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LEARNING FROM EXAMPLES. THE HUMAN AND THE NON-HUMAN

Abstract

The paper argues that examples are not only used as rhetorical support for a presented general thesis but also circulate without explanation (whether or not with a hidden agenda). We often encounter particulars (persons, cases, situations, stories, etc.) that only with time assume the meaning of an example of something. Learning from so encountered examples is a lengthy process, based on recognizing serious and significant stakes (often related to essential structures of human life) reflected within them, resulting in i) the ability to trace significant connections to other particulars and ii) acting upon this recognition. It is disputable whether i) and ii) are intrinsically connected. The elusive nature of learning from examples – the difficulty of deciding whether learning has taken place – is illustrated using the example of environment-related actions.

Keywords: Examples; Learning; The Particular; The Human

VON BEISPIELEN LERNEN. DER MENSCH UND DAS NICHT-MENSCHLICHE

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Beitrag wird argumentiert, dass Beispiele nicht nur als rhetorische Unterstützung für eine vorgestellte allgemeine These verwendet werden, sondern auch ohne Erklärung zirkulieren (ob mit oder ohne versteckte Absicht). Wir treffen oft auf Besonderheiten (Personen, Fälle, Situationen, Geschichten usw.), die erst mit der Zeit die Bedeutung eines Beispiels für etwas annehmen. Das Lernen aus solchen Beispielen ist ein langwieriger Prozess, der darauf beruht, dass man ernsthafte und bedeutsame Aspekte (oft im Zusammenhang mit wesentlichen Strukturen des

menschlichen Lebens) erkennt, die sich in ihnen widerspiegeln, und der dazu führt, dass man i) in der Lage ist, bedeutsame Verbindungen zu anderen Besonderheiten zu erkennen und ii) nach dieser Erkenntnis zu handeln. Es ist umstritten, ob i) und ii) untrennbar miteinander verbunden sind. Der schwer fassbare Charakter des Lernens an Beispielen - die Schwierigkeit, zu entscheiden, ob ein Lernen stattgefunden hat - wird am Beispiel umweltbezogener Handlungen illustriert.

Schlüsselwörter: Beispiele; Lernen; das Besondere; das Menschliche

Introduction

Some philosophers consider a capacity for abstract thinking indispensable for philosophy. For them, particular examples are tools useful for slower intellect. This view has been associated with Kant and expressed in his first *Critique* (B174f); though, as most things in Kant's philosophy, this one too proves more complicated on a closer look (cf. Louden, 1992). Example-less philosophy or philosophy using only formulaic or schematic examples still appears quite common, though, mainly without a felt need to reflect theoretically on it. On the other hand, just as many philosophers consider particular examples important to philosophy. This tendency finds its strong expression, for instance, in the post-Wittgensteinian tradition; cf. the classical formulation in Winch's (1972) criticisms of the presumption of universalizability or the recent book-length discussions of the topic (Beran, 2021a; Mácha, 2022). Many of these and similar example-friendly positions rely on intuition (essentially, an epistemological concern) that we may not know clearly what we talk about without examples. In her book on epiphanies, Sophie Grace Chappell mentions this exact motivation for populating the introductory chapter of her book about epiphanies with many examples of epiphanies (see Chappell, 2022, pp. 21ff).

I share this need and concern; I lack clarity when I do not have an example. Still, put in this way, you quickly get the impression that examples are, just as Kant suggested, "go-carts" for our judgment, support for making a general point that we perhaps feel unable to make without this support. Still, something ancillary. To be accurate, we often work with examples in precisely this loosely rhetorical manner: perhaps when we say that there has been a surge of bizarre conspiracy theories recently and then throw in a few juicy instances (lizard people).

Yet, in some cases, what we do – what is happening – is subtler and it results in something more complicated. Most of the discussion of examples in

philosophy (ethics) concerns people and interpersonal situations; I will follow the line, but in making my suggestions concerning learning from examples, I will also intentionally touch upon a different kind of cases (responses to environmental crises).

Throughout the text, I will be working with a broader, open-ended notion of an example. Not just examples in the sense of a thing such as the standard meter (an exemplar of 1-meter length, or of all these things that are 1 meter long) or a particular person representing a class (Beethoven being an example of German classical composers). Quite often, what we use as “examples” of facts, such as that “dishonesty does not pay off”, are elaborate narratives. Some particular mess that has happened may serve as an example of how difficult life sometimes is. And so forth. I will thus refrain from specifying what is an example. We take various things to be examples of other things. These “things” that we take have very little in common, structurally; they are usually more specific or particular than what they are an example of, though this does not mean much: “nouns” being an example of “word types” fits this description. More importantly, the particular that can serve as an example can be a particular thing or person, but also a situation, story, or narrative, or a case or event. I will thus be ecumenic in my use of “examples”. My interest is with what it is about the workings of (some) examples that allow us to learn (take a lesson) from them, incomparably to the capacity to learn from the exemplified generality. My choice of examples, though, will gravitate towards story- or event-like rather than thing-like examples, and those that are more rather than less specific and fleshed-out. I believe, for reasons that should transpire, that these are more conducive to learning in the strong sense of coming to see something significant.

In section 1, I will introduce and briefly discuss two examples of examples working in a less obvious and more nuanced way than providing rhetorical support. In section 2, I will argue that the impact of examples on our understanding is often connected to the seriousness of one’s concern involved in understanding the example. In section 3, I develop this suggestion further, towards the framework of human life and its central concerns as that which calls for taking some examples we encounter seriously. Section 4 discusses a particular case of an example striking in this manner: David Attenborough’s recent film *A Life on Our Planet*. In section 5, I hint towards the sense of learning (from an example) as a matter of perceiving the example almost unavoidably in certain terms (or under a certain description) and not in others, along with a corresponding practical attitude (acting upon

such an insight). However, throughout my discussion, I argue that while fleshed-out enough, examples may facilitate such a transformation of understanding and practical attitude (compared to being presented with the unexemplified generality only), no encounter with any example can *warrant* that the process will take place.

1. Two Examples of Less-Than-Obvious Working With Examples

1.1. *Miss Marple*

‘Ah,’ said Miss Marple, ‘but we haven’t all got such iron nerves as you have, Colonel Bantry. You belong to the old school. This younger generation is different.’

‘Got no stamina,’ said the Colonel, repeating a well-worn opinion of his.

‘Some of them,’ said Miss Marple, ‘have been through a bad time. I’ve heard a good deal about Basil. He did A.R.P. work, you know, when he was only eighteen. He went into a burning house and brought out four children, one after another. He went back for a dog, although they told him it wasn’t safe. The building fell in on him. They got him out, but his chest was badly crushed and he had to lie in plaster for nearly a year and was ill for a long time after that. That’s when he got interested in designing.’

‘Oh!’ The Colonel coughed and blew his nose. ‘I – er – never knew that.’

‘He doesn’t talk about it,’ said Miss Marple.

‘Er – quite right. Proper spirit. Must be more in the young chap than I thought. Always thought he’d shirked the war, you know. Shows you ought to be careful in jumping to conclusions.’

Colonel Bantry looked ashamed.

‘But, all the same’ – his indignation revived – ‘what did he mean trying to fasten a murder on me?’

‘I don’t think he saw it like that,’ said Miss Marple. ‘He thought of it more as a – as a joke. You see, he was rather under the influence of alcohol at the time.’

‘Bottled, was he?’ said Colonel Bantry, with an Englishman’s sympathy for alcoholic excess. ‘Oh, well, can’t judge a fellow by what he does when he’s drunk. When I was at Cambridge, I remember I put a certain utensil – well, well, never mind. Deuce of a row there was about it.’

Agatha Christie, *The Body in the Library*

The background (SPOILER ALERT): Basil Blake found a dead body in his house and got rid of it by moving it into the Colonel's house. The story about Blake's war service can provide, at first sight, an example illustrating the general claim that Blake, despite the Colonel's disdain, has "stamina". This is *not* what the initial discussion was about, though. Miss Marple wants to show Blake to the Colonel in a different light.

But she does not just exemplify a general point to the discussion of which both parties would be open beforehand. First, she must dispel the Colonel's prejudice. Miss Marple's war story thus does not exemplify a statement "Blake is a decent person" that would make enough sense to the Colonel, even without an example. Without the example, this statement sounds simply absurd to the Colonel's ears. The countering example expands the Colonel's conception of Basil Blake and his character or his conception of a "decent chap". Then, moving a corpse to the Colonel's house turns from an example of the depravity of youth into an example of what a decent chap could easily relate to.

However, the shape of this persuading is quite complicated: Miss Marple wants to persuade the Colonel that Blake is a good person and an unlikely murderer. The example (note: an example in the shape of a glimpse into a part of Blake's past) she offers is that of *courage*, though, rather than necessarily of a morally impeccable character. Miss Marple does not simply use her example as an illustration of a more general statement or principle – such as "arrogant young dandies can be decent chaps". The example plays a more transformative role in how the Colonel looks at matters. For it is the particular choice of the example – related to *war service* – that succeeds in focusing the Colonel's vision. A story about Blake's honest behavior in his everyday job (show business) or in his personal life might not suffice. It is, however, an *example* of courage that stands at the beginning of the real talk about Blake's character, not the *general* statement of his character, and not even an example of him as a person of impeccable character.

Miss Marple showed to the Colonel something that Blake has done – a snapshot of what and where he was in the past –, but the idea of Blake as a certain kind of person (a judgment) is something for the Colonel himself to form. Thus, here it is not the case of two people knowing beforehand what in general they talk about and of one just offering a particular example of the more general statement to the other. In a sense, we have here the case of something first inconceivable for one of the parties, and of the other party

opening their eyes by way of throwing in an example of something *else* than the contested inconceivable idea.

Examples may not even always be examples of a previously settled something (for neither of the parties), though. Let us consider another example:

1.2. *The Brown Book*

Imagine this language: –

1) Its function is the communication between a builder A and his man B. B has to reach A building stones. There are cubes, bricks, slabs, beams, columns. The language consists of the words “cube”, “brick”, “slab”, “column”. A calls out one of these words, upon which B brings a stone of a certain shape. Let us imagine a society in which this is the only system of language. The child learns this language from the grown-ups by being trained to its use. I am using the word “trained” in a way strictly analogous to that in which we talk of an animal being trained to do certain things. It is done by means of example, reward, punishment, and suchlike. Part of this training is that we point to a building stone, direct the attention of the child towards it, and pronounce a word. I will call this procedure *demonstrative* teaching of words. In the actual use of this language, one man calls out the words as orders, the other acts according to them. But learning and teaching this language will contain this procedure: The child just “names” things, that is, he pronounces the words of the language when the teacher points to the things. In fact, there will be a still simpler exercise: The child repeats words which the teacher pronounces.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Brown Book*

Only one short paragraph precedes the description of the language game (1) in the whole book. Wittgenstein (1969b, § 1) says the following about long series of game descriptions, they are “correct descriptions of simpler languages than ours”, i.e., examples of what such a simpler language can look like. Countless examples of more and more complex *invented* games populate the text of *The Brown Book*. Wittgenstein comments at length on various detailed aspects of their working, however, he mostly doesn’t say what the descriptions are examples of, or what it is that he is trying to persuade the reader about. Instead, the reader’s impression is one of being simply thrown into the midst of examples, one after another. This confusing exposition is probably designed to take away the ingrained, but confused certainty about the working of language from the reader. (Perhaps analogously to the result of “paradox and contradictions loved by Buddhist thinkers” – that “logical thinking is baffled and exhausted by absurdities” –, which makes the mind

more open to weakening its attachment to what it considers as reality, as Edward Conze (1951, pp. 17, 26) claims.)

In our lives, we are exposed, all the time, to various particulars without a clear statement of their meaning, and many fluidly assume a particular meaning, yet often only in hindsight. In our twenties, we may not be able to appreciate that caring for an ailing partner (as we witness in our parents) is an example of courage and strength; instead, we might consider climbing a steep rock. It may be only in our fifties or sixties that we come to appreciate that; including, in hindsight, understanding the example of our parents *in these terms* and not in others. It is not that we did not see the life of our parents, but we might have been prone to describe it differently. Yet, ultimately, the long-ago exposition to this example and its memory might have helped us to come to understand it so at least now.

Often, “presenting more examples and making one’s point clearer” might mean making it not only clearer to those to whom one talks, but also clearer to oneself. (Wittgenstein’s strategy?) And making something clearer often amounts to first *locating* the thing, which in surprisingly many cases is located elsewhere from where (and what) one thought it was. Like: courage and strength.

This may be why it is hard to tell what it is exactly that Wittgenstein is doing at all, compared to Miss Marple’s story or the more common examples used rhetorically in passing. Both our examples present an unexpected kind of eye-opener, though; exposition to them shifts the terms in which one understands the topic. Miss Marple’s example of Basil Blake’s war service helped shift the terms in which the Colonel was then able to make sense of Blake’s transport of the dead body: now he is, surprisingly, able to relate to that as to “a capital joke”. Before the Colonel absorbed, thanks to the example, the image of Blake as an unlikely war hero, any crime could be attributed meaningfully to Blake in his eyes. Afterward, he is much more cautious. Wittgenstein’s case is less straightforward, for it takes away but does not replace what it has taken away with anything else, comparably positive. In both cases, though, through these eye-openers, some overlooked reality intrudes (it may *take time*) upon us.

Our two examples suggest that rather than only throwing in an example afterward, when it has been settled what it is an example of, we are just as commonly exposed to particulars – objects, people, stories, situations, cases, experiences – without any such preceding explanation (whether it has been intentionally withheld by the architect of the encounter, or there simply is

no idea or architect operating). Afterward, and gradually, these particulars assume the meaning of the example of something specific. The unclarity, unpredictability, and unwarrantedness of this process stand behind the opaque nature of what it means to learn from examples. Especially complicated and elusive subjects open themselves to our understanding through our encounters with particulars whose relations to these subjects are often so quirky that one would not think of using them as an example in the usual “rhetorical” manner. People often struggle with fully realizing the impact, extent, and direness of the environmental crisis. What has turned many a person into a convicted environmentalist has not been instruction about facts, accompanied by carefully selected “obvious” examples (rhetorical illustration), but an encounter with a crushing particular that eventually assumed the significance of the example of environmental crisis. Witnessing starving stray dogs fight for pieces of plastic they eat is such an encounter that will make the reality sink in; much as it is an odd particular, and from the viewpoint of global ecology, perhaps less representative than population data about life cycles in particular affected ecosystems.

2. The Seriousness of Concern

I am thus interested in cases in which it happens that an example makes one see, that it weighs on you. Some instances of what is commonly considered an “example” tend to fail in this respect, though. Why?

Let’s consider the Trolley Problem. Supposedly, an exemplification of a moral dilemma. Yet, it seems to have done little more during the decades of its career than helping to cement the utilitarian answer as the right one (cf. Hannikainen, Machery, and Cushman, 2018; Awad et al, 2020); perhaps thanks to speaking in terms of quantifiable and commensurable stakes. But it did little to convey the sense of a dilemma as a “situation where, whatever one does, one is going to hurt someone” and where “talk of arranging goods in an order of priority often seems out of place,” to quote D. Z. Phillips (1992, p. 209). In a manner of speaking, the Trolley Problem does not help take the situation – the supposed moral dilemma – seriously enough, it does not make (or help) one see that in a dilemma, even the “right” solution (by any criteria) is still bad enough (you must do something but whatever you do is bad).

It also allows for various fanciful reimaginings. Imagine a more real-life-like example: the dilemma of somebody torn between – my apologies for a

very schematic example – covering for one’s friend who is cheating on his wife and telling the wife about it, as she also is one’s friend (though perhaps is not one’s best and oldest friend, who is the culprit). The seriousness can be “deflected” (to echo Stanley Cavell and Cora Diamond) either by providing a theoretically backed dogmatically clear-cut answer dismissing any remnant worries, or by a fanciful reimagination such as “Try to look at the problem from a Buddhist point of view. Tell yourself: what if ‘cheating’ is only a disguised term for structures of attachment and craving? You have to see through the reality and see everything as ultimately unreal”. Both these approaches seem to ignore what it is like to be in a dilemma and to live with it after one *has* made a decision.

There is only so far that one can apply the latter kind of deflective liberty on real-life people (but also, interestingly, on characters in fully-fledged narratives, too). They differ from pawns labeled as A and B and featuring in an open-ended example. A fully fleshed example blocks the fanciful reimaginings. For me, to react in the above way to the cheating dilemma would amount to missing what the example of (*my*) friends in a quandary “about” means. A proper response requires orientation within the depicted situation, but also a recognition of the importance of the fact that we are dealing here with a *situation*. If intellectual exercises like the Trolley Problem do not provide an example weighing on you through an urgent moral decision to make, it is because they do not really talk about a *situation*.

In Sophocles’ *Antigone*, the central character proves herself through the dialogue in which she tries to persuade her sister Ismene to help her bury (against Theban law, enforced by Creon) their fallen brother Polynices. Through glimpses such as that – they can be quite short – we enter a *story* that features people (persons, personalities) *here*. Various things *matter* to these people: familial piety and loyalty matter to Antigone, law (and his position) to Creon. They *act* towards each other in ways that express what matters to them. They *succeed* or *fail* in their actions and projects; the particular shape of their successes and failures matters to them, too. They have *lives*. What is shown by the dialogue is the love between the two sisters and for their fallen brother, but also Ismene’s meek character and, on the other hand, Antigone’s spine of steel. This kind of unflinching principledness in the face of the threat of death is something that shows itself, for what it is, within a person’s *life*. And it is suitably *shown* by the example itself, rather than by stating explicitly: “Antigone has a spine of steel”. (This observation

may be taken as a distant echo of what Wittgenstein (2001 [1922], 4.1212) was pointing at with his distinction between saying and showing.)

Fully fledged examples thus, *ideally*, show contents that can instill a sense of discernible concern. The perceiver will then clearly feel the difference between what one should take *seriously* and what is open to whimsical replies. Not all avenues of understanding and response are on par. It is, I believe, the sense of seriousness with which we approach some things that prevents us from reacting to situations that qualify as thus “serious” with something like the above mock-Buddhist solution. But we feel no restraint when the example (or “example”) bounces off us without effect.

In many cases, the perceived importance of distinguishing between the lines of understanding is moral. The difference between these lines matters highly in our lives, *as* the lives of persons. Some options of understanding or response are such that we shrink from considering them seriously, out of fear of violating something that matters to us unconditionally. We cannot imagine how anyone (including ourselves) could really *mean* the suggestion without damaging or compromising the sense in which they could conceive themselves as good. This fear, which I label as moral, is, however, not fear for oneself (not even what fear of what one might become), but a fear from which a concern for oneself is largely absent.

The constrained imagination appears here as an aspect of how (in fact: *that*) some things matter to us. Raimond Gaita devoted some space to his polemic against “fearless thinkers” (2004, chap. 17) who do not shrink from drawing *any* conclusion (including, say, infanticide) from the accepted premises; which is, deep down, an extensive unpacking of Anscombe’s (1958, p. 16f) classic criticism of “corrupt minds”. However, “ruling certain things out of consideration”, as Gaita (2000, pp. xxxi, 161f) puts it, only comes up as a natural option (and the unwillingness thereto as a mark of deficient, or morally atrophied understanding) face-to-face with a fully-fledged example. (Gaita’s own example is his refusal to debate with people who deny the Holocaust.) On the other hand, “examples” of the kind of the Trolley Problem appear to be apt food for “fearless thought”. Though such thought experiments speak of many lives (sacrificed, saved, etc.), they do not talk about human life. They do not provide the environment in which we encounter moral problems in such a way that plausible-looking “solutions” can strike us as unthinkable takes on human life.

Facing a seemingly abstract, open-ended question such as “Can/should humanity proceed towards a transhumanist future (on Mars?),

independently of the fate of the Earth's ecosystem?" by way of saying "Who knows? That's an interesting idea, totally plausible" is an option only so far. For it involves leaving real human lives (many lives) behind. My point here is not trying to prove that transhumanism is morally wrong, but rather to indicate that certain ways of presenting it as a relatably interesting, plausible plan avoid or deflect from perceiving the weight of the lives left behind. Not losing this importance of (human) lives from sight does not prevent situations of dilemmas, sacrifices, or losses; on the contrary, it makes withstanding them more difficult (on difficulty and deflection, see Diamond 2003).

Philosophers in the Wittgensteinian tradition (Diamond, Gaita, Rhees, or Winch) do not base their emphasis on the importance of (human) life biologically, but rather they stress that human life represents a space of an unrepeatable and irreversible development of understanding (also understanding oneself and understanding what it is to have a life to lead). In this "realm of meaning" (to borrow Gaita's term), understanding is not a leisure activity that may or may not succeed; understanding, and trying to understand, matters highly. (It is not of insignificant interest what we make of our lives). And as our understanding develops – for instance, understanding of what "being free" or "living happily" means or in what sense these matter – its shifting terms are integral to the turns that life takes over time.

A sense of the importance of the human dimension of our lives also means appreciating the importance of failures and losses and responses thereto – *these* make what happens in our lives matter in the way in which it does. Fanciful, deflective takes on our lives that not only enable us to move over these losses – there is nothing wrong with that – but enable us to act as if these losses, "in sum", do not matter (just as well as if they have not happened) betray a lack of understanding. The same kind of appreciation for the importance of failures and losses lies at the heart of doing justice to what is happening in and to the non-human world, too. Characterizing this in terms of the "human" may perhaps sound confusing or deceptive. However, looking more closely at the key aspects of the paramount human-oriented ways of understanding may illustrate what I have in mind.

3. The Human

What is it in our encounters with various particulars that makes the appropriate understanding of them a matter of "seriousness"? As I suggested, the *moral* significance of a person to me is their significance within life (or

related to the significance of human life) as we share it. If a near and dear person is dying, one may ask oneself: “Why did I waste so much time? I should have spent it with someone so important to me.” *This* is the moment when the other’s significance fully unfolds itself, even though the regretful mourner wishes she were capable of being the person to whom the other would have meant all the time what he means to her now. But part of the perceived significance arises exactly from the now-awareness of the time wasted, the awareness that it is too late now. All this assumes the meaning that it has in response to certain events in my life. This way, the significance of what is happening within a person’s life has less to do with information that can simply be told than with something one *learns* through time.

I use my notion of “learning from examples” as an umbrella term covering the cases of coming to see a particular kind of significance, in the example from which one “takes the lesson” or elsewhere, thanks to understanding the example as in an important respect analogous to this other context. The significance, bolstered by thick moral terms, is that of what the example is about for the one who learns from it. (Correspondingly, examples that do not, deep down, concern a plausible bearer of such perceivable significance, are nigh impossible to learn from.) I will try to make it clearer with the help of two lengthy quotations from two moral philosophers important to my discussion.

3.1. “*Having a Human Life to Lead*”

We, who share this striking thing – having a human life to lead – may make in imagination something of what it is to have a human life to lead; and this imaginative response we may see (and judge and learn from) in the doings and words and customs of those who share *having a human life to lead*. (...)

Suppose (...) we are shown in a story someone who, as a child, had been inconsolably affected, afflicted, by hearing of something horrible that people do, or had done, to other people or to beasts. The child cries out ‘Why are they allowed to do that?’ – and no one can answer; perhaps no one cares enough to try to; to the pain of the knowledge of what we do is added the pain of not being understood. In the story we are shown how what happened then enters the grown-up person’s sense of life, his sense of the darkness that there is in the way things go; and we may then see that sense of life to be present in some action many years later, shaping its significance. The sense that someone has of the terribleness of what we do, as part of that person’s sense of what it is to have a human life, may be shown in a story as making an action intelligible, or as making appropriate and in that way understandable the intensity of remorse

for some action, or as making it possible for some action to alter the face that the person's life has for him. (...)

Th[e] opening of the heart, which for Dickens is tied especially to Christmas, is inseparable from a live sense of oneself as, with others, bound towards death, of others as one's 'fellow passengers to the grave'. The viewing of other people as 'another race of creatures, bound on other journeys', is an expression of one's having suppressed or rejected, rather than imaginatively owned, one's own being human; and so is the incapacity for love or mirth, the incapacity to enjoy life, that marks Scrooge and so many other characters in Dickens. The first thing that Dickens's Scrooge does when he is fully awake is *laugh*. The laughter Dickens wants from his readers is the laughter of awakened humanity in us; his writing, his imaginative attention to the ordinary and extraordinary, to the comic and horrible particulars of life, serves his readers – or is meant to – as the Ghosts serve Scrooge. Dickens's aims are not unlike those explicitly put by Joseph Conrad: If a writer of fiction takes a particular moment of life and holds it up and 'shows it in its vibration, its colour, its form', shows 'the stress and passion' in it, this may awaken in the hearts of the reader, the beholder of the described moment, 'that feeling of unavoidable solidarity; of the solidarity in mysterious origin, in toil, in joy, in hope, in uncertain fate, which binds men to each other and all mankind to the visible world'.

Cora Diamond, "The Importance of Being Human" (Diamond 1991, pp. 43f, 46, 49f):

All these are parts of human life: relating to an example as an example of somebody who has a human life to lead means acknowledging the significance of all these things that are at stake in that life *qua* human life. It means to respond, in a differentiated manner, to particulars of the example in a way that clearly appreciates the difference between matters important (that concern what is of joy or horror or laughter in human life) and matters that can be taken with indifference.

Such a response is natural to a fully-fledged example, but not really to an abstract principle or thesis (even when it talks about "kindness" and "cruelty"). And even when we display such careful understanding when talking in abstract, it may be because we "in fact" imagine something particular, and the careful sense of seriousness in fact belongs and is due to the particular.

3.2. "Understanding of Human Difficulties"

If you said of someone: 'He is a person with great knowledge of people. He knows what you have to expect; he knows enough – you might almost say he is wise enough – not to expect too much, is able to see beyond the circumstances that seem terribly upsetting at the moment' – all that and much more is closely

connected with wisdom. Yet I do feel that you could say of somebody that he had a great knowledge of people, a great understanding of people, and yet not expect to find wisdom there. He might show great appreciation of people's weaknesses, and a very shrewd appreciation of their capabilities and their abilities, and still show no great wisdom. Perhaps he might show even a great understanding of human difficulties, and show no great wisdom, although here you are coming much closer to wisdom. 'Understanding difficulties' is one point at which wisdom seems to be allied to what you learn through conversation. It is clearly different from a shrewd appreciation of human weaknesses and human capabilities.

Rush Rhees, *In Dialogue with the Greeks II: Plato and Dialectic* (Rhees 2004, p. 137):

I am not sure what Rhees means by "understanding of human difficulties". I read this as anti-judgmentalist caution: to appreciate that human life is immensely complicated, and that there is a big difference between being able to see that something one has done was wrong and condemning the deed and, especially, the person.

A possible example from the work of Jane Austen, the great moralist. When we read *Pride and Prejudice*, we see that Mr. Collins is an idiot and laugh at him and do not approve of Charlotte's decision to marry him. But we understand her reasons; we also understand that the point of having these characters in the book was not to offer readers an opportunity to unleash their moral indignation or feed their sense of their own moral superiority, but to allow them to understand something about human lives. We are not given a piece of information, nor are we offered a theory. Austen just provides a glimpse into the life of a ridiculous person, a glimpse that is compatible with laughing at his expense, but eventually invokes compassion and pity for lives wasted (the life of Mr. Collins himself, his wife's life).

Unlike noticing human follies and weaknesses, and the troubles into which people get, which surely is a valuable skill, understanding human difficulties is not really a skill at all. It has more to do with a *concern* for doing justice and being compassionate in my noticing another's difficulties. The difference between a wise understanding and simple knowledge also concerns where and how we need to look within an example for its exemplarity. In his analysis of heavy drinking, Herbert Fingarette (1985, chap. 4) argues that it is futile to look for *medical* "causes" of alcoholism. Drinking issues respond to events in the drinker's life. Questions such as "Why does this man succumb to drinking?" are not best answered by, "It's because of what dopamine does in his brain." But rather by "Because his wife has left him

and he cannot come to terms with it.” Alcoholism shows itself as a bad turn taken in life. And the appropriate response is not the condemnation of the drinker but rather compassion – based on seeing what the drinker’s life (and the lives of those close to him) is like, seeing that he has to live this life now, carrying the burden of what he has become and done.

Here we have a compassionate insight into the complexity of life and its difficulties that abstains from moralizing judgement. It is, however, appreciation and not exculpation; the capacity to also see lucidly that a person has done something bad. A refusal to condemn the person, and caution about judging the deed, relates to seeing the involvement of moral luck in our lives.

These are therefore aspects of a morally sensitive understanding of an example: following it with respect for, and an appreciation of, all that comprises having a human life to lead, which often requires being sympathetic to human difficulties, because it is often difficulties, failures, shortcomings, wrongdoings (what one might come to regret, and why) what informs the overall shape of a particular human life. This is also characteristic of cases in which an example weighs (heavily) on the person, she takes something from the example; which, of course, may range from a genuinely learned “lesson”, to a day-long bout of depression.

What my take on Diamond’s and Rhee’s reflections aims at is that such appreciation may require being exposed to (a) human life in its breadth, length, and depth, in a manner that allows one to immerse into it at least similarly to the way in which the person is immersed in their life. This would contrast sharply with the “exposition” to one’s life in the manner of reading a short biographical summary in an encyclopedia. Experimenting with such exposition may go to truly extreme lengths; elsewhere (Beran, 2021a, sect. 3.4; and independently in Beran, 2021b, in a discussion of wisdom), I propose a reading of the masterpiece of classical Chinese literature, Cao Xueqin’s *Dream of the Red Chamber*, as a monstrously extensive elaboration of the difference between what one is told and what one immerses oneself into. In the following section, though, I will offer an illustration of the significance and the unexpected directions of the exposition to a life in its full, “phenomenological” scope, on a less remote example; this time, from a not-only-human context.

4. *A Life on Our Planet*

In David Attenborough's recent documentary, *A Life on Our Planet* (2020), archive snippets from his older films (some black and white and dating back to the 1950s) mingle with beautifully shot depressing compositions of pristine nature and human destruction thereof at present. Thus, for instance, after a nostalgic and beautiful reminiscence of Attenborough's encounter with Bornean orangutans



Figure 1. *A Life on Our Planet*: archive footage of an orangutan (self-made movie still) we are shown what is left of the living place and life of these large primates now:



Figure 2. *A Life on Our Planet*: an orangutan on a lonely tree trunk (self-made movie still)

The melancholic air often surrounding orangutans and emphasized by the conditions in which they are sometimes living in zoos – sitting on a tree that is not part of a dense forest – is used by Attenborough to convey the sense of utter desolation, though the image is not graphically brutal in itself. The fallen forest is just immensely sad; an impression underscored by the view of the lonely orangutan melancholically sitting on the lonely tree.

The extent to which man-made destruction is a large-scale and systemic issue is directly shown only a few times, but to a no less striking effect, when the camera zooms out to see the immense area of fragmented agricultural landscape leaving no space for “useless wilderness”:



Figure 3. *A Life on Our Planet*: fragmented agricultural landscape (self-made movie still)

Or when we see vast oil palm plantations, elbowing out the shrinking remnants of wild tropical forests:



Figure 4. *A Life on Our Planet*: oil palm plantation surrounding forest fragments (self-made movie still)

The oil palm plantations, being green, offer a deceptive picture of nature being alive and lush, yet, as Attenborough laconically observes, this is basically a dead habitat: “You see this curtain of green with occasional birds in it, and you think it’s perhaps okay. But...”

The last 25 minutes of Attenborough’s movie are resolutely hopeful and the old environmentalist is going through a series of quite particular things that can be done (and already are done) to reverse the trends. Yet, I have felt, after seeing the film, that the world *qua* one which had a future (and meaning) has been or is irreversibly being destroyed. Oddly enough, the “hopeful” part of the film, much as it was well-researched and matter-of-fact, rather than utopian and imaginative, did not do much to counteract my desperate impression.

The uneven relatability (for me) of the two parts of the film probably has to do with the – inevitable – fact that the film is intentionally constructed as a witness statement and reflection by David Attenborough, a nonagenarian *looking after* his life, though – admirably – well-aware of the challenges and opportunities of the future. If a similar witness statement was produced by one of the current climate school strikers, it might be looking after the history that has led to this moment, too, but not in a way structured as a mirror of one’s *own* past *lifetime* (as, in this case, Attenborough’s). And

while Attenborough's film contains the part predicting bleakly the possible future during a similarly long lifetime of somebody born now, it is not mirroring the stages of the person's life just as his looking-back *is* mirroring the stages of *his* life (documented also by his physical transformation through age, as captured in the 60 years of his filmmaking, the snippets from which the film features).



Figure 5. *A Life on Our Planet*: fade overs of David Attenborough at different ages (self-made montage of 4 movie stills)

On the other hand, a person entering their adulthood only now might be mapping the course of the upcoming decades in relation to where, in particular, *they* might be finding themselves in the course of their own life in 2040, 2050, or 2070.

In *A Life on Our Planet*, the lifetime of a single human (David Attenborough) who may be nearing his death is integrated with the story of a lifetime of *nature* into one narrative arc. At the beginning of Attenborough's career as a naturalist (first an amateur one), he pictures nature as a pristine, almost boundless space for endless explorations. Much as he soberly observes that this has been an illusion already decades ago, he *does* present a story of the life of nature – a place that could be explored – that gave a credible impression of being fresh (capable of constantly refreshing and regenerating itself) as a newborn baby 80 years ago but now feels like a frail nonagenarian, perhaps nearing the end of its life. The relative narrative weakness of the positive, hopeful addendum might thus be due to this parallel with David Attenborough's life: it has a weakened relevance in a sense similar to one

in which events after one's death are somewhat less relevant for one's life than events that took and take place during this life. We witness too much of Attenborough's past and life in the film not to be moved by the film as, centrally, an expression of grief or guilt (largely *past*-oriented emotions) because due to the autobiographical framing, the way in which these emotions are expressed here is more narratively fleshed-out than the film's expressions of his anxiety and hopes for the future.

I have inserted this excursus to the environmentalist cinema here because *A Life on Our Planet* seems a good example of contents, which – when exposed to them – can powerfully influence the terms in which we see, perceive, understand, and approach cases and situations which are in an important sense related, but can also appear quite different. Much of environmental grief and anxiety nowadays express (various forms of) the concern that our world is, still more and more, in such a state that affects human lives in ways sad, deplorable, and tragic. The film has succeeded in making this point by way of showing us something – making us see something, by way of literally opening our eyes (cf. Wittgenstein 1969a, § 578) –, rather than saying it. It is one thing to be told “Human activity leads to environmental degradation everywhere”; it is another to be shown how this is happening in a way that will trigger one's spontaneous inclination to *see* a too-low cut yellowing lawn (which they have passed by without notice several times), as “man-made environmental degradation” and a tad more unlivable place. Some even argue (e.g. Winch 1987) that such a shift in terms of how we come to see certain cases commonly brings about the perceived necessity to act upon this seeing. However, there is no necessary link between being exposed to an example and learning from it.

In relation to what I introduced in the previous section, I believe that the film succeeds in imparting the “lesson” about the tragic fate of the *non-human* world thanks to anchoring this lesson in the terms in which the film also works as an example of *human* sadness, of the weight and complexity of what human life is about.

5. Learning from Examples

How do we, then, learn from examples?

As I said, I understand “learning from examples” as an umbrella term covering the cases of coming to see a particular kind of significance in an example and being able to pass, along the lines of this perceived significance

(in its terms), towards another particular that one then understands more clearly and responds to more sensitively. It may strangely demoralize me that my father did not have time to finish the lifelong project he cared so much about (building the country house from scratch). I would not be, in the same way, demoralized by the *general* thought that people sometimes do not have enough time for important undertakings, if the thought relates to nobody in particular. Those strange, gut-wrenching reactions to the particular may be provoked by familiar examples just as by newly encountered ones. But the “lesson” – seeing how sad it is that people sometimes do not have enough time for important undertakings, or seeing that the structural injustice harms individuals, powerless against it – is “learned” after the acquaintance with the example, not before.

As I mentioned, “learning from” an example suggests an *extrapolation* somewhere further. At the end of the Good Samaritan simile, Jesus says “Go and act likewise”: but there may not ever be a chance to do the same. What does “likewise” mean? What exactly do we learn from examples such as Jane Austen’s Mr. Collins? To not be like him? But be simply different in *any* way? Hardly.

We can get an idea by considering the peculiar manner in which we learn from *our own* failures. A person who has failed (morally) focuses her whole mind and feeling and personality on one thought: “This must never happen again.” However, the “same failure” will *not* be repeated. Not even in somebody who betrayed one’s friends twice: not just because “betraying one’s friends” is often not failing the same people in both cases, but also because *I* am not the same person. The second time, I would already have a “record”, I would be someone in whose life it makes sense to understand the action as “repeating one’s failure” (“betraying my friend *again*, which makes it even *worse*”) or “learning from one’s failure”. Importantly, these descriptions can apply to unprecedented events: a connection may establish itself, a highly significant one for me, between, say, failing to stand by one’s friend when they become the target of abuse, and having clandestine sex with their partner. This connection contributes something vital to the meaning of these wrongs; something which I could not deduce from what they would mean, however awful they are, without there being this connection.

On account of these connections, we talk about moral growth or decline. Things we do mean what they mean as elaborations of what has been said and done and what has happened before. This development is central to the notion of acts having significance. Learning of this kind thus inserts

connections into a series of situations that might otherwise appear totally unconnected. What makes one a “serial offender” in failing one’s friends, if one did not really do the same thing? On the other hand: one has let down one’s friend, their relationship suffered from it, and on account of *this* remorse and the urge to make amends and to get better, one later manages what he failed in before: “doing the right thing”. But a totally different right thing: He may help a stranger in need or learn to remain silent in certain situations. Making amends is possible even where what has been done cannot be undone; in a way, the urge to make amends – in whatever way – is the true expression of properly understanding what one has done, the reality of the lives it has affected (Gaita’s (2004, chap. 4) classic discussion of remorse makes this point powerfully). Learning from one’s failure to engage with one particular (situation, problem, ...) then somehow “leads” to engaging “better” with another particular, which may be, however, “nothing like” the first one – until one has created the connection. I may see more clearly what is going on and what to do (and do it) the second time, but not because it is already the second time that I have the same thing to do before me, and therefore I would recognize it more clearly. However, due to the random-looking nature of some of these transitions – consider the above examples of a totally different right thing “the next time” –, it may be difficult to locate and confirm whether or how a learning took place.

These considerations may shed some light on what exactly we may have (unconsciously) in mind when we ask questions such as what we (should) have learned from the environmental crisis, what it means to learn from it, and why it is surprisingly difficult for many people to give an impression passing for “having learned from the environmental crisis”, despite being faced with obvious undeniable facts. Notably, when we blame our governments for not learning from their previous failures in environmental policy, what we have in mind is not the government’s failure to see that they are repeating the same (kind of) mistake. We care about their failure to act on this recognition. Learning from one’s previous failure is probably impossible without a recognition of what was wrong with one’s actions in the first instance; and being exposed to the full awareness of that failure in its particularity, to its significance, seems almost indispensable. Attenborough’s film cleverly particularizes the already powerful pictures it offers by framing them as a story of a life nearing its end; and one effect this may bring about is the heightened uncomfortable awareness of how cowardly, half-hearted,

and lukewarm many contemporary instances of so-called environmental policy are. And yet, *acting upon* such recognition is another thing.

There are at least two ways of conceptualizing the failure to act. One attributes it to *akrasia*; and it is not an uncommon move to see *akrasia* in the half-hearted, conflicted, or self-undermining instances of environment-related behavior (cf. Aaltola 2019, or Urban and Swain 2023). On the other hand, a distinctly Platonic move – and the way in which Wittgensteinian authors develop the notions of response and attitude, for instance, Peter Winch (1987) in his discussion of the Good Samaritan simile – would be to stress the perceived and experienced *necessity* (inevitability) to act, connected to understanding the case. Learning from an example would then mean that acting in any other way disappeared, as a saliently perceived option, from one’s “moral map”, to paraphrase Bernard Williams. In this sense, failure to act in an appropriate manner upon one’s recognition of one’s past failures indicates a shortcoming of understanding. When we blame our political representations for failure to learn from their own past, though their own words testify for a kind of awareness of the situation, we are employing a stronger, Platonic notion of learning from an example. This notion – deep down skeptical about the idea of *akrasia* – understands cases of failure to act upon recognition as failures of recognition from the very beginning, that is, as only *seeming* knowledge. (I am relying on Segvic’s (2000) reading of Plato’s position on *akrasia*.) For sure, no example, however graphic or striking, can warrant that that lesson will be learned and acted upon; still, in the absence of examples and based on an abstract argument only, learning in this stronger sense seems an idea difficult even to begin with.

The points I have been trying to make in this section eventually tended towards relying on action-related cases: learning consisting of *acting* “likewise”, or differently, often learning from what one *did* (or failed to do). These are, I believe, the most striking kinds of learning; however, they are not disconnected from the much more pervasive cases of learning in the sense of coming to understand something differently, with seriousness and sensitivity (even without a salient transformation in action). After all, without a shift in understanding, action-shaped cases of learning (such that would really feature a lesson taken) probably could hardly take place. And while learning a lesson may or may not take the shape of a distinctive action, I would claim that what makes both action-featuring cases and “mere understanding” cases cases of learning is essentially the same: responding

appropriately to the recognized points of serious concern, as these are embedded in the structures of human life.

To Conclude

That the particular people (our parents, friends, people we know, people we read about), events, situations, cases, and so on, understood as examples of something of interest, make us, by virtue of this role they play, *see* something, represents, I believe, an important part of what we do with examples and how we respond to encounters with examples. I also believe – and that was the point of this text – that this relation of examples is somewhat more complex and less obvious than that of giving or receiving an instance of a general point that is being talked about at the moment. We often let ourselves be struck by the impact of a particular which may eventually shift the terms in which we understand this particular – the general lesson which we will take it to instantiate – as well as what other particulars we will henceforth take as in relevant respects similar. Most of these processes of learning are, if not directly conditioned, then facilitated by the significance we perceive within the example. This significance is of a moral kind, recognizable as something located within a human life, but also, possibly, elsewhere. Abstract, general reasoning does not have this power for most people. While particular examples certainly do not *always* have this power either, cases of people “immune” to them indicate a worrisome lack or failure of understanding: they are not *open to learning* from the example (whether because they lack the “eye to see” it, or because they are unwilling to use it). In contrast, a failure to draw conclusions from an abstract argument tells in itself very little about the person.¹

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