Deirdre's Smile: Names, Faces, and 'the Simple Actuality' of Another

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Abstract

The paper explores what it could mean to speak of love as involving a delight in 'the simple actuality' of another, or, as Buber does, of the 'touchable' human being as 'unique and devoid of qualities'. Developing strands in Merleau-Ponty's treatment of perception, it is argued that the relation between recognising this as a particular individual and recognising particular qualities in her may be close to the reverse of what might be supposed: a recognition of this distinctive smile being dependent on a recognition of who this is. The fundamental place of particulars, as opposed to kinds (transferable properties), in our thought about those we know and care for is developed in part through a phenomenological treatment of our perception of faces. That treatment is set in a context of the justification of our judgements about who someone is, and is linked with a critique of treatments of proper names of individuals in the spirit of Frege. It is in our speaking to (rather than 'about') those we know (rather than 'know about') that we find a relation to a particular that is direct—not mediated by a description of its properties—that Russell sought in 'knowledge by acquaintance'.

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1. Wittgenstein writes: 'It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists' (Wittgenstein, 1960, p. 6.44). That is, perhaps, a readily comprehensible thought. It is closely analogous to another thought that is, at least at one level, also readily comprehensible. Writing of his friend La Boetie, Montaigne says: 'If you press me to tell why I loved him, I feel that this cannot be expressed, except by answering: Because it was he, because it was I' (Montaigne, 1987: Book I, ch. 28). It is in the same spirit that Rowan Williams writes: '[B]eing in love is normally thought to mean delighting in the simple actuality of the other' (Williams, 2005, p. 151). As we might express it, in so far as I love

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another, it is not *how* he is that is wonderful or astonishing, but *that* he exists. I take there to be *something* clearly correct there: something seen clearly in, for example, a parent's delight in her new born child, or in the particular character of the delight or horror that someone may feel in the face of the recognition that the person before him now, radically changed through long suffering or through dreadful damage, is *Deirdre*, the woman he loves. Now my concern is not so much as to whether Williams's observation about 'being in love' will stand up as a general claim about love as with the fact that this does characterise a way in which one person sometimes matters to another. And as I say, while there may not be much space for it in a good deal of recent English language philosophy¹, this idea is, at one level, both readily comprehensible and hugely important. The way in which the mere existence of certain people matters to almost all of us is, as one might express it, a fundamental form of 'anchoring' in the world: one closely analogous to that in which the mere existence of certain places is a fundamental form of 'anchoring' in the world, and, like that, one without which life would be, for most of us, deeply unthinkable.

Yet, these ways of talking may seem to involve a difficulty of a kind that marks them off from the Wittgenstein thought. When we speak of the existence of 'the world', there is no need for a specification of the object of our wonder in terms of its particular characteristics: in terms of *how* it is. By contrast, one might wonder what it can mean to say that what matters to me is that a particular person exists quite independently of any of those qualities that go to make him *him*. My paper is, in part, an attempt to respond to this concern—to bring out what it can mean to speak of a delight 'in the simple actuality of the other'. The puzzle is closely connected with a question traditionally formulated in more metaphysical terms: what can it possibly *be* for something to exist other than for a certain collection of qualities to be instantiated?² It is connected, too, with treatments of proper names that find a manifest incoherence in the idea of 'A *bare* knowledge of the reference of the name [that consists] in knowing, of some object, that *a* refers to it, where this is a *complete* characterization of this particular piece of knowledge' (Dummett, 1991, p. 127). And to make what may be a spurious link in a slightly different direction, my concern is to explore one possible kind of sense to be found in the suggestion that, in the case of a human being, 'existence precedes essence'.

I will focus my interest a bit more through the following remarks by Martin Buber:

Even as a melody is not composed of tones, nor a verse of words, nor a statue of lines – one must pull and tear to turn a unity into a multiplicity – so it is with the human being to whom I say You. I can abstract from him the colour of his hair or the colour of his speech or the colour of his graciousness; I have to do this again and again; but immediately he is no longer You. (Buber, 1970, p. 59).

¹ Parfit's treatment of personal identity exemplifies particularly clearly a general trend that I have in mind here.

² 'In this proposition, a die is hard, extended and square, they will have it that the word *die* denotes a subject or substance, distinct from the hardness, extension and figure, which are predicated of it, and in which they exist. This I cannot comprehend: to me a die seems to be nothing distinct from those things which are termed its modes and accidents' (Berkeley, 1993, section 49). Locke is more circumspect. While suggesting that we have 'no other *Idea* of those Substances, than what is framed by a collection of those simple *Ideas* which are to be found in them' he adds that we 'have always the confused *Idea* of *something* to which they belong, and in which they subsist'. (Locke, 2008: Book II, chapter xxiii, section 3.)

The human being who but now was unique and devoid of qualities, not at hand but only present, not experienceable, only touchable, has become a He or She, an aggregate of qualities, a quantum with a shape. (Buber, 1970, p. 69).

These remarks appear to contain a challenge to something that can seem to be an inescapable truth: the idea that things are fundamentally given to us through their qualities. It can seem little more than a platitude that it is through its distinctive colour, shape, size, and texture that I recognise this as a cucumber and that as a table; and through more detailed structural qualities that I recognise this as a *particular* table or that as a *particular* person (presumably including in the latter case qualities of her 'behaviour', for example, qualities of her voice, or the particular way she turns her head). Yet, Buber suggests that, in the case of our contact with people, and perhaps some other things, it is not necessarily like that. At least in the ideal case, I do not experience her qualities at all: I experience (though Buber rejects this word) *her* as opposed to her qualities. And while we can speak of the distinctive colour of her hair or speech, to do so is to 'abstract from' what we normally encounter.

We might be tempted to dismiss this as mystical or poetical stuff. Whether or not we agree with the philosopher who said that nothing is given to the eyes but colours, and to the ears but sounds, must we not agree that what is given to the five senses are *qualities* of one kind or another? And so it might seem that, if this is not simply some form of poetic licence, Buber must be thinking in terms of some additional sense: a form of 'touching', not involving the hands, that somehow takes us behind what is given in normal sense experience, taking us to a (supposed) 'real person' that lies behind the qualities. In short, the way Buber speaks of the person as 'devoid of qualities' might seem alarmingly reminiscent of a view, now widely taken to be utterly discredited, of substance as an underlying something that is intrinsically featureless but in which qualities 'inhere'.

That said, there are considerations that may create pressure to find some kind of sense in Buber's remarks. For if we suppose that our identification of something must inevitably be by way of its qualities, we may be confronted with a dilemma. On the one hand, we may suppose that in identifying this as Deirdre, I take no step beyond her perceivable qualities—in which case 'Deirdre' will, it may seem, be reduced to a set of qualities that could, in principle, be instantiated in another; and so the sense of a delight in 'the simple actuality of the other' is lost. On the other, if, in order to find a place for the *particularity* of the other, we picture the matter in terms of something that *underlies* the perceivable qualities, something to which I can never have access except by way of the qualities, it will seem that my identification of the other involves a step beyond the qualities given to me in perception: a judgement that can never be fully justified by anything in my experience of her. Our thought and feelings about those who are most important to us will then appear to be open to a unique form of sceptical challenge: one that does not threaten our thought about other, much less important, things in our lives.

2. It will be helpful to approach this initially in phenomenological terms drawn from Merleau-Ponty. I suggested that it can seem little more than a platitude that what is most fundamentally given to us in experience is qualities, *properties*: patches of colour of a certain shape and size, noises of a certain pitch, certain tastes, smells, temperatures, and so on. One form that this idea may take is found in the claim that what each of us is really, *directly*, aware of in perception is not something out there in the publicly accessible world, but something essentially 'private': a visual sensation of redness, and so on. Again, it may be suggested that our idea of persisting objects in space—things, such as tables, apples,

and human beings—is the product of our experience of recurrent, and more or less stable, clusters of properties. But what concerns me now is distinct from both of those. Thus, at another level again, it may be suggested that when, on a particular occasion, I pick something out from its surrounding environment as a self-contained object—and one of a particular kind, say an apple—this must reflect a process of the form: a particular pattern in my current experience strikes me, stands out for me, because it calls to mind, through its similarity to it, a pattern experienced in the past: that of apples. The constituents of the pattern may include, perhaps in different forms in different cases, on the one hand qualities of the whole—the redness, roundness, shininess, hardness, of this object—and on the other qualities of elements that, in a particular combination, make up the whole—an oblong patch of redness adjacent to two round black spots, and so on.

In opposition to this picture, Merleau-Ponty argues that, far from the current pattern standing out for me through its recalling the previous instances, my detecting a similarity with the previous cases is *dependent on* my awareness of the relevant pattern in this instance:

Figure 1 is not recalled *by* Figure 2, or rather it is so recalled only if one has first seen in Figure 2 ‘a possible Figure 1’, which amounts to saying that the actual resemblance does not relieve us of the necessity of asking how it is first made possible by the present organization of Figure 2. The ‘prompting’ figure must take on the same meaning as the induced figure before it can recall it. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 22)

So the traditional story gets it (more or less) the wrong way round. It is not through noticing a resemblance to particular things I have encountered in the past that I recognise a distinctive structure in this instance. It is rather that it is only because (or in so far as) I perceive the distinctive structure that I see the resemblance: ‘... the unity of the thing in perception is not arrived at by association, but is a condition of association ...’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 19–20). As Merleau-Ponty also puts it: ‘Before any contribution by memory, what is seen must at the present moment so organize itself as to present a picture to me in which I can recognize my former experiences’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 22–3).

This is a decisive point beautifully made. Another example, one that is very relevant to my concerns in this paper, would be this. On a familiar view of perception, I see the face before me now as angry, happy, or friendly because I notice a resemblance between the arrangement of elements in it (for example, the angle of the lips, the wrinkles around the eyes) and previous angry, happy, or friendly faces. But on reflection, this is clearly false. It is, characteristically, the other way round: I see the resemblance to the earlier, angry, face only *because* I see the anger in this one. The upshot of Merleau-Ponty’s discussion is that we must abandon the ‘theory of sensation, which builds up all knowledge out of determinate qualities’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 13): out of atomic units of experience whose arrangement in current experience calls to mind certain past configurations—that, say, distinctive of apples. We must replace this picture with the idea that what is most primitive is a recognition of wholes of particular kinds. Indeed, and this is a further significant strand in his argument, the supposed ‘atomic units of experience’ are an artificial intellectual construction. Our experience of

the *colour* of some object is dependent on what we take the object as a whole to be: for example, 'this red would literally not be the same if it were not the "woolly red" of a carpet' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 376). This is a further ground for the claim that our experience of this as a woolly red carpet is not the product of an experience of discrete elements: that it is, rather, the experience of the *whole* that is fundamental. As Merleau-Ponty expresses it: 'Perception goes straight to the thing and bypasses the colour' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 355). My perception of the properties of an object with which I am confronted is, in normal contexts, *dependent on* my grasp of the kind of thing that it is. Under normal conditions, my perception of this—my recognition of this—as a table, an apple, or a human being is more fundamental than (is logically prior to) my perception of its properties. And any adequate characterisation of a perceived property will be in terms of the kind of object of which it is a property: for example, the colour that I am now perceiving is, irreducibly, 'the shiny redness of an apple'. It is noteworthy that in making his point in relation to inanimate objects, Merleau-Ponty appeals to our experience of other human beings: the thing—for example, the apple or the chair—is, he remarks, offered as is a familiar face³ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 376). A human face is, perhaps, our clearest exemplar of the way in which things characteristically present themselves to us, not as atomic sensory elements awaiting combining by the intellect or imagination, but as structured wholes. (Another, closely related but broader, exemplar is living creatures.) We can distinguish different levels here. I recognise this as a particular kind of object: a human being, or a human face. I recognise in this face a particular feature: a strong or gentle character, or, more fleetingly, an expression of grief or joy. I recognise this as a particular individual: 'Deirdre'. Those—recognising it as a human face, recognising a certain character or feeling in the face, recognising this as Deirdre—are different. My central concern is with the last: recognising this as a *particular* individual. But, I will suggest, this case shares with the others a sense in which the recognition may be 'immediate'. The sense is seen in the fact that, for example, I may be incapable of articulating a basis for my judgement that this is a friendly face in the elements that make up the face. Presumably such elements—for example, the particular structure of wrinkles around the eyes—play *some* role in leading me to see what I do. After all, had those been different in certain ways, I would have seen something different: not quite the same friendliness, or joy, that I do see. But the role that the structure of wrinkles plays does not run through my *noticing* it: is not part of the *grounds* for my judgement.⁴

3. I said that my concern is with the recognition of this as a particular individual, for example, Deirdre. It is worth noting again that my concern is, in this respect, different from Merleau-Ponty's. In the discussion to which I have referred, he is concerned with recognition of something as of a certain *kind*: an apple, a human face; or perhaps: a happy

³ In another passage that is very relevant to my concerns, Merleau-Ponty writes: 'The human signification is given before the alleged sensible signs. A face is a centre of human expression, the transparent envelope of the attitudes and desires of others, the place of manifestation, the barely material support for a multitude of intentions. This is why it seems impossible for us to treat a face or a body, even a dead body, like a thing. They are sacred entities, not the "givens of sight"' (Merleau-Ponty, 1963, p. 167.)

⁴ I am tempted to add: just as certain processes in my brain play some role in leading me to see what I do, but not by way of my noticing them. Just how far the addition would be appropriate is a moot question. If there are important *disanalogies* here, they lie, I think, in the way in which there may be imaginable contexts in which an appeal to the wrinkles, but not to processes in my brain, might feature in my justifying of my judgement to another.

or angry face. And his point is that we should not assume, in a way in which we may be tempted, that this recognition is grounded in an identification of qualities either of the whole (for example, the paleness of the face) or of elements of that whole (for example, the configuration of the mouth) that characterise objects of that kind. *My* concern, however, is with recognition of this, not as a thing of a certain kind, but as a particular individual: an individual, identified through her name 'Deirdre', as one with a particular history. While, then, I will draw on considerations of exactly the same form as Merleau-Ponty's, the point that I will be making through appeal to them is a different one.

In the context of recognising this as a particular individual, the most direct target of an argument of the form of Merleau-Ponty's would be the suggestion that such recognition necessarily runs through a recognition of certain 'atomic' features of the face: it is on the basis of the particular combination of just this eye colour, tilt of the nose, and so on that I identify this as Deirdre. But this is not the end of the matter. For one who accepted the Merleau-Ponty argument on this point might then take it that my recognising this as this particular individual necessarily runs through—is necessarily *grounded in*—my awareness of certain Deirdre-like features at another—a 'structural'—level: the general 'shape' of the face, the characteristic gentle but determined expression that is a standing feature of Deirdre's face, the passage across it of characteristic Deirdre-like expressions of amusement and of sympathy, the characteristic Deirdre-like bodily posture and turns of phrase, and so on. These features, for example, the distinctive standing facial characteristics (so the story would go), call to mind previous sightings of a face with just such characteristics: the previously sighted face being that of the human being whom people call 'Deirdre' and with whom I am acquainted. And it is on the basis of such perceived likenesses to that earlier human being that I identify the one before me now as my friend Deirdre.

This account is, I believe, open to a close analogue of Merleau-Ponty's reasoning in relation to our identification of *kinds* of thing. We might note, first, that any assumption that it *must* be like this may rest on a prejudice analogous to that which Merleau-Ponty identifies. Just as it is a prejudice to suppose that seeing sadness in a face is necessarily dependent on seeing in it a certain combination of wrinkles and so on, so it is a prejudice to suppose that (as we might put this) seeing Deirdre in a face is necessarily dependent on seeing in it certain characteristic Deirdre-like features. Certainly, there is a connection between seeing each of those: there may be no seeing Deirdre in a face without there being a seeing of Deirdre-like features. But such a necessary coincidence as yet tells us nothing about a priority of one to the other. And it seems clear that in practice, I might recognise this as Deirdre independently of being able to articulate any grounds for this judgement in terms of more basic forms of identification of what I see: whether the terms be at the level of, for example, 'piercing blue eyes' or of a 'sympathetic gentleness' in her face. Of course, my assumed recognition is not infallible; and, if challenged, I may (probably with considerable effort) be able to offer some kind of reason in terms of her appearance for supposing that this is Deirdre. But the fact that I can, on reflection, offer grounds of this form does not demonstrate that any awareness of such features was in play in my original identification of this as Deirdre. And it will, in any case, take an exceptional face or an exceptional observer to provide any such description that is individuating: that marks this face out from—picks it out uniquely amongst—the countless others that conform to the same basic pattern (female, middle aged, determined, and so on).

It is relevant here that in many cases, it would be bizarre to ask of someone who addresses a woman he meets as 'Deirdre' 'How did you know it was her?' There are, however, contexts in which such a question could be natural; and in some of those contexts, the answer might be 'From her smile', 'From her walk', 'From her voice'. But if we go on to ask 'What was it about the smile, the walk or the voice that made it clear to you who this was?' there may be nothing to be said but 'It was hers'. Thus, when I spoke of seeing 'Deirdre-like features' in a face, the point was that *that* may be the most fundamental form of specification of what I see. What is given to me is given, irreducibly, as 'Deirdre's smile'. (Just as the redness that Merleau-Ponty sees is given, irreducibly, as the woolly redness of a carpet.) It is only in so far as this strikes me as 'Deirdre's face', or as strikingly resembling Deirdre's in certain respects, that the decisive similarities strike me. This is not to deny that I might take a face I see in a crowd to be Deirdre's when it is not; or might be struck by the similarity of another face to Deirdre's. These possibilities do not compromise the idea that there is no identifying of the relevant features—those in which the decisive similarities lie—in terms that do not make reference to Deirdre, and of which one can say 'That's one of the kind that Deirdre has'. (The point here stands out particularly clearly in cases in which I suddenly recognise a face: a face, perhaps, that I encounter out of its normal context, or after a long break, and that has caught my attention through its vague familiarity.⁵ In such cases, the features that are decisive in the perceived similarity may only appear to me when I see the similarity.)

4. I have presented these points in essentially phenomenological terms: appealing to a sense of what it is like, in practice, to encounter someone one knows or cares for. But what is at issue here is not simply 'phenomenological': in so far, at least, as that is contrasted with the 'logical'. I have spoken of the distinction between the idea that a certain quality is a ground for our identification of another and the idea that it is part of a causal mechanism that is in some way at work in the process of identification. It is no part of my aim to deny that certain fungible qualities—for example, the particular structure of wrinkles around the eyes, which may equally be present in another face, and, with that, equally recognisable by one to whom this individual is a stranger—will be part of a causal mechanism that is in some way at work in the process of identification (as certain brain processes are, presumably, part of the mechanism at work in the process of identification). This contrast between 'mere causal mechanism' and 'grounds'—at another level, between (mere) explanation and justification—is a logical one. Thus, when I stress that there may be no noticing of eye colour or tilt of lips such that I might be in a position to offer these as grounds for my judgement, what is at issue is not simply the cognitive capacities of individuals. What is at issue is also what it is appropriate to require of each other, and of ourselves, in terms of providing reasons for our judgements.

What grounds it is appropriate to require for a judgement can depend on a variety of factors. It can depend on the role that acknowledged expertise plays in the particular sphere of judgement. It depends, quite generally, on the possible doubts about the

⁵ As Merleau-Ponty describes, a case of the general kind I have in mind: 'Suddenly the sight before me was recast in a manner satisfying to my vague expectation' (20) Wittgenstein articulates the experience in very similar terms: 'I meet someone whom I have not seen for years; I see him clearly, but fail to know him. Suddenly I know him, I see the old face in the altered one. I believe that I should do a different portrait of him now if I could paint.' (Wittgenstein 1958, p. 197.)

judgement that may be in the air: the kinds of ground needed for my claim that my car is parked on College Street may be affected by the fact that this is an area of astonishingly high car theft. It can depend too on the kind of legitimate interest that others have in an individual's judgement.

In many cases, my identification of something is one in which an indeterminate range of others may have a legitimate interest of much the same form as mine. This is how it characteristically is with my identification of something as measles, an ancient burial ground, or the man who knocked the waitress down. The kind of interest in another that is the focus of my discussion has been different in that it is one that is essentially 'personal': not an interest that could, in the same way, be 'anyone's'. What matters to me is that this is Deirdre; and being Deirdre is not a matter of satisfying a range of impersonally specifiable criteria. In such contexts, then, a requirement that I be able to provide impersonal grounds for my identification may be quite out of place. If I do not feel a need of a 'grounding' for my unquestioning acceptance of this as Deirdre—as, in the huge majority of cases, I plainly do not—what business has anyone else to insist that I ought to have such a grounding to hand?

An emphasis, such as we find in Wittgenstein, on shared language and forms of life needs to be taken alongside a reminder of just how much of what is central to the life of each of us—in particular, the particular individuals around which it revolves—is not shared with others. A demand that we ought to be able to justify our judgements 'impersonally'—in terms that, on the one hand, make no reference to particular individuals and, on the other, are accessible to any competent speaker of the language—is an insistence that we are answerable to others for those judgements; and such an insistence is significantly circumscribed in the context of our identification of the particular people that matter to us: at least, it will be regarded as such by anyone who values a form of life in which particular others have a place of the kind of which I am speaking.

The distinction between qualities that ground our identification of another and ones that are (merely)⁶ part of a causal mechanism that is in some way at work in the process of identification is a logical one. I have claimed that qualities of the former kind need not be impersonal in character: 'impersonal' in the sense of being recognisable by *just anyone*, and, with that, in the sense of being qualities specifiable independently of *whose* qualities they are. My defence of this claim about the logic of our thought about certain others has had (as I believe should be expected) an ethical dimension. The next two sections further explore, and I hope strengthen, this ethical defence.

5. In my introductory remarks, I suggested that Buber's talk of the 'human being to whom I say You' as 'unique and devoid of qualities' is alarmingly reminiscent of the metaphysical picture, now widely regarded as hopelessly problematic, of an object as a compound of a collection of properties (which are what are given to us in sense experience) and an underlying featureless something (perhaps the object properly speaking) that has them. I linked that with an impression we might get that Buber is thinking in terms of some sixth sense that somehow takes us beyond what is given in normal sense experience to a (supposed) 'real person' that lies behind the qualities. With that, I asked what could it mean to say (in the spirit of Montaigne and Rowan

⁶ I insert '(merely)' to indicate that, for my purposes here, nothing turns on the question of whether a person's reasons for thinking something can be considered a kind of cause of their thinking it.

Williams) that what matters to me is that a particular person exists, independently of any of those qualities that go to make him *him*. I hope it is becoming clear that to represent matters in these ways is to *misrepresent* them. I will develop this further by saying, in this section, a little more about the idea of 'properties', and, in the next, about that of an 'underlying featureless something'.

First, that Buber's suggestion need not be of at all this form is seen in the fact that while, on encountering a person I know well, there may be no recognising of the qualities that mark her out from others independently of recognising it as *her*, this is not to suggest that there is any recognising it as her independently of her distinctive smile, posture, tilt of her head, or quirky intelligence. And when Buber speaks of the 'touchable' human being as 'unique and devoid of qualities', we need not read him as denying this. His point (as I am suggesting we should read him) is rather that such characteristics are not 'qualities' in the sense of being impersonally specifiable traits: traits, that is, that have a nature that can be specified independently of any reference to this particular person. Similarly, when Rowan Williams remarks that 'being in love is normally thought to mean delighting in the simple actuality of the other', he is not, I take it, denying that being in love may involve delighting in the other's smile, her mannerisms, the tone of her voice, and so on. The point is, rather, that delighting in these things cannot be separated from delighting in *her*. That it is *her* smiling is crucial to the delight that I take in the smile.

What is challenged here is a certain way of construing the contrast between a thing and its properties, or, as we might express this, the idea that a thing's properties are necessarily *kinds*. Thus, the ideas of 'personality' or 'psychological characteristics' as these feature in familiar philosophical discussions of personal identity are completely 'impersonal': they are movable sets of characteristics that could, in principle, turn up anywhere.⁷ We are asked, for example, to contemplate scenarios in which the personality of one person turns up in the body of another. But while a description of an individual in terms of transferable qualities may be the kind of thing that is called for in, for example, a job reference, it involves abstracting from the incidents of a life in a way that makes it quite inadequate for articulating what it is that is important to me in a particular person I care for. The point here is not that such descriptions are, by themselves, not sufficiently rich in detail for this purpose. It is rather that, in so far as I care about a person, when I try to capture what is special about her by recalling for myself or retelling to others particular incidents in her life, the incidents may be more than simply *illustrations* of, or evidence for, something in her that I value. I see this face now *in the light* of her past. For example, I see the possibility of that wonderful smile in these currently sombre features. Again, the particular—perhaps delightful, perhaps terrifying—quality of the look she just gave me is what it is only in the light of my past experience of her expressions and moods. Perhaps, it is one stage in a movement of expression—a movement of mood—that I know well. Perhaps, it is an unmistakable echo of a way in which she responded to another situation—an earlier situation that, without this link of expression, I would never have connected with the current incident.

⁷ Or, at least, in any human being; though it may be noteworthy that those who trade in these notions readily slide into speculations about the possibility of them turning up in quite other places too.

Its being such an echo is an irreducible feature of the significance that it has for me now. She is looking at me in just the way she looked at that man who was deeply condescending to her; or perhaps, in just the way she looks at condescending men. I see her current look in the light of those other cases.⁸ Again, where to the eye of a stranger there is only irritation to be seen, I may see her irritable response now in the light of events in her life many years ago: see it, for example, as an expression of a continuing shame about a hurtful remark she once made.

There are, I suspect, a variety of points in play here, points that I am not sure I am able to distinguish as clearly as they deserve. But a contrast between two examples may help to bring some central issues into focus. Both highlight factors of a kind that are of central importance to our experience of each other; but, and this is my immediate point, *what* each highlights is different.

In her fine biographical work *Portrait of a Turkish Family*, Irfan Orga writes:

When I reached the hall I saw my mother sitting on one of the chairs, though indeed she was so changed that only the eye of love could have singled her out from the rest of the drab humanity about her. (Orga, 2002, p. 174)

The daughter is able to do something that others cannot: pick out this woman—her mother—even though she is hugely changed since she last saw her. Another, perhaps someone the mother worked with back then, could not pick her out now. That the daughter can do something the other cannot comes, Orga suggests, from the fact that she loves this woman. How are we to understand this? Well, one who loves another may characteristically observe that person with a degree and kind of attention that others do not. She has watched the other's face and bodily postures in varied circumstances and has noticed patterns in them that others are unlikely to. What is more, those patterns are alive for her in a way such that she spontaneously sees them: sees them through the substantial changes that, for others, would completely obscure them. That we are like this in relation to those we care for is an important dimension of that caring.

While the daughter, because of her past relationship with this woman, sees something that others do not, the patterns in her mother's face and posture are, as the case is described, there to be seen in a way that is independent of the past. One who did not know this woman—someone, for example, who was an observant reader of faces and had studied numerous photographs of the younger mother—could, in principle, do what the daughter does: that is, single out that particular woman in the crowd even though she is radically changed. Compare this now with the following description of a mother looking at her daughter who has died in warfare: 'She gazed at her face, at her forever twisted mouth, at her terrible features; in them she could see what only a mother

⁸ These points concerning what I may see in a face have close analogues in what I may hear in a voice. Think of how instantly recognisable a voice may be; and of how this, along with a range of related phenomena, may play in the life of the blind a role, difficult for the sighted to imagine richly, in many ways analogous to that played by the face for the rest of us. They may relate, too, to a range of other aspects of what I may observe of another. For example, I have recently been struck by how reliably I am able, in the small town in which I live, to identify a significant percentage of the population by their walk from several hundred yards away. While these remarks connect with the extended use of the term 'face' employed by Levinas, and while there may well be significant echoes of Levinas in my discussion, I will not follow him in this extension.

could have seen – the adorable face of the baby who had once smiled at her out of its swaddling clothes' (Grossman, 1985, p. 805). In this case, what is at issue is not something that the mother, but not others (unless they are exceptional), can *do*; and, with that, the exclusion of others does not stand in need of the qualification 'unless they are exceptional'. Only a mother could have seen what she saw in the sense that an adequate characterisation of what she sees involves an essential reference to her past relationship with this girl. The point here is in part that a characterisation of what she sees involves an essential reference to who this is: as I suggested, a characterisation of a smile might involve an essential reference to Deirdre. But further, what is happening now, the mother's seeing in the face what she does, is an echo of a way in which she was earlier related to this girl; and that is an essential characteristic of what is happening *now*. In the absence of that history, nothing that happened now would *be* a seeing of that in this face. (This example is a particularly dramatic illustration of something that is, I think, a pervasive feature of all long-term relationships.)

6. Turning now to the other term in the contrast between the person and their properties—the idea of an 'underlying featureless something'—it will be helpful to consider a concern that underlies philosophical treatments of proper names deriving from Frege. (I hope that consideration of this particular issue will help to underpin the connection between the logical and the ethical that has been central in the two previous sections.)

One strand⁹ in prominent recent treatments of proper names gives central place to the idea that access to an individual thing must be through its properties. Thus, Searle writes: 'Clearly the notion of what it is to intend to refer to a particular object forces us back on the notion of identification by description' (Searle, 1969, p. 87). He adds that to reject this is to fall back on a picture of an object as 'a combination of its propertyless self and its properties'. Similarly, Dummett argues that for every proper name, there must be a propositional knowledge ascription whose content is a non-singular proposition that makes the method of identification of the referent explicit: 'must be' since to deny this is to be committed to the incoherent idea that there is such a thing as 'A *bare* knowledge of the reference of the name [that consists] in knowing , of some object, that *a* refers to it, where this is a *complete* characterization of this particular piece of knowledge' (Dummett, 1991, p. 127).

Russell, defending the same basic thought that what we normally think of as proper names of individuals—'Deirdre' or 'Barak Obama'—are really 'abbreviated descriptions', adds that a *real* proper name is a word that picks out an individual object *directly*, that is, not by way of a description of it, by some specification of its qualities. He goes on to argue that 'this' and 'I' are the only real proper names on the grounds that it is only in these cases that we have an 'acquaintance' with what is spoken of, a directness of relation with it, that is necessary for using a name for something.¹⁰

The striking suggestion that the only *real* proper names are words that, by our normal lights, are not proper names at all requires some significant underpinning. On

⁹ Another, deriving in its modern form from Kripke, shares with the considerations I am presenting here serious reservations about the role of individuating descriptive properties in our use of proper names along with an emphasis on 'contact' of a certain form with the individual spoken of. The form of 'contact' highlighted is, however, quite different. It may be worth mentioning, though I can do no more than that, another philosopher who approaches these topics from a very different angle. It has been pointed out in Levinas, the figure of the name does the same work as that of the face: an observation that I have found helpful in thinking about these issues. (Young III 2006, p. 151.)

¹⁰ See, for example, Russell (1956) and Russell (1986). In an afterthought added in the latter, Russell excludes 'I' from proper names in the strict sense.

the face of it, the underpinning needed is of some such form as the following. Our normal use of words like ‘Deirdre’ or ‘Barak Obama’ involves an aspiration to a *direct* link between word and object—one not mediated by a definite description. Such a link is, in fact, only found in the words ‘this’ and ‘I’; but the aspiration is so central to our use of what we normally think of as proper names that we should reserve the expression ‘proper name’ for words that *do* achieve it: that is, for the words ‘this’ and ‘I’.

We need to ask just *where* in our normal use of words like ‘Deirdre’ or ‘Barak Obama’ we see the aspiration that Russell¹¹ believes cannot be attained. In fact, there *is* a use of such words—indeed, a very central one—in which the relation to the ‘object’ is direct in just the sense he is concerned with. We might add that in this use, it is clear that such words do *not*, as he and others suppose, function as some form of definite description. I am speaking of the use of a person’s name in addressing them: ‘Thank you, Deirdre, for that interesting observation’. In this context, the relation between the word ‘Deirdre’ and the woman Deirdre is as direct—unmediated by any description—as is the relation between the word ‘this’ and an object pointed to. With that, the role of the name ‘Deirdre’ is *not* one that could equally be played by some description. What may be expressed in my remark would manifestly not be captured in, for example, ‘Thank you, third person from the left whom I see every morning at Conti’s, for that interesting observation’.¹²

In response to the question ‘Why do we have proper names at all?’ John Searle answers: ‘Obviously, to refer to individuals’.¹³ The suggestion might usefully be placed beside Blanchot’s observation of ‘the common strangeness *that does not allow us to speak of our friends but only to speak to them*, not to make of them a topic of conversation ...’ (Blanchot, 1997, p. 291). Using a person’s name in *addressing* them as opposed to referring to them—in speaking *to* them as opposed to *about* them—is one of the central ways of acknowledging another as an individual: as something other than a replaceable filler in my picture of the scheme of things. (As a readiness to talk *about* someone—to make them a ‘topic of conversation’—can be a clear failure of friendship.) This goes with the way in which we mark our attitude towards, and our understanding of our relationship with, another in part through *which* name we use in addressing him—‘John’, ‘Mr Wright’, and in some cases, forming a very mixed bag, by our not using their name at all (where this merges, in one direction, into using a pet name.) Again, we show a certain kind of interest in someone we have newly encountered by asking their name; and we recognise that we are very probably in the realm of the barbaric when we hear of communities in which some members are addressed by numbers rather than by names. (If the role in human life of names of individuals was fundamentally a matter of ease of reference, numbers would, on the face of it, be a

¹¹ I am not able to substantiate my attribution of this thought to Russell by reference to particular passages in his work. So far as I can see, something of this form must be in play in his thinking. But little in my argument turns on this.

¹² Commenting on a closely related use of names, Wittgenstein remarks: ‘how singular is the use of a person’s name to *call* him!’ (Wittgenstein, 1968, paragraph 27). That he found it ‘singular’ testifies to the pull that he feels of philosophically prevalent ways of thinking of language; that he notices it at all, and finds it worth remarking on, testifies to the particular character of his genius.

¹³ Searle, 1963, p.160. In the same spirit, though with a slightly different emphasis, Antony Quinton suggests (Quinton, 1962, p. 402) that the reason we give names to people is that this is a helpful device for keeping track of, and referring to, sets of character and memory complexes in which we are interested, which we love or like.

much better system than that which we, in the West, now have. Yet the truth is that numbers are peculiarly, perhaps uniquely, *unsuited* to serve as names.)

The accounts of proper names that we have been considering presuppose that the contexts to which we must look if we are to understand the use of proper names are those in which we employ them to speak *about* their referent¹⁴; and, with that, that the knowledge embodied in the use of a proper name is knowledge *about* the individual. But alongside knowing *who* Deirdre is, or knowing *about* Deirdre, there is also 'knowing *Deirdre*'; and, in one central use of that expression,¹⁵ that is something very different. I may know another person while knowing little *about* her, and know a great deal about her without knowing *her*. To know a person is to have some form of relationship with her: to be in some form of ongoing interaction with her. And that is to be in a position to address her by name.¹⁶ If we are to give a remotely adequate account of the use of what for most of us are, perhaps, the most prominent proper names in our vocabulary we must give due place to the way in which that use is embedded in knowledge of *this* form.

While the idea of knowing a person is central to my concerns in this paper, my explicit discussion of it will be brief. My central thought is that it is in the context of *knowing* another that the idea of (in Williams's phrase) the 'simple actuality' of a person has its central home. In so far as I know another—most clearly, but not only there, in so far as I love or care for another—it is not 'under a certain description' that she is of significance to me. What, most fundamentally, matters to me is not that this person tells good stories or has a delightful smile, but that it is *Deirdre*. Thinking of another as *Deirdre* is thinking of her in a way that is relatively removed from her possessing any particular set of characteristics—falling under any particular description. It involves an acknowledgement that she has an identity as an individual that is not dependent on her retaining any particular set of characteristics that I now associate with her. With that, the interest in another that finds expression in addressing her by name is, in an important sense, prior to—a condition of—finding in her that rich sense of her characteristics that may have a central place in my love for, or friendship with, her. And further, in just the sense in which that *interest* is independent of any specification that she satisfies so my *recognition* of her—my ability to pick her out from other human beings—is independent of her meeting a set of descriptive conditions. The point here is in

¹⁴ In this they do, of course, reflect a very general bias in discussions of language in 20c Anglo-American philosophy.

¹⁵ There is the familiar locution in which the aim is simply to establish that our interlocutor knows whom we are speaking of: to the question 'You know Kevin Spacey?' I can answer 'Yes' even though I have never even met him. The use, a standard one, with which I am concerned is quite different. Just why it should be spoken of as a form of *knowledge*—and whether it might be better thought of as simply a curious ambiguity in the term 'know'—is not a question I will pursue directly. (For an interesting discussion that bears on my concerns here, see Chappell (2009).) Nor will I pursue the relation between this idea of 'knowing a person' and the philosophical notion of 'knowledge by acquaintance'. (Incidentally, the term 'acquaintance' has different faces that seem to match the different faces of 'knowledge' strikingly closely.)

¹⁶ See, in this connection, Buber's observation: 'But all names of God remain hallowed – because they have been used not only to speak *of* God but also to speak *to* him' (Buber, 1970, p. 123). Similarly, William W. Young III notes that naming God makes Him addressable, and links this with the possibility of having a relation with another across a distance, and, in particular, with the possibility of calling on God (Young and William 2006, pp. 1–8). There are, I believe, also important connections, which I cannot develop here, with the idea that: 'The Name is the effective word par excellence. It is the very sounds of the name which are effective' (Janowitz, 1991, p. 265).

part the hugely significant fact, beautifully highlighted by Irfan Orga, that most of us recognise those we care about instantly, even in a crowd in which, to most eyes, others look very similar; and we do so despite the fact that we are unable, even when standing right in front of her, to offer any description of her appearance that would mark her off from many other people. (Aside, that is, from descriptions that *presuppose* that it is her.) In this sense, our primary hold on others, at least on those we care about, is not through any description they fall under. This point, along with others I have highlighted, is reflected in our language in those uses of proper names that are not captured in the Fregean schema. The ‘immediacy’ of the relation between the name and the person as it occurs in the act of addressing another by their name mirrors the ‘immediacy’ of our recognition of the other. The ways in which we recognise and care about certain others create—better: *are*—the place in our lives for a use of proper names that are not mediated by a definite description.¹⁷

I have given to our knowledge of our acquaintances—of those we know—a significance that in important respects parallels that attached by Russell to ‘knowledge by acquaintance’. That we are, nevertheless, some distance from Russell comes out in the fact that, in sharp contrast with the place that Russell is inclined to give to the word ‘I’, my emphasis has been on a sense of ‘acquaintance’ and a use of names from which the person is, in relation to himself, (more or less) uniquely *excluded*. This goes with the fact that, where the ‘directness’ that Russell links with ‘acquaintance’ involves an appeal to a perceptual model, my appeal has been to the idea of a *relation*. One¹⁸ way to bring out the importance of that contrast is to note that, while both models may leave room for an idea that knowing something is logically prior to knowing *about* it, they construe this very differently. In particular, the relational model highlights, as the perceptual model does not, the fact that who a person knows is amongst the central things to *be* known about her. On any understanding of the self that is not infected by a Cartesian individualism, a person’s relations with others are amongst the most important facts about *her*. For Sartre, whose thinking clearly *is* infected by a Cartesian individualism, the force of the phrase ‘Existence precedes essence’ lies in the idea that each of us creates, has sole responsibility for, *what* we are through the choices that we make: while we *exist* prior to our choices, we have no nature, no prior essence, from which those choices flow. In contrast to that, in so far as we allow that an individual’s nature is in part constituted by his relations with others, and that both the existence and character of those relations are *not* entirely the product of his own choices, the picture changes. Others also have responsibility for what I am. In particular, others both shape my character and, in what we do together, contribute to the biography that is a key dimension of what I am. In this further sense, knowing another person is prior to

¹⁷ Of course, there are uses of proper names, including proper names of people, whose immediate context lacks any of the features on which I have focused. My point is, in part, simply that no account of the Fregean form will adequately capture all, including some of the most central, aspects of our use of such words. I might add that, though I cannot defend this claim here, I suspect that other uses of names are in some way ‘conditioned by’ the uses to which I have given central place. One possible example of this would be our tendency, in so far as we do have one, to share Kripke’s intuitions about counterfactuals involving proper names.

¹⁸ Other aspects that merit further development revolve around the mutuality of this form of knowledge: I know the other only in so far as she knows me. This is reflected in a fact that is relevant to one of the central themes of this paper: the fact that my confidence that the person approaching me is Deirdre is, characteristically, closely intertwined with her reaction to me.

knowing about her. Of course, one may know a great deal about a person without knowing *her*. But, as I have noted, what there *is* to be known about someone centrally includes her relationships with others. And in so far as I am one of those others, in so far, that is, as I know a particular person, she is not given to me as a set of qualities that I may take or leave, and, if I choose the former, to which I must accommodate myself. She is given to me as, say, *Deirdre*.

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