

Rhees on the Unity of Language

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If someone learns to speak, he does not just learn to make sentences and utter them ... If that were all he ever did, I should not imagine that he could speak, and I should never ask him anything. When he learns to speak, he learns to tell you something; and he tries to. In learning to speak he learns what can be said; he learns – however fumblingly – what it makes sense to say. He gets some sense of what different remarks have to do with one another. That is why he begins to follow a conversation, or to carry on a conversation himself. Or rather: it is misleading to say ‘this is *why* he does that’, as though we had to do with a condition and what follows from it. For in beginning to carry on a conversation – in trying to tell you something and in trying to understand your answer – he *is* getting a sense of how different remarks have a bearing on one another.

Rhees, “Wittgenstein’s Builders”, *Wittgenstein and Possibility of Discourse*.¹

1. Let me start by saying a few words about Rhees’s place in the history of contemporary philosophy. During his tenure as lecturer at Swansea, from 1940 to 1970, Rush Rhees exerted a profound influence on the philosophers around him. Among these were a group of philosophers who are sometimes referred to as the

¹ Edited by D. Z. Phillips, 1st ed., Cambridge University Press, 1988, subsequently referred to as *WPD*. The quotation is from p. 185.

Swansea school, most prominently Peter Winch, Dewi Phillips and Roy Holland, but also to some extent Cora Diamond and David Cockburn.

Before coming to Swansea, Rhees was a student of Wittgenstein's at Cambridge. They became close friends, and Wittgenstein was to appoint Rhees as one of his literary executors. Rhees published very sparingly in his lifetime, and is best known for essays in which he commented on themes in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. Because of this he was long regarded as simply an interpreter of Wittgenstein's work. Rhees's personal modesty must have contributed to this perception. In fact Rhees was an original thinker in his own right. He was not only an interpreter but, in a sense, also a critic of Wittgenstein. It is true that Wittgenstein's thought was the fertile ground from which Rhees's thinking grew, and in fact, calling him a critic of Wittgenstein might easily lead to misunderstanding. Unlike many critics of Wittgenstein he spoke from a high respect for his work, while struggling to make clear what he thought were its limitations. In most other cases, the critique of Wittgenstein has been driven by a desire to counteract his influence in philosophy, on the part of those who have felt it to be of dubious value or detrimental to the discipline. Rhees's attitude is the opposite of this. He considered Wittgenstein's influence in philosophy to be a salutary one; at the same time, he thought, it had its limitations, and hence was in need of deepening.

Rhees's main criticism concerned Wittgenstein's use of the notion of a language-game. In his best-known essay, "Wittgenstein's Builders", from which the epigraph of this essay is taken, Rhees discusses Wittgenstein's comparing of language to a range of games. When Wittgenstein introduces the builders' game in § 2 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, this is part of a critique of St Augustine's account of learning to speak. Augustine argued that a child learns to speak by having physical objects ostensibly defined to it. In putting forward the idea of the builders' game Wittgenstein was making a concession in the direction of those who are inclined to think like Augustine. He is saying, as it were, "Let's suppose you're right and all the words of our language do designate physical objects; this is what you'd end up with". His point is that, to begin with, this dreamed up language is radically

impoverished in relation to any actual human language; and apart from that, even a simple sign system such as envisaged by Augustine could not be learnt in the way he described, since the designative role of the words in the builders' game depended on their being bound up with specific activities which could not have been conveyed through the simple act of pointing to objects as Augustine imagined.

Wittgenstein goes on to make two points: on the one hand, he suggests that the builders' game, i.e. an Augustinian language suitably amended, might be the whole language of a tribe, and on the other hand, he claims that all of human language could be thought of as simply consisting of a range of different language games. Rhee finds these ideas questionable. What he finds missing in the game perspective on language is the way speaking is connected with life.² Rhee reflected deeply on what is involved in the game metaphor in a way that many other readers of Wittgenstein have not: this primarily concerned the contrast between playing a game and *really* doing something – *really* meaning what one says – in a context in which the question of one's standing behind one's words arises. In this essay, I shall begin by outlining Rhee's critique of the language-game metaphor. After that, I shall make an attempt to understand how Rhee thought about the connection between language and life. I will suggest that one can distinguish between what might be called an anthropological and an ethical strand in his thinking, and will raise the question how these are related to one another. Finally, I shall discuss the dialogue in a short story by Ernest Hemingway; I believe it can be taken to illustrate some of the ways in which we may fail to live up to the requirements of a genuine conversation.

2. Consider the landscape into which Wittgenstein introduced the concept of a language game. Starting earlier but culminating around the turn of the previous century, there had been a shift in philosophers' focus, within the Anglo-Saxon tradition, from thoughts or judgments to sentences or propositions. A basic

² It might be thought that in fixing onto Wittgenstein's suggestion that the builders' game might be a whole language to itself, Rhee is ignoring the strategic role of Wittgenstein's example. Whether he does so or not, the point he means to be making is independent of what Wittgenstein aims to do in these remarks.

assumption was that a judgment could, ideally, be identified by means of the sentence expressing it. In principle, if not always in practice, it was thought, one could determine the logical properties of a judgment by reference to the sentence expressing it. The sense was, as it were, packaged into the sequence of words (sounds or marks). This perspective formed part, say, of Russell's theory of definite descriptions, of Frege's idea of a *Begriffsschrift*, etc. This view, too, formed the core of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* (either literally or in the form of a parody, depending on one's reading of that work).

This perspective on language offered an excuse for not looking at what speakers are actually doing when they utter words in specific contexts. Thus it encouraged a spirit of apriorism. This was what Wittgenstein was trying to battle. Against the fixation on words and sentences, he introduced the notion that the sense of a linguistic expression depends on its place in a language game. It is misleading to think of the sense as something that could – even ideally – be fixed by reference to the sentence itself, without regard to the wider activity of which uttering it forms a part. Or differently put: it is only when the sentence is being considered as used in a particular context that it can be said to possess a distinct *form*. (In fact, it could be argued that the contrast between the sentence as a bare range of sounds or markings and the sentence in actual use is itself a spurious one. To be certain I had rendered the words uttered or written by someone correctly I would have to understand what use the speaker or writer was making of them.)

Wittgenstein's aim was to open philosophers' eyes to alternative possibilities: for one thing, within our language, similar-looking sentences might carry different senses in different contexts of use; accordingly the logical relation between sentences could not be read off from their appearance.³ Furthermore, life-forms could be imagined in which words were used within activities wildly different from ours. The idea of the language game, then, as I see it, was primarily directed at the philosophical inclination to adopt a narrow perspective on linguistic phenomena.

³ In *Philosophical Investigations* § 117 Wittgenstein speaks of the idea of meaning as “an aura the word brings along with it and retains in every kind of use”. (4th edition, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2009.)

Wittgenstein was exhorting the philosopher to raise his eyes and look around rather than limiting his attention to sentences by themselves.

Rhees, in turn, considered this holistic perspective an unqualified advance in our thinking about what it is to speak. The problem, in his view, was that Wittgenstein did not go far enough in his holism. According to Rhees, the fragmentation in the view of language evident in the emphasis on sentences (propositions) was preserved in the idea of language being made up of a range of independent language games. This conception led to a schematic view of the relation between different uses of language. This in fact constituted a new apriorism.⁴ Against this, Rhees emphasized the unity of language. Language is bound up with the lives of speakers, hence what a person says on one occasion is connected with what he says on other occasions. What needs to be kept in mind, I would like to suggest, is simply that the form of interdependence between different contexts of use is not given once for all: language is not divided into watertight compartments, but neither is it a unitary formal system.

3. Spelling out what Rhees means by the unity of language is no simple matter. It is clear that what he had in mind is not a system in which sentences are connected with one another through formal, deductive relations. Rhees was at pains to point out that the unity of language is not a formal unity in the sense of formal logic.⁵ In fact, he might have argued, making the unity of language a matter of deductive relations would be a case of putting the cart before the horse: it is only *because* of their place in people's lives that we can speak of utterances standing in deductive relations.

⁴ This is connected with the temptation to conceive of language games as real entities rather than tools for the description of ways people speak, which may lead one to conclude that what is said within one type of activity will *never* have a connection with things said within other activities. This fallacy is criticized by Cora Diamond in "Unfolding Truth and Reading Wittgenstein" *SATS*. Volume 4, Issue 1, pp. 24–58. Yet the opposite fallacy, of assuming that all uses of some expression *must* be connected with one another, is of course equally insidious.

⁵ *WPD* pp. 193, 245 f.

Anyone who presumes to expound Rhees's views on the unity of language has to be doubly cautious. For one thing, Rhees himself emphasized the difficulty of describing the relation:

... the description, or determination, of what these relations are between what is said here and what is said on other occasions, is very difficult. In other words it is very difficult to make definite what you do mean by "saying it in the language" or "in a language"; to give any single account of this. (*WPD*, 263; July 1958.)

Actually, it is not clear what type of difficulty Rhees is thinking about here. Is he trying to say that there is something inherently problematic about the attempt to spell out the nature of these connections in the first case, and if so, what is the nature of the difficulty? Is it just that the connections are very complex? Or is he rather saying that what is difficult is to try to give *one single* account of them? In either case, in saying that the task is difficult, is he nevertheless presupposing that this is something than *can* be done? If I may venture an interpretation, it would be plausible to assume that Rhees wanted to say, on the one hand, that spelling out the relations in particular cases requires subtlety and an ear for nuances of speech - that it is difficult in this sense, but not impossible - whereas on the other hand the attempt to give a single account that would cover all relations of this kind is simply a meaningless undertaking. The problem, it seems, is that he is trying to say two things at once.

But apart from Rhees finding the topic difficult, the material we have to go on is somewhat precarious. Rhees himself only published two essays on this topic, "Can there be a Private Language?"⁶ which was his reply to Alfred Ayer, and "Wittgenstein's Builders"⁷. Apart from this, the material consists in a very large number of notes he wrote, mainly for himself, but sometimes in correspondence, compiled by Dewi Phillips in the posthumous volume *Wittgenstein and the Possibility of Discourse*. (The published notes in this topic were written between 1957 and 1960;

⁶ *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society. Supplementary Volume* 28 (1954).

⁷ *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 60 (1959-60). A longer version of this paper, dated 1957, is contained in *WPD*.

in addition there is a set of notes from 1967.) I think it would be fair to say that in these notes, Rhees is not trying to construct or convey a coherent view, but rather drawing a number of sketches, sometimes several sketches of the same subject from different angles, sketches which suggest various ways of going on with the questions. Rather than a unified conception, the sketches convey the sense of a philosophical temperament at work.

I should like to quote a lengthy passage from a note written in July 1958, in which a number of the themes that recur in these notes are brought up:

... it seems to me that Wittgenstein is inclined to treat the language games which he mentions as too self-contained, and to neglect the sort of interdependence that there is between them, even though there is not that kind of system by which one implies the other. I suspect that he is led to this partly by neglecting the difference between learning to speak and learning the mastery of a technique.

...

Perhaps at this point one would have to bring in the matter of the various standards that are relevant to discourse between people; which makes it possible for them to understand one another. It is always important that we may use the same language in pretence or deceit. (There is not any distinction of this sort in playing a game; and this is one of the chief reasons why carrying on a conversation is not like playing a game.) Genuineness and deceit. The possibility of this distinction belongs to what we mean by speaking: saying something, telling one something. Another point (still in the connexion of the conversation with the rest of language) is the relevance of the kind of things that people say. If you are to get the point of a remark that someone has just made, you may have to be familiar with the sorts of

things that people say; otherwise you will miss it. It is important to recognize anything like irony in a remark a person is making...⁸

Rhees keeps coming back to the point that the language game metaphor encourages us to think of acquiring language as a matter of acquiring a skill or a technique. This is connected with Wittgenstein's emphasis, especially in the early parts of the *Philosophical Investigations*, on the central role of *training* in the acquisition of language, apparent in the remarks on ostensive definition in connection with the discussion of Augustine, in the discussion of rule-following, in the discussion of knowing how to continue a number series. The issue in these sequences of remarks turns on the central role of reaching *conformity in our judgments*.

Rhees suggests that Wittgenstein tended to model his thinking about language too much on mathematics. He may well be right about this. Wittgenstein had of course to some extent been moulded by the inheritance of logicism. Rhees does not say much about the ways in which mathematics is misleading as a model. It could be suggested that in mathematics the signs used are internal to what is being said. Or differently put, to regard something as a mathematical expression is already to consider it as being used in a particular type of context. In thinking about mathematics, the emphasis in connection with learning will be on gaining mastery of the signs to be used, the criterion of mastery being conformity with one's community; the *speaker's* relation to the signs she produces will not be important. What tends to be left out in the account Rhees attributes to Wittgenstein, as I understand him, is the importance, for what we take as learning to use words, of the speaker's coming to express herself.

Rhees found it particularly important to emphasize the ability to take part in conversation with others. In order to carry on a conversation one would have to have an understanding of the people one is talking to and the things one is talking

⁸ WPD p. 263 f.

about, would have to see the point of remarks made. Rhees discusses this issue in some notes from September 1957:

Understanding what is being said; not just understanding what the words mean. Objection: "those are synonymous." I do not think so. You can understand what the words mean even when nothing is being said. As opposed to: explaining the *point* of the remark.

Understanding the remark he is making is not simply a question of knowing English. It is a question of finding that he is saying something intelligible; that he is saying something sensible. And what do you have to know, in order to see that? ... It does not do to say that you have to learn the language ..., if that means that you have to acquire a kind of equipment.⁹

I would suggest that what Rhees means by "understanding the words" is not simply recognizing the single words, but recognizing the sentence as an English sentence, getting a "sentence feeling", as in a grammar exercise in which nothing is being said: "The cat is on the mat."¹⁰ This is not a skill brought about through training, rather we might think of it as a psychological phenomenon: a sense we develop as a by-product of a life of speaking and listening.

As for finding that the other is "saying something sensible": what does this amount to? Is not this demanding too much? Surely, we may understand people even when they speak thoughtlessly! I guess what Rhees has in mind here is that we must have some idea of how uttering these words in these circumstances might be an expression of *this* speaker: if we have no idea what is being expressed, we would have no sense of the speaker having *said* something, whether or not it had the ring of

⁹ WPD pp. 206 f.

¹⁰ This criterion is of course open-ended: which of the following, one may ask, would we be ready to recognize as English sentences: "Green ideas sleep furiously", "It's five o'clock on the sun", "A time machine is a device that allows you to travel backward and forward in time". For more on this, cp. Gordon Baker, "Wittgenstein's 'Depth Grammar'", in *Wittgenstein's Method: Neglected Aspects* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), esp. pp. 75 f.

an English sentence. Besides, the less a person is present in her words, the less there is *to* understand: the less is being said. For a remark to make sense is a matter of degree, not a hit-or-miss affair.¹¹

Part of what the child will learn in learning to take part in conversations is the *kinds* of thing people say. The example Rhees mentions under this heading is speaking ironically, but I should like to suggest the point is to be more broadly understood: it might be taken to concern the different kinds of topic we may find it worth while to make comments about, and the different spirits and contexts in which we talk about them: say, the weather, what we have been doing, the news of the day, how we feel, etc. Rhees might also have been thinking about things like jokes, hyperbole, proverbs, allusions, etc.

In this connection, Rhees talks about the “growth of understanding”. This notion, according to Rhees, was central to Plato, and it was something the sophists questioned. He wrote (in May-June 1957):

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...

You understand what is said when you learn *from* it, not otherwise – or not fully anyway.¹²

“Learning from it”, I am sure, must involve more than simply receiving information. It may involve things like discovering alternative ways of seeing things, where this may be a way of learning about the world and at the same time of learning about other people.

¹¹ Again, it might be thought that in suggesting that understanding a remark is a matter of seeing its *point* Rhees is putting forward a very narrow view of meaningful conversation. After all, we may say a number of things in the course of a sensible conversation that are not used to make any specific point.

¹² WPD p. 27.

4. How are we to understand Rhees's *dictum* that speaking makes sense if living makes sense, that the unity of language is the unity of life? As I suggested before, I have no clear idea of how to answer these questions. Suppose we accept the idea that learning to speak means being trained in a skill, or that it consists in being taught to meet a standard. One very obvious thing missing from such accounts is how we come to use words to *express* ourselves. Being taught to say, "I'm thirsty", for instance, is not exactly the same as being taught to recognize the circumstances in which you are justified in saying you are thirsty. It is, rather, a matter of coming to utter the words spontaneously in circumstances in which it makes sense to do so. On the other hand, when a dog is taught to sit or fetch on command, or to signal that there are narcotics in a bag on the conveyor belt, the success of the instruction lies precisely in the fact that the dog will do it whether he feels like it or not; spontaneity does not matter here.

The issue of being able to express oneself is not one on which Wittgenstein has much to say, at least not in the introductory part of the *Philosophical Investigations*. (To be sure, his point about learning to express pain, in § 244, might be thought to bear on this issue.) In not taking account of this aspect of what it means to become a speaker, the idea that we learn to speak through a form of training gives rise to a weird disconnect between our words and our lives. Of course spontaneity is not only important when it comes to asking for a drink and such-like, but is crucial, say, to what it means to take part in conversation with others.

5. What we have been discussing so far are what might be called the anthropological aspects of speaking and intelligibility. However, for Rhees, these issues evidently also had a moral dimension. This is connected with the centrality of the distinction between the genuine and the deceitful.

The fact that this distinction has a bearing on what is said, Rhees argues, is what distinguishes a real conversation from a sham. In "Wittgenstein's Builders",

Rhees imagines how you might teach me a foreign language by carrying on a sham conversation, giving me the opportunity to construct, say, French sentences and giving replies in French (p. 189). In this case, neither of us would be *telling* the other anything. In a real conversation, the question may arise whether you really mean what you are saying, whether you will stand behind your words. A sham conversation is one in which the question will not arise. Rhees's point is that if speaking were simply a question of playing the game correctly it would be very close to this.

In Rhees's view, Plato's critique of the sophists has bearing on this issue. According to the sophists, to speak intelligibly is to speak *effectively* (p. 24). I succeed in making myself understood if I succeed in getting my interlocutor where I want her; if I am able to get her to agree with whatever it is I want her to agree with. Since effects are all that matters to the sophists, they have no use for the distinction between the genuine and the deceitful. Accordingly, the image of language as a collection of games or a toolbox would have been adequate for their view of what it is to speak. Plato, on the other hand, says Rhees,

thought it particularly important to be able to recognize discourse: to be able to recognize when something is being said, and to tell the difference between this and the imitations that were offered by the rhetoricians and the sophists... here the point is that there must be a distinction between what is real understanding and what passes for understanding.¹³

I am not sure whether the idea of someone who truly has no use for the distinction between the genuine and the deceitful is one that can be taken literally. It is clear anyway that we are now moving on ground that is markedly different from the anthropological reaches of *Philosophical Investigations*. How are we to understand the discussion about the sophists? Who are they anyway? What are they to us? Just a bunch of ancient philosophers, who, we are given to understand, were soundly trashed by Plato in the persona of Socrates? Or does the concept include their latter-day counterparts, and if so, who are they?

¹³ WPD p. 258; August 1958.

It would hardly be all too daring to suggest that the reason Rhee thinks it important to reflect on the sophists is that in his view they are someone who lurks in each one of us. The word "sophist" marks a certain kind of moral temptation that besets our attempts at conversation. In being sophisticated we use our conversational skills either to get our interlocutor to see things in a way favourable to our interests or our self-esteem, or to conceal our real wishes or emotions. Sophistry is a guard against an openness we find counterproductive or embarrassing, though unlike the professional sophists we are liable to do so without acknowledging it even to ourselves. Conversations often fail because we yield to self-deception. On this reading, when Rhee criticizes the sophists, or the inclination to reduce speaking to the exercise of a skill, he is not simply, or not all of the time, drawing attention to the intellectual limitations of a certain view of what we do when we speak; he is also, on many occasions, *challenging* us to keep our conversations genuine, to keep them such as to contribute to a growth of understanding on the part of all participants. We should refrain from thinking of speaking as similar to playing a game, on the one hand because this view is philosophically limiting, but on the other hand also because our own conversations will suffer if we do. But I am not sure how the ethical unity Rhee is speaking about here is related to the connectedness between remarks in a conversation that we were discussing earlier.

6. I wish to end by considering the way a conversation may fail because the interlocutors shy away from giving expression to their sincere concerns. Conceivably this may serve as an illustration of what Rhee is criticizing. The conversation occurs in a short story by Ernest Hemingway, "Hills like white elephants". The story is short indeed, only four and a half pages, most of which is dialogue. A man, known as "the American", and a woman, known as "the girl", are waiting for the train from Barcelona to Madrid in a small trainstop in the sun. No background or inner monologue is given, we get to know no more about them than if we were overhearing a conversation between two strangers.

The girl looks at the line of hills and says: "They look like white elephants." He answers: "I've never seen one."

This interchange sets the tone for the dialogue. It is evident that the man does not want to play along. Maybe he is in a foul mood, or maybe he thinks she is evading the issue. The issue, it gradually becomes clear (though it is not spelled out in so many words), is whether she should have an abortion. He is apparently trying to talk her into it or into staying with it, while she is hesitant. What is particularly striking about the dialogue is what is left unsaid or is only touched upon indirectly.

The man suddenly broaches the issue by saying,

"It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig... It's not really an operation at all."

The girl looked at the ground the table legs rested on.

"I know you wouldn't mind it, Jig. It's really not anything. It's just to let the air in."

The girl did not say anything.

"I'll go with you and I'll stay with you all the time. They just let the air in and then it's all perfectly natural."

In the course of the brief dialogue, the man returns to the point that the operation is simple three more times. He makes as if what troubles the girl is simply the physical procedure. In other words, he is pretending not to understand that there might be other reasons for hesitation beside the fear of the operation itself. Clearly he is not just playing dumb; the purpose of his pretence is to shut out those other considerations, it seems – since if he were to acknowledge them he might have to answer them, and maybe he would not know how to. So he is determined to keep the discussion one about the hazards of the operation. (This is also underscored by his never speaking about the procedure as an abortion, referring to it, rather, as "it" or as "the operation".)

The woman asks:

"Then what will we do afterward?"

"We'll be fine afterward. Just like we were before."

"What makes you think so?"

"That's the only thing that bothers us. It's the only thing that's made us unhappy."

For him, the end of her pregnancy would mean the end of their problems. *She* sees the situation differently. For one thing, she worries about their relationship. She may feel it's time to move on in life, to welcome the responsibility of parenthood and the deepening of their relationship that that might bring. It is suggested that up until now, they have been leading a rather flighty, nomadic life. At one point she says: "That's all we do, isn't it - look at things and try new drinks."

On the other hand, she may feel the wrongness of wantonly cutting short a human life. Later on, she looks at the landscape and says,

"And we could have all this... And we could have everything and every day we make it more impossible."

"What did you say?"

"I said we could have everything."

"We can have everything."

"No, we can't."

"We can have the whole world."

"No, we can't."

"We can go anywhere."

"No, we can't. It isn't ours anymore."

"It's ours."

"No, it isn't. And once they take it away, you never get it back."

It is not clear what the “it” is here, in the girl’s lines. Perhaps she feels that in terminating her pregnancy she would be turning her back on the world as an object of hope and joy, or that she would be burdened by the guilt: a feeling as of being expelled from paradise.

He does not want to go down that route. He says, “You mustn’t feel that way”. These are words one might say in consolation, perhaps in response to an apology. But here their effect is to make it out as if the problem were simply a matter of her emotional reactions, something she could choose to ignore or try to overcome. She replies, “I don’t feel any way... I just know things.” In other words: it is not a question of how I *feel*. At the end of the story, he asks, “Do you feel better?” and she replies, “I feel fine... There’s nothing wrong with me. I feel fine.”

At one point, the man says:

“You’ve got to realize... that I don’t want you to do it if you don’t want to. I’m perfectly willing to go through with it if it means anything to you.”

“Doesn’t it mean anything to you? We could get along.”

“Of course it does. But I don’t want anybody but you. I don’t want anybody else.”

Again, note how both the man and the woman use the word “it”, as a means of avoiding spelling out what it is they are talking about. (Evidently, the first “it” refers to the abortion, the second perhaps to the woman’s pregnancy, the third and the fourth to the child.)

In the last line the man is using the language of love in what may sound like a conventional expression of devotion. But his words come across to us as ironic, since he is refusing to think of their unborn child as a consummation of their love for one another; as expressing the wish that life may go on through them. In saying that he wants nobody but her he is really saying that he is not willing to make a steady commitment to her. Yet he does not mean for her to take his words as ironic. He uses

language designed to make it hard for her to contradict him. (Note too the reversal of the perspective on the situation: he speaks of having the child rather than getting an abortion as something to “go through with”.)

Similarly, in saying that he does not want her go through with the operation if she does not want to, he is being disingenuous. Since she knows what he prefers, what his words mean is that he does not want to assume responsibility for the decision: he wants her to do it, *and* to do it of her own accord. Besides, if he acknowledges no other reason for her to retain the baby than her not wanting to go through with the operation (presumably because she is afraid of the procedure itself), that, for her, falls far short of the degree of commitment on his part that bringing a child into the world would require.

The dialogue ends when she asks him, then entreats him, to stop talking: “Would you please please please please please please please stop talking.”

What makes this a problematic piece of conversation, I would claim, is not the fact that the American and the girl think differently about their predicament, or that they have different desires; rather it is their unwillingness to acknowledge this. They are not prepared to meet one another in an open interchange. The man is reluctant to confront the full scope of what they are facing; the girl, apart from the one attempt to appeal to what they stand to lose, lacks the courage to come out and confront him, to tell him what *she* wants. She resorts to passive aggression. A key to her attitude is when she says, “... I’ll do it. Because I don’t care about me... I’ll do it and then everything will be fine.” As if to say: I don’t signify, don’t attach any weight to what I want, hinting that that is what he is about to do anyway, and thus trying to stir his guilt feelings. The girl’s final plea is a desperate recognition of the futility of their attempt at so-called conversation. She resents what is happening to them, what is being done to her, but she feels incapable of averting it.

The man uses words as a rhetorical smokescreen, whereas the girl simply refuses to acknowledge her responsibility for what happens. There is no growth of understanding taking place here. The speakers’ lines bounce off each other

like billiard balls; each remark is only apparently relevant to the preceding remark. Yet both speakers are clear about what the other one is up to. Their aim is to evade having to acknowledge what is going on; each of is trying to shove responsibility for the decision to be made on to the other. Perhaps we could say: both are adroit in using words to suit their purposes; they play their respective games to perfection. If we wish to see what is going wrong here, we must look beyond the words, to how they are connected with the speakers' lives, with their knowledge and wishes.¹⁴

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