

Contours and Barriers: What Is It to Draw the Limits of Moral Language?

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Abstract

Does language limit the moral thoughts we can have? To answer that, I distinguish between two kinds of limits: (1) Boundaries or barriers fence things out. Identification and erection of linguistic barriers, defines, diagnoses, or places restrictions on what language can in principle grasp or be, and often involves abstraction from actual linguistic behavior. This is typically preformed by remarks I call 'theses'; (2) Contours or outlines give real-life portrayals. Drawing the contours of a linguistic activity involves a certain attention to reality: to detail and particularity ('Was this greeting contrived or genuine?'), and we typically draw contours by using remarks I call 'helpers'. I examine the possibility that confusion can be diagnosed in Sabina Lovibond's attempt to apply the idea that moral language has necessary boundaries, and explain the alternative of drawing linguistic contours. I then examine Richard Rorty's position according to which the fact that we can shape our language indicates that the boundaries of language do not encompass all possible sense, and compare Rorty's discussion with Sarah Bachelard's discussion of euthanasia. My claim here is that trying to improve on the language we have might be part of drawing its contours, rather than redefining its boundaries. The discussion reveals a difference between two kinds of contour drawing, and thus between two kinds of helpers: ones that help to draw the contours of the actuality of linguistic activities, and ones that help to draw the contours of their potentiality. Finally, I argue that the value of drawing contours instead of barriers is that the former better reveal the fact that we care about our ways of making sense.

I am not inclined to urge that because such statements sound out of tune (or whatever an Austinian might call it) they therefore must be meaningless, [...]; instead I should want to enquire what they might mean and to test the possibilities.

R. F. Holland

Is God's power limited by logic? Is our power of thought limited by the fact that we use language, or that we are acculturated? A family of questions about limits – the limits of being, the world, thought, the mind, life, freedom, and meaning – are philosophically troubling. What lies beyond those limits? Can we cross them? Can sense even be made of the idea that there is a limit to the universe, to thought, to the meanings language can grasp? I propose to offer a partial investigation of the usefulness to moral philosophy of the idea of *limit*.

In characterizing language we sometimes say that it has limits. But we may mean two different things by this: we may mean that it has boundaries or, alternatively, that it has contours. Boundaries or barriers face outward. They are the kind of limits that fence things out. Identifying or erecting the barriers of language is discovering the restrictions on, or actively restricting – defining – what language can in principle grasp or be. Usually, this involves abstraction from actual linguistic behavior, and is expressed by ‘impossibility’ claims, for example when saying that words cannot express certain things, or when formulating conditions that expressions must meet in order to be truth candidates. In opposition, contours or outlines face inward. They don’t enable definition, but characterization – a description of the reality of that whose contours they are. Contours thus give a real-life portrayal of something. Drawing the contours of a linguistic activity involves a certain attention to reality: to detail and particularity. A particular greeting, for instance, may be characterized as mechanical and contrived, or alternatively as warm and genuine, or formal, or awkward, or sarcastic... This would involve attention to the greeting’s contours.

Contours and barriers are internal to different philosophical methods. What contours and barriers are is clarified by how we draw contours and identify or erect barriers. Sometimes, I shall argue, we draw contours by using remarks I call ‘helpers’. I shall contrast these with another kind of remarks, which I call ‘theses’, often used in the identification and erection of linguistic barriers.

Within the barrier category, we may make a sub-distinction between contingent barriers that certain educations or political realities may create, and necessary barriers that are embedded in the very nature of language. I shall be mostly interested here in necessary barriers. We can further make a sub-distinction between two kinds of necessary barriers: all-encompassing barriers that delimit all sense, and circumscribing barriers that fence out some possible sense. Sections I–II concentrate on all-encompassing barriers, whereas Sections V–VI focus on circumscribing barriers. The latter can be further sub-divided into mobile and immobile barriers. I touch on this distinction in Section VI.

The attempt to draw linguistic boundaries can sometimes be confused. Sections I–II discuss the possibility that a confusion is involved in Sabina Lovibond’s application of the idea that language has necessary all-encompassing barriers. Sections III–IV explain the alternative of drawing linguistic contours. Sections V–VI examine Richard Rorty’s thesis, according to which the fact that we can shape our language indicates that its barriers are not

all-encompassing. I compare his discussion with Sarah Bachelard's discussion of euthanasia. My claim here is that trying to improve on the language we have might be part of drawing its contours, rather than moving or replacing its boundaries. The discussion will reveal a difference between two kinds of contour drawing, and thus between two kinds of helpers: ones that help to draw the contours of the actuality of linguistic activities, and ones that help to draw the contours of their potentiality. Section VII argues that the value of drawing contours instead of barriers is that the former better reveal the fact that we care about our ways of making sense.

In many of my arguments, I follow in the footsteps of Cora Diamond. I shall try to make that explicit, although I shall not examine any of her works in any detail. This paper is a tribute to Diamond's philosophy.

I

John McDowell advises us to investigate ethics 'from the inside out'.¹ Our conception of right conduct, for example, is graspable only via the knowledge we have as members of our moral form of life. According to this so-called quietism,² gaining moral knowledge is a matter of assimilating a form of life.³ We can easily envision an issue of limits here: the barriers between us, who are on the inside, and some imaginary others, who were not acculturated the way we were – barriers that seem to restrict where we and they can travel in thought.

McDowell recommends a course of investigation, and I would like to examine a tempting but confused way of taking McDowell's quietist advice, signs for which can be found in Sabina Lovibond's writing on moral philosophy.⁴ After assessing the confusion, I outline how I think the advice should be taken.

¹ McDowell, 'Virtue and Reason', *The Monist*, **62** (1979), 331–50, 331.

² See McDowell's *Mind and World* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 93.

³ This 'quietism' in ethics parallels McDowell's quietist reading of Wittgenstein on rule-following. Here, too, our next move in following a mathematical series is justifiable only from within the language and knowledge we have as members of a linguistic life in which we develop mathematical series, teach the practice, correct those who fail to do it right, and so on. Only within there are standards of objectivity.

⁴ Lovibond, *Realism and Imagination in Ethics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983); *Ethical Formation* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University press, 2002).

‘[T]here is something we *cannot* do’, Lovibond argues, namely, ‘codify’ moral thought and practice. The forms of knowledge deployed in practical reasoning ‘outrun anything we could “reduce to a set of (mechanically applicable) rules”’.⁵ We cannot say things of moral significance in such a way that ‘their correct uptake owes nothing to any substratum of *tacit* likemindedness on the part of our audience’.⁶ One cannot reason fully explicitly, Lovibond maintains, but not because it is too difficult. We are concerned here not with a contingent barrier and an empirical difficulty, but with a necessary barrier, and the conceptual impossibility of going outside the space of moral reasons while retaining the meanings of our sentences – going outside these barriers while keeping the grammatical identity of our words. Any attempt to reason explicitly in this sense would amount to not saying what we intended, or indeed anything at all. There is no moral sense outside the boundaries of morality.

‘[T]he uncodifiability of what is apparent to [morally acculturated people]’ Lovibond argues, ‘is offset [...] by the endless availability of real-life material from which the spirit of their thinking can be reconstructed’.⁷ Involved in moral thinking there is, accordingly, a kind of compensation – a kind of indirection, to use Cora Diamond’s term⁸ – and a necessary one: the kind of account of ethics we might want to supply is impossible for us, logically impossible. However, we have another, logically valid, even if a bit of a roundabout option. We can account for ethics from within.

II

It seems that the way Lovibond conceptualizes the barriers of language exposes her to a philosophical criticism. The criticism was

⁵ *Ethical Formation*, op. cit. note 4, 32. The quotation contains a quotation from McDowell’s *Mind and World*, op. cit. note 2, 91.

⁶ *Ethical Formation*, Op. cit. note 4, 50. Lovibond’s italic.

⁷ Op. cit. 50.

⁸ See Cora Diamond’s ‘Wittgenstein, Mathematics, and Ethics: Resisting the Attractions of Realism’, in H. Sluga and D. Stern (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 226–260, 246. There, the idea of indirection is connected with Lovibond’s views. Indirections are also discussed in Diamond’s ‘Wright’s Wittgenstein’, in *The Realistic Spirit* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT press, 1991), 206–223, 210–2, and Diamond’s ‘Does Bismarck Have a Beetle in His Box?’ in A. Crary and R. Read (eds.), *The New Wittgenstein* (London: Routledge, 2000), 262–92, 267–8.

formulated by Wittgenstein: 'In the actual use of expressions', he writes, 'we make detours, we go by side roads. We see the straight highway before us, but of course we cannot use it, because it is permanently closed'.⁹ Here, Wittgenstein gives voice to a kind of philosophical fantasy, and Lovibond seems to share a fantasy of that kind. Wittgenstein's remark is applicable to various issues: e.g. the existence of infinite numbers, past facts, and other people's minds. We may think that *there are* infinite numbers, *there are* past facts, or *there are* thoughts in other people's minds. We want our minds and language to capture *these*. But, alas, they are out of reach. We cannot count to infinity, go back in time, or enter other people's minds. The highways are blocked and sealed, and we have to compensate, make detours, and approach all these things by indirections.

The idea that a necessary indirection is present in thought may naturally involve the idea that there are some thoughts we logically cannot think, or some things we logically cannot do: count to infinity, go back in time, think other peoples' thoughts, and so on. Here we risk confusion: As in many other cases, 'The great difficulty', Wittgenstein says, 'is not to represent matters as if there were something one *could* not do'.¹⁰

Lovibond seems to be confused in this way. She appears to claim that the barriers of moral language fence some sense out: a kind of reasons and a kind of activity of reason-giving we cannot offer or engage in. Now, presumably, to conceive of such an activity would be to conceive of its reality: for instance, of what would constitute trying to engage in it, or learning, or encouraging, or forbidding it; and to conceive of such reasons would likewise be to conceive of their actual reality: the ways they justify actions, for example, and the sort of thinking that goes into estimating how good they are. In the case at hand, however, all this is irrelevant. Lovibond seems to rule all this out, and to maintain that the boundaries of moral sense encompass all moral sense and leave nothing outside. Yet, if one could not clarify the reality of those activity and reasons, but still wanted to say that *something* was impossible, it would very

⁹ *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd edition, R. Rhees, and G. E. M. Anscombe, (eds.), G. E. M. Anscombe, (trans.), (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), §426.

¹⁰ *Philosophical Investigations*, op. cit. note 9, §374. I slightly altered Anscombe's translation.

much seem that one would not be saying of *anything* that it cannot be offered or done.^{11, 12}

III

Confusions like the one Lovibond's mode of presentation creates can often be traced back to a certain conception of limits: that in which the limits of sense are barriers and the drawing of those limits is a kind of fencing something out. In this section I explain how to conceive of

¹¹ Similar potentially confusing modes of presentation can be found in the writings of other quietists. McDowell writes: 'If one attempted to reduce one's conception of what virtue requires to a set of rules, then, however subtle and thoughtful one was in drawing up the code, cases would inevitably turn up in which a mechanical application of the rules would strike one as wrong – and not necessarily because one had changed one's mind; rather, one's mind on the matter was not susceptible of capture in any universal formula' (op. cit. note 1, 336). And again: '[T]he ascription of value that one cites in giving an agent's reason for an action, so far from revealing the rationality in the action to an imagined occupier of the external standpoint, need not even be intelligible from there', in 'Non-cognitivism and Rule-Following', in S. H. Holtzman and C. M. Leich (eds.), *Wittgenstein: to Follow a Rule*, (London: Routledge, 1981), 141–162, 155. Alice Cray argues against the view that it is 'possible to make sense of the idea of a wholly non-circular mode of discourse', in 'Wittgenstein and Ethics: A Discussion with Reference to *On Certainty*', in D. Moyal-Sharrock and W. Brenner (eds.), *Readings of Wittgenstein's On Certainty* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 275–301, 293. I do not hold that these potentially confusing modes of presentation signify actual confusions on those writers' part. Below, I indicate how I think such quietist remarks ought to be read.

¹² At some point, Lovibond talks about a 'fantasized external standpoint' and a delusion of an intellectual vantage point that would presumably allow for fully explicit reasoning. At the same time, she thinks the conception of this vantage point is intelligible enough to reject, and argues that 'it' 'is in fact inaccessible' (*Ethical Formation*, op. cit. note 4, 22). To perform this feat, Lovibond has to occupy the same, or a very similar, and according to her confused, vantage point. It would thus seem inevitable to ascribe to Lovibond the very same fantasy she diagnoses, if only the content of this fantasy could be clarified. In fact, nothing that made sense could, for that very fact, be the content of those fantasies and delusions. This is why Lovibond utilizes the language of fantasies and delusions, rather than of mistaken opinions.

the idea that language has limits differently: instead of barriers, we can use contours.

We saw that Lovibond's apparent conception of that impossible kind of moral reasoning disintegrates when we try to clarify what she has in mind: the reality of that moral reasoning. What is it to learn how to give reasons of the impossible kind? How can one estimate their soundness? The absence of answers to such questions indicates that we have nothing clear in mind. When we appreciate that, we can also learn to see *that* attempt at clarification, and the kind of attention it invites, as an attempt to draw the limits of sense – to characterize language – that is different in kind than Lovibond's. This sort of clarification is what I call drawing the contours of sense, which does not imply that some *thing* is out of reach, but that something is unclear.^{13, 14}

We can draw the contours of a particular activity: a certain greeting, a certain description, a certain request. But we can also draw the contours of kinds of activities. Let me step back for a moment from the characterization of moral language, and give an example in which we

¹³ Graham Priest, in *Beyond the Limits of Thought* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), makes a distinction between four kinds of limits: of the expressible, of the iterable, of cognition, and of conception. My argument helps to explain why classifications such as this do not solve the problem. Those categories are normally tied to one another, and we do not in fact have clear ideas of the one without the other. For instance, we do not have a clear idea of a thought whose reality does not involve expressibility. How a thought is expressed is normally part of its reality – its contours. So, we may argue that we can conceive of things we cannot express, thinking we have thereby separated two domains, and shown how the limits of the expressible can be crossed. But the problem will come back to haunt us when we try to draw the contours of (or characterize or even hint at) that which is conceivable but inexpressible. The philosophical problem is not solved merely by making those classifications. This is of course not to say that issues about those categories cannot be separated.

¹⁴ It should be noted that drawing the contours may be attempted in different ways. Wittgenstein's understanding of the ways in which that might be achieved has changed dramatically from the *Tractatus* to his later writings. Nevertheless, the kind of perspective thereby achieved on philosophical questions marks continuity in Wittgenstein's philosophy. See Cora Diamond's 'Criss-cross Philosophy', in E. Ammereller and E. Fischer (eds.), *Wittgenstein at Work: Method in the Philosophical Investigations* (London: Routledge, 2004), 201–220; and James Conant's 'Why Worry about the *Tractatus*?' in B. Stocker (ed.), *Post Analytic Tractatus* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), 167–192.

would naturally want to encourage contour drawing. Imagine your friend tells you of a strange facial expression an acquaintance of her made in response to something she said. You ask her to describe the expression, and in response she gives you a geometrical description. If you didn't think she was joking, you might naturally tell her: 'Look, I don't want to know the geometry of the expression, I asked you to describe *the expression*'. This would be a sort of grammatical remark. It is meant to function methodologically – to foster sensitivity to a sort of activity: that of describing facial expressions. We express happiness or malice or whatever, not by bending our mouths in such and such angles etc., but, e.g., by smiling, wincing, snarling, frowning, or gapping.

To emphasize, I am not now interested in the contrast between your friend's geometrical description and the kind of description you asked for. I am interested in the contrast between erecting barriers and drawing contours; the difference between the natural and the geometrical description is not such a contrast. There is nothing in your friend's description, which should lead one to believe she was trying to erect barriers to some activity. I am interested in the contrast between your grammatical remark, which was uttered in response to the geometrical description – the remark that contrasts the geometrical description with an ordinary description of a facial expression, and thus helps to draw the contours of both kinds of descriptions – I am interested in the contrast between that and a possible barrier – erecting remark, like the claim that facial expressions *could* not be studied geometrically.

If someone were to claim that facial expressions cannot be studied geometrically, she might thereby define that she will not consider geometrical descriptions – whatever they may involve – as descriptions of facial expressions. In philosophy, however, we sometimes try to go farther. We look for *absolute* generalizations. We want to claim not merely that an action of a certain kind (e.g. geometrical description) will not be considered as manifesting a certain activity (e.g. description of facial expressions), but to argue that certain activities are logical impossibilities – for instance, a geometrical description of facial expressions, or the codification of moral thought and conduct. That would be an attempt to draw a barrier – to define and fence something out. Making such claims may commit us, even if we do not intend it, to the confused idea that this fenced out logical impossibility is at least conceivable. After all, we want to claim something about *it*: to say *it* is impossible. It would seem there is some *thing* we have in mind: an impossible practice. As we've seen, though, in attempting to characterize the practice by

drawing its contours, we find that we have not fenced anything out. That is, we have no activity in view, whose contours we may wish to draw, and thus that we have not really erected any fence. The attempt to define, to erect a barrier, has not fully materialized as it were.

My claim is not that we cannot have theses, barriers, or definitions in philosophy. The claim is that such attempts are often confused. Barriers have two sides. And so, erecting one might not be a useful – might actually be a confusing – philosophical method.¹⁵ Alternatively, in drawing the contours of a practice we may invite a kind of attention to the practice as we know it, attempt to give a true sense of its reality, and foster a realistic view of its outline and shape. In ethics, for example, we may mention the fact that we *do not* normally appeal to guidebooks, or experts, to tell if something we did was just, brave, considerate, or cruel. We may say that we *do not*, normally, codify moral practice, and that would give a sense of what thinking and acting morally is like.

The characterization I gave to the philosophical activity of drawing contours is thus far partial. What contours are is clarified by how contours are drawn in different cases, and section VI below distinguishes between two kinds of contour drawing. In the next section I would like to deepen the distinction between contours and barriers.

IV

Contours and barriers are internal to different philosophical methods. Let me examine the distinction between the two kinds of methods.

I call remarks that are designed to educe sensitivity to different dimensions of our activities and their reality ‘helpers’. Consider these two sentences: 1) ‘A rule is something that is followed’, 2) ‘Unlike cubes, spheres do not have sides’. Think of situations in which you would use them. Sometimes they can be appropriate responses to philosophical claims. (Claim: ‘Moral rules are algorithms for people’s behavior’. Response: ‘A rule is not something with which you calculate behavior, but something you *follow*’.) They can also be responses to grammatical confusions. (Confusion: ‘Can you please count the sides of that ball?’ Response: ‘What are

¹⁵ This is partly why Wittgenstein argues: ‘If one tried to advance *theses* in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree to them’ (op. cit. note 9, §128).

you talking about? Balls don't have sides.')

This would be to use them as helpers, as if to help someone regain linguistic balance. However, such sentences can be used differently: as theses – theses that define what rules and balls are.

Theses and helpers are thus two kinds of philosophical uses of sentences. To characterize the difference, I would first like to make some distinctions. Later, I shall argue that we cannot identify theses or helpers by the words they utilize, and that the very same sentence can be used as a thesis or as a helper.

First, then, the point of using sentences as helpers is to help draw the contours of activities. They lead our gaze toward dimensions of a practice, but are not meant themselves to arrest our gaze. Theses are intended not just to characterize, but to define – often they formulate conditions: necessary, sufficient, or both. They thus fix our gaze on certain dimensions of a practice, and are designed to arrest it. Using a sentence as a thesis involves fencing something out: When one states in philosophy that something is necessarily this way or the other, and is thereby putting forward a thesis, one implies that there is a way in which things cannot be, or that if something is different, it is excluded by the definition. Theses might sometimes be involved in drawing contours and in giving a sense of the reality of some practice, but it is not their function, and there are philosophical theses, as we've seen, that do not exclude anything – theses that have not materialized completely as theses.

Second, used as theses, there will normally be a question about sentences' truth: We can talk about counterevidence against them, and it is at least intelligible to say they are erroneous. Alternatively, used as helpers, there will normally not be a question regarding their truth, but about their usefulness. If, for instance, one came up with a reason or a purpose for talking about spheres as having sides, this would not be counterevidence against the thought that spheres do not have sides, but a reevaluation of its usefulness.¹⁶

Third, used as a thesis, different people might understand the same sentence differently. A moral realist and a moral anti-realist, for example, may both hold that there is truth in ethics. For both it is a true thesis. They thus make the same sort of use of the idea about

¹⁶ This does not in itself imply that there is room for dialetheism, defended by Graham Priest. According to Priest, there are true sentences whose negations are also true. '[T]he limits of thought are boundaries which cannot be crossed, but yet which are crossed' (*Beyond the Limits of Thought*, op. cit. note 13, 3). However, there is room for investigating the usefulness of the law of non-contradiction.

truth in ethics. At the same time, the idea means something different for the two kinds of philosophers: While the realist may think it indicates the existence of an irreducible moral reality, the anti-realist may hold no such reality exists. Theses can thus support different theories. In contrast, sentences can be used as helpers only in so far as people *do not* in fact understand them differently – that is, in so far as they have the power to elicit a true sense of the reality of some practice.

‘Theses’ and ‘helpers’ are classifications by use. It is not the words, but what one does with them that matters. This first means that we cannot tell whether a sentence is a thesis or a helper by the words included in it, or by its syntax. We have no alternative but to examine how it is used. The word ‘necessary’ does not prove that a sentence is a thesis, and neither does a conditional syntax – if-then. Even the words ‘logically impossible’ do not prove that a certain sentence is a thesis. Not every claim that some activity is a logical impossibility is confused. The claim that we cannot do something might be an attempt to draw contours, rather than erect boundaries. To settle that, one must clarify its use: to look at what is done with it.

Second, to say that ‘theses’ and ‘helpers’ are categories of use means that often the very same philosophical text can be used in those two different ways: not just mean *something different* (as when realists and anti-realists support different theories on the idea that there is moral truth), but *be meant differently*.¹⁷

What I suggest is exemplified by an examination of Wittgenstein’s remarks about language-games: ‘If you follow other rules than those of chess you are *playing another game*; and if you follow grammatical rules other than such-and-such ones, that does not mean you say something wrong, no, you are speaking of something else’.¹⁸ Such remarks have led commentators to the idea that, according to

¹⁷ Consider the sentence ‘to think truly is to think what is the case’. It can be used as a helper, e.g. in describing the activity of thinking the truth. Lovibond argues it is a ‘truistic thesis’ (*Ethical Formation*, op. cit. note 4, 19). She takes McDowell to infer from it ‘that for language using animals, the content of experience is essentially such as to lend itself to conceptual articulation’ (op. cit. 19–20). She then goes on in a footnote to ask whether ‘the uncontroversial fact that we often find it hard to put our thoughts and feelings into words’ discredits the inference, or constitutes counterevidence against it. This strengthens the impression that she uses the sentence as a thesis *rather* than a helper.

¹⁸ *Philosophical Grammar*, R. Rhees (ed.), A. Kenny (trans.), (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), 185; Zettel G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright (eds.), Anscombe, G. E. M. (trans.), (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), §320.

Wittgenstein, language is a many-faceted rule-governed activity or set of activities.¹⁹ This is taken as a definition of language, a thesis about what sort of thing a linguistic activity – language game – is in general. Here is another ‘Wittgenstein’ remark about how games can help us when we investigate language:

Doesn't the analogy between language and games throw light here? We can easily imagine people amusing themselves in a field by playing with a ball so as to start various existing games, but playing many without finishing them and in between throwing the ball aimlessly into the air, chasing one another with the ball and bombarding one another for a joke and so on. And now someone says: The whole time they are playing a ball-game and following definite rules at every throw. And is there not also the case where we play and – make up the rules as we go along? And there is even one where we alter them – as we go along.²⁰

The activities Wittgenstein mentions here are unlike chess in various ways. They do not have sharp contours. It is not always clear when one game stops and another begins, when a game has come into being, or when it has been altered. The games he considers are also not all rule governed. Not all involve rules, and those that do, do not all involve rules in the same way.

Rather than giving a theoretical characterization of language, then, Wittgenstein's remarks – both of them – can, and are in fact designed to, call attention to and help us to see the reality of differences between linguistic activities. The chess remark helps to see the reality of some games and some linguistic activities. It implies that chess is largely rule-governed (this is a characterization of chess – of its contours) and that some grammatical remarks are rules (this characterizes some grammatical remarks – their contours). But the chess example was not meant to be generalized over the whole of language. In other words, such a generalization would arrest our gaze, and would not allow us to discern other dimensions of our linguistic behaviors. The ball examples help us to see and characterize some of those other dimensions.

‘There is not *a* philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like different therapies’.²¹ This, I believe, is a Wittgensteinian philosophical method: to demonstrate that one can

¹⁹ See, for example, G. P. Baker and P. M. S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein: Rules, Grammar, and Necessity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 38.

²⁰ *Philosophical Investigations*, op. cit. note 9, §83.

²¹ Op. cit. §133.

use theoretical remarks otherwise. One can, that is, argue against philosophical theses not by denying them, finding counterexamples, contradictions, or contrasting theses. One can use *them* differently: as helpers.

In particular, we can use McDowell's quietist advice, to investigate ethics from the inside out, (and I suspect it is intended) not as a thesis, but as a helper. To go back to the facial-expression example from the previous section, we could use the quietist advice to say that your friend's geometrical description of that facial expression was given from 'sideways-on', as if she was foreign to the activity of describing facial expressions, and to say that your remark tries to lead her into inspecting this activity from 'within'. The point of the quietist advice, understood this way, is not to reject a kind of descriptions, (e.g. geometrical descriptions of facial expressions), but to help us to attend to the grammar of certain descriptions. Since it helps to examine the contours of different kinds of descriptions, it is also a useful tool for diagnosing cases in which what looks like a description is really a confused use of language.

I should, in conclusion of this part, also point out that it is perfectly possible to use Lovibond's apparently theoretical claims as helpers. We may for example take Lovibond's claims about that substratum of tacit likemindedness that is found in moral communication, not as claims about explicitness that moral communication is logically prevented from attaining, but as reminding us of how moral communication looks like, and of the kind of attunement it involves. Insofar as she does indeed use her seemingly theoretical claims in such a way, she is drawing contours, not erecting barriers.

V

The discussion thus far raises a worry about a certain type of attempts to state theses and erect barriers in philosophy. I suggested that we can alternatively attempt to clarify the contours of our linguistic activities, often with the use of remarks as what I called helpers. However, one might think that this implies that we can only investigate where the limits of language are, but not where they should be. So the question is this: Do my claims thus far pull in the direction of linguistic conservatism: namely, towards the idea that language is a given, and has a fixed shape which our linguistic investigations cannot affect?

In what follows I argue that it does not. We can investigate language with a view to improving it. This is the point and essence

of some linguistic investigations, and in this sense, it is possible to change the limits of sense. I'll compare two sorts of attempts to do so. This section examines the suggestion that the boundaries of language are not all-encompassing, but exclude some sense – which can be included in the realm of meaning by a redefinition of the boundaries of language. Here I use Richard Rorty's discussion in his *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*.²² Section VI examines the idea that when we characterize linguistic activities we might be interested not in their established contours, but in the contours of their potentiality. Here I use Sarah Bachelard's discussion of euthanasia.²³

Rorty writes with a view to improve on the language we have. We make transitions between vocabularies, he argues, each involves passing through an interregnum during which we witness a contest 'between an entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance and a half-formed new vocabulary which vaguely promises great things'.²⁴ During those interregnums, Rorty argues, we are invited to try new ways of making sense, tempted to ask new questions, and encouraged to leave old difficulties behind, until new patterns of thought and behavior are formed and settle as the new regime.²⁵

²² Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

²³ Bachelard 'On Euthanasia: Blindspots in the Argument from Mercy', *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, **19**(2) (2002), 131–40.

²⁴ Op. cit. note 22, 9.

²⁵ Rorty insists that the process is completely contingent. At one point he compares language to a coral reef, and argues that 'This analogy lets us think of 'our language' [...] as something that took shape as a result of a great number of sheer contingencies' (op. cit. 16). He also claims that 'genuine novelty can [...] occur in a world of blind, contingent, mechanical forces' (op. cit. note 22, 17), and shares an evolutionary picture of language: new languages, like 'new forms of life constantly [kill] off old forms – not to accomplish a higher purpose, but blindly' (op. cit. 19). He often treats thinking as passive, saying that vocabulary changes may be a natural result of prolonged muddles and confusion, at the end of which we simply find ourselves asking different questions and in general utilizing a new vocabulary and a new way of problematizing things. 'Europe did not *decide* to accept the idioms of Romantic poetry, or of socialist politics, or of Galilean mechanics. That sort of shift was no more an act of will than it was a result of argument. Rather, Europe gradually lost the habit of using certain words and gradually acquired the habit of using others' (*Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, op. cit. note 22, 6). Rorty thus stirs clear of any positive suggestion about how these changes come about. Despite first impression, Rorty is not committed to completely non-intentional explanations that leave no room for reasoned changes. He argues that a language that has been newly accepted might be 'a

There is thus room for Rorty for a kind of discussion of language that does not participate in already given forms of thought and talk, but attempts to create them. For example, metaphors, according to Rorty, are like slaps and kisses: they are at bottom semantically meaningless sounds we emit or signs we create on paper, which have effects on our audience. Nevertheless, metaphors might be involved in changes of vocabulary. A metaphor might, he writes, 'become a truth-value candidate [...] it will gradually acquire a habitual use, a familiar place in the language game. It will thereby have ceased to be a metaphor – or, if you like, it will have become what most sentences of our language are, a dead metaphor. It will be just one more, literally true or literally false, sentence of the language'.²⁶

The process of vocabulary change, Rorty thinks, is not aimed at discovery of some independent truth, which the new vocabulary is better suited to capture. He insists that such investigations achieve their goal 'not by inquiry but by imagination'.²⁷ He thus contrasts the kind of investigations he favors – investigations that involve imaginative creation and invention, the investigations of 'the poet', as he calls them – with what he calls discovery or inquiry of truth, which characterize the investigations of 'the physicist'.²⁸ The poet, Rorty says, 'is typically unable to make clear exactly what it is that he wants to do before developing the language in which he succeeds in doing it. His new vocabulary' Rorty continues, 'makes possible, for the first time, a formulation of its own purpose. It is a tool for

tool which happened to work better for certain purposes than any previous tool' (op. cit. 19). At least to some extent and sometimes, then, vocabularies develop in response to certain purposes, and we might be a causal factor in the process.

²⁶ *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, op. cit. note 22, 8. Rorty thereby accepts a Davidsonian view of metaphor; op. cit. 19. See also Rorty's 'Unfamiliar Noises: Hesse and Davidson on Metaphor', in his *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 162–72.

²⁷ *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, op. cit. note 22, xvi. Rorty's main goal is the articulation of a conception of a utopia. However, he also utilizes his conceptual tools to describe past events.

²⁸ Rorty rejects the idea that changes of vocabulary are aimed at truth. He goes further: 'The moral is not that objective criteria for choice of vocabulary are to be replaced with subjective criteria, reason with will or feeling. It is rather that the notions of criteria and choice (including that of 'arbitrary' choice) are no longer in point when it comes to changes from one language game to another' (op. cit. 6).

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doing something which could not have been envisaged prior to the development of a particular set of descriptions, those which it itself helps to provide'.²⁹

The Rortian physicist is interested in the actual boundaries of our language games. The poet is interested in its potential boundaries. To investigate language in an attempt to improve on it, Rorty holds, requires that we leave behind the vocabulary we have, and cross a barrier of sense. *There are* meanings on the far side. The poet can sense them, but she cannot completely grasp them *from where she is*. Metaphors are the poet's vehicle to an indirection she must make.

To examine Rorty's view, I would like first to recall my claim above that the idea that a necessary indirection is present in thought may naturally involve the notion that there are some thoughts we logically cannot think, or some things we logically cannot do, and may thus be confused. Rorty's claims seem to structurally resemble Lovibond's, and his views seem to be confused in much the same way: they seem to involve an attempt to fence something out, state a thesis, and erect boundaries. Yet, this attempt seems not to have completely materialized as such. I do not wish to dwell on this point. I do wish to note that, as in Lovibond's case, despite the confusion, there is no reason to assume that Rorty's theoretical arguments cannot be used as helpers with which to draw the contours of some linguistic activities.

The difference between Rorty and Lovibond is in the kind of boundaries they erect or discover. For Rorty, the bounds of sense are not all-encompassing. They only circumscribe what we can do now. What is now fenced out of sense is not fatally non-sense. It may be brought inside the bounds of sense in a new language game. To examine this conception of the nature of linguistic boundaries, let me contrast Rorty's views with those of Sarah Bachelard.

VI

Bachelard, like Rorty, attempts to improve on the language we have. However, she does not think that in order to do that, we must cross a barrier of sense.³⁰ Shaping language, to fit our changing needs for

²⁹ *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, op. cit. note 22, 12-3.

³⁰ Another interesting difference between Rorty and Bachelard is that Rorty is interested in much bigger chunks of language. The narrower focus of Bachelard's investigation helps to get into focus the particular needs and purposes that motivate her investigation.

example, might involve drawing a particular kind of linguistic contours – not of established language usage, but of its potentiality.

Bachelard argues that in the discussion of euthanasia we sometimes use a concept of a human being, which deprives us of the possibility of making sense of certain experiences. This happens when we draw a parallel between humans and animals, and this sometimes happens when we think of the terminally ill as creatures that can be put out of their misery. Bachelard thinks it is wrong to draw this parallel, because it serves to conceal our ‘capacity to make or to fail to make something of our suffering in our lives’ and thus makes us ignore ‘the requirements of a proper responsiveness to our sufferings’.³¹ For Bachelard, those capacities and requirements go to characterize our concept of a human being. ‘[T]o act in the spirit of putting a human being out of his misery is radically demeaning. It is to treat a human being as someone incapable of responding to the claims of the meaning of his suffering, and hence as less than fully our fellow, as less than fully human’.³² To justify this claim Bachelard does not examine what human beings are, and whether it would or would not make sense to say of them that they can be put out of their misery. She rather asks: ‘is there an argument for thinking that the concept of a human being as a being who can be put out of his misery is the ‘right’ concept of a human being to have?’³³

As I understand Bachelard, people are in fact asking that very question when, in the face of terminal illness and great suffering, they find themselves raising questions like ‘What if she were a dog? – What would I do then?’³⁴ They connect animals to humans, and thus make sense of such suffering. The connection does not force them to accept a way of thinking about humans, for although it may make them think about the similarity between animals and humans, it may equally make them think about the difference.³⁵

³¹ ‘On Euthanasia...’, *op. cit.* note 23, 136.

³² *Op. cit.* 138.

³³ *Op. cit.* note 23, 133.

³⁴ *Op. cit.* note 23, 132.

³⁵ Bachelard thinks we have a choice: we may bring into the way we make sense of human suffering the idea of a kindness that we do to suffering animals by putting them out of their misery. This, she says, would give expression to a ‘particular understanding of the human’ (*op. cit.* 136). Alternatively, she argues, we may bring in ideas about how we mourn our dead, pray, and recognize each other’s humanity, or fail to – ideas that reflect the meaning of being human in ways that make it foreign to the kindness there is in putting an animal out of its misery.

The important point for my purposes, though, is that by exploring those different possible connections – their naturalness or rightness – Bachelard is guided by her sense of what it is to be human. That is, she is guided by her sense of the contours of this concept. This goes to characterize the sort of investigation she conducts, as well as the sort of interest she has in language, which is neither wholly conservative nor completely revolutionary.

Bachelard's investigation exemplifies a kind of 'non-theoretical' interest in language. She is not attempting to erect new linguistic boundaries, or move existing ones. She is interested in the contours of language. At the same time, she wants to shape language, and so she is interested in a special kind of contours. We already saw that exploring the contours of linguistic practices may involve using helpers to point out their established reality – saying, for example, that we do not talk of spheres as having sides, or that we express emotions by making facial expressions. But sometimes, when exploring the contours of concepts and linguistic activities, we may not be interested only in their established reality. Sometimes, there is no single established way of using a concept – as when we ask what would be to treat a terminally ill person as fully human. In such cases, we may note, some ways of using the concept are more natural than others. That would not be a helper that helps to characterize an actual reality, but that helps to examine that reality and perhaps create a new one. And this indicates the existence of a different kind of helpers: helpers that explore the contours of the potentiality of concepts. Bachelard, I suggest, is using a helper of this special kind when she talks about the 'right' use of a concept. She is, as it were, exploring a linguistic horizon.

To contrast Bachelard's investigation with Rorty's, let us ask: What if we read Bachelard's question with Rortian eyes? If we did that, it would seem that in asking her question, Bachelard is adopting a point of view outside our – outside *her* – concept of a human being in an attempt to contrast it with a competing conception. Bachelard would seem to have a choice: either she is a 'poet' (in Rorty's sense) in the process of creating new boundaries to the concept of a human being, which would help us to make sense of certain experiences that we currently cannot make sense of, or she is asking a question within the bounds of a concept we already have. This Rortian reading (mis)identifies Bachelard's contour drawing as one kind or another of erection of barriers of sense – either as of the poet or of the physicist kind. What she cannot do, according to this view, is assume that we have a concept of a human being which does not allow us to make sense of certain experiences,

and at the same time think that by investigating its boundaries she can come to a conclusion regarding how those experiences could or should be made sense of. Yet, this is exactly what she does.

The Rortian view *assumes* a theoretical interest in language, and accepts various theses about it: notably, that language games have immobile boundaries and cannot be changed but only replaced. Now, we do not have to accept Rorty's theory. We might suggest a contrasting one, in which the boundaries of sense are mobile and flexible, and language changes and develops shrinks and expands constantly, e.g. in response to fluctuating needs.³⁶ I am here less interested in the differences between these two kinds of theories, and more in their similarities: Both share the idea of characterizing language as clarifying what in principle can and cannot be done in language, both are putting forward theses about that, and both are looking to identify the nature of linguistic boundaries.

My claim, and what I think Bachelard's investigation demonstrates, is that we can, alternatively, have an altogether different, 'non-theoretical', interest in language even when we attempt to shape it: an interest in drawing the contours of the potentiality of linguistic activities. Bachelard asks about the 'rightness' of a concept. Beyond 'rightness', we can and sometimes do ask about the natural, intelligent, interesting, funny, useful, needed, and even compelling, extensions of the use of concepts. Investigating all that would be investigating the contours of concepts by exploring their horizons.

In fact, we can use both theoretical ideas I mentioned above – that of linguistic activities as having immobile, and that of linguistic activities as having mobile boundaries – as helpers to shed light with on different dimensions of the horizons of language and of how it changes in different cases: how it takes new shapes, develops, degenerates, is replaced, and so on, in the face of formulations of new scientific paradigms, discoveries, technological inventions, political transformations, developments of new styles of art, and so on.

³⁶ A theory of that sort might, for instance, be inspired by I. A. Richards' context theory of meaning, see *Richards on Rhetoric*, Berthoff, A. E. (ed.), (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 111–18; or by Donald Davidson's 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', in R. Grandy and R. Warner, (eds.), *Philosophical Grounds of Rationality: Intentions, Categories, Ends* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 157–74.

VII

In conclusion, I would like to ask: what is the value of examining the contours of language – both actual and potential? The discussion thus far shows, I think, that examining all this allows us to examine what Cora Diamond called ‘the good of concepts’.³⁷ I do not mean the goods that we can instrumentally gain by using some concepts, but the good intrinsic to concepts, which cannot be understood without them: the good of making sense of the reality we live in – the political situation in which we find ourselves, the fact that we were born to certain parents, that we fall in love, that we are going to die. In other words, drawing the contours of language allows us to explore the ways we care about how we make sense – think and act.

We care about how we think. Patterns of talk reflect patterns of care. Investigations of linguistic barriers are partly meant to reveal that, but they tend to conceal some of those patterns. For example, claiming that facial expressions cannot be studied geometrically (or alternatively that they must), unnecessarily limits the ways we are interested in facial expressions. Similarly, claiming like Lovibond that we cannot codify moral practices (or adopting another theory, according to which we must), unnecessarily limits the ways we are interested in moral practices. It thus misses the fact that we do not always care about things, and make sense of them, in the same ways.

Similar unnecessary limits might also be placed on how language can change. Part of Rorty’s motivation in investigating vocabulary changes is to show that we might not always care about things in the same ways: vocabulary changes signify transformations in our patterns of interest. He himself wants to bring about such a change. However, his interest in linguistic barriers leads him to make a sharp distinction between invention and discovery, which undermines his ability to distinguish between kinds of inventions and kinds of discoveries. He allows no room for the idea of re-inventing our vocabulary, or re-discovering it, or of claiming traditional vocabularies as our own. In other words, Rorty uses the idea that patterns of talk reflect patterns of care as a thesis, which informs his sharp distinction between two sorts of ways of caring about how we think – conservative and revolutionary. Either we keep our concepts, he holds, or we throw them away and get new ones. Being interested in our established linguistic patterns, he holds, must be different from being interested in improving on them. You are either a poet or a physicist. You cannot be both. It thus becomes very hard for

³⁷ Diamond, ‘Losing Your Concepts’, *Ethics* 98, (1988) 255–277, 269.

him to see how patterns of care, and how changes in those patterns, are actually reflected in language.

Let us look at some of the relevant data. Our care about moral practice is reflected, for instance, in our seldom codifying it, and in that we seldom require scientific kinds of accuracy from descriptions of moral phenomena. Our care is also reflected in our interest in how others think. What it is to care about our concepts, about the possibilities of making sense, the contours of this, will be clarified in part by an examination of different cases in which we appeal to foreign practices to shed light on our own: Political-theologians, for instance, employ old theological ideas to explain modern politics. Christians today identify Buddhists as having religious thoughts. Science fiction novelists warn us about the future possibility of losing touch with ways of making sense. Philosophers promote views by trying to persuade us to adopt new distinctions.

Some, but not all, differences between ways of making sense indicate cultural distances. Others are differences between ways in which our thoughts might be brought to bear on each other. We make connections between ideas, and we sometimes have a choice: we can connect ideas in different ways. Sometimes we are forced to make such connections, for instance when we feel that our established ways of making sense do not equip us with the means of making sense of certain experiences, or that they equip us with contrasting ways. Bachelard, as we saw, is investigating such a case. By exploring different possible connections between the concept of a human being and the concept of an animal, she enables an investigation of the former – the good of that concept, and the patterns of care it can, and can be made to, express.

We can thus employ the idea that patterns of talk are tokens of patterns of care not as a thesis, defining for us what language is or what it can become. We can use it as a helper with which to draw attention to the contours of linguistic activities. For example, we can use it to help someone stay sensitive to the significance of slight differences in wording; or we can, like Bachelard, look at different linguistic patterns to investigate what we care about. Saying, with Diamond, that concepts are goods can be used as a tool for looking at the contours of our life with words, and of the different types of interests we might have in how we think.

One last remark. Bachelard's investigation shows that concepts may allow us to bridge distances between what we experience and what we can express. This is part of their good. However, this indicates our vulnerability to situations in which language does not keep up with experience. We may sense in such cases that language puts a barrier

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in front of us. This, however, does not entail that the very nature of language restricts thought. That is, it does not indicate the existence of necessary linguistic barriers. Rather, different contingent occurrences, including the interventions of other people and political regimes, might erect contingent barriers that interfere with the language we are taught or allowed to have. Blindness to this is another price that inattention to the good of concepts – to the contours of their actuality and of their potentiality – may have to pay.³⁸

VIII

It might seem that the upshot of my arguments is that no sense and no use can be made of the idea of a necessary barrier logically restricting what language can grasp. ‘The great difficulty’, says Wittgenstein, ‘is not to represent matters as if there were something one *could* not do’.³⁹ But can we make sense of the idea of a logically necessary linguistic barrier? Can we do more with the idea of a *limit*? I leave that for another occasion.⁴⁰

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³⁸ For further discussion see Cora Diamond’s ‘Truth: Defenders, Debunkers, Despisers’, in L. Toker, (ed.), *Commitment and Reflection* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994), 195–221, and James Conant’s ‘Freedom, Cruelty, and Truth: Rorty versus Orwell’ in R. B. Brandom, (ed.), *Rorty and His Critics*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 268–341.

³⁹ *Philosophical Investigations*, op. cit. note 9, §374.

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