Gaita points out, it is important to note that "[n]othing should be read into Wittgenstein's use of the word 'soul' (Seele)" (Gaita 2000, p 265). Wittgenstein is not out to show that we can refute the sceptic’s notion of the possibility of an automaton masquerading as a human being, simply by referring to the existence of a soul. Wittgenstein uses the term "soul" in order to illustrate that there is no idea of a mind or an inner life to be doubted or proved concerning our attitude towards others (Ibid. p. 266). That is not to say that terms such as "mind" and "inner life" do not have a meaning or a place in the description of others, it is only to say that they are used wrongly as a base for the sceptic’s notion of the problem of other minds.³ In other words it could be said that understanding of others precedes doubt because I can only doubt that someone is, for example, sincere or insincere, honest or dishonest, in pain or not in pain, if I see them as a living being. If I did not, there would not be cause for me to doubt. I do not, for example, doubt whether or not a stone is in

¹ The distinction René Descartes makes between mind and body, between inner and outer, maybe best summed up by the following segment from Discourse on Method: "I concluded that I was a substance whose whole essence or nature consists in thinking, and whose existence depends neither on its location in space nor any material thing. Thus the self, rather the soul, by which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from the body, is indeed easier to know than the body, and would not cease to be what it is, even if there were no body." (Descartes 1960, p. 61)


³ Cf Phillips 1997, "The self and others". In this chapter Phillips presents a short and illuminating description of the strangeness of the skeptic’s view of the self as the primary source of understanding others, which illustrates the point being made in this text, that doubt cannot be the starting point of an understanding of others.
pain. This shows that if we wanted to take the sceptic’s notion literally then we would have to alter the view we have of a human being, because the way we respond and act in relation to others is already part of our understanding of them. Moreover, even if we doubted we would still be doing so, as Phillips says, “as members of a human community”, consequently we would still not be able to be sceptical in the way sceptics would wish (Phillips 1997, p. 57).

In a similar way, one might take Wittgenstein’s words: “My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul”, not as saying, such is my attitude because he has a soul, but such is my attitude because he is a soul. This is a grammatical and moral reminder, and not a religious perspective. Doubt should then not be an a priori stance one might take in order to develop a sound basis concerning our understanding and attitude towards other human beings. Rather we should concern ourselves with the fact that we are already living with other human beings, not because we assume them to be human, but because that is how we find ourselves in the world. This is not to say that Wittgenstein’s distinction between “belief” as opposed to “attitude” illustrates either that one does not believe something about the other or that our attitude is based solely on the outward behaviour of the other (Winch 1987, p. 142). Rather, it is an attempt to indicate a different perspective of what it means to understand another, thus an “attitude towards a soul” is the general framework within which we understand or do not understand each other. Speaking of particular uses of “belief”, of “doubt”, or of “not understanding” is, therefore, not what Wittgenstein criticises, his criticism is aimed at the idea that such particular cases of doubt might shed light on and explain what lies behind our relationship with others (Winch 1987, pp.144-145). We should not see a particular case of doubt concerning others as the basis for our relationship with others. This is not because we cannot doubt, but once again it is because doubting and not doubting are both part of what it means to relate to another human being. If it were not a human being, but an object this discussion would no longer make any sense. That is also why we cannot see “an attitude towards a soul” as fundamental, because Wittgenstein does not mean it in the sense “that is what gives meaning to”, but rather that it should be understood as an expression of our attitude. (Cockburn 1990, pp.10-12)

In a similar manner, it might be said that the Raimond Gait quotation at the beginning of this chapter, is trying to emphasise that acts of shallowness, vengefulness, spitefulness, callousness, indifference etc. arise from an understanding of each other. Such behaviour should not need further investigation, by asking questions such as: “Am I being shallow towards and automaton or a human? This is because being shallow implies being so towards another living being. I cannot be shallow or callous towards a computer or an automaton, other than in a figurative sense. This is both a grammatical and a moral viewpoint of our lives and could be said to be the core of what both Gaita and Wittgenstein are saying in the quotations above. If we accept this perspective there is, nonetheless, a question concerning what stock we should place in particularly emphasising the importance of other human beings in our lives? Why should anyone have to agree with the fact that others are important in the way that

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4 Cf. Cockburn, ”'An attitude towards a soul'''”, 1990.
Raimond Gaita speaks of? He does, after all, write that others have the “power to affect us in ways we cannot fathom and in ways against which we can protect ourselves only at the cost of becoming shallow”. Is that right, can we agree to that? Some might even be able to agree with Ludwig Wittgenstein’s argument that we have an attitude towards a soul and that should be the basis of our understanding of others, yet they might not agree with Raimond Gaita's view of the importance of others. One might even be inclined to argue that Raimond Gaita goes to the extreme in order to show that other human beings are necessarily important in our lives. But is that not an overly generalised picture of human relationships? One way of determining if there is a problem with the way Gaita underlines the significance of others is by comparing the way he speaks of others with the way Simone Weil speaks of others:

I cannot choose what weight it shall have that I fail you, or betray you, or that I on some occasion look at you but with a look that leaves you a mere circumstance and not a human being.

(Diamond 1988, pp. 255-277)

Here Diamond draws our attention to the fact that the weight of recognising or denying “[...]has nothing to do with our choosing to evaluate things one way or another (Ibid, p. 265). This seems to confirm what Weil is speaking about in the passage quoted earlier, when she says “[...]A person who crosses our path does not turn aside our steps in the same manner as a street sign[...]”. In other words we cannot choose whether or not people will affect us, because with their very presence they seem to affect us. In this sense, Gaita seems to make a striking point when he writes “[...]against which we can protect ourselves only at the cost of becoming shallow.”, because choosing to ignore is not something we can do without there being consequences. When we ignore, we are ignoring someone and that has moral implications which cannot simply be brushed aside as if they were not real. This seems to imply that we do in fact necessarily share something,
and in denying the other we break or deny a bond with the other that was otherwise there, as Gaita seems to be pointing out. Yet is this true? Does this general aspect of our behaviour and attitude towards other human beings derive from the fact that we share a common humanity? As Peter Winch says: [i]t is temptingly easy to think it [the generality of our attitude towards other human beings] must lie in certain general beliefs I hold about human beings” (Winch 1987, p.151).

In order to answer the question raised above it might prove instructive to turn to Lars Hertzberg’s essay “Gaita on recognizing the human”, in which, amongst other things, he criticises Raimond Gaita for the way he uses the word “sharing” in his book A common humanity: thinking about love truth and justice (Hertzberg 2010). Hertzberg writes:

> Although Gaita does not make this explicit, what examples in moral philosophy are meant to show, I would argue, is how moral responsiveness is possible, not why it is inevitable. [...] What I am suggesting, however, is that the role of the examples, first and foremost, is to remind us of responses we are able to share, not responses we cannot help sharing.

(Hertzberg 2010, p. xxxx)

Here Hertzberg crystallises the problem which seems to underlie Gaita’s valuable, yet problematic, portrayal of human relationships. It seems as if Raimond Gaita tries to focus on what all humans share in order to show something universal, something fundamental in what it means to be human. Yet while doing so Gaita opens the door to misconceptions and problems concerning what he is actually implying when focusing on a common humanity. It would, however, be unfair to say that Raimond Gaita is simply mistaken concerning these issues; in fact the discussion in the aforementioned book is very enlightening concerning, for example, the topic of racism. Nonetheless, the problem that Lars Hertzberg identifies in Gaita’s discussion is a problem that needs to be addressed. It might be said that what Hertzberg is criticising Gaita for is not so much the fact that he uses the phrase “common humanity”, but the way he conveys the importance of a common humanity. This becomes clear in the following passage from Lars Hertzberg:

> Perhaps it could be said [...] that the concept of a common humanity is the result of a reflection on our responses: it is because we note our readiness to respond to others in compassionate ways that we are open to and understanding of the moral importance of being human, rather than the other way round. Rightly understood, then, the idea of a common humanity carries with it an exhortation to be attentive to those we are inclined to disregard. But then it can never be an excuse for turning our back in the suffering of a living being.

(Ibid, p. xxxx)

In other words Hertzberg seems to be saying that it can be both relevant and important to speak of a “common humanity”, but one should not assume that this phrase might be the fundamental building block of morality or of humanity. We speak of a common humanity and of sharing because it is an expression of how we react and relate to each other in a certain way. This is, however, a difficult point to make about language. What it indicates is that fundamentals of this kind when concerned with language seem to be misguided and ultimately faulty, because such discussions lead to the conception of either language or morality as being separable from our lives. That is why Hertzberg speaks of the concept of a
common humanity as a “result of a reflection on our responses”. It is a reminder that we cannot step outside language or our lives to reflect upon and define what gives them form or meaning. To speak of a “common humanity” should, therefore, be done only in the sense that it reminds us of what we already experience, not to define what gives meaning to morality. If it were possible to pick out one thing and point to it in reference to what gives meaning to a concept, such as, in the present case, the term “sharing”, it would be like stepping outside of language and saying: “It is clear that the reason we react to each other in a certain way is because we share a common humanity. That is the basis for our moral reactions towards others”. To speak of meaning in this way is, nonetheless, highly problematic and although there is a great temptation to speak in such terms, it leads one astray. This point is also made by Rush Rhees when he writes:

The feeling that we ought to be able to understand why language is the way it is: that we ought to be able to understand the principles of language. Thought trying to catch its own tail.

(Rhees 1994, pp. 573-586.)

There seems in other words to be something odd in needing to speak of an underlying bond between human beings, which acts as the frame of reference by which morality finds its meaning. One question is, however, what is it that does give meaning to terms such as “shallowness” or “neglect”? The answer to this has in a way already been given, because it is part of Hertzberg’s critique of Gaita and can be seen when Hertzberg writes: “[...]the role of the examples, first and foremost, is to remind us of responses we are able to share, not responses we cannot help sharing.”. This is a reminder that we should always look at each situation in order to see what is being shared or not being shared. To begin from the assumption that two or more people always necessarily share something is, in this sense, not simply mistaken, it also draws our attention away from the fact that our understanding of a situation is also bound up with our description of what we perceive as important or not important in that situation. This then is the frame of reference that we need to focus on, the actual situation at hand and what we are trying to say about it. This might be said to be what Wittgenstein meant when he wrote: “But if we had to name anything which is the life of the sign, we should have to say that it was its use” (Wittgenstein 1958, p. 4). Here some might be inclined to interpret this as saying that meaning is contextual and nothing more. Such a perspective is, however, not without its own problems and hopefully that perspective can be avoided by looking more closely at the relation between meaning and use in language. In the following chapter, closer attention will be paid to the specific use of the term “sharing” and hopefully this will illustrate why a generalised conception of a common humanity is problematic.

2. Meaning and use

How are we to understand the term “sharing”? Saying that we share a common humanity, for example, seems rather superfluous considering the fact that one might simply say that the word humanity includes all human beings and so naturally human beings share that description.

To use a concrete example we might imagine two people who are fishing. We can then ask: what is being referred to in order to say they are sharing or not sharing
something in this situation? Someone might point out that by saying “they are fishing” we have already given a context in which the two people fishing necessarily share something, as, for example, the location or the activity. Yet in what way do they share these? Is it because they are in the same place at the same time and are both fishing? What if they, for some reason, have had some kind of disagreement and now sincerely dislike each other's company, but both wish to fish in the same spot at the same time because they have always done so and are both stubborn. Would we then still be inclined to say that they are sharing their fishing experience or even one another’s company? What if they, for some reason, have had some kind of disagreement and now sincerely dislike each other's company, but both wish to fish in the same spot at the same time because they have always done so and are both stubborn. Would we then still be inclined to say that they are sharing their fishing experience or even one another’s company? Someone might say “yes” to this and hold that no matter what the participants think or do, they are still sharing something, simply by being in the same place. However, a further question arises here as to what stock we may place in such an “objective” summation of the situation? Does this imply that no matter what we do or say we are always sharing a moment or a location with someone? Do I share my bus ride with all the other passengers, does everyone in an apartment building share the same house? In some cases yes and in some cases no. We might argue both. In one instant it might be vital to remind everyone on the bus to take care and keep others in mind, since we are all sharing the bus ride. At another time it might be relevant to state that we have no association with the others on the bus. In other words the meaning in saying that two people are sharing something seems contingent on them as people and on what is being said about the situation and about the people involved. To say that two people share something necessarily, with no reference to the actual situation seems, therefore, pointless. Pointless not because it cannot be done, but because it completely neglects to take into account the fact that a description is both done by someone and with a certain purpose.

Another way of illustrating the point that it is important to understand that a description is done by someone, is to look at what might be the focus of interest in a given situation. Here someone might again simply say that the answer is obvious in the example situation - they are fishing, yet how do we know that this means that they are sharing something? The next step is to say “because that is what it means to go fishing with someone”. Here it is then important to draw attention to the fact that we are dealing with language and how we understand language and relate it to our lives. We are not simply explaining uninteresting and incomprehensible details about the world; we are describing activities and using concepts which are part of a much larger structure, language. This might best be shown in the reductio ad absurdum aspect of leaving the judgement to, for example, a computer, if such a machine could act of its own accord. The question is then: how could the computer judge what is relevant or not in the example of the two men fishing? Where should it start? For all we know it could begin with the fact that the two individuals are all made of atoms and these share the same vicinity in time and space. Yet then so do all the other atoms which are in that space, the air, the water, the ground, etc. Why should the individuals, let alone their activity be of any greater importance or mean anything more to the computer

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5 The use of inverted commas when employing the term “objective” was done in order to signify that it is problematic to understand such a term as an example of a perspective void of context and, therefore, as a reference to facts about the world which are unconnected with human engagement. Rather, it might be said that the term objective refers to a specific kind of perspective of a situation, as for example a third person perspective, as in a court of law or a third party.
than the other movements and interactions of atoms in that area? Who then defines the area to be under scrutiny? In many ways, the example of the computer exemplifies the fact that there would be no sense in speaking of sharing or not sharing in the case of the two men fishing if we had no language, which seems to indicate not only that someone is doing something when describing a situation, but that to describe something is such a way is the reason why we find it meaningful to speak of sharing at all.

To clarify the claims made above, it can be said that in some cases we might, for example, say that the two men fishing were happy and that they enjoyed spending time together, yet even in such a case it is for the describer to judge whether or not there is a need to maintain that they were sharing or not sharing something. If, for example, we judge that a father and son who are fishing are sharing an experience it is vital to point out “what” they share, e.g. a bond between father and son or a moment in which they became closer or have found a common interest etc. Yet the “what” is not a definition or referent in the context or situation, it is here used simply to stress the need to specify a meaningful description of what we are saying when we want to say that something is being shared or not. In other words the “what” refers to the use to which we put the word “share” in different descriptions, not a something that can be applied to all situations. This may be said to be what Ludwig Wittgenstein is pointing out when he writes:

Consider for example the proceedings that we call “games”. I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all? Don’t say “there must be something common, or they would not be called ‘games’” - but look and see whether there is anything common at all. For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don’t think, but look!

(Wittgenstein 1953, § 66)

To see similarities in the way we speak about something does not show how there has to be an underlying connection which binds them together, but rather seeing similarities is part of the meaning of things being similar. However, many would wish to say that we see a similarity only because there is already a connection inherent in what is being compared, as for instance between a board-game and the Olympic games. Here it could be said that the connection is obvious, we are talking about games, so the definition of the word “game” is what naturally must bind together these two separate activities. Why then does Wittgenstein think he has changed this by saying “don’t think, but look!”, how is that supposed to change the “fact” that we are here dealing with the “same” phenomenon? Here I think it is prudent to look at the preceding paragraph, paragraph 65:

Here we come up against the great question that lies behind all the considerations. For someone might object against me: “You take the easy way out! You talk about all sorts of language-games, but have nowhere said what the essence of a language-game, and hence of language, is: what is common to all these activities, and what makes them into or part of language. So you let yourself off the very part of the investigation that once gave you yourself most headache, the part about the general form of propositions and of language”

And this is true. Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all, but that they are related to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all “language”.

(Ibid. § 65)
Here we might take Wittgenstein to be saying that there is nothing that binds them together other than how we speak of them and understand them. The connection does not lie between different factual circumstances in the world which precede how we speak, but rather the reason we speak of similarities is the reason we understand what it means to see similarities. A discussion about meaning should, according to such a view, place emphasis on language as communication between people, not as language based on rules which govern language or fundamental structures which give meaning to words.

He[Wittgenstein] is urging her[people in general, but more specifically philosophers], when finding herself stunned time and again by her inability to give an account of the meaning of words such as ‘pain’, or ‘knowledge’, or ‘cause’, or ‘meaning’, or ‘time’, or ‘will’, etc. to rid herself of her preoccupation with the objects of discourse and to focus her attention instead on the activity of speaking about those things, that is, to ask herself what kinds of interchange we engage in in using those words. The primary relation to be considered according to Wittgenstein, is not that between the speaker and the object, but that between speaker and listener with respect to the object.

(Hertzberg 2002, p.259)

This is a very important shift of perspective from what one is speaking of - to whom one is speaking with, and what one is talking about with that person. Briefly, this might be expressed as there being something odd about the quest for meaning or a unifier in language that should explain meaning by referring to something outside of language or to a definition within language. Therefore, instead of saying “this word is what is common to all these cases” or “this reference is what unifies these words”, we should say “When I see or discover a similarity it has to do with my understanding of what I am looking at and when I speak of it to another I am showing how I understand this connection”. The point is that we are always speaking to someone about something, we are not relating “the world as it is without reference to our lives”, instead it is as Hertzberg writes a relation “[...]between speaker and listeners with respect to the object.”.

How does this then relate to the discussion about sharing a common humanity? Put simply, what has been said is an attempt at showing in what way a generalised use of the term “humanity” or “shared” seems rather empty. The reason such a perspective appears rather meaningless is because it leans towards a perspective out of which one might say that the reason why we can speak of sharing or not sharing is because we a share a common humanity. Alternatively we can say that the meaning in sharing or not sharing is derived from our idea of a common humanity. This is then another example of trying to define or explain meaning in language and it might be said that this is exactly what Wittgenstein was trying to warn against when he wrote “Don’t think, but look”. Therefore we should turn instead to specific situations in order to see what is happening and how we understand what is happening. Otherwise we might all too easily laps into thinking that we can show how meaning is explained in language, which, as Rhees aptly described it, would be like “[t]hought trying to catch its own tail”.

Another way of looking at the problem of defining or explaining meaning in language in the way illustrated above, is by exploring a debate which is intimately associated with language and meaning. The debated topic is the idea of following a rule, which Wittgenstein could be said to introduce in paragraph 185 of Philosophical Investigations and continues to discuss at least as far as paragraph
The notion of following a rule is a discussion about meaning in language and the debate is often divided between two perspectives. There are those who argue for the idea that language is ultimately a private matter and those who are adamant that language can only be understood as something based on a community. In a paper titled “Wittgenstein and the sharing of language” Lars Hertzberg discusses this topic in relation to Wittgenstein’s view of language by contrasting two different perspectives (Hertzberg 1994). On the one hand there is Gordon P. Baker and P. M. S. Hacker who, according to Hertzberg, “[...]claim that the meaning of an expression could be grounded in the practise of a solitary individual, and the repetition supplies the requisite basis for establishing what rule he is following.” (Ibid, p. 21). That is to say, meaning is not contingent upon others, but is a solitary affair. The contrasting perspective presented and quoted by Hertzberg is that of Norman Malcolm who writes in his book Nothing is hidden:

I think I have adduced a sufficient number of passages to show that for Wittgenstein the concept of a rule presupposes a community within which a common agreement in action fixes the meaning of a rule.

(Malcolm 1986, p.175)

Hertzberg goes on to show that neither perspective is correct, as the private-language argument fails because no particular instance, or indeed any number of, particular instances in language can be shown to be a referent for the meaning in a specific situation (Hertzberg 1994, p. 19). Such examples can only show meaning to someone who already has a language (Hertzberg 1994, p. 19). Malcolm’s perspective is also faulty, according to Hertzberg, because it explicitly claims that meaning is defined by the language community, and that meaning is derived from agreement in the language community. Hertzberg’s alternative to both perspectives is:

The [...] meaning of an expression is not to be detected by looking at the ways in which speakers agree. Rather, we must have an understanding of the language and the ways in which it is bound up with human activities in order to recognize the ways in which agreement may show itself.

(Hertzberg 1994, p.32)

This can be understood as indicating that the language-community is important in understanding meaning in language, but just as one cannot define meaning through looking at a specific situation, or a single individuals understanding of a situation, neither can one look at an agreement amongst a community. This point is also made by Cora Diamond in her paper “Rules: Looking in the right place”, when she discusses paragraph 351 from Zettel (Diamond 1989, p. 19). Diamond shows that this particular paragraph is often misunderstood as implying that agreement precedes the meaning of a concept. Yet Diamond says that we should not see the meaning of the concept of colours as based on agreement, rather agreement is part of what it means to have a concept of colours. To clarify, it could be said that if one sees agreement and our concepts as separable one is quickly confronted with the question “how does one relate to the other?”, yet the

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6 Of course it is always problematic to refer to specific paragraphs in Philosophical Investigations, because from a certain perspective the whole book is a continuous discussion which discusses directly or brushes certain topics throughout.


point is that they are part of what it means to have concepts such as colour. That is why Diamond writes:

What Wittgenstein replies is that if they did not agree about the colours of things, and hence did not have complex life but lived in some quite different way, that would be their not having our colour concept. There is not in that life the grammar: things have whatever colour they have, independently of whom looks. That grammar is to be seen in how we live.

(Diamond 1989, pp. 19-20)

This is relevant to what has been said earlier about generalised concepts and the attempt to find a fundamental basis for words and their meaning. To endeavour to find what defines a concept is all part of the wish to find what lies behind our reactions, our behaviour, and our attitudes towards one another. However, the point being that speaking of sharing or not sharing, speaking of agreeing or not agreeing, cannot be defined in such a way. There is nothing behind language which may act as a referent which constitutes meaning. We should, therefore, stop and look at the way we live our lives and instead of saying that meaning is defined by agreement we should perhaps, as Hertzberg states, try see the meaning of the term agreement through “recognising how agreement shows itself”. Nonetheless, the temptation not to reflect in such a way is succinctly summarised by Diamond:

We do not look at the use; we look for what, in the use, is essential to the logical features that interest us. This is what not looking at the use, but looking for the meaning, comes to for us.

(Diamond 1989, p. 33)

Another way of expressing this thought is to say that if we, prior to actually looking at what people are doing in a situation, decide what constitutes, for example, “to share”, then it quickly leads to us becoming blind to what is happening, rather than understanding the situation. We assume that we know what the answer will be, or rather we form an opinion of what the answer must be, before actually exploring the possibilities by looking at the way we live our lives. That is why it is so essential to look at specific instances in order to see what we can say about those instances. That is not because one cannot say anything general about language or our attitude towards one another. However, if we wish to explore the meaning of concepts such as “sharing”, we should turn to situations which are expressions of “sharing”, not look for what lies behind or must be the reason for speaking of sharing.

3. Why not share?

In this section the discussion considers what it might mean “not to share”. According to the perspective presented earlier, which Raimond Gaita seems to be advocating in his book A common humanity: thinking about love, truth and justice, the notion of sharing or not sharing finds its meaning through the phrase “a common humanity”. Gaita implies that to understand the reasons why we react towards each other in a certain way is because we share something fundamental, a common humanity. To neglect, reject, be callous towards, look down upon etc. are according to such a view instances of going against what we naturally react to, a person with whom we share something, and according to Gaita, sharing in such a
way is what it means to be a human being. To be blind in the face of the other is then to be blind towards the humanity in them, the fact that they are a human being. Being blind or callous are of course not the same as “not sharing”, yet Gaita’s discussion hints towards seeing such terms as instances of going against what we naturally and necessarily do share. Clearly, all terms such as shallowness, callousness, blindness, neglect, belittlement etc. seem, from such a perspective, to find their meaning in how we avoid or try and shield ourselves from what we must be sharing simply because we are human beings. In the following discussion an attempt will be made to show that this is possibly an all too narrow view and in many ways a problematic understanding of what it means to, for example, be blind towards another human being.

A good introduction to this discussion is the following excerpt from Lars Hertzberg’s paper “Gaita on recognising the human” (Hertzberg 2010, p xx):

The very question of what may be regarded as a belittling of the human is indeterminate. It is not a matter in which criteria can be laid down once and for all. [...] The temptation to belittle the human is omnipresent, and often we are not ourselves in a good position to recognize our failure to resist it.

(Ibid, p. xx)

What Hertzberg is saying is that to disregard or not acknowledge someone else’s life or what they do as being important seems to be something we often do in life. We are in other words sometimes blind to others and there seems to be a temptation to view one’s own life as more important than others, and therefore we continue being blinded to others. How should we then understand such a “temptation”? One way might be to show that we sometimes feel distant to others and we do not want to see their position in the same light as our own. Whether such a distance is dependent on racial, cultural, social, economical or religious prejudices, is not the main focus here. For it is first and foremost the lure to let such differences become a hindrance or a barrier between myself and others, that is at issue. That is also why Hertzberg writes the following:

Our callousness to those who are different from us need not be hitched to a racist thought system – on the contrary, it could be argued that the omnipresence of temptations such as these is an important part of what enables racist attitudes to form and be sustained.

(Ibid. p. 10).

In this passage it is clear that Hertzberg touches upon a significant difference in our conception of belittling or being indifferent towards others. Two examples which might, through comparison, illustrate this difference are firstly: a situation in which one neglects to include a certain individual in the discussion at a dinner party, and secondly: a situation in which this lack of attentiveness towards the aforementioned person becomes a habit. In the first case, the lack of attentiveness might seem to be nothing of great importance, since it may be a result of many different circumstances, for example, an acute interest in another person or topic in the discussion, which blinds one from noticing that another is being neglected. Naturally, this is not a defence or a reason for being inattentive, it is only a way of stating that we might understand someone behaving in this way and not reprimand them for it. If, on the other hand, this becomes something regular, albeit not because of any malevolence or callousness, but simply through a lack of trying to talk to everyone, we might feel more inclined to judge the person as being
inattentive or even shallow. One understanding of Hertzberg’s comments concerning the way Gaita discusses a common humanity is that Gaita does not leave room for discussing such varied examples or nuances in what it means to become blind towards another. That is why Hertzberg uses the term “temptation” to neglect. It can be said that Gaita is not attentive enough to the fact that in ordinary circumstances it often happens that we may fail to notice or that we become blind towards each other. In summary, we might take Hertzberg as saying that there is a temptation to belittle the other not in the sense that we want to belittle but are restrained because of social conventions. Instead we should maybe understand such a temptation in the sense that when someone, for example, neglects another it could very easily begin for no special reason at a dinner party and then grow from there. This indicates that in order to understand what it means to be shallow towards someone we should perhaps focus on nuances in our relationship with other people, not look for what is being denied in the other, such as their humanity. An interesting perspective which goes against the idea of their being an underlying shared humanity is also the view that we often only begin to ask questions when things go wrong. That is when we begin to pay attention to a situation, when someone is not sharing or when someone is being neglected.

A direction which might clarify the statement made above, is by turning to an example from literature and examining the character of Dorian Grey in Oscar Wilde’s novel The picture of Dorian Grey. In Oscar Wilde’s story the main character Dorian Grey finds himself in a position where he may do and act as he pleases with no visible marks on his physical appearance. Instead his portrait exhibits the stains of his character and only the canvas can relate the depth of his corruption as he walks the streets as young and bright as ever. Interestingly Mr. Grey acts upon every whim, every desire, want, or need that he has in life and becomes an increasingly degraded character. There is no one other than himself who knows of the true horror of his deeds because they cannot be seen in his face or in his manner. Through Dorian Grey, Oscar Wilde depicts a person who, having realised that he will not be altered in any outward way by his acts seize the opportunity to do what he would not otherwise do. He feels free from constraints. Nevertheless, might we not imagine someone who would not behave as Dorian Grey does? Someone who upon realising that the painting shares such a mysterious bond with themselves chooses instead not to act in any other way then they would normally? What is interesting, in other words is that Dorian Grey sees the possibility to do as he pleases with no regard of others. Why then does the painting acts as an incentive for him to behave badly? The answer might be said to lie, not so much in him choosing the wrong path, but that he saw the situation as an opportunity. In other words his fall from grace began the moment he understood his situation in the way he did and that he consequently chose to act upon that understanding.

One explanation of Dorian Grey’s attitude is to say that he either failed to understand that what he was doing was wrong or that he understood yet failed to act as he knew he should, that he lacked will. An interesting alternative to such a description is to point out that Mr. Grey did not only misunderstand his own actions and their consequences, he also misunderstood the meaning others had in
his life. This difference between an “intellectual” misunderstanding and a moral failing is a difference in meaning and might be explained by, for example, pointing out the difference between using a spoon in a manner unaccustomed at the dinner table and speaking rudely to another person. To act in a wrong manner towards another might, in this way, be said to involve more or even to be completely different from a factual misunderstanding. Thus, one might say that it is not that Dorian Grey fails to see that his acts hurt others, most likely he does make this connection, but it is that he fails to recognise this as a deterrent from acting in the way he does; he already possesses all the so called “facts” about his situation and he does not seem weak willed, on the contrary he goes out of his way in order to pursue his will. His failing might, therefore, be described as an inability to see the moral aspects of his actions, which is different from his intellectual understanding of his actions. One clear sign of this is the fact that he deflects feelings of guilt and remorse through his painting, he does not let himself come to terms with his own actions.

How does the example with Dorian Grey illuminate the problems raised in connection with the notion that we understand what it means to, for example, be shallow towards another person because we share a common humanity? Partly it has to do with showing how shallowness can be seen as nothing more than an expression of, for example, greed. Mr. Gray does after all have insatiable hunger for experiences, a hedonistic need to satisfy himself. Not seeing the worth of others may then be attributed to a blindness of his relation other people, yet it does not have to imply that he does not see the humanity in others. In some ways one might even be inclined to say he does not see the humanity in himself and that is why he acts the way he does. The relationship to others should be the main focus and one way of touching upon this subject is to speak of “remorse”, for remorse is one way of coming to terms with what one has done and is also one of the only ways of “repairing the damage”, so to speak. Remorse means insight and also acceptance of what one has done. Do we then feel remorse because we come to realise something about our shared humanity? Perhaps upon realising that we have indeed been shallow in our attitude towards another, we would say something along the lines of: “I cannot believe I acted in such a way towards another human being!”? Should we then see this as a confirmation of it being their humanity that we suddenly see, or should we instead see this as an expression of a different kind of understanding? The meaning of the word “remorse” might not be found in a general conception of humanity, yet it is only intelligible within our lives, i.e. the lives of human beings. Does that mean one precedes the other? Not necessarily, for remorse can be seen as an expression of what it means to be human, an expression of our reactions to each other and our attitudes towards one another. Nonetheless, this is still a difficult argument to grasp, what is wrong with saying it is because we see the other as a human being. Surely that is part of it? And the answer is “yes, it certainly is part of it”, but it is not the reason for it. Rather, as has been said previously the concept of remorse shows what it means to be human, it does not reflect or build upon an underlying structure.

An expression of remorse which might elucidate what has been said can be seen in William Shakespeare’s play King Lear. In the play, Shakespeare portrays King
Lear as a man who fails to see the sincere love of his youngest daughter Cordelia and for that reason divides the kingdom between his two remaining daughters Goneril and Regan, who both later betray him. The fate of Lear is to be afflicted with madness due to his desire for his daughters to prove how much they loved him, and by neither recognising nor wanting the humble and honest love which Cordelia tried to show him. Ultimately, however, just before Lear dies, he feels remorse and too late sees the preciousness of his dead daughter.

Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,
And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more;
Never, never, never, never, never.
(Shakespeare 1972, Act V)

There is, however, a question as to whether this should be taken as a sign of remorse or simply a sign of recognition of his daughter, one does not necessarily follow the other. Leaving this difficult debate aside, it is, nonetheless, important to see this as an instance of realisation of the importance of another human being. One might say that such a realisation is then also bound up with what it means to regret one’s actions, particularly one’s actions towards another. We might then say that this is where we should look if we wish to understand what it means to be human. Why? Because it shows how we share a common humanity? No, not because we share or do not share anything, but because it reflects what it means to be in relation to another human being. Lear saw his daughter, not the humanity in her, he saw his daughter.

In another way one might say that the problem arises from the need to specify what one sees in another person when recognising that our previous acts towards them have been shallow. We might say that the “what” could refer to how I see my own actions, or how I understand my relationship with another person, or what this person means to me, or who I am by acting in a certain way towards another, or how I should be in order to be a better person, etc. All and any of these would do as specific examples of what it means to relate to another person. Why then should we need more, why should we need to say we see the humanity in them? Why is the reaction not good enough? Why can we not stop and say that, for example, “remorse” is an expression of what it means to be human, not because it shows what we share as human beings, but because it expresses what it means to share a life with others. It is not a definition of what it means to be a human being; it simply illustrates a part of what it means to be human.

**Conclusion**

The discussion in this paper has been an exploration of what it means to speak of sharing and not sharing with other human beings. This topic is, however, connected to a much larger and more complicated debate about language and meaning. The main focus, therefore, has not been to show when we can say that someone is sharing and when someone is not sharing with another. Rather, it has been to exemplify the philosophical misconceptions which are part of the debate concerning the notion of an underlying or fundamental structure in language. The problem arises because one often falls into the trap of saying: “two people are
sharing because....” and then see this as a statement of fact, rather than an expression of an understanding. This is then connected with a fear that focussing on description and on understanding leads to either subjectivism or relativism. The shift that Wittgenstein has made, and others since, is to show that such a fear is based on an all too narrow and often warped view of what it means to understand and to speak of meaning in language. To focus on particular circumstances and on the relationship between people is not to give a different fundamental base for meaning in language, it is an attempt at shifting people’s perspective of how we understand examples of what it means to act, feel or think in certain ways. To see an example as an expression of meaning and not as the definition of meaning is, however, extremely difficult, because as Cora Diamond says: “We do not look at the use; we look for what, in the use, is essential to the logical features that interest us”. (Diamond 1989, p. 33). We investigate something other than the meaning and call that meaning instead, because we are so certain that we know how the world must be.

**Bibliography**


