

Epilogue

In daily life, ethical issues are everywhere. We make frequent and continuous decisions about the small details of even the most mundane of our interactions. Typically, we assume a limited number of large-scale principles and we take into account regional codes of behaviour. However, the substantive contents of our face-to-face relationships are not set primarily by such principles or codes. Rather, they are negotiated in the courses of these relationships as they emerge out of our shared lifeworlds of social and cultural experience.

When we engage another person in almost any interchange, we embark on a process of mutual exploration that may lead to uncharted, unknown territory. If he or she is not an intimate acquaintance but someone I have come across in everyday life or my professional work, the experiences we have shared may be limited. Nonetheless, this does not diminish the fact that we are, from the outset, irrevocably bound to each other. We engage in dialogues and share experiences as we negotiate our way—not always without misadventure—through potentially explosive fields of conflicting values. We call on whatever resources are available to us: we advance ideas and arguments; we watch for, and try to accommodate, reactions; we call up past experiences and previous conversations. We may draw

others into our relationship; we reflect on our interactions and then discuss them; we may even discuss our discussions. We reach an outcome, sometimes conclusive and satisfying, often partial, desultory and incomplete.

It does not always work smoothly, and often we encounter obstructions that prove insurmountable, as many of the stories in this book attest. For example, I may be perplexed about the seemingly irrational refusal of a patient such as Maria to engage in treatment of proven benefit for breast cancer in place of untested complementary medicines; I may struggle to understand the world of someone struggling with advancing illness and the burdens of a ruined childhood, as in the case of Elizabeth; or I may watch aghast as I witness the inexorable decline of a young woman like Jo, encumbered not only with the sad fact of her obesity but also with the cruel responses of an unsympathetic society. These difficulties, however, only emphasise the deep complexity and richness of everyday ethical discourse.

When I enter an ethical interaction—with Maria, Elizabeth, Jo or anyone else—our lives intersect and become intertwined. Together, we launch into a journey that leads into the unknown. At the end of the process we are both changed irrevocably. The practical dialogues that drive my daily life forward start from the inexorable fact of this enmeshment with others. Indeed, relationships with others come even before my sense of my own identity, before my own subjectivity. In contrast to commonly held assumptions, the latter actually arises from the former. My uniqueness lies precisely in my irreducible responsibility for others, a responsibility that I cannot evade and that I would not want to evade. This responsibility is mine alone: it establishes who I am and how I am differentiated as a free and autonomous human being.

Our contact with others is not primarily through ideas and concepts. We are connected both through language and through our shared corporeal presence in the world. This is especially relevant to medicine, of which the general currency is the physical experience of illness and disease. Our shared language enables us to share physical experiences, and at the same time our common, embodied world opens up new fields of meaning to which we have joint access. Words and carnal experience are themselves inexorably intertwined. On the

one hand, our embodied experiences underlie the possibility of language. On the other, words can 'pick up and amplify the sonorities' latent in the things; they can 'resonate through the body and help it re-establish its inner rhythms and melodies'.¹

Through language, we make and pursue our contact with the world of things and with other people. These other people appear as specificities or singularities within our fields of speech and language, and our mutual contact arises from an abrasion between our discrepant discourses. Our dialogues are therefore never seamless or straightforward. They are not processes of translation; they do not entail the realisation of pre-existing meanings; they are not the result of the application of a tool according to a formal procedure or a fixed algorithm. They cannot be separated from the acts of speaking themselves or from gestures that are often obscure and opaque², and which lead to the open and unpredictable creation of new meaning. They constitute an experiment and, as in all experiments, their outcomes cannot be predicted.

It is often pointed out that the unavoidable responsibility for the other that is the premise of my personal and social identity is also the grounding moment of love.³ In love, an 'I' establishes a responsibility for a 'You' and in so doing accepts the other's radical otherness as unique. In this sense, all ethical contact is based on the presupposition of love. This is not to minimise the complexity and difficulty of ethical interactions, or that communication is usually imperfect, or that protagonists may occupy widely varying value positions, assumptions, philosophical dispositions and religious beliefs, in part because of the diversity of culture, in part because of the irreducible specificity of personal experiences, of love, pain, suffering and death. However, it does emphasise the equally important fact that, as difficult as ethical dialogues can be, the sharing of meaning can never be fully obstructed.

No matter how profound the differences are between us, we can always establish some kind of contact: it is always possible to make some sense, to share some degree of understanding. As the examples discussed in this book illustrate, communication can occur in the most difficult of circumstances through the deployment of a wide variety of expressive resources, through intuitive and unspoken connections that draw on broader cultural knowledge and embodied

experiences, and through the creative use of language, including ambiguity and silence. The technics of ethical communication are complex and multifaceted. What is common to them, however, is that they commence with the suspension of narrow sets of rules about the production of truth or the identification of ethical validity and that they provide an opening to the fashioning of novel forms of meaning. When I face someone I do not understand—when I try to fathom the pain of Rebecca’s traumatic history, when I try to understand Maria’s apparent irrational rejection of the Western medicine that might save her life, when I attempt to interpret Miss T’s conflicting messages—I seek a way to break through the curtain of unintelligibility. To achieve this, I have to suspend my own biases, to find a way to make contact on a different level, to listen in a different vein. I have to try to imagine, to re-create within myself, what she is getting at. As I listen to her talking, I try out images and possible meanings to see if they are plausible or carry compelling force. Rather than relying on a demand for causal explanations, I construct in my mind systems of categories of functional principles or qualities. My task is to identify common ground, a place where we can come together as individuals in the understanding of our mutual and diverse experiences. I open myself, carefully and deliberately, to a suggestiveness and an allusiveness from which the process of dialogue can progress.

In their work, scientists seek precision, univocality and the elimination of divergent shades of meaning. In ethical discourse and clinical communication, however, what is often required is the deliberate expansion of the range and scope of possible meanings and the preservation of uncertainty and ambiguity. When we encounter the implacability of otherness, its opacity and perverseness, when we sense that we are reaching the margins of sense, when, for example, Elizabeth is negotiating the limits of her own understanding and insight, when Jo expresses her despair as her options close off, we call on the expressive power at the edges of language. We rely not just on the words themselves, on their exact meanings. We call up the resources of ambiguity, of metaphor, of irony, or of the many other tropes available to help us to move forward to new territory. We become, literally, the poets of our lives, in the smallest, most everyday matters.⁴

In ethical dialogue we keep future possibilities open, however remote they may be; that is, we seek to maintain hope.

The construction of the future from within the present as an open array of potential events is always dependent on the ability to imagine possibilities that go beyond the certainties of the everyday, on utterances left unfinished, on strange metaphors, on silences. Similarly, ethical dialogues occur not only through formal processes of mapping across theoretical structures, but also by the exact opposite: through the location and mobilisation of the gaps in language, of the spaces in which meaning is not fixed, in which words gesture towards things, ideas, emotions and experiences, the rents in the flowing fabric of meaning. By allowing us to move within the shadow world at the boundaries of sense, these dialogues enable us to fashion ideas and ways of understanding that have never before acquired recognisable shape. Here we find weapons for conquering new territory, for driving beyond the conventional limits to the silent territory just outside what has hitherto been said or experienced.

These experiences or utterances cannot be separated from the concrete settings in which they arise. They are always rooted in a social and historical reality and in flesh-and-blood experience.⁵ They are always subject to the absolute and irreducible specificity, and the infinite variety, of the shared lifeworlds that are their ground and their precondition. The connections that are established in the often troubled course of the ethical interchange are not the result of the application of formal tools or methods; they are not outcomes generated by formal, logical deductions. They flow out of the complexed, embodied contact we make with others, out of the menacing but irresistible meeting of gazes across the unfathomable abyss of otherness.⁶ The shared meanings of the ethical relationship arise out of the constant proximity of the other to us. Ethics, speech and face-to-face contact are not the outcome of a solitary or impersonal exercise of thought. They are part of a shared adventure of creation, discovery and sometimes difficult struggle.

One does not have to go to exotic places, seek out extreme circumstances or look for fundamental innovations in science, technology or culture to encounter the edges of experience and meaning. In the grey, commonplace continuum of the everyday, there is already heroism, joy, tragedy, suffering, honour, trust, loyalty, betrayal, altruistic caring and ruthless egoism. The lives and deaths described in this book were and are the lives and deaths of flesh-and-blood men and

women. They express the richness of the fluid and tragic experiments of love and death, often partial, inchoate and incomplete, but always inexhaustible.

Notes

- 1 A Lingis, *The First Person Singular* (Evanston, North-western University Press, 2007), p. 62.
- 2 E Levinas, *Philosophical Essays* (The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1990), p. 115.
- 3 *ibid.*, p. 133.
- 4 F Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, tr. Walter Kaufman (Toronto, Vintage Books, 1974), pp. 239–40.
- 5 F Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (New York, Modern Library, 1937), pp. 198–9.
- 6 G Deleuze, *Essays, Critical and Clinical* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 166.