

Philosophical experience in childhood

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Those who argue for an elementary school curriculum containing philosophy, often point to a child's propensity for wonder. Referring to Socrates' questioning, they rhetorically ask: Isn't this wondering essential to philosophy? Perhaps it is. Yet there are other ways philosophy may enter into the lives of children. Remember that Socrates was not only asking questions; he also claimed to have received philosophical insight through a kind of *experience*, namely the perception of ideas. And this might not be as lofty or obscure as it seems today, for perhaps even children can encounter philosophy through certain experiences. Are there experiences that may bring a person into philosophy, analogous to the way some experiences may lead one into religion?

Consider this: One evening I am out walking on my own. I stop and look up at the sky. In the silence of the night I start thinking: Who am I? Does my life have a purpose? Why am I here? This is an example of wonder. But now consider this: A boy, aged 16, has ran away from his strict and religious parents. On Christmas Eve he finds himself alone, walking the streets of the capital. Doubting the God of his parents has driven him to despair. He thinks: Who am I? Does my life have a purpose? Why am I here? His questions are identical to those asked in wonder under the starry sky. Nevertheless, they are not primarily expressions of *wonder*. And the boy's questions are not merely questions, but *problems*, arising out of crisis and confusion. The difference between these two cases should be enough to make one reconsider the centrality of wonder in philosophy.

Now the run-away's anxious questions did not arise *ex nihilo*. What made them crop up? It may have happened through gradual development, through conversation with friends or

through reading. But his doubt may also have set in suddenly as a consequence of specific experiences, perhaps in connection with dramatic events: Hiding in the bathroom at night he sees his father beating his mother, and in that instant he knows that no one can be trusted and that everything may be different from what it seems. Or perhaps the questions are induced by quite ordinary events: He observes a cat hunting, killing and eating a little mouse and is struck by how void of mercy and meaning the world is. Or it may be an “aesthetic” experience: while watching a film about the Holocaust, he sees *the ultimate loneliness of the suffering individual* laid bare in front of him. These are all experiences that may have changed his philosophical sensibility, possibly forever. In the following pages, I will investigate such experiences as these.¹

My intention is to extract a concept of philosophical experience from two literary examples. I have chosen literary sources because the elusive nature of philosophical experiences makes them hard to recognize in ordinary life. Nevertheless, elusiveness does not mean insignificance – indeed, it is one of the merits of novels that they show us this. However, when I proceed to the essential features of philosophical experiences, I will refer to non-literary examples whenever they clearly exhibit a particular characteristic.

The philosophical method used can be termed “logical grammar”, after the model of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*.² In employing such a method, one tries to achieve clarity and dispel confusion by describing the patterns of human life in which concepts are entrenched. However, when the object to be investigated is a kind of experience that does not have standard or established ways of being expressed, grammar of the Wittgensteinian kind is closely related to phenomenology. And this is exactly the case for

¹ Some may feel that these are religious matters rather than strictly philosophical. Yet in my view, such a “strict” interpretation of philosophy distorts the existential importance of it: In dealing with fundamentals, philosophy shares some of its questions with religion, though they try to answer them in different ways.

² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen/Philosophical Investigations*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953). For an interpretation of this concept of grammar see: Cora Diamond, “Rules: Looking in the right place”, in D.Z. Phillips and P. Winch, ed., *Attention to particulars*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), pp. 12-34.

philosophical experiences: In these cases we must describe different ways in which we are inclined to express such experiences, and we will have to utilize our *own* inclinations in doing so. In this respect, it will resemble a phenomenological description.

It is not my intention to argue for the truth or falsity of the various philosophical insights and experiences that I will mention. Neither am I able, within the context of conceptual analysis, to show how widespread philosophical experiences actually are in childhood. In the end, a conviction of their existence and importance can only be produced by the readers recognizing themselves (or stories they have heard) in my account. In other words, this is a philosophical, hence conceptual, investigation. If someone wanted to conduct empirical research into such experiences, then it would presuppose a philosophical explication of the concept, since otherwise we would not even know which cases would *count* as philosophical experiences.

Philosophical aspects

At the outset, "philosophical experience" refers to an experience that one is inclined to express in philosophical terms.³ The word "experience" usually denotes either a conscious process that a person undergoes at a particular time (e.g. pain) or a skill that a person develops over time ("an experienced teacher"). Of course, these two are often linked: By undergoing experiences of a certain kind (e.g. sexual experiences) one may acquire a corresponding "skill" (e.g. to be sexually experienced). The first use of "experience" is a count noun; it refers to something occurring for a reasonably specific period of time, and this use is what is involved in the concept of philosophical experience. A philosophical experience, then, is something a person undergoes at a particular time (and place), and which he expresses

³ I am not able to discuss the meaning of "philosophical" within the confines of this essay; I must simply presuppose an understanding of which questions and themes that are philosophical. Therefore, "in philosophical terms" means, "terms related to the characteristic questions and themes found in philosophy".

philosophically, usually in the form of an (professed) insight. It is not, in itself, a skill or ability, but it does have a counterpart in the second use of “experience”: By undergoing philosophical experiences one may acquire a philosophical *sensibility*, which shapes one’s actions, thoughts and perceptions. It is perhaps the central feature of philosophical experiences that they can create such a sensibility, which, in part, constitutes one’s identity.

On this account, a philosophical experience seems almost to be a kind of *perception*: One perceives an object (or a situation as a whole) in a way that one expresses philosophically in the form of an insight. Now, even though the concept of philosophical experience is easily distorted when conceived of as a vision, it is still possible for us to use a peculiar kind of perception as its model. In part II of his *Philosophical Investigations* Ludwig Wittgenstein makes some remarks on what he calls *seeing-as* or *seeing aspects*. His key example, already known from Gestalt psychology, is the now famous duck-rabbit figure. Strange as it may seem, the transition from seeing a duck to seeing a rabbit shares important features with philosophical experiences; there are remarkable similarities between the two.

Aspects are peculiar in that they are located ontologically in between the subjective and the objective, for is the change of aspect from duck to rabbit an objective change or something “in the mind”? We do not know how to answer this; it is neither, and both. Aspects seem, so to speak, to signal the existence of a field *beyond* subjectivity and objectivity; or if one prefers a more modest description, aspects combine subjective and objective features without being in any way intersubjective. A change of aspect is subjective in the sense that it does not correspond to a change in the world described by physics. Furthermore, it is subjective, insofar as we may look at the same but still not see the same; you may not be able to see the aspect that I see no matter how hard you try (the duck-rabbit figure perhaps obscures this important point). Nevertheless, aspects are objective in that they approach and

confront us from the outside.⁴ This is what inclines us here to speak of *seeing* as opposed to, say, thinking or interpretation. Finally, aspects share with things objective the feature of being “out of our hands”; we are unable to force or control the dawning of an aspect, although we can set up favourable conditions for it (e.g. by staring or relaxing). In occurring independently of us at a particular time and in a particular place, it is a kind of *event*, not an action; it is not something we *do* – it is something we are struck by.

All these characteristics apply to philosophical experiences as well. As a preliminary characterization of philosophical experiences, we may therefore say that they are *experiences of philosophical aspects*. Yet this rudimentary account is still far too abstract. We will therefore proceed to some literary examples, in the hope of eliciting more concrete attributes of the concept of philosophical experience.⁵

Case 1: Ian McEwan, *Atonement*

Briony, 13 years old, has written a play that she plans to perform, together with three cousins, to celebrate the visit of her older brother. Unfortunately the project does not succeed, and Briony finds herself alone in the rehearsal-room, brooding over her failure. Philosophy sets in:

She bent her finger and straightened it. The mystery was in the instant before it moved, the dividing moment between not moving and moving, when her intention took effect. It was

⁴ This is sometimes called a “phenomenologically objective property”, which, if it just means “is subjective, but seems objective”, simply begs the question. Instead of deciding what its status is, I think one should rather describe how and why one is inclined to say, “In one sense it is subjective, in another it is objective”.

⁵ In this essay, “(philosophical) experience” refers to the whole process, including *both* the object of the experience (seen under a particular aspect) and the professed insight of the experience (expressed in words). “Object” is shorthand for “the object of the experience seen under a particular aspect”, although I will occasionally use “situation” to emphasize that the object involved is always the object as seen in a particular situation or context. “Insight” serves as shorthand for the expression of the experience, that is, what one gets out of the experience, what one feels that the experience shows. Furthermore, remember that the “object” of the experience does not have to be a middle-sized *thing*, but can also be an event, a gesture, a melody, a situation as a whole, and so forth.

like a wave breaking. If she could only find herself at the crest, she thought, she might find the secret of herself, that part of her that was really in charge. She brought her forefinger closer to her face and stared at it, urging it to move When did it know to move, when did she know to move it? There was no catching herself out. It was either-or. There was no stitching, no seam, and yet she knew that behind the smooth continuous fabric was the real self – was it her soul? – which took the decision to cease pretending, and gave the final command (pp. 35-36).⁶

These thoughts then slide into another philosophical theme, the so-called "problem of other minds", but now the wonder gains a slightly anxious undertone:

... one mystery bred another: was everyone else really as alive as she was? ... did her sister really matter to herself, was she as valuable to herself as Briony was? Was being Cecilia just as vivid an affair as being Briony? Did her sister also have a real self concealed behind a breaking wave, and did she spend time thinking about it, with a finger held up to her face ... If the answer was yes, then the world, the social world, was unbearably complicated, with two billion voices, and everyone's thoughts striving in equal importance and everyone's claim on life as intense, and everyone thinking they were unique, when no one was. Once could drown in irrelevance. But if the answer was no, then Briony was surrounded by machines, intelligent and pleasant enough on the outside, but lacking the bright and private *inside* feeling she had (p. 36).

These are well-known thoughts for those who have reflected on the mystery of other minds. Importantly, it is a kind of thinking – more specifically, a kind of wonder – bordering on perplexity. A certain distance characterizes it; Briony has trouble realizing what her reflection tells her must be the case: "She knew [that everyone else had thoughts like hers], but only in a rather arid way; she didn't really feel it" (p. 36). In the grip of philosophical reflection, she is unable to see or understand how other minds can exist. Everything seems utter chaos; she loses her grip on reality: "The self-contained world she had drawn with clear and perfect lines had been defaced with the scribble of other minds ..." (p. 36). She notes the difference between the difficulty of the real world, which she is now philosophising over, and the simpler world in which she feels more at home, the world of fiction, where there is no gap between words ("the others have minds like I do") and understanding (that other minds really do exist).

⁶ This and the following quotes are from Ian McEwan, *Atonement*, (London: Vintage / Random House, 2002).

At this point something crucial occurs; wonder is superseded by a philosophical experience: She looks out of the window and notices, down by the water fountain, her older sister and her childhood friend Robbie, both home from their studies in Cambridge. Suddenly, her sister undresses and jumps into the fountain. Then, after climbing out again, she immediately disappears into the house, without exchanging words with Robbie at all. Briony is confused – the event is so illogical; it doesn't mesh with her ideas about love and marriage. And this confusion becomes a sort of revelation for her.⁷

This sequence of events does not meet Briony's expectations because she expects human relations to be as they are in stories: easy to understand and with a clearly recognizable moral pattern. Watching the strange proceedings by the fountain shatters her picture of the world. Yet this very strangeness is pregnant with a philosophical insight concerning other minds. Precisely the fact that she does not understand forces her to acknowledge the separateness of other minds: Much of what people say and do does not conform to our expectations of what life is or should be. Exactly this mismatch between my mind and other people is what their "otherness" consists in. Now Briony understands the meaning of what she formerly could not fathom: the independent, and therefore inherently problematic, existence of other minds ("... it wasn't only wickedness and scheming that made people unhappy ... it was the failure to grasp the simple truth that other people are as real as you" (p.40)). The gap between words and understanding has now been bridged; her philosophical experience has given her the insight to fill the abyss that wonder created or discovered. Now she not only *knows* that other people have their own minds, she *realizes* it, for recognition of their separate minds forces itself on her.

⁷ The reason behind her sister's seemingly strange behaviour is simply that she has lost a valuable vase in the water, but Briony does not know anything about that.

Case 2: Marcel Proust, *Combray*

The next example is from one of the most sophisticated childhood recollections in literature, Marcel Proust's *Combray*, the first book of his great cycle. We enter the novel when the young boy, who we might suppose is young Marcel himself, has convinced himself that he lacks the necessary talent to become a writer, perhaps due to his meeting (and losing) love. On his way home to Combray from Guermites, seated at the top of the family carriage with the driver next to him, his mood shifts once again:

At a bend in the road I experienced, suddenly, that special pleasure, which bore no resemblance to any other, when I caught sight of the twin steeples of Martinville, on which the setting sun was playing, while the movement of the carriage and the windings of the road seemed to keep them continually changing their position ... In ascertaining and noting the shape of their spires, the changes of aspect, the sunny warmth of their surfaces, I felt that I was not penetrating to the full depth of my impression, that something more lay behind that mobility, that luminosity, something which they seemed at once to contain and to conceal.⁸

Earlier, he describes the experience this way:

Then, quite apart from all those literary preoccupations, and without definite attachment to anything, suddenly a roof, a gleam of sunlight reflected from a stone, the smell of a road would make me stop still, to enjoy the special pleasure that each of them gave me, and also because they appeared to be concealing, beneath what my eyes could see, something which they invited me to approach and seize from them, but which, despite all my efforts, I never managed to discover. As I felt that the mysterious object was to be found in them, I would stand there in front of them, motionless, gazing, breathing, endeavouring to penetrate with my mind beyond the thing seen or smelt.

Marcel is here struck by how each thing or situation seems to have a mystical kernel that the mind can only glimpse. Such an experience is not as common as the sudden realization of the separateness of other minds that we met in McEwan's novel; nevertheless, there are parallels to it in the history of philosophy. It may be interpreted as a poetical version of the medieval

⁸ This and the following Proust-quotes are in Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, I-II, transl. by C.K.S. Moncrieff and F.A. Blossom, (New York: Random House, 1934), pp. 138-140 (vol. I).

thesis *individuum est ineffabile*. Alternatively, the experience can be seen as the root of the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, at least of this philosophy as it is often interpreted: Behind every impression or perception there is an unknowable thing that, in its absoluteness, is forever out of our reach ("Das Ding-an-sich").

We will now proceed to an account of the essential features of the kind of philosophical experience had by Briony and Marcel. To introduce some order into my exposition I will arrange these features under four different headings: *concreteness*, *idiosyncrasy*, *intensity*, and *significance*.

Concreteness

There is a crucial difference between Marcel's experience and the philosophical theories of the scholastics and Kant. For in Proust, this kind of experience is explicitly *opposed* to abstract philosophical ideas. He says of his experiences:

It was certainly not any impression of this kind that could or would restore the hope I had lost of succeeding one day in becoming an author and poet, for each of them was associated with some material object devoid of any intellectual value, and suggesting no abstract truth. But at least they gave me an unreasoning pleasure, the illusion of a sort of fecundity of mind; and in that way distracted me from the tedium, from the sense of my own impotence which I had felt whenever I had sought a philosophic theme for some great literary work.

In Marcel's view, what distinguishes a philosophical experience from a philosophical theory (or "idea") is the concrete fullness of the first, and the emptiness and powerlessness he feels in facing the latter. Even though Marcel implies a downgrading of the importance of theory that we will not adopt here, he still points to the distinguishing trait of an experience, viz. its *concreteness*: it is intimately connected to the particular time and place in which it occurs. This means that the relation between a philosophical experience and its occasion is

not like the relation between a thesis (or theory) and an example. An example can always be exchanged for another example without this changing the meaning of the thesis. It is typical of this kind of experience, though, that the person having the experience finds it hard to imagine that the same experience could be had with regards to another object, for the distinguishing trait of a philosophical experience is that its insight or content is *tied* to its concrete object and the situation in which it is experienced. In other words, with regards to theories or theses, there is a sharp distinction between matters of *genesis* and matters of *validity*, but this is not the case with philosophical experiences.

On the one hand, the concreteness of philosophical experience lends the insight of the experience its peculiar power; the concrete object seems to be an embodiment of the insight to such a degree that the insight takes on the object's substantiality – its permanence and unavoidability – something that “only words” cannot capture. On the other hand, the concrete attachment bestows a certain instability on the insight. When the concrete object or situation is lost or forgotten, the insight itself threatens to fade away. This is central in Proust's novel: Marcel tries to preserve his philosophical experience by inculcating into his mind the objects that gave rise to it; these mental pictures, he hopes, will keep the experience fresh and alive. Yet he does not succeed; all that is left is “a confused mass of different images, under which must have perished long ago the reality of which I used to have some foreboding ...” In losing the concrete object, he loses the revelation.⁹

What Marcel could have done, though, was to convert his experience into a theory or thesis, and to preserve his insight in that way.¹⁰ It would perhaps not preserve the personal importance it had, since it could not bring the hidden reality back to *life*. For that reason, people of Marcel's temperament would prefer to lose the insight rather than “anaesthetize” it

⁹ The borderline between “present” and “lost” is rather vague, and varies from case to case. One may, for instance, speculate on whether the “fullness” of the insight can only be preserved by “*mémoire involuntaire*”, and never by “inculcation” – we cannot *make* it stay alive.

¹⁰ I cannot go deeply into what characterizes a philosophical “theory”, “thesis” or “position”, but some features will be clear from the way I describe philosophical experiences.

into a theory. On the other hand, converting the insight into a theory would take it into a more rational realm, where it is made available to other people and can be argued for or against. What some condemn as an empty, free-floating theory of no personal importance, others praise for its objectivity and rationality. Conversely, what some value for its personal intensity, others discard as obscure subjectivity. I do not want to take sides in such a debate here; I only want to point out that, in cutting the ties between insight and object, one is no longer treating the insight as an expression of an experience. Rather, one is treating it as a theory.

However, a philosophical experience shares an essential feature with a theory or thesis. For even though the insight is weaved inextricably into a concrete situation, it is formulated *generally*. Marcel's philosophical experience is not expressed as an insight into the nature of only a certain stone or country road; it seems rather to him that his peculiar perception of a particular thing represents an insight into the nature of *all* things. In other words, a philosophical experience is marked by being treated and expressed as an *embodiment* of the insight; its object is a "symbol", in the Romantic sense of the term. The particular object and the general insight become inseparable; the particular expresses the general as a face expresses an emotion.

Due to this internal relation between insight and object, the communication of philosophical experiences is a precarious affair. I may express a certain experience by saying: "It is as though all the world is just a surface; what's underneath is impossible to know". And you may reply "Oh yes, I know exactly what you mean". But the tone of your voice seems to prove that you do not. I say to myself: "He has no idea what I mean; he has never experienced such a thing". On the other hand, if your response convinces me that you actually do understand, then I may think: "He really knows what I mean; he must have experienced the same thing". These formulations demonstrate that in order to understand another person's

expression of a philosophical experience, one must have had something like the same experience oneself.¹¹ Yet what does it mean to have had the “same experience”? In the end, that one is inclined to express it in the same way, which means that there is an internal relation between the experience and the expression of it. Understanding the expression of a philosophical expression is to have had the experience oneself, which again means to express it in the same way.¹² It is crucial for any teacher or parent to be aware of such connections; to say “I know what you mean” without being able to show that you really do – that is, without showing that you have experienced the same – will only make the child suspicious and, as a consequence, reticent.

Some may fear that this annihilates the rationality of philosophy, since it appears to make genuine disagreement impossible. Disagreement normally presupposes understanding, but in order to understand the expression of a philosophical experience, one must have had the experience oneself, in which case you would not disagree. This worry, though, is groundless, for the rationality of philosophical theory and argument is left intact. Agreement and disagreement simply play a different role in speaking about one’s experience of the world than they do in the realm of theory and argument. To “disagree” with (the expression of) a philosophical experience is to confess that you do not understand, that is, that you do not see what I see, feel what I feel – that you are *different* from me. This should make it abundantly clear that philosophical experiences are something quite different from philosophical theories, which are characterized by an external relation between understanding and experience (no particular experience is needed to understand a theory), and a one-way internal relation

¹¹ Perhaps this should be modified by “or being able to imagine how it would be to experience it”. I have to leave this question open. In any case, it would be a feat of imagination that seems to presuppose an affinity in philosophical sensibility. For that reason, it would not undermine the main thrust of my argument.

¹² This is not as peculiar as it may seem. We are familiar with similar internal relations in the field of aesthetics. For that reason, one could say that philosophical experiences amount to the aesthetic dimension of philosophy.

between understanding and agreement (you must understand a theory to agree with it, but not the other way around).¹³

Idiosyncrasy

Naturally, such an internal relation between understanding and experience would not be much of a problem if most of us actually *shared* all philosophical experiences. However, even though there are some “archetypical” philosophical experiences, they nevertheless contribute more towards exhibiting differences between people rather than dissolving such differences. Although some of us may have a vague idea of what Marcel is pointing to, most people will find it difficult to really get a grip on it. This may seem like a bad excuse for a lack of verbal or pedagogical ability on my part, but the difficulty actually highlights a central feature of every philosophical experience, namely its *idiosyncratic* character.

Perhaps some will recognize the experience expressed by the words “Things felt, somehow, *unreal*”. Now, asserted about a highly unexpected event, it would perhaps be unexceptional; but what if it was meant as saying something about *everything*, that is, as saying “It is as though everything is unreal, that all is but a game”? Then it will seem dangerously close to an absurdity, though for the person uttering these words it may be absolutely fundamental – crucial, yet idiosyncratic. Something of the same applies to expressions that do not at first sight seem idiosyncratic at all, perhaps because they have become commonplaces in academic philosophy. For instance, “There is a deep gap between what people say or do and what they in fact feel”. In saying this, one does not only mean that people *sometimes* lie or pretend. Rather, one expresses a sense that *everything* a person does is unreliable and that it is *impossible* to *ever* know another person – an experience which

¹³ Remember that the very same words may be used both as the expression of an experience and as a description of a theory. To be precise, then, we should say: To understand the expression of a philosophical experience *as an expression of a philosophical experience*, you must have had the experience yourself.

professional philosophy has “de-experienced” into a theory, and which we therefore have become unable to recognize as deeply peculiar.

What makes these expressions idiosyncratic is that they dislocate words and phrases from their normal context. They are formed by transferring words from the contexts in which they are ordinarily used and learned, to radically different contexts: From using “unreal” for something particular as distinct from something else, to using it for referring to the world as a whole. Wittgenstein called this using words in a “secondary sense”¹⁴. He also noted how one’s fundamental perspective on the world could be expressed through such a creative employment of language. One of his examples – “Suddenly I felt absolutely *safe*; nothing whatsoever can harm me” – may even be interpreted as an instance of a philosophical experience.¹⁵ Such an idiosyncratic way of handling words is perhaps related to religious language. It is often observed that when a Christian applies words like “care”, “love” or “power” to God, he wants them to have an entirely different meaning from what they have in social contexts, but they still have a meaning that can only be expressed by using exactly those words. Stanley Cavell calls it using words in “a heightened sense”.¹⁶ A similar transfiguration of ordinary words is characteristic for secondary sense, and consequently, for the expression of philosophical experiences.

Using words in a secondary sense – risking absurdity, but nonetheless attaining meaningfulness – is hard. We have seen the difficulties it can create for communication. In addition, it is often hard for the individual himself to find a way of expressing his experience. This is the difficulty of understanding one’s experience, of understanding oneself. I may feel forced to express an experience in words that are, in a sense, above my comprehension. Asked to explain, I am unable to say what I meant. Uncertain of whether it made sense at all, I

¹⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen/Philosophical Investigations*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), pp. 215-216

¹⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, “A Lecture on Ethics”, in James C. Klagge and Alfred Nordmann, ed., *Ludwig Wittgenstein. Philosophical Occasions, 1912-1951* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), pp. 36-44.

¹⁶ Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, (New York: Schribner, 1969), pp. 169-171.

hesitate: “I don’t know ... it is as though ... but don’t ask me to explain ...”. This is often dismissed as whimsical, obscure and irresponsible. And certainly, hesitation and elusiveness may at times be signs of sloppiness and flippancy. At other times, though, it may express seriousness and authenticity, especially when touching upon something of crucial and personal importance. Indeed, on such occasions, ease and confidence may be considered a sign that one is *not* speaking from the depth of one’s soul. Furthermore, confidence may turn into doubt under the gaze of other people: I may begin to doubt the adequacy and meaning of my own expression when I see the incomprehensibility in the other’s eyes. This might lead me to reject the experience: “What was I talking about? Have I lost my mind?” or I may withdraw only the expression of it, and hide the experience inside. Most teenagers, I think, will recognize what a painful lesson this can be.

Philosophical experiences are also idiosyncratic in the sense that they are characteristic or personal. Together they form one’s philosophical sensibility, which is felt to be uniquely one’s own. If you do not share my philosophical sensibility, you would not, for that reason, be excluded from knowing me fairly well, even extremely well. Nevertheless, an elusive core deep within me would be inaccessible to you. Only in exceptional cases does disagreement over theories touch that personal nucleus. Yet with philosophical experiences, this is the rule, since they partly constitute my identity and my unique perspective. This is not disproved by the fact that we may share philosophical experiences, for agreement in sensibility would not stop me considering it uniquely my own. Instead I would feel that you and I are, fundamentally and perhaps even mysteriously, in harmony, which shows how philosophical experiences can touch the heart of my identity – my “spirit”, if you like.

Even the connotations of “idiosyncrasy” with sensation and sensitivity are particularly fitting. Once again, there are striking similarities to aesthetic experience. If I am not able to convey to you by words how I have seen or heard a piece of art or music, then in

the end I can only say: “But can’t you hear? You must hear it!” No more arguments will do. Only by seeing what I see or hearing what I hear can you understand what I mean. And the same goes for philosophical experiences: They define how I see things, how I perceive the world. Hence philosophical sensibility is the whiskers sensing the corona of being. Usually, such a sensibility is formed during childhood and adolescence.

Intensity

A philosophical experience is characterized by a certain *intensity*: In the experience one feels that a certain knowledge or insight comes to life, has a special power, or is peculiarly close. One way of expressing this intensity is by drawing a contrast between the insight given in the experience, and something one already knows. This contrast may be voiced in numerous ways, for instance: I already knew that other people have separate minds, but now I *realize* it; I have always agreed that the universe is inherently meaningless, but now I *see* it; I always thought that I understood the word “freedom”, but now I know what it *means*. Prior to her experience, Briony formulates it as a distinction between knowing and feeling: I know other people have minds like me, but I am not able to *feel* it. Putting the key words above (“realize”, “see”, “means” and “feel) in italics is not arbitrary; it mirrors how speakers may stress certain words to express that there is now an extra dimension to their knowledge. Indeed, the intensification of already existing knowledge is often only detected in other people from *how* they say their words, not from the words in themselves.¹⁷

Importantly, the intensity of a philosophical experience may also be articulated as a contrast between (just) words and (genuine) knowledge: “It is one thing to say the words, quite another to *know*”. Occasionally, the experience appears too intense for language as

¹⁷ To get the feature of intensity in focus I have concentrated on cases where the philosophical experience is an intensification of already existing knowledge; but the power or intensity of the philosophical experience is present also where the experience introduces an altogether *new* content.

such: Words, any word whatsoever, seem insufficient; they are too weak compared to the intensity of the experience – only by changing my life, I may feel, can I express the insight. Professional philosophers may argue that this is equivalent to obscurantism, to make one's assertions immune from criticism by taking refuge in the ineffable. It is not my task, though, to moralize. Trying to understand these phenomena is neither to condone nor to condemn them. Yet the very least one can do is to reflect on the philosophical significance of the fact that most people, especially teenagers, find it difficult to express their deepest experiences and most fundamental sensibility. Are they just lacking words or is there something words cannot say?

As long as the philosophical experience is fresh in mind, be it for a minute or a lifetime, the insight it incorporates feels unavoidable. It tells us something we cannot ignore, but must confront. Even in the face of arguments against the insight it has given us, we are inclined to hold fast to it. Admittedly, strong and varied arguments, or contrary experiences, may get us to admit that the professed insight was an illusion. Nevertheless, there are differences between theories and experiences in this respect. It is always possible that a theory can leave one cold; even though one accepts and defends it, it does not necessarily *affect* us. Professional philosophers may adopt scepticism without changing their lives in any way. A philosophical experience, on the other hand, speaks with a voice that cannot be shut out – it must be taken into consideration. Even if I were to dislike or be afraid of what it reveals, I cannot avoid it: Either I accept it, make it a part of my (view of) life, or I deny it, that is, repress it, at the risk of not being true to myself.

In this respect, philosophical experiences differ not only from theories, but also from wonderment. There is a gap between the wonder and the life of the wonderer; an instance of wonder may remain an isolated episode from which one returns unchanged – and unharmed. Of course, wonder may *gain* a personal meaning and importance. In order for it to gain this

importance, though, it is necessary to *bridge* the gap between wonder and life, to *apply* the content of the wonder to life. And one may not even want or be able to apply it in this way. In that case, the wonder remains external to the rest of one's life, a cogwheel that does not engage with the rest of life's machinery. Philosophical experiences, on the other hand, make the bridging of the gap between philosophy and life redundant; they are of *immediate* importance.

Significance

What is the significance of philosophical experiences? Do they have any genuine influence on our lives? It is not possible to answer these questions in general. Some experiences may be forgotten at once, while others may change us fundamentally. It all depends on the particular case, the particular life-context in which they occur. Nevertheless, I would like to mention some fascinating ways in which they may be incorporated into one's life.

One obvious possibility, all too easily overlooked, is that they are included among those events the significance of which we remain uncertain, even puzzled. Sometimes, experiences of this kind fade from a distance, perhaps even to the point of being brushed aside as illusions or absurdities. In the grip of the experience, it is felt to be of crucial importance, characterized by a fullness of meaning seldom encountered. Yet as the situation that gave rise to the experience recedes in time, it may seem rather like a peculiar illusion. As long as the concrete situation is fresh in mind, that is, as long as one is able to re-experience the relevant aspect in one's imagination, then the philosophical experience seems meaningful and important. When the expression of the experience is no longer an immediate answer to a perception, it may grow fainter – in the end one may even conclude that it is absurd; the experience was nothing more than a fantasy. This conclusion can be strengthened by the

idiosyncrasy of the experience; if it is in tension with ordinary life, it may have to yield when practical matters once again dominate. But the experience may also be *revived* by later events; once again it is felt to reveal an insight of crucial importance. In this way, a philosophical experience can be characterized by a certain instability that makes it alternate between insight and irrelevance. This instability can be a major motivation for transforming the experience into a theory; since a philosophical theory is (more) independent of individual experience, holding such a theory may serve as a stable position that provides continuity in one's life.

If one is to tell the story of one's life, then important parts of it would consist of dramatic events and their influence upon us: Love, death, parenthood, etc. Philosophical experiences may arise out of such events, but in that case their philosophical lesson is often less important than the emotional. For that reason, the influence of philosophical experiences is better understood by comparing them to another kind of event. Upon reading or listening to other people telling the story of their lives, one may be surprised by the inclusion of some events, which seem to be given a prominence out of proportion to their normal influence. In between death, marriage, glorious success and great failure, one sometimes gets what seem to be quite ordinary events: walking the dog, watching a movie, visiting grandparents and so forth. What can make this kind of event deserve a leading role in life-stories? There are many reasons, of course, depending on the particular context, but quite often it is that they somehow *symbolize* a turn in one's life. An ordinary event becomes transfigured into a fateful moment: "Things would never be the same again".

Philosophical experiences can sometimes achieve such a symbolic function, becoming emblematic for a new way of seeing, feeling, thinking, and perhaps even acting. In this way they can be one of the powers that structure human time, heralding the dawning of a new era and thereby ordering one's life in separate epochs. Typical of a philosophical experience in adolescence, is that it is interpreted as the threshold that divides childhood from adulthood.

This was what happened to Briony when she watched the strange events by the fountain: "... she had privileged access across the years to adult behaviour, to rites and conventions she knew nothing about, as yet ... This was not a fairy tale, this was the real, the adult world".¹⁸ Sometimes, as in Briony's case, we are conscious at the time of the experience that we are crossing a border. At other times, though, it is only understood in hindsight; as W.H. Auden put it, "...what had seemed an unimportant brook was, in fact, a Rubicon".¹⁹

An almost archetypal philosophical experience in childhood is the discovery of "the problem of other minds". It may proceed like this: An eleven-year-old boy learns that his best friend has told the other boys a secret he had promised not to reveal. Perhaps some children will react to such a disappointment by getting angry, and then forgetting it. This boy, however, experiences the betrayal as an exposure of people's dishonesty and unpredictability: No one can be trusted. From then on he never reveals personal matters to anyone, and treats everybody with suspicion. The apparently innocent experience of being deceived has shocked him into a pessimistic view of human nature: What they say and show, is never reliable evidence for how they actually think and feel – they can always be doubted. Whether this event was the real cause of his later doubt or not, it can nevertheless become a symbol of his new attitude towards others.

Many are familiar with this kind of experience, usually from childhood, although it is unusual that it colours one's life as a whole. In our everyday dealings with other people, trust is the rule, and doubt the exception. What is peculiar about the professed insights of philosophical experiences, though, is their universality: We can *never* know what others think and feel. Although this universality seems to be completely out of proportion to how we actually and ordinarily behave, it may still seem to be the awful truth in the aftermath of such an experience. In the midst of the experience, and as long as it is fresh and alive, we seem to

¹⁸ Ian McEwan, *Atonement*, (London: Vintage, 2002), pp. 39-40.

¹⁹ Quoted from Irwin D. Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy*, (New York: Basic Books, 1980), p. 298.

reveal what is concealed in ordinary life, namely the unknowability of other people. After a while, though, we slide back into everyday life, and now the professed “revelation” seems at best irrelevant, just a figment of the brain. Yet a certain uncertainty may remain in the back of the mind.

Sometimes a philosophical experience can be unstable and yet emblematic. This is nowhere more apparent than in the case of the awareness of death. Our first philosophical experience is often the death of someone close, perhaps a grandparent. Such an event may be the first message to the child that her world is vulnerable and that even her parents will some day disappear and never return. This first encounter with death and transience is often the first step out of innocent childhood and towards the adult’s painful knowledge that all things must come to an end. But even though such an experience may influence the child permanently, it cannot stay alive in all its painful intensity – to live on, it is necessary to forget or suppress it. Sooner or later, although for an unfortunate few it never happens, we slide back into ordinary life, where such things are only relevant to someone else. The knowledge, of course, does not go away: We still *know* what faces everyone at the end; but we don’t normally *feel* it, as Briony would have put it. Someone who has just experienced the death of a family member often feels that other people do not understand: “They *say* it’s terrible that people have to die, but as long as they are out of danger, they don’t *really* know the meaning of what they say”. Children are, I think, just as sensitive to such distinctions as adults.

The child’s point of view?

At this point I will no longer suppress an objection that may have seemed pertinent for some time: Is it not recollections rather than childhood experiences I have been talking about? Furthermore, are not all such recollections really projections from the adult world into

childhood? It may seem like a blatant anachronism to say that the content of childhood experiences are captured by words like “the transience of life”, because children simply do not use such words. Perhaps the child’s experience is completely different from what we adults are prone to think. From such considerations some would draw the conclusion that it is impossible to understand experiences from the child’s point of view, and that the theme of this essay is more accurately an adult’s picture of childhood rather than childhood itself.

This kind of argument is familiar, yet flawed. It rests on an objectivism with regard to understanding, which is often associated with Wilhelm Dilthey’s positivist version of historicism. This objectivism thinks of the understanding of a cultural object as a reconstruction of the objectively given meaning that the object had for its creator. Since this demand is difficult to satisfy, this objectivism easily turns into a version of subjectivism or scepticism: We can never understand the meaning experiences have for the child (or for a former culture); our interpretations of them only tell us something about ourselves.

The philosophical issues that this argument involves are far too complex to allow for superficial treatment and simple solutions. Nonetheless, I would claim that my essay is about childhood itself: It treats *both* childhood and our conceptions of it. It is true that a child would not use words like “the transience of life” to express her encounter with death. The child may not express her experience in words at all; perhaps she expresses it through anger or by wetting herself at night. Nevertheless, that does not rule out the possibility that the adult woman’s description of her experience as a girl *captures precisely what she felt as a child*. The meaning and importance of some experiences may be better understood in hindsight. In other words, there is a distinct possibility that the content of a childhood experience is more truly described from an adult point of view, that is, by an adult *capable* of doing it, perhaps a writer, like Proust. I am not able to argue for this view at present, but the possibility of this being the case at least shows some of the complexities in these issues.

Now it is true that I have not made childhood or anything “childlike” a part of the *concept* of philosophical experience. Consequently, such experiences are not necessarily restricted to childhood. There is no reason why such moments of revelation should not occur to adults. Yet there are reasons to believe that such experiences are more frequent in childhood, although, once again, the readers must decide for themselves whether this is true. Perhaps most of us, even philosophers, have stopped developing philosophically when we reach adulthood; perhaps our deepest views and convictions are already entrenched by that time, and seldom changed afterwards; for that reason, perhaps adults are not open to experiences that put their hard-fought identity at risk, as though our philosophical sensibility is finalized in early adulthood, and has lost the plasticity that characterizes it in childhood. Yet this sensibility may be “softened” again in the face of serious events in life, for instance untimely deaths. Such events may force one to reconsider the philosophical assumptions that one has based one’s life upon, a possibility that illustrates the destructive as well as the constructive side of philosophical experiences.²⁰

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²⁰ I would like to thank Espen Eide, Reidar Pedersen and Arlyne Moi for comments.