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Coming into Life with Education: Definitions, Difficulty and Meaningfulness in Conceptual Aesthetics

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Résumé de l'article

What do we mean by the word "education"? How do others know what we mean when the term is under constant revision? Do we even need definitive answers in order to speak meaningfully of it? This paper attempts to explore the potential for education's meaningfulness via attention to its ordinary usages. In order to justify the need to be attentive to the specific instance of use, I will explore the closing down of conceptual meaning represented by acts of definition. In taking a closer look at what definitions of education try to do when they are articulated, I will follow a line of argument from Cora Diamond that the definition and explanation of a term can constitute a deflection from the difficult "reality" of educational discourse, a reality that poses its own problems in turn, but also should not be ignored. Attending to "education" as a word that appears with particular meanings in particular instances reveals the richness of the various forms it can assume. I describe this as a conceptual aesthetics of education.

Coming into Life with Education: Definitions, Difficulty and Meaningfulness in Conceptual Aesthetics

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Introduction: This Thing Called Education

We talk a lot about education, but with little guarantee that the concept has the same meaning either from one context to the next, or from one person to the next – or possibly even at all. Education as it is discussed at the board of governors meeting differs from its articulation in white papers from the Department for Education; over the family dinner table, the word carries one kind of weight with the parent, another with the child. Nor is there consistency in the use and meaning of "education" across or within academic circles: not only are the various disciplines of sociology, psychology, anthropology, and philosophy often entirely disharmonious when it comes to the subject of their internal discussions, but there is little interdisciplinary agreement to be discovered across them. Even theoretical approaches to the study of education (as opposed to conceptual approaches), with their greater facility for cutting across disciplines by means of abstraction and generalizability, still run up against the limits of language (in Wittgenstein's words) in this regard: meanings of "education" have no greater force in theory than they do at the family dinner table, unless the people involved both know what is being said and find it meaningful to talk about.

So how can we ever be confident enough that we are talking about the same thing, amidst this conceptual cacophony, for our statements about education to have some claim upon the activities that take place in its name? In this paper, I intend to explore the reconciliation of semantic restlessness under more stable notions as a drive toward conceptual definition, a prevention against meaning going astray. I want to then suggest that the drive towards fixity denies precisely the source and potential for education's meaningfulness, which lies in its capacity to be *recognizably* meaningful as different things in

different situations. A concept such as education comes alive according to its context. The potential for meaningfulness is easily inhibited by attempts to define or delimit it: usages and meanings cannot – and should not – be so easily divided into scientific and non-scientific discourses, to use Israel Scheffler's (1978) terms, or, to put it another way, into the academic versus the ordinary. Too sharp a separation between these spheres could allow for the meaning of education in the conference room to be something quite different to what is then talked about over coffee. Such distinctions not only underplay the porousness and seepage of meaning between discourses, but also fail to show how more ordinary usages invariably perdure whilst more rarefied and radical conceptualizations spark and fade. As Megan Laverty has observed, there is a danger in trying to keep more rarefied understandings out of conversation with more received meanings (Laverty, 2010). The upshot of this line of investigation is not to say that we should stop reconceptualizing education for our present times, but rather to recognize that no new definition or conceptualization will account for its rich and multivaried usage across a wide range of language games. Perhaps, then, an immersion in and attentiveness to that variety presents itself as just as valuable an approach to understanding education today as trying to settle in advance what precisely the thing means in order to bring about change in its name.

My intention here is to show that conceptual definition can in fact constitute something of a deflection from the linguistic reality of the word's ordinary usage, and that only a greater attentiveness to the latter will contribute to more meaningful discourses on the subject of education. I want to explore the possibility that changes in, or reforms to, educational activity need not proceed from (new) *definitions* of education, but from meaningful conversations on the subject of education itself. I will explore Raymond Carver's short story "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" as a way of demonstrating how these meaningful conversations are ordinarily conducted, how concepts often conflict and become confused in the process, and, finally, how attentiveness to their context can turn confusion into clarity as a result.

Answering the Question: What "Is" Something?

The problem posed by the question "What is education?" carries within it a number of assumptions: firstly, that the question can be answered; secondly, that its answer should take the form, "Education is…"; and thirdly, that we need the answer in order to proceed with whatever activities are implied by the word. Of the first, many might argue that in fact the point is not to find the right answer, but to offer a response that allows others to know the respondent's stance in relation to the question. I don't intend to contest this perspective here. Of the second assumption, however, there is more to be examined: in what sort of a language game does the expression "Education is…" give authentic meaning to the word "education"? Is there something going on with the pronouncement (that says that education is *this* and not *that*) in this utterance that actually takes us further away from how the word is ordinarily used and understood, and places us in a more rarefied relation to it than it does bring us closer to the (educational) *reality* it describes?

The nature of the question "What is such-and-such?" prescribes different modes of response according to the discipline. The question "What is a star?" need not prompt from the astrophysicist the same kind of essay-length apologiae provided by Immanuel Kant and Moses Mendelssohn to the question "What is Enlightenment?" Where the former participates in a language game of empirical, factual observation, the latter is both a defence of and an attempt to enforce a particular understanding (in Michel Foucault's interpretation, for example, Kant is enforcing a double bind in his formulation that links "the contract of rational despotism with free reason" (Foucault, 1984, p. 37). In providing an extended definition of "Enlightenment," the philosophers impress a general understanding of the term upon us, which might rule out, for example, the kinds of enlightenment that might be achieved via religious experience and ritual. Both the posing of the question and the answering of it emerge as underwritten by the desire to seek – and fix – the thing's meaning beyond the limitations of the

speaker. What compels this desire? Is it the reassurance that we know what something is, or the need to ensure that others know what we know? And does it really find its satisfaction in definition, or does definition necessarily distract from, and therefore delay, an attention to the reality to which our words actually relate?

Benedetto Croce opens his *Guide to Aesthetics* by saying:

> To the question, "What is art?" one could reply in jest – and it would not be a foolish retort – that art is something everybody knows about. As a matter of fact, had we not some inkling already as to what art is, the question itself could not even be raised. For every question entails some notion of what is being asked, implicit in the question and, therefore, qualified and known. (Croce, 1995, p. 3)

Croce offers us the notion that, at least in part, any ordinary person has some notion of the concept of art – otherwise we wouldn't be able to speak of it. By contrast, the British Idealist philosopher F. H. Bradley opens an essay on the concept of responsibility with the observation that there is a contradiction between the idea that "what everyone thinks must be known by all men" and the idea that "It is not so easy to say what the ordinary people mean by their words" (Bradley, 1876, p. 2). This note of scepticism strikes at the heart of philosophical difficulties over whether we know what others are talking about when they talk about such important things as art and responsibility. Distrust enters in, inviting a call for a conceptualization that covers all possibilities: "responsibility *is*…" According to this line of thinking, if everyone knows what either art or responsibility *is*, a general explanation must be forthcoming – mustn't it? This distrust is as much one of doubting our own grasp of the concept as it is doubting that others (Bradley's "ordinary people") share the same understanding. So there is a sense, as Rush Rhees writes, that all "philosophical problems are personal – just as scepticism is" (Rhees, 2006, p. 18). I will return to Rhees in due course, but want to dwell on the difficulty of both knowing and defining what a thing is for a while longer.

Going further back, the same paradox of both knowing and not-knowing seems to be expressed by St. Augustine when he asks in his *Confessions*, "Quid est ergo tempus?," or "What, then, is time?" (cited in Wittgenstein, 2009, §89). Time, like Croce's art, and Bradley's responsibility, is a concept that poses a particular problem, summed up by Wittgenstein in the following way:

> Something that we know when no one asks us, but no longer know when we are supposed to give an account of it, is something that we need to remind ourselves of. (And it is obviously something of which for some reason it is difficult to remind oneself.) (Ibid., §89)

Wittgenstein's language plays a trick of the light here, seeming to point towards the notion that concepts are indeed a matter of epistemological concern; namely, the question of whether we have grasped them (to use the Kantian terminology) enough to inform others of what they are. But, as both Croce and Bradley unconsciously recognize, the Wittgensteinian account of the meaning and meaningfulness of concepts actually resides more in our language use than in any abstract sense; it inheres in the way we both speak and write about things – not just our expression of them, but the expression of our *interest* in them. "Education is…," I will argue, provides a formulation that denies that interestedness, and risks presenting the concept of education as the object of scientific knowledge, rather than as something that is subject to different shapes and forms for different language games.

The Difficulty of Definition

In her paper "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," Cora Diamond suggests that some of our encounters with things that the mind cannot seemingly fully grasp – such as art,

responsibility, or time – produce in us a kind of existential fear, a horror of "experiences in which we take something in reality to be resistant to our thinking it, or possibly to be painful in its inexplicability, difficult in that way" (Diamond, 2003, p. 2). Diamond is here speaking about the concept of death, making reference to a poem by Ted Hughes in which the poet describes an experience of looking at a photo of six men who were later killed in war. The experience is strangely dual, of looking at both the living (in the photo) and the dead (in actuality), as their faces "shoulder out / One's own body from its instant and heat" (ibid.). We feel almost physically displaced by the problem that the paradox of explanation produces in us – the same feeling that Augustine seems to allude to in his passage from the *Confessions*. Augustine's solution is to close down the possibility for confusion by coming up with a theory of language that dispels the discomfort: a "picture theory" (Wittgenstein's term for it) of language in which every object in the world has an allocated name, thus mitigating semantic ambiguity.

Diamond's approach is to instead embrace the semiotic-semantic ambiguity, describing this kind of moment as one in which we encounter the "difficulty of reality" (a phrase she has borrowed from John Updike), that is, the difficulty of how to go on with a word in the one language game in which it doesn't make sense (namely, metaphysics). She goes on to say that, very often, we are equipped to make these troubling encounters evaporate through language games that cast them in a different light:

> Now it is plainly possible to describe the photo so it does not seem boggling at all. It is a photo of men who died young, not long after the picture was taken. Where is the contradiction? – Taking the picture that way, there is no problem about our concepts being adequate to describe it. Again, one might think of how one would teach a child who had been shown a photo and told it was a photo of her grandfather, whom she knows to be dead. If she asks "Why is he smiling if he's dead?," she might be told that he was smiling when the picture was taken, because he was not dead then, and that he died later. The child is being taught the language-game, being shown how her problem disappears as she comes to see how things are spoken of in the game. (Ibid., p. 2)

Diamond here describes how language evolves to include its own coping mechanisms for existential crises, to provide us with language games in which the difficulties of reality can be dispelled by the effective practice of a particular language game. But why might having to answer for education constitute one of these experiences? In many ways it possesses the same quality of Augustine's (quasi-childlike) confusion over the concept of time, and is related to the feeling that we do understand, but cannot encompass, the concept of death represented by the faces of six men in a photo: you both know, and do not know, what it is.

But is our dwelling with the concept of education ever really *that* painful? Possibly not, and yet for the educationalist faced with the question "What is education?," the fact is that to be answerable for the meaning of education does place us in a position of difficulty, not least because it seems so simple to speak of it, but also because the possibility of its inexplicability means that the experiences of many millions of people might be going unexplained unless we can provide a good account of what it is, what it does, or what it can achieve. But try and come up with any one explanation, and it soon seems that it proves inadequate to the task of accounting for those many millions, and becomes, as Diamond puts it, "awesome and astonishing in its inexplicability" (ibid., p. 3). How we deal with that inexplicability becomes not only a matter of interest, but urgency.

As I suggested above, explanation – much like that given for why the grandfather in Diamond's example is smiling even in death – contrives to conquer a problem of reality (i.e., inexplicability) by providing a solution that wears the appearance of objectivity, or science. One way to do this is to state categorically what the word "education" means, as in R. S. Peters' famous formulation that it involves "the intentional transmission of what is worthwhile" (Peters, 1974, p. 35). The effect of making such a proposition is to firmly indicate – as Peters hoped to do – that "education is what it is and not some other thing" (Peters, 1973, p. 82). In other words, education must be seen as *this*, and not *that*. The achievement here may be to impress a particular picture on the reader, but it also (to use Diamond's

word) "deflects" from the fact that there may be many other pictures of educational meaning we are willing to entertain also. Other formulations may not be so categorical, but have the same effect of leading us to look at the meaning under one aspect, whilst deflecting from the fact of education's many-aspectedness. For example:

> "Education is … a fostering, a nurturing, a cultivating, process." (Dewey, 1916, p. 10)

> "Education is at once the most intimate and the most far-reaching of human endeavours." (Scheffler, 2010, p. ix)

> "Education is not encounter between robots but an encounter between human beings." (Biesta, 2013, p. 1)

These propositions may not be definitions to the exclusion of all other possibilities, but they define in the etymological sense of limiting or bounding the sense, such that the concept is to be taken *this way*, and not *that*. Taken on their own, these statements have all the appearance of harmless facticity: this *is* simply the way things are in the world they are describing. Taken together, we begin to see their incompatibility: they can start to feel at odds with one another. There is no reason, for instance, why we shouldn't entertain the idea that education might also be the fostering or cultivating of relationships between robots, nor any reason why we should suspect that robots might not undertake more intimate and far-reaching endeavours than (some) human beings. But the difficulty we are faced with here is not so much the difficulty of deciding, therefore, which of these claims has the greatest purchase upon educational reality; the "difficulty of reality" is accepting that their equally valid claims upon our reason mean that none can amount to a full and complete representation of what education really *is*. These claims risk becoming guilty, then, of what John Tasioulas (2021) has called "conceptual overreach," which "offers the illusory comfort that the most difficult challenges that confront us all 'boil down to' one factor" (Tasioulas, 2021, np). Conceptual comfort may be the opposite of conceptual confusion, but this is more a matter of psychology than truth: we feel temporarily satisfied with the answer provided, as the "is" of the formulation carries the force of a conclusion. But if it is the case that no such completion can be arrived at (because we can entertain more than one answer to the question), it is perhaps worth moving away from "the underlying inadequacy in a philosophical view of language that ties description to a classification," and towards "a capacity to participate in the life from which the word comes" (Diamond, 1988, pp. 266–7).

What happens, then, if we approach the "difficulty of reality" not from the position of trying to surmount an otherwise semantically volatile concept via a universal phraseology, but from the ground up? The trouble with characterizations of the kind discussed above is not so much that they are or are not the things that they say that they are, but that they both are (acceptable characterizations) *and* are not (the only characterizations we are willing to accept). And this is why, when confronted with the question "What is education?," we might begin to experience a kind of verbal vertigo, as we are asked to confine the meaning of the concept to a sense or meaning which is inconsistent with an awareness that we apply and accept it differently in multifarious situations. It is a question of feeling forced to adhere to a language game (an abstract definition) that contravenes our comfort with the language games in which the word ordinarily appears. Here are some examples of what these ordinary contexts might look like:

> "There is, I believe, in every disposition a tendency to some particular evil – a natural defect, which not even the best education can overcome." (Mr Darcy, in Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*)

"the quality of concealed filth lying at the base of many a human character which may be the inevitable outcome of base blood, and which education may have veneered, is revealed to me at the first glance." (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*)

"The only path to national unity is through our shared identity as Americans. That is why it is so urgent that we finally restore patriotic education to our schools." (Donald Trump, White House Conference on American History, 2020)

In these instances, I would argue, the word education is "alive" with meaning (both positive and negative) in ways that don't require definition in order for us to understand them, whereas in the case of definitions or delimitations, the word has no content other than that with which it is subsequently supplied. "Learning to use a term," writes Diamond in a paper entitled "Losing Your Concepts," "is coming into life with that term" (Diamond, 1988, p. 268). This life with a concept, she continues, "involves doings and thinkings and understandings of many sorts" (ibid., p. 276). Laverty, referencing Diamond, also speaks of the need to pay close attention to the multiple instances in which a concept can present itself as meaningful (Laverty, 2006). If we can accept the use of the word "education" in the instances provided by Austen, Nietzsche, and Trump as valid applications of the term, then we may have to accept that its meaning is less tied to any scientific or semantic definition, and finds its life more in the situation of its utterance. What's more, it might be argued that new definitions of education can only arise from a seeming need to depart from the ordinary: that they are in fact claims to the *extra-*ordinary, and therefore expressions of an interest to exceed the ordinary. To exceed the ordinary is to make a claim to general application of a concept, and therefore to avoid its slipperiness, its variability, and its vitality, the fact of meaning being contingent upon the context of its utterance. It is all too easy, for example, to dismiss Trump's use of education as simply wrong if we try to make it consistent with one of our previously noted definitions; its use instead requires an evaluation of what he was trying to say and enforce by using the word.

Wittgenstein describes the confusion generated by the (desire for) general applicability of a semantic definition of concepts as follows:

It is as if our concepts involved a scaffolding of facts – that would presumably mean: If you imagine certain facts otherwise, describe them otherwise, than they are, then you can no longer imagine the application of certain concepts, because the rules for their application have no analogue in the new circumstances. (1967, §350)

Wittgenstein highlights the feeling of being stuck once we are committed to seeing our concept as being either this or that, so that we struggle to see it otherwise. To see education only as Dewey does, for instance, might prevent us from seeing what it is that Mr Darcy or Trump are talking about in their own contexts. So explanations of what education *is* actually end up removing us from the reality of their expression. This is precisely the issue raised in Diamond's paper, in which she describes deflection as "what happens when we are moved from the appreciation, or attempt at appreciation, of a difficulty of reality to a philosophical or moral problem apparently in the vicinity" (Diamond, 2003, p. 12). The problem in the vicinity, I have suggested already, may lie in the question of reassurance: either reassuring a child that the problem of death can be contained by a language game that explains an image's relationship to death, or reassuring an audience that the concept of Enlightenment has a fixed and determinate meaning, for the sake of their self-betterment. These games, for Diamond, are understood as being adjacent to the actual difficulty posed by the thing in question.

When Diamond moves to bring philosophical discussion closer to reality, she does so in terms of an "an attempt at appreciation." In so doing, the surety provided by abstract definition is waived in favour of an aesthetic attitude toward the world and the language we use to describe it. She evokes an aesthetic attitude towards our concept that the epistemological strains against: so often we want to *know* things for sure, more than simply appreciate them for what they are, or might yet become. The

likelihood is that knowing seems to promise surety, whereas an appreciation of a phenomenon can only ever exist in relation to things changing, or to different perspectives and aspects to things. Ann Chinnery has made a similar observation about Diamond's relevance for moral education, in that her attention to the particular instance tilts moral education "away from an emphasis on moral understanding and toward the cultivation of moral perception and moral imagination" (Chinnery, 2019, p. 122). The aesthetic characteristics of the latter realm can no longer rely on fixity to generate meaningful expression.

Conceptual Investigation

The attempt to tie meaning to definitions – which I have described here as a form of reassurance in scientific language games – reaches something of an apotheosis in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, in which he describes knowledge as being a synthesis of intuition (how objects impress themselves upon us) with concepts. Concepts, at their purest, constitute "the form of the thought of an object in general" (Kant, 1998, p. 193). Kant's formulation aspires, therefore, to a principle of general applicability in his understanding of concepts, a strong-arming of language into theoretical abstraction for which Nietzsche expressed significant disdain. In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche counters with the notion that "all concepts in which an entire process is semiotically concentrated defy definition; only something which has no history can be defined" (Nietzsche, 2007, p. 53). Nietzsche's impatience with Kantianism leads him to state further that "A concept is produced by overlooking what is individual and real" (Nietzsche, 1999, p. 145). Kant's formulation also bears out precisely the Wittgensteinian irritation with the "deep disquietudes" that arise from a "misinterpretation of our forms of language" (2009, §111). Wittgenstein's method in the *Philosophical Investigations* is to proceed by exploring language-in-use, and therefore by "conceptual investigation." Wittgenstein initially offers the very concise description of a concept as "the use of a word" (§383), situating concepts less in the ether or the mind than in the mouth. Later, we are provided with a more extended description: "Concepts lead us to make investigations; are the expression of our interest, and direct our interest" (§570).

Contra Kant, Wittgenstein suggests that our concepts do not exist a priori, but play out in our language as both *expressive* and *interested*: in speaking of them we reveal what they mean *to us*. Both form and desire are thus at play in conceptual utterance in ways that semantic definitions cannot recognize. To know what someone means when they speak of a thing, we have to look at the circumstances (interpersonal, social, cultural, intellectual) of its being spoken. As Rhees observes, "it is by looking at the different games and at the different things we are doing in them, at the importance which the different words have in them and in what we are doing, that we find the relation of word and things" (Rhees, 2006, p. 181). Further to this, Rhees also raises the problem of some expressions being possible in a language but not having any meaning: "what about the various games which are deliberately imagined and expressly made unlike any which plays a part in our lives?" (ibid.). If we think about the ways in which definition features as a game in our language, there are many instances in which it is only called for to *go against* what is ordinarily understood.

Expression and interest are two characteristics of a concept that allow us to describe it as *aesthetic* in character, rather than either analytic or synthetic (Gibbs, 2019). If concepts express our interest, they situate us – they place us in relation to the situation of their usage: they are not just words with meanings, but words which reveal our attitudes towards particular things.

When Wittgenstein writes that concepts are the expression of our interest, he does not confine his understanding of a concept's functioning to something purely intellectual. Instead, he relates to language (concepts, words, sentences) in a deeply physical, sensual way. In his *Philosophical Investigations* (2009), in §568, immediately prior to the comments about concepts, he writes that "Meaning is a physiognomy," whilst in §457, he says that "meaning something is like going up to someone." Our words have almost facial features in their expressiveness, and to use them is to put them into motion;

we *reach* towards others with our words. If a person only conceived of words according to their definitions, would they have any real appreciation for how they operate in language?

> Is it that such a person is unable to appreciate a sentence, judge it, the way those who understand it can? Is it that for him the sentence is not alive (with all that that implies)? Is it that the word does not have an aroma of meaning? And that therefore he will often react differently to a word than we do? – It *might* be that way. (1980, §465)

Wittgenstein's emphasis on the (physically and psychologically) expressive character of conceptual utterance, again described in aesthetic terms of appreciation and judgement, leaves us hopelessly aware of the potential for misunderstanding ("It *might* be that way"). But necessarily so. It is only in awareness of this possibility that due care over our own expression arises, and that we avoid the nagging desire to fall back on formulations that wear the guise of science. If education is an expression of the interests of those that would speak of it, then it compels not only our attention to those utterances (and what is being done with them by others), but self-reflection in terms of what we do when we speak of it, also.

The Aesthetics of Our Concepts

The Wittgensteinian philosopher Alice Crary has spoken of a need to pay closer attention to "the sensibilities that inform individuals' ways of speaking and thinking" (Crary, 2007, p. 45), an invitation that goes beyond considering things said and thought solely in terms of their objective being. An attentiveness to expression, to the ways in which language exists not just to circumscribe the world (to contain it as abstract concept) but to bring it alive, means both accepting the situated, physical character of our utterances, and taking an interest in the interests of others (whilst keeping in mind our own interest*edness*). This leads to an appreciation for a concept's *meaningfulness* in any given situation, rather than a search for its ultimate meaning, a search which can often portend tyranny in discourse. Stanley Cavell writes:

> the philosopher who proceeds from ordinary language is concerned less to avenge sensational crimes against the intellect than to redress its civil wrongs; to steady any imbalance, the tiniest usurpation, in the mind. This inevitably requires reintroducing ideas which have become tyrannical (e.g. existence, obligation, certainty, identity, reality, truth…) into the specific contexts in which they function naturally. This is not a question of cutting big ideas down to size, but of giving them the exact space in which they can move without corrupting. (Cavell, 2002, p. 18)

The will to secure education's meaning in terms of what it "is" may often arise from a concern that "sensational crimes" are indeed being committed in the name of the concept, and therefore a radical alternative seems necessary. Whilst alternatives can provide us with the opportunity to see the concept in a different light, the corruption Cavell refers to occurs when one meaning tries to assert itself over others, or replace them altogether. Cavell, like Wittgenstein and Diamond, is interested in modes of expression that restore concepts to scenes and situations in which they have their correct weight, rather than being inflated out of proportion to a recognizable reality. Diamond draws on examples from literature to make her point about the difficulties of reality. Rhees is equally insistent upon the relevance of literature for appreciating how words operate within forms of life: "Language is something that can have a literature … And if we include folk songs and stories, then literature is immensely important in almost any language: important for the way in which things said in the language are understood" (Rhees, 2006, p. 192). For Rhees, literature might even provide the best examples of what people mean when they talk about specific things and concepts, because it shows how dialogue affirms particular rules of communication whilst revealing the precarious fragility of human

misunderstanding. He describes the phenomenology of "speaking about something" as one in which it is important to be attentive to the ways in which we conduct these conversations *together*:

> If you want to see the kind of role that rules do play in speaking with people, you have to consider the way in which the various remarks in a conversation are about something; the way in which people are talking about something when they talk together. That is what makes the big difference. (Ibid., p. 197)

Rhees' phenomenological phrasing of a thing's *aboutness* here acts as a reminder that intentionality is always at play in our language use (the "interest" of Wittgenstein's conceptual formulation), and that therefore the concept's meaning cannot be abstracted from its environment. The examples above from Austen, Nietzsche, and Trump all reveal their "aboutness" through an evaluation of the context: questions of narrative, audience, and register all express the interests of the speaker. They express a position in relation to it, which compels a closer look at the speaker's sensibilities. By contrast, Rhees objected to R. S. Peters' titling of a book *The Concept of Education* precisely because the definite article was so assured there was such a thing, and that it transcended the finitude of our discussions. There may be competing concepts of education, but there is never "the" concept of education.

If language is inherited from scenes in which real people are speaking "about something," then literature takes its readers back to those scenes in which people *really* inherit their understanding of things (such as the girl's understanding of the relationship of a photographic image to the concept of death), putting us into conversation with the experience of others, testing the concept against theirs. The trouble with some forms of philosophizing, according to Diamond, is that they can deflect from our ability to explore these experiences, to place ourselves in relation to one another, to engage with reality. In particular, she articulates this deflection as one that points away from our situated and embodied relation to the world: "the deflection of a moral issue is a deflection which makes our own bodies mere facts" (Diamond, 2003, p. 13). In short, the meanings of things can't matter when the bodies that give them utterance and form aren't taken to be in play also. To reduce philosophical discussions to argumentation articulated in terms of mere facts (and/or definitions) is to avoid the fact that we are bodies that do the articulating; our reliance on argumentation of this kind "may make unavailable to ourselves our own sense of what it is to be a living animal" (ibid., p. 8). Rhees complements this view by emphasising that *speaking* a language is not the same as learning one, because speaking involves not just evidencing mastery of a language, but an appreciating how it develops through our discourse with one another:

> If you understand anything in language, you must understand what dialogue is, and you must see how understanding grows as the dialogue grows. How understanding the *language* grows. For the language is discourse, is speaking. It is telling people things and trying to follow them. And that is what you try to understand. (Rhees, 2006, p. 7)

For Rhees, the unity provided by a definition (when it amounts to *a=b*) defies the bigger picture of any dialogue on the subject, because there is nowhere for the language to grow beyond that equation. If we understand the speaking situation as the site for growth, however, there is potential for an exchange of ideas and justification of them, rather than a requirement for their abstraction. Education's value as a meaningful concept, then, relies on our being attentive to the situations in which we speak of it, and not just arriving at general propositions for its purpose that transcend those situations. Coming into life with the concept of education means thinking about whether statements and propositions about education that we find in research and scholarship have any affinity with the things we have experienced or witnessed in our own lives, not just the lives we think it might be desirable for others to live. "A dialogue has sense," Rhees observes, "if *living* has sense; not otherwise"

(ibid., p. 13, my emphasis). This is not to say that living always makes sense, but that it is the right place to start with our investigations into how we can make ourselves understood by others.

What We Talk About When We Talk About Something

To appreciate a concept as the expression of our interest in a (or in any) given reality is to begin to move away from our desire to conceive of it in the abstract, as something that can be fixed or determinate outside of language use. The latter can only succeed in *deflecting* from the reality in which we are conceptually interested, rather than engaging with it. To speak, for Rhees, is to "tell you something," to rediscover "what it makes sense to say" in any given context; to define, by contrast, aims to secure and impose understanding outside of contextual variation (Rhees, 2006, p. 186). Raymond Carver's 1981 short story "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" shows how language grows as people try to speak of it and make sense of their lives, albeit through multiple instances of misunderstanding, as well as attempts to overcome misunderstanding through definition. It unfolds as a story of what becomes of love as a concept over the course of a conversation about love. It reveals the difficulty of facing the reality of a concept when our attempts to pin it down definitively fall short. At the same time, the story demonstrates how we strive to find familiarity in our speaking of concepts, even as the variation in its usage evades common understanding. As Ondřej Beran has put it, "the grammar of the word 'love' is not exhausted by a list of examples, but it could hardly be what it is without the connection to familiar examples" (Beran, 2018, p. 55). By means of Carver's story, I hope to show that the same is true of the grammar of the word "education": we need to see it in action to know what and how it really means, and not in abstr-action.

In the story, a group of four friends (two married couples) sit around a kitchen table, drinking gin and discussing their own understandings and experiences of love. The bottle of gin that sits in a bucket of ice on the table makes for an important parallel with the concept under discussion, with the first being set up as a concrete centripetal force: "The gin and the tonic water kept going around, and we somehow got on the subject of love" (Carver, 1981, p. 170). The gin is a stable, material presence, in contrast with the volatile notion of love. No one within this narrative would question the existence of the gin (in the way that philosophers like to wonder whether the table is really there), or their understanding of what it means. The concept of love, however, is much disputed, with characters expressing differences of opinion and perception about what it means to them.

Mel, the male friend of the narrator, Nick, seems already to have declared his position: "Mel thought real love was nothing less than spiritual love" (ibid.). Mel is a cardiologist by profession, but had spent time in a seminary, which is what has informed this attempt at profundity. It is also a declaration of universalism, something bullishly metaphysical, whose mysticism also smacks of machismo (the "nothing less" being a muscular insinuation of an intolerance for any other notion). But Mel's wife, Terri, then moves the concept into problematic emotional terrain, and also a deeply private one, to say of her ex-husband that "he loved me. In his own way maybe, but he loved me. There was love there, Mel. Don't say there wasn't" (ibid., p. 171). To say to her husband that this abusive man loved her is not as difficult as the addition of saying "in his own way." Immediately, this conception of love not only provides an alternative to Mel's, but actually excludes him. Terri has privatized an aspect of the concept of love in a way that can be shared by only her and one other person, removing from everyone else the possibility of its verification. How can anyone prove whether Ed loved Terri, when "his own way" was a matter of one other person's perception only? Terri's adamance only serves to fuel Mel's fear that he does not know her, does not know whether she loves him, and that he cannot find the correct conceptual definition for their relationship that will somehow secure it.

Mel's response is to refuse to recognize Terri's objection ("That's not love, and you know it"), and to then reduce the absent man's character solely to the violent displays with which his expressions of love were sometimes associated in Terri's experience: "The man threatened to kill me" (ibid., p. 171).

With this declaration, Mel appears to remove from Terri the understanding she had claimed for herself, one in which love was inseparable from violence, and in doing so reasserts his position as the dominant male in her affections. It must be clear that there is some threat from the possibility that a man who could be violent could also be loving. Mel's triumph is punctuated with a reaching for the gin bottle, as if reaching for the kind of stability that Terri's conception of love had briefly unsettled. He then strokes her cheek as if to reassure them both of his physical presence, a kind of aggressive tenderness in its own right.

The narrator presses Mel to affirm a notion that love is an absolute concept, and that, whatever it is, it must be the same for all – ergo, what Terri saw in her ex-husband cannot have been love: "The kind of love I'm talking about, you don't try to kill people," argues Mel (ibid.). Mel has here given up the attempt to affirm the noble love he opened with, and is now trying to deploy a logical strong-arm to the situation, to quash the (meaning of) love Terri shared with her ex-husband. But it is the narrator's wife, Laura, who throws in the next destabilizing element: "But who can judge anyone else's situation?" Somewhat differently from Terri, Laura is not suggesting that only certain people can recognize the feelings of certain others; instead, she floats the possibility that no one can discern how or what others are feeling. In so doing, she then invites in the dangers of subjectivism. Herein lies the malleability, or aesthetics, of our concept: like the gin bottle at the centre of the table, everyone seems to be partaking of the same thing, but the effect is incalculably different.

The narrator then shares his own sentiments on the subject privately with his readers, saying of Laura: "In addition to being in love, we like each other and one another's company" (ibid., p. 174). Love, for the narrator, is something independent of the companionship that his wife offers him. Again, there are all sorts of possibilities implied by this segregation of feelings: that the narrator wants to reassure himself of his wife's affections by speaking on behalf of them both, that he sees loving and liking as (possibly necessarily) conceptually different within a relationship – that there might even be dangers in conflating the two. Carver reveals to his readers the different attitudes adopted by the characters towards the concept of love, showing how their articulation and utterances all betray a variety of psychological subtleties and neuroses that having to speak of love brings out in them:

> "Mel thought real love was nothing less than spiritual love…"

> "But he loved me. In his own way maybe, but he loved me. There was love there, Mel. Don't say there wasn't…"

> "The kind of love I'm talking about, you don't try to kill people…"

> "In addition to being in love, we like each other and one another's company…" (Carver, 1981)

The story gives the concept of love, in Cavell's words, "the space in which it can move without corrupting": it does not elevate the concept to an aspatial metaphysics, but confines it to a scene of quiet domesticity, in which we feel the vibrations of people's language use intimately and loudly – but also only briefly, and with unknown consequences. This might be what Cavell terms a concept's "natural environment":

> The profoundest as well as the most superficial questions can be understood only when they have been placed in their natural environments. (What makes a statement or a question profound is not its placing but its timing.) The philosopher is no more magically equipped to remove a question from its natural environment than he is to remove himself from any of the conditions of intelligible discourse. (2002, p. 41)

Carver can be seen as posing the conceptual question of what love is, just as Croce had done about art, and Augustine about time – but on this occasion he places the task within the mouths of those who

would ordinarily speak of it. Within the limitations of a brief scene from the lives of otherwise unseen people, we witness how a concept is contested, shaped, and transformed over the course of a conversation, as the expression of various different interests. We are observing the life of the concept in this language game, and learning about its meaningfulness.

In the story, the concept of love is contested and unresolved, and yet the story as such displays many of the characteristics both of love and of our reasons for seeking surety in definitions: if only we knew what it was, we would know whether others felt it or understood in the same way. But the performative and passionate dimensions to speaking of love show that this end is never in sight, a point to which Cavellian scepticism consistently returns us: we cannot fully know the mind of another, nor can criteria and/or definitions serve as a substitute for that (lack of) knowledge. In the observation and appreciation of a scene such as this, however, we can see how things seem to others and become meaningful for them: as such, concepts become (meaningfully) enriched through ongoing conversation and not through the kind of conclusion brought about by definition.

Conclusion

Education, much like love, cannot be reduced to "scaffolding of facts." But a desire for its accurate definition can blind us to its multiplicity, and plasticity – its aesthetic, as opposed to semantic, character. Cavell writes that "[t]he meaning of words will, of course, stretch and shrink, and they will be stretched and shrunk" (2002, 39), a fact that demands our vigilance. As Bernard Williams writes, a commitment to the expressive character of language is more than just aesthetic, but has its political dimension, too:

> It is interesting that although some people have criticized linguistic philosophy for being pedantic, or just lexicographical or trivial in these respects, or for worrying too much about small points of verbal formulation, in fact it is the same demand that is often made by poets … who felt that the integrity of meaning, saying no more and no less than what you mean, and being self-aware about what that is, is itself a bulwark against dissolution, terror, splurge. (Williams, 1978, p. 141)

It is not my intention in this paper to deny the importance of definitions altogether; they have value in both situating discourse and in stretching its reach. But when we situate our concepts at a significant remove from the reality to which they are supposed to relate, and we separate out their plasticity into silos, scholarship loses its sense of intimacy with the ordinary. This is the same observation that led David Hume to argue that philosophers who were beholden to abstract theorizing thrived on "a mental attitude that cannot enter into every-day business and action; so it vanishes when the philosopher comes out of the shadows into daylight, and its principles can't easily influence our behaviour" (Hume, 2008, p. 4). If we don't mean in the conference room what we say in the street, there can be no real purchase of the former upon the latter. The appeal to definition becomes an appeal to the *extra*-ordinary, the hope that philosophy might abstract itself from lived discourse in time and place, for something outside of language. But the ways in which we inhabit our language, as living beings of limited understanding, provide the evidence for an attitude towards education that is grounded in its reality, as well as pointing towards its possibilities.

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